

War and Remembrance: The Case of Finnish Covert Operations in First World War

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Introduction

No era and no continent have been untouched by war. From ancient times to the present day, thousands of wars of different sizes and natures have been fought in diverse geographic locales. It is regrettable that despite voluminous academic endeavour in the discipline of military history, many conflicts do not receive much attention. For various reasons, some wars, or parts thereof, have not lived on in national or international consciousnesses and can therefore be said to be ‘forgotten’. It is the purpose of this article to examine one such ‘forgotten’ conflict: Finnish covert operations in the First World War.

The article will be divided into three sections: firstly a historiographical exposé justifying that these covert operations are indeed a ‘forgotten’ aspect of WWI; secondly an analysis of why they have been ‘forgotten’, both in Finland and in Britain; and thirdly an outline of the reasons why these operations merit further academic coverage. British scholarship has been selected for comparison partly because in this centenary year of WWI it seems appropriate to situate this article in close relation to the various remembrance activities taking place in this country, and also because Finland’s participation in WWI did pose a very real policy problem for contemporary British statesmen. To conclude, the article will assert that the daring – sometimes outrageous – character of the Finnish covert operations make them particularly worthy of study from a military history perspective. Furthermore, this article will claim that the actions of the Finns had effects far beyond their immediate locales, were inexorably linked with the Russian Revolution, and laid the foundations for the Finnish declaration of independence in 1917.

A ‘Forgotten’ War

Finland’s history is dominated by its involvement in the Second World War. This is the case both internally, in the Finnish national consciousness, and externally, in international attention. Occupying a cold and desolate corner of Europe, Finland only ‘broke into the world’s awareness on 30 November 1939 when she was subjected to Russian land, air and naval attack.’¹ Until she was unceremoniously accosted by her enormous eastern neighbour, Finland had maintained a relatively low profile in international war history. However, it would be a grave mistake to assume this means Finland’s past is not wrought with war. While the present article does not offer scope for a detailed history, in summary, after the Finnish War of 1808-1809, Sweden was forced to cede its Finnish territory to Russia, with Finland becoming an autonomous region of the Russian Empire.² Therefore, Finland as a state did not exist until 1917, when she opportunistically declared independence, a movement which had been brewing for more than a decade prior, on the back of the Russian Revolution. Finnish participation in WWI is inexorably linked with this independence struggle.

Despite a history tarnished by war, WWI is conspicuously absent from Finnish national collective memory. In a recent conversation this author had with six Finnish adults in ages ranging from 25 to 75, no one was aware of the covert operations which took place almost literally on their doorstep during WWI. They were all knowledgeable about similar activities during WWII, with the eldest male even being able to give a guided tour of precise locations

¹ H. M. Tillotson, *Finland at Peace and War*, revised edn., (Michael Russell, 1996), p. 1.

² See Tom Gullberg, Nils Erik Forsgård, Joachim Michwitz (2008), *Finskt krig svenskt arv – finlands historia genom nyckelhålet 1808-1809* [Translated title: *Finnish war, Swedish inheritance – Finland’s history through the keyhole 1808-1809*] (Söderströms, 2008).

in the Ostrobothnian archipelago where weapons smuggling had taken place. Weapons smuggling was also a significant aspect of WWI covert operations, and memorial plaques have been placed in locations where such actions were performed.³ However, even with these attempts to commemorate operations conducted in WWI, the anecdotal knowledge exhibited by the local populace offers evidence that it is the WWII operations which endure in Finnish memory.

The evidence offered by Finnish oral history is corroborated by commemorative monuments. In the local church in the small village of Pörtom, where the aforementioned individuals reside, the war memorial and cemetery are dedicated to fallen WWII heroes, with hardly any mention of WWI. Pörtom's situation is typical of both the Ostrobothnian region specifically and Finland in general. Memorials throughout the country have been erected in honour of those who fought and died in WWII, with WWI remaining a secondary consideration, almost an afterthought. This is in stark contrast to Britain, where war memorials dedicated to the 1914-1918 conflict are hugely prominent and the trenches occupy a privileged place in the national memory. It can be argued that the efforts exerted and sacrifices made by Britain in WWI are comparable to those exerted by Finland in WWII (in terms of the high proportion of families who were directly affected) and this has in turn dictated how the respective wars are remembered, a point to which we will return further below.

A statistical analysis of relevant National Library databases reinforces the idea that Finland's involvement in WWI has been overshadowed by the monumental efforts exerted and the surprising results achieved in WWII. Research was conducted by using the term 'Finland World War' to search the catalogues of the British Library, National Library of Finland, National Library of Russia, and National Library of Sweden – for which the localised 'Finland Krig' ['Finland War'] was used as search term. It was found that out of a total of 862 catalogue items, 281 items covered

WWII, and only 37 items pertained directly to WWI (see Appendix A).⁴ While by no means a perfect quantitative study, the basic results illustrate that Finnish participation in WWI is virtually forgotten in the historical literature. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to assume that very few, if any, of the 37 items are dedicated specifically to the covert operations which are the focus of this article. By comparison the British Library catalogue returns almost 10,000 search results regarding WWI in general and covert operations involving the larger belligerent nations have received due treatment by historians. Consider the well-known names of Mata Hari (92 results) and T E Lawrence (13,634 results), both of whom were engaged in covert-style operations, and even John Buchan's swashbuckling hero Richard Hannay (16 results).

The preceding paragraphs demonstrate that Finland's part in WWI, including covert operations, has been largely 'forgotten', at least in the official literature of other key states involved. There is therefore scope to uncover some of this lost history and bring to the forefront one of the remote corners of the Great War. However, before exploring the nature and impact of the operations which makes them alluring for academic study, it is first worth analysing the reasons why this aspect of WWI has not been remembered to the extent it deserves.

Why 'Forgotten'?

Despite WWI playing such an integral role in the formation of Finland as the modern state we know today, it is also understandable why this episode of the country's history has been 'forgotten'. This study posits that there are a number of reasons for this; some relevant to Finland itself and some to British scholarship.

⁴ British Library Catalogue; (http://explore.bl.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?dscnt=1&dstmp=1396991747554&vid=BLVU1&frOmLogin=true); National Library of Finland Catalogue (<http://www.nationallibrary.fi>); National Library of Sweden Catalogue (<http://www.kb.se/english/find/catalogs/regina/>); National Library of Russia Catalogue (http://primo.nlr.ru/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do)

³ K-G Olin, *Tärningskast på liv och död* [Rolling dice on life and death] (Olimex, 2008), pp. 336, 362, 368

The covert operations were conducted both to hamper Russian involvement in WWI and as part of an independence movement against Russia's occupation of Finland. With the Russian revolution in 1917 and an increase in left-wing political activism in Finland, it became inevitable that the struggle for independence would simultaneously mean a civil war against Finnish 'Reds', who were supported by the Bolsheviks.⁵ Like many civil wars, the Finnish conflict from January to May 1918 was bitter and it seems resentment associated with this may have contributed to WWI being deliberately 'forgotten'. The dearth of Finnish literature on this period of their history may reflect a desire in Finland to leave the civil strife, including flirtations with communism, behind and move forward as a modern democratic state (perhaps comparable to modern Germany's active distancing from the Nazi regime, or Japan's reluctance to engage with its imperial past). This disdain for the Reds was aptly demonstrated when, in 1918, Yrjö Eriksson – a Red who had been executed for treason – was not afforded a proper burial and relatives were not allowed to erect a gravestone until several decades later.⁶ A desire to actively forget this dark episode in Finland's history has therefore contributed to covert operations in WWI being left out of the national consciousness.

It was briefly mentioned above that the proportion of Finns affected by WWII was greater than WWI. During WWI, due to Finnish resistance, Russia was never able to mobilise Finns to fight in the Russian army.⁷ Despite incentives, only a mere 544 Finns volunteered to fight for Russia.⁸ Adding to this some 2000 Jägers who were trained at Lockstedt in Germany and saw action with the Kaiser's army on the eastern front, we find a relatively modest sum of Finns who fought in WWI.⁹ In WWII, by comparison, there was a general mobilisation against the Soviet invasion

resulting in 295,000 Finns taking up arms.¹⁰ This huge disparity in the amount of people who directly participated in the conflicts goes some way to explain why WWII has left an indelible mark on Finnish history, whereas WWI has been relatively forgotten. This effect is increased when we take into account those who indirectly participated – families of combatants and civilians caught in the fighting. Given the enormous scale of the Soviet invasion – comprising their 7th, 8th, 9th and 14th Armies totalling some 470,000 men – it is not surprising that a large portion of the Finnish population were in some way affected.¹¹ The differing levels of participation and amount of people affected therefore account for why WWII has had a stronger effect on the Finnish national consciousness than WWI.

If WWI as a whole has been largely omitted from Finland's history, the covert operations conducted during the course of the war have been even more so. The secretive nature of these operations may well account for this. Due to their extralegal nature, activities such as weapons smuggling were often undertaken using false names and passports as to mislead both authorities and intelligence agencies.¹² With such precautions, it is only natural that protagonists could not write about their activities in diaries or letters. There is therefore a lack of written records of these covert operations. If the history is only preserved orally, there is a danger of it disappearing once the participants die, or if they are unwilling to discuss their experiences. This certainly seems to be the case with Finnish covert operations in WWI, because while we are privy to some of these operations, there are almost definitely many more which we do not have any knowledge about.¹³ Reluctance of participants to discuss their experiences later on, for example in interviews or memoirs, most likely stems from any combination of four reasons: an active desire to repress memories, both personally and nationally (as elucidated above); upholding official secrecy classifications; fear

⁵ Olin, p. 293

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 470

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 521

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40; Tillotson, p. 315; Anssi Vuorenmaa (a), 'Finland's defence forces: the years of construction 1918-1939', in Ilkka Seppinen, *et. al.*, eds. *Aspects of Security – The Case of Independent Finland*, *International Review of Military History*, No. 62 (1985), p. 40

¹⁰ Tillotson, p. 127; Anssi Vuorenmaa (b), 'Defensive strategy and basic operational decisions in the Finland-Soviet Winter War 1939-1940', in Seppinen. *Aspects of Security*, p. 77

¹¹ Vuorenmaa (b), *Ibid.*

¹² Olin, p. 210.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

of reprisals or prosecution for illegal activities; and career objectives (many Jägers rose to high commands in the Finnish armed forces). The very nature of the operations therefore makes them prone to be 'forgotten', both in national consciousness and scholarly work.

In Britain, Finland's participation in WWI was a difficult issue, as it endangered the entente with Russia. In the build-up to the war and until the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed in March 1918, British policy was therefore to largely ignore the 'question of Finnish autonomous rights', lest the alliance with Russia be disturbed.¹⁴ Later in 1918, Britain was trying to get Russia back into the war, or at least nullify the positive effects of the Revolution for Germany. It took some time for British policymakers to realise that the Finnish Whites could be useful allies against the Bolsheviks; so by the autumn of 1918 before the full effects of cooperation could materialise, the war ended and Finland fell by the wayside of more pressing British post-war priorities.¹⁵ So, after being purposefully ignored at the beginning of the war despite apparent knowledge of the Finnish struggle for independence, once Finland achieved this she became a forgotten northern outpost. As we have seen, this continued until the Soviet invasion in WWII, where Scandinavia was a much more prevalent theatre and Finland is much more remembered.

The British experience on the Western front in WWI was so monumental and so generation-defining that there is little room in the historical literature for works on other theatres of that war.¹⁶ Indeed, it has been pointed out that 'we are apt to forget many of the smaller and less important campaigns...especially those in which this country held only a watching brief.'¹⁷ This is similar to the Australian experience, which is entirely dominated by the Gallipoli campaign and the dawning glory of the ANZACs. In Britain, almost every battle in Flanders has been subject to a number of military history works,

¹⁴ Eino Lyytinen, *Finland in British Politics in the First World War* (Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1980), p. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁶ Peter Englund, *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War* (Profile Books, 2011), p. x.

¹⁷ Anon., 'A Half-Forgotten War', *The British Medical Journal* (14 January 1928), p. 68.

analysed from different perspectives, perhaps taking into account new, obscure pieces of evidence that may or may not alter our understanding of events. This preoccupation with the Western front has meant that literature about other theatres of the Great War has become rare. This is of course understandable, as people want to read about where their relatives and countrymen fought. In WWII, British troops fought in geographically dispersed locales, leading to a corresponding breadth of historical literature. In WWI, by comparison, very few British troops left the confines of Europe and those who did often did so in secret, like Major General Dunsterforce's 'Hush-Hush Army' operating in Mesopotamia.¹⁸ The key point here is that in Britain there is a dearth of literature about any other theatres than the Western front as this was such an integral part of Britain's experience of WWI. Because it bore very little influence on the outcome of the war and in no way affected the average Tommy, Finland's participation in WWI is unsurprisingly not remembered in British scholarship.

Finally, when historical literature does turn eastward during this time period, it is inevitably to discuss the Russian Revolution of 1917. Of course, this remains one of the defining events of modern history, the effects of which are still resonant today. The wealth of primary and secondary sources on the subject makes it attractive to a scholar compared to the lack of material on Finland. However, here it is argued that Finland's participation in WWI deserves further study not only by its own merit, but also because it is inexorably linked with the Russian Revolution.

Why Remember?

The above sections have outlined the extent to which Finnish covert operations in WWI have been 'forgotten' in Finland and neglected in Britain, and provided analysis of the reasons why this is the case. This section will offer evidence to justify why these operations deserve to cast off their 'forgotten' status and assume a more prevalent position in academic

¹⁸ Major General L. C. Dunsterforce, *The Adventures of Dunsterforce* (Edward Arnold, 1920), p. v.

military history literature. Four key arguments will be employed to achieve this: the character of the operations, their influence on the course of WWI beyond Finland's borders, their links to the Russian Revolution, and their role in the shaping of Finnish independence.

Before looking at these specific issues, it is worth making the general point that one should remember more than one's own country. With regards to the British scholarly literature's approach to WWI, we would do well to recall Robin Winks' assertion that 'until we fully understand that he who only his own country knows, knows not his country, we will remain locked in the castle of our exceptionalist historiography.'¹⁹ The British fascination with their own experience has led to a very narrow bibliography of the war and it would be beneficial to widen this conservative approach. Though the total inclusiveness of the Annales School of history is not attainable given the lack of source material in the Finnish case, there is certainly scope to consider national experiences other than those of the Anglosphere and the Western front. This will result in a more comprehensive understanding of the war, and perhaps a greater appreciation of the finer nuances of the conflict and modern history.

While each nation will argue that their particular experience of WWI deserves further study, the Finnish covert operations are so exceedingly daring and tenacious they merit academic coverage on the basis of their character alone. This article does not offer scope to outline the particulars of every operation conducted during the course of the war, but one especially exemplifies Finnish boldness and endurance, and represents the acme of covert warfare. The operation in question is Otto von Rosen's expedition into the Finnish wilderness in the winter of 1916. Leading a trio of German-trained Jägers, von Rosen set out with a 'varied array of explosive devices' with the aim of penetrating into Russia as deep as the White Sea coast and detonating a

railway bridge.²⁰ The journey, potentially covering some 500 kilometres, was to be undertaken entirely by foot and ski. If this mission was not ambitious enough, von Rosen's arsenal contained small vials of anthrax disguised inside sugar cubes, with which he intended to wage biological warfare.²¹ Though ultimately unsuccessful in both demolishing the bridge and spreading a deadly disease, von Rosen's expedition is a tale of raucousness and audacity. An indication of these traits can be seen in the group's repeated avoidance of border patrols by the employment of field craft and skiing abilities; duping of officials with coolly told tall-tales, falsified documents, and even with a bout of vodka drinking; and an improvised Christmas spent with indigenous Samis. However, perhaps the most memorable episode occurred when von Rosen managed to axe himself in the foot while chopping firewood. In typical dry Finnish manner he utters: 'Yep, this feels nice, call the doctor.'²² The joke, of course, was that the quartet was out in the wilderness, in minus twenty degrees Celsius temperature, several days skiing from nearest civilisation. The tale of von Rosen's expedition exemplifies the spirit the Finnish Jägers displayed throughout the war. Finland should celebrate characters and actions such as these, as they reaffirm perceived Finnish character traits.

Though fighting in a remote frontier of WWI, the covert operations performed by Finnish Jägers did affect the course of the war for other, more prominent, nations. For example, despite spending over 1.1 billion roubles on armaments in the years leading up to the conflict²³, the Russian armed forces were woefully unprepared to make war on the Triple Alliance.²⁴ For this reason Russia was reliant on

¹⁹ Robin W. Winks, 'Review of *America's Forgotten Wars: The Counterrevolutionary Past and Lessons for the Future* by Sam C. Sarkesian', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 484 (March 1986), p. 180.

²⁰ Olin, p. 212 [Original Swedish: 'varierande arsenal av sprängämnen', author's own translation].

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 220 [Original Swedish: 'Joo, det här var skönt det, ring efter doktorn', author's own translation.].

²³ Peter Gatrell, 'Industrial Expansion in Tsarist Russia', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 1982), p. 105.

²⁴ See Daniel W. Graf, 'Government, Industry and Rearmament in Russia, 1900-1914: The Last Argument of Tsarism by Peter Gatrell', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Apr. 1997), p. 384; and chairman of the Tsar's Council of Ministers admission in William C. Wohlforth, 'The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-

supplies from her Entente allies. With the Dardanelles being closed off, the only transport route was therefore via Murmansk in the north.²⁵ The key location here was the port of Archangelsk, which Finnish operatives targeted with explosives twice in late 1916 and early 1917, causing ‘almost unfathomable’ destruction resulting in upwards of 3000 deaths and material damage estimated at several hundred million roubles.²⁶ While the effect on Russia was direct, the most momentous results were the indirect effects it had on Romania. Despite the distance between them, Allied supplies from Archangelsk were ‘critical to Romania’s survival’ due to Finnish covert operations the Romanian army was severely undersupplied.²⁷ K-G Olin deems that the operations in Archangelsk were of ‘decisive significance’ in this matter and eventually led to Romanian defeat in three months.²⁸ While the ultimate outcome of the war may not have been swayed one way or the other, the influence of Finnish covert operations on Romania’s participation in the conflict shows that these operations had effects far beyond Finland’s immediate locale. By influencing the course of WWI, the operations have therefore helped shape not only Finland’s history, but also those of other nations involved in the conflict.

As mentioned above, the most important event of 1917 was the revolution in Russia, which first overthrew the Tsarist regime and later saw the Bolsheviks seize control of the country. Finland, as an autonomous region of Russia, got swept up in these events, causing ‘serious divergence in political opinion’²⁹ and ‘brought forth demands for an armed rising and revolution.’³⁰ In the ensuing civil war, the Finnish leftists strongly identified with the

Bolsheviks and received aid from them in the form of weapons and Russian troops stationed in the country. The Finnish Jägers, the perpetrators of the covert operations outlined above, fought for an independent Finland and strongly opposed the leftists. In this they joined Finnish Whites who strove against communism and the influence of Russia in Finland. This conflict between Reds and Whites is therefore a precursor to the civil war which engulfed Russia in the years following the Revolution. Unlike the Russian civil war, in the Finnish conflict the Whites prevailed and this opens up possibilities for comparative studies between the two.

It can be argued that the single most important long-term consequence of the covert operations and the Jägers who conducted them were in securing Finnish independence from Russia. Olof Enckell has stated that ‘for the happy outcome of the war of independence, the Germany-travellers [the Jägers] played an enormous, even decisive, role.’³¹ Two key contributions were made by Jägers in this regard. The first was the successful covert reception of the steamship *Equity* which, after a perilous journey from Germany, arrived in the Ostrobothnian archipelago at the end of October 1917 carrying 150 tonnes of rifles, machine guns, pistols, ammunition and other war materials.³² Though not a huge volume, the weapons were sufficient to give the Whites the edge in a war where resources were scarce. The second contribution was the Jägers themselves who, with their German training, returned to their homeland as heroes. General Gustaf Mannerheim, commander-in-chief of the Whites, proclaimed that ‘Finland welcomes you as its best sons. In the creation of Finland’s army we will look to you as leaders and teachers.’³³ Forming the nucleus of the officer corps, the Jägers were instrumental in building the prevailing White army, and later in leading the armed forces of independent Finland. The evidence for this lies in post-WWI careers of

194 Balance’, *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Apr., 1987), p. 368.

²⁵ Olin, p. 107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235 [Original Swedish: ‘nästan ofattbar’, author’s own translation.]

²⁷ Glenn E. Torrey, ‘Romania in the First World War: The Years of Engagement, 1916-1918’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Aug., 1992), p. 464.

²⁸ Olin, p. 236 [Original Swedish: ‘avgörande betydelse’, author’s own translation.]

²⁹ Lieutenant Colonel J.O. Hannula, *Finland’s War of Independence*, Faber and Faber, 1939, p. 32.

³⁰ Lyytinen, p. 87.

³¹ Quoted in Olin, p. 457 [Original Swedish: ‘För frihetskrigets lyckliga utgång spelade Tysklandsfararna en enorm, ja, utslagsgivande roll’, author’s own translation].

³² *Ibid.*, p. 337.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 429 [Original Swedish: ‘Finland välkomnar er hennes bästa söner. I skapelsen av Finlands arme kommer vi se till er som ledare och lärare.’, author’s own translation].

Jägers, of whom 800 became officers and no less than 50 reaching the rank of General.³⁴ Many of these were still in service when the Soviet Union invaded in 1939 and therefore helped secure a free Finland in both World Wars. For their decisive role in attaining and maintaining Finnish independence, and helping create the Finland we know today, the Jägers should be remembered.

Conclusion

In military history, Finland is most known for its stalwart defence against the Soviet war machine in WWII. Whilst this is certainly warranted, it is truly a shame that Finland's involvement in WWI, particularly the covert operations by specially trained Jägers, have been relatively 'forgotten'. These operations had effects far beyond their immediate targets, and they deserve more coverage in academic literature. Intimate links to one of the twentieth century's most monumental events, the Russian Revolution, is further justification for this. More importantly for Finns, however, the manner in which the operations were conducted reaffirms the perceived character traits of the Finnish people, and covert actions during WWI laid the foundations for the independence of Finland. In conclusion, therefore, to gain a broader appreciation of WWI as a whole and to understand the origins of modern Finland, we ought to look back at this period of history and remember those who battled against the odds and elements in this remote north eastern corner of Europe.

Appendix A

Table 1

	Library			
	British Library	National Library of Finland	National Library of Russia	National Library of Sweden
Search Term	'Finland World War'	'Finland World War'	'Finland World War'	'Finland <u>Krig</u> '
Total Hits	366	335	54	107
World War One	11	17	4	5
World War Two	156	96	4	25
War of 1808-1809	0	0	0	18

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 513.