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## ***Transition from war to peace and cultural history: The case of Finland, 1944-1948***

### **Abstract**

Although cultural history has been an increasingly successful approach to history in general, it has been less utilized in attempts to understand the difficult transition from war to peace after WWII. This article discusses the uses and benefits of examining that period from 1944 to the early 1950s from the perspective of cultural history – concentrating on the Finnish case. In the first half of the article, a general discussion on the state of the art is offered. In the latter half, the article builds on insights central to cultural history to show how it can add to our understanding of the era. It argues that the culturally constructed and symbolically ordered narratives of ‘*survival*’, ‘*sacrifice*’ and ‘*self-control*’ made up a normative framework in which the meaning of Finland’s post-war transition from war to peace was given. In addition, the framework offered the Finns moral guidelines and lessons from the past as what to do in order to successfully return to peace. Exploring these perceptions from a theoretical framework in which narratives are placed into the core of cultural structure and practice, it is argued that the press created a homogenous meaning for the immediate postwar reconstruction which the majority of the society understood in a homogenous way.

*Keywords:* cultural history, narrative, World War Two, war to peace transition, Finland, the press.

**W**riting in 1948, Finnish left-wing journalist and cultural critic Matti Kurjensaari had the following to say about the transition from war-to-peace: *‘The political change happened overnight but the mental transformation is still going on...the war reparations are easy to carry out if contrasted to the mental burden.’*<sup>1</sup> In terms of the historiography on the postwar Finland, his words ring equally true. While we know much about the political machinations and the changes which took place after the war – the ascendancy of the extreme left into politics, war reparations and Finnish-Soviet as well as Anglo-Finnish relations – there is much less knowledge on the ‘*mental transformation*’, pace Kurjensaari, which examines cultural and social-psychological landscape of ‘*transformation*’.<sup>2</sup> In historiography, then, Kurjensaari’s ‘*mental transformation*’ is still going on.

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<sup>1</sup> KURJENSAARI, Matti: *Taistelu huomispäivästä. Isänmaan opissa 1918-1948*. Tammi, Helsinki, 1948, 203.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent assessment on the immediate postwar international relations and diplomacy, see AUNESLUOMA Juhana: *A Nordic Country with East European Problems: British views on post-war Finland, 1944-1948*, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 37, (2012) 230-245 and RENTOLA,

However, in Finland, as elsewhere, cultural history has been increasingly popular way to examine the past, including World War Two era. Indeed, the current academic approach to wartime Finland is often labeled as ‘new military history’ (*Uusi sotahistoria*).<sup>3</sup> In essence, ‘new military history’ takes its cue from cultural history and history of mentalities, as the Finnish pioneers of such practice explain: ‘More than other historical approaches, cultural history examines and deconstructs national myths. Precisely, the wars of 1939-1945 have been canonized as part of Finnish national mythology; to its core which defines Finnishness.’<sup>4</sup> As the title of the book ‘a human at war’ (*Ihminen sodassa*) illustrates, instead of the ‘traditional military history’ which concentrates on battles, generals, military strategy and weaponry used, the ‘new military history’ places individuals and collectives with their experiences and memories to the core of investigation. Naturally, this, too, fits well into the sphere of cultural history, which, according to Anna Green, means emphasizing the many ways and layers of human subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> If cultural history, then, puts the emphasis on the experiences and memories of individuals and groups, it becomes perhaps more understandable that the official end of the war after the Armistice agreement with the USSR in September 1944 was not the end of the war for most participants. Granted, their memories lingered on and war-related events such as demobilization and paying for the war reparations continued during the peacetime, latter until 1952. Further, if one takes into account the groups such as war disabled, war widows and war orphans, it becomes clear that war frames – and keeps framing – the rest of their lives. Thus, in order to understand the meanings of the peace which followed the war, it is useful to turn into cultural history.

### **What is cultural history?**

Since Clifford Geertz’s influential work, historians of culture have increasingly sought to explain culture as hidden practices and customs which exist in society but cannot be explained in any other way than through symbols, that is, as Dan Stone puts its ‘aspects of society which stand for something else and that provide focal points for the functioning of, and hence, understanding of that society.’<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, (new) cultural history examines how meanings in society are seen through power relations as expressed in class, gender, race or religious relations. Thus, beyond examining texts, also other forms of social practices – for example memories, remembrance and rituals are taken into consideration. American

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Kimmo: *Great Britain and the Soviet Threat in Finland, 1944-1951*, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 37, (2012), 171-184.

<sup>3</sup> For example, KINNUNEN, Tiina – KIVIMÄKI, Ville (eds.): *Ihminen sodassa. Suomalaisten kokemuksia talvi- ja jatkosodasta*, Minerva, Jyväskylä, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> KINNUNEN – KIVIMÄKI (2006): 13.

<sup>5</sup> GREEN, Anna: *Cultural History: Theory and History*. Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2008, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> STONE, Dan: *Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History*, *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah*, 23, (2009) 53.

sociologist Anne Kane has argued, in turn, that the way in which different meanings are constructed in culture is perhaps the most important task of cultural history: *'meaning structure and meaning construction together form the basis for cultural explanation in historical processes.'*<sup>7</sup> According to her, the useful way to reveal meaning in cultural models is *'to study the 'active' component of culture structures, namely narrative', since cultural meanings serve as the guides or markers to which people turn when trying to interpret experience, that is to say that narratives are 'configurations of meaning, through which an individual and/or community comes to understand itself.'*<sup>8</sup> Indeed, cultural history is especially needed in order to deconstruct what could be called *'a memory conundrum'*. That is, on the one hand, the immediate postwar period was marked by unity and working together attitude, as the veterans and popular histories habitually argue while on the other, the basic social facts of the era certainly tell a story other than the national narrative of great unity: immediately after the war divorce rates as well as sexual offences rose sharply, rates of other forms of crime too, especially juvenile delinquency, skyrocketed, alcoholism was widely acknowledged problem, politics became more diversified than ever before. Thus, the task of cultural history – in this context – is to examine how such a dominant and nostalgic argument has been forged, starting with the transition from war to peace.

### ***Cultural history and the making of the meaning of war-to-peace transition***

According to Paul Connerton, the importance of examining collective memories through different manifestations of culture lies in the fact *'that a community is reminded of its identity as represented by and told in a master narrative.'*<sup>9</sup> Thus, by taking up Connerton's and Anne Kane's arguments, it is evident that in a historical explanation in which the constructive nature of culture is in focus, the ability to explain and analyze the process of meaning construction is necessary in order to understand the multilayered way in which societies operate. If we want to know more about how *'historical event'* such as the transition from war to peace has become to be understood in an idyllic and homogenous way in our modern culture, we need to return to the beginning of the process, to the early phase of the reconstruction, and examine it in its own contemporary context: how the meaning of the reconstruction started to take shape. By doing so, we will understand better why *'reconstruction era'* has become to mark a phase in the nation's history in which people's best qualities are shown and which is unified and coherent but which does not do justice to *'reality'* or experiences of the late 1940s.

Since 1944, the meaning of reconstruction in Finland has been produced and re-produced through cultural artifacts such as film, literature, exhibitions and

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<sup>7</sup> KANE, Anne: *Reconstructing Culture in Historical Explanation: Narratives as Cultural Structure and Practice*, History and Theory, 39 (2000) 314.

<sup>8</sup> KANE (2000): 315.

<sup>9</sup> CONNERTON, Paul: *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, 70.

political discourse to the point that the nostalgic vision of reconstruction is actually rather far from the lived past experience. One contemporary case serves to illustrate the point: in 2006, the leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* reviewed an opera (*Metsäooppera*) which had a historical theme. When it came to war years and postwar years, the reviewer had this to say: *'the opera walks us through the nation's collective memory and experience...the war's horrors and the nation's reconstruction including the war reparations which all are experienced collectively...we are with the people, work is hard and bread is sacred...for today's rootless youth this could be a fine history lesson.'*<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is doubtful whether this would be a fine history lesson, but it is a fine lesson on how history is actively used in culture – or as Bessel and Schumann observed, *'perceptions of present-day political, social and cultural developments are conditioned by a remarkable image of golden age stability and normality...'*<sup>11</sup> An important task of cultural historian – or any historian – is to go beyond these simplistic assumptions and dig deeper, for the return to *'normality'* was *'anything but normal'*, simple or easy.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the immediate postwar era is marked by increasing crime and divorce rates, juvenile delinquency, moral panic over alcoholism and sexual behavior, acute housing shortages and on-going rationing.<sup>13</sup> Yet, none of these themes make it into the dominant nostalgic vision despite the fact that the evidence is widely available, for example in the way of newspaper reporting or literature, forming the memory conundrum, mentioned above.

In the mainstream Finnish newspapers in 1944 the meaning of return to peace was given in three overlapping narratives which I have labeled as *'the narrative of survival'*, *'the narrative of sacrifice'* and *'the narrative of self-control.'* Taken together, these themes, when they entwined with people's everyday life and to certain extent structured it, constituted a normative framework of rules and guides how people were supposed to be – a master narrative of sorts and a tool for the construction *'collective autobiography'*.<sup>14</sup> In order to understand the significance of these narrative constructions when considering Finland's return to peace, it is useful to look at them in more detail. Although these narratives could be labeled in many different ways, I have chosen these terms as they were consistently used by newspapers, magazines and the radio – thus having a tangible rhetorical focus.

<sup>10</sup> Helsingin Sanomat, 11 January 2006.

<sup>11</sup> BESSEL, Richard – SCHAUMANN, Dirk (eds.): *Life After Death: Approaches to Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003: 13.

<sup>12</sup> BESSEL – SCHAUMANN (2003): 12.

<sup>13</sup> On the postwar crime, see TARJAMO, Kerttu: *Kansakunnan tulevaisuutta pelastamassa – viranomaisten keskustelu rikollisuudesta 1940- ja 1950-luvun Suomessa*. IN: KARONEN – TARJAMO (2006): 341–376. On the tense gender relations and sexuality, see NÄRE, Sari: *'Kuin viimeistä päivää' – sota-ajan sukupuolikulttuuri ja seksuaalinen väkivalta*. IN: NÄRE – KIRVES (2008). JUVONEN, Tuula: *Ruotsalaistaudin kourissa – Heteromaskuliinisuuden jälleenrakentaminen 1950-luvun Suomessa*. IN: KARONEN – TARJAMO (2006). On housing shortages, see MALINEN, Antti: *Korsuista kodittomuuteen. Rintamasotilaat asunnonhakijoina sodanjälkeisessä Helsingissä*, Historiallinen aikakauskirja, 2011, 62-73.

<sup>14</sup> CONNERTON (1989): 70.

### ***The Narrative of Survival***

First, the postwar narrative of survival was activated by the Armistice agreement between the Soviet Union and Finland on 19 September 1944. Despite the fact that Finland had managed to halt the Soviet offensive in summer 1944, the newly signed Armistice agreement gave a heightened sense of insecurity: the events in Romania and Bulgaria showed that the Soviet occupation – despite the agreement – was still possible. Thus, in this situation, surrounded by the volatile international politics, the Finnish press created a narrative of survival. The day after the agreement *Karjalan Sanomat* wrote that: *‘No matter what our burden shall be, we have to be able to carry it. It is not the first time that great hardships and trials occur...through centuries, there have been many, but the life has always moved on.’*<sup>15</sup> According to *Helsingin Sanomat*

*In this harsh period of our destiny, our consolation and reassurance is that many times in history Finnish people have had to experience tough ordeals and always survived. That is what is going to happen this time too, as long as we maintain unwavering faith in our future and will to live.*<sup>16</sup>

What is remarkable about the narrative of survival is its explicit utilization of the past. Importantly, the themes discussing *‘Finnish people’* and their past referred to something more or less unified and shared experiences, which meant that different readers, holding many different political opinions were drawn into collectively shared visions of the past and their lessons for the future. In terms of Paul Connerton, we could talk about *‘progressive narrowing of the focus’*, which was achieved by textually re-enacting the past.<sup>17</sup> According to Connerton, these commonly shared narratives help people to make sense of the past as *‘a kind of collective autobiography, with some explicitly cognitive components.’*<sup>18</sup> Thus, it seems hardly surprising, then, that these *‘explicitly cognitive components’* took up a life of their own which lives on in our current historical culture.

An example of what the functioning of Finland’s *‘collective autobiography’* and how the nation had overcome the challenges of peace, may mean in practice was offered by Professor Aulis J. Alanen in *Suomen Kuvalehti* in autumn 1944. In his view, *‘the answer’* to the question of what was the purpose of the fight [between 1941 and 1944] could be found in the past:

*Then and there none of our ancestors demanded explanations when it was the question of survival of our land and the people. We fought tooth and nail and after the battle those who had survived rebuild their dwellings out of ashes*

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<sup>15</sup> *Karjalan Sanomat*, 20 September 1944.

<sup>16</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat*, 20 September 1944.

<sup>17</sup> CONNERTON (1989): 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

*like Paavo the crofter. How many times Finnish people have had to start from the beginning.*<sup>19</sup>

Paavo the Crofter was one of the best-known fictitious figures from Finnish literature, which symbolized the 'good spirit' of agrarian Finland; hard work, faith in God and love of one's neighbors. In the story, Paavo, like the Biblical Job, is tested with hardships. It is, thus, no accident that Finnish politicians and public commentators used the symbolism from Paavo the crofter in 1944, since the 'Paavo narrative' offered cultural meanings that were instantly recognized by the majority of people in 1944. When these symbolic codes were attached to the current crises, the era of re-construction began to be forged as a traditional folklore narrative in the spirit of Paavo.

### ***The Narrative of Sacrifice***

During the war and immediately afterwards, national survival required sacrifices from every citizen – as symbolized by Paavo the Crofter. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that underneath the new peace-oriented talk about the USSR and its newly installed good will, the public arena was also filled with the talk about sacrifice – an unspoken fact was that about 90 000 Finns had sacrificed their lives at war and now, in the new postwar situation, more sacrifices were needed in order to honor the sacrifices already made during the war. In this way, it is evident that war and peace did not have an easily distinguishable line but many wartime anxieties still continued and new ones arose. In other words, in terms of the press' narrative construction of the immediate postwar situation, the line between war and peace was not obvious.

There are two layers of sacrifice which become distinguished by examining the rhetorical strategies of the press. First, everyone had to make sacrifices in order to fulfill the demands set in the Armistice treaty. The second set of sacrifices related much more explicitly to the everyday life, essentially to postwar structuring of gender roles. This type of narrative was especially directed towards women: As *Helsingin Sanomat* wrote, 'men returning from the frontlines have had to bear the hardest personal burden and responsibility of this nation's destiny while sacrificing the most. Homefront knows and acknowledges this fact.'<sup>20</sup> Adding to that, leading women's magazine, *Kotiliesi* reminded women: 'It is your turn to endure.'<sup>21</sup> Typically for the dominant view, the point of departure was that men's masculine authority, embellished by war, should dictate the relationship between man and woman:

*How extensive the change will be in those men who for a long time have been outside the influence of home, in an environment totally different than home,*

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<sup>19</sup> Suomen Kuvalehti, 40/1944, 1136.

<sup>20</sup> Helsingin Sanomat, 30 September 1944.

<sup>21</sup> Kotiliesi, 9/1945.

*experiencing shocks undreamt of, but at the same time uplifting shared spirit, eager sacrificial comradeship, and undividedly offering their lives, work and hobbies only to one sole goal, to defend Finland.*<sup>22</sup>

When masculine authority was constructed in such clear terms, the question remains, how were the wives expected to behave? A conservative female writer, pen-name 'Grandmother' had the answer: 'we Finns do not have time to seek selfishly our own happiness'. In other words, the Finns' – especially women's – duty was unselfish sacrifice for common good. This also applied when the returning man had „forgotten his old love (meaning the wife) and he believes that he has found more enduring happiness with someone at work or someone he met randomly (...) I have received many letters from wives whose men have momentarily forgotten their homes and duties towards it. But they were brave women who did not get depressed. They tried to understand the temptations men had far away from home and by forgiving everything they found love in a totally new way”.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, a letterbox section in the magazine, 'Grandmother's letterbox', was brimming to burst with this type of answers: Forgive and all will turn out good. They all shared the same basic tendency, holding that women had to sacrifice and suffer for men.

No doubt, many families followed this type of instruction. Yet, it is also clear that many did not as the postwar divorce rates testify. In fact, only recently have the legacies of such mental frameworks, and how they have been transmitted from one generation to the next, been taken under examination.<sup>24</sup> However, it can be argued that this type of normative narrative, designed to maintain the masculine hegemony, helped in the process of creating a very one-dimensional cultural atmosphere to which the whole master narrative of 'the miracle of reconstruction' could be built. This is further emphasized by the discourse about men's occasional infidelity. Overwhelmingly, it was accepted as a matter of nature, even if frowned upon. In May 1945, when divorce had made its way into public talk, a women's magazine *Eeva* conducted a mini-survey on women's attitude to divorce. Five well-known women were asked about their attitudes about men's adultery and all favored forgiveness over divorce: 'If man is unfaithful (...) let it pass with certain limits (...) vice woman will forgive little cheating. Making a mistake is human and there's no point in making a storm in a tea cup and think about divorce.'<sup>25</sup>

### **The Narrative of Self-Control**

Finally, it was clear that if the society was to operate within the frames of sacrifice and survival, both individuals and collectives were required to

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<sup>22</sup> Kotiliesi 20/1944, 588. Emphasis added

<sup>23</sup> Kotiliesi 20/1944, 588.

<sup>24</sup> KIRVES, Jenni - NÄRE, Sari and SILTALA, Juha (eds.): *Sodan kasvattamat*. Helsinki: WSOY, 2010 and KUJALA, Erkki: *Sodan pitkä varjo. Sota-ajan lasten pitkä elämä*. Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> *Eeva* 5/1945, 4-5.

exhibit a great deal of self-control. Until now, Finnish historical research into newspapers has not dealt with self-control as a social-psychological or cultural process. Instead, the investigations into newspapers role in the immediate postwar years have almost exclusively dealt with the more institutional form of self-control, that is the press' self-censorship regarding matters relating to the Soviet Union and foreign politics.<sup>26</sup> Yet, in the press' rhetoric, the virtue of exercising self-control was not only implemented as a journalistic policy, but the press actively advocated that the private citizens do the same.

For example, the Minister for Interior Kaarlo Hillilä's radio speech on 20 September which was printed in verbatim in the press the following day, left no doubt about government's – and the press' – attitude. *Helsingin Sanomat* published the headline 'Absolute duty to retain self-control', according to which 'every citizen must whip itself with the knotted whip of self-control and make sure that as far as he is concerned, law and order is maintained.'<sup>27</sup> What is more, with an omnipresent authority, the Field marshal and the President Mannerheim reminded the soldiers in his Order of the Day, issued a few days after the Armistice agreement: '*My soldiers! [...] I am convinced that you take up these [peacetime] tasks with the same vigor, devotion and self-control which I have learnt to see in you in your warpath and which I have always admired in you.*'<sup>28</sup> In the same way, too, the importance of retaining self-control was discussed in the leading women's magazine *Kotiliesi*: '*healthy self-control is always needed, but especially when an individual, home or a nation is met by hard challenges...*' The writer, a well-known figure in Finnish education, continued, '*and we humble citizens who in our hearts grieve and worry about the future of our fatherland, let us learn in the difficult moment the noble, love-guided difficult skill of self-control...let us work and pray.*'<sup>29</sup> These examples could be multiplied many times over. For example, the *Helsingin Sanomat* columnist, pen-name 'Eero' (Lassi Hiekkala) repeatedly advocated 'patience and common sense' in his writings. Eero was keen to point out that even if the people felt that Finland had suffered great injustice at the war's end, the Finns were required to humbly recognize the realities of stately politics: '*we have been pushed now wiser, brisker, and with solemn minds to walk towards brighter future.*'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example SALMINEN, Esko: *Aselevosta kaappaushankkeeseen. Sensuuri ja itsesensuuri Suomen lehdistössä 1944-1948*. Otava, Helsinki, 1979. SUISTOLA, Jouni: *Kylmä sota paleltaa: Kylmän sodan alku Suomen johtavassa sanomalehdistössä*. Pohjois-Suomen historiallinen yhdistys, Oulu and Rovaniemi, 1994; USKALI, Turo: '*Älä kirjoita itseäsi ulos: suomalaisen Moskovan-kirjeenvaihtajuuden alkutaival 1957-1975*'. Jyväskylän yliopisto, Jyväskylä, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat*, 21 September, 1944.

<sup>28</sup> Mannerheim's the Order of the Day, N<sup>o</sup> 132 given on 22 September 1944. See [mannerheim.fi/pkaskyt/s\\_paiva.htm](http://mannerheim.fi/pkaskyt/s_paiva.htm) Accessed 17 December 2012.

<sup>29</sup> *Kotiliesi* 6/1945.

<sup>30</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 September, 1944, 3.



### ***Conclusion***

If we put all these narratives together, it is possible to see how their overtly instructional tone, with demands of unity, self-control and sacrifice shaped the framework in which people were required to return to peace. This narrowly defined narrative and the process of making the meaning of postwar reconstruction was repeated over and over again with slight variations of these themes mentioned here. Although economic, political and military history provides very useful context in which return to peace was achieved, an insight central to cultural history, to look into the ways how people were offered meanings to the situation in which they found themselves, is also immensely important if we want to learn how, indeed, the Finns and Europeans got out the era of violence which was unprecedented in the history of mankind.