The Holocaust as History Culture in Finland

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The Holocaust has in the post-Cold War era provided different societies with the possibility to discuss and debate their historical development in the 20th century. The Holocaust means different things in different states. For states like Germany and Israel that have been directly involved and affected, a historical debate about the Holocaust constitutes at the same time a reflection on their own national identity. In these cases the Holocaust has activated a political and identity-based historical and actual interest (Karlsson/Zander 2006).

For states like Sweden, that was not directly involved, the debate has been more ideological, and focused on themes such as values and human rights, but also on the basic subject competence of history. During the latter part of the 1990s this perspective was connected with the debate of Neo-Nazism and skepticism and Holocaust-denial. Here, the post-Cold War debate has had a strong focus on moral and values, and has involved also other genocides than the Holocaust.[1]

Several studies have been published about the reasons for making the Holocaust the most important object in the debate of historical identity and historical consciousness in the post-Cold War Europe. In this article I restrict myself to Finland and the Finnish historical discussion – or non-existing discussion – about the Holocaust. Nevertheless, also the Finnish case must be related to the general context, not only of the post-Cold War debate, but also to the general context of post-Second World War debate in Europe in the era after 1989.

1 For example Rosenbaum 2001 and Gerner/Karlsson 2005.

The leading argument in this article is that the Finnish silence in relation to the Holocaust must be understood in the context of some more tragic, sensitive and complex aspects of Finland's own history, or at least how some of these historical phenomena have been interpreted in the historical debate during the last decades.

The general (Western) European discussion during the 1990s about Holocaust-deniers and Neo-Nazism was also introduced in Finland, but the question never grew into such a big political issue as in Sweden. While Sweden became a world leader in the new international debate on the Holocaust, Finland handled the newly arisen interest in a more formalistic way as a technical issue for the National Board of Education. Especially Swedish-speaking schools in Finland were also at quite an early stage inspired by some didactical models from Sweden (and Norway), as for example the White Buses-projects and the Swedish school book "Om detta må ni berätta" (also in English with the title "Tell ye your children"). The book was later translated into Finnish with a shorter supplement, on the initiative of the National Board of Education.[2] The supplement is related to the debate in Finland in 2000-2001 about the expulsion of eight Jewish refugees to Germany, and further on to Auschwitz-Birkenau (Bruchfeld/Levine 1998; Bruchfeld/Levine 2001). I will return to that debate later in this article, but it is interesting to note that a national authority was eager to explain, and in some extent even to contend the official version of what really happened in Finland during the War. I will argue that this is quite illustrative for the Finnish historical debate of Finland's role in World War II during the period 1941-1944 in general, and for the relation to Nazi Germany in particular (Sana 2003).

Like all the other members of The Council of Europe, Finland has celebrated the 27th of January as the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust and the Prevention of Crimes against Humanity since 2001. Still, the reason for flying the flag that day seems to be quite unknown to the

2 Since the first constitution in 1919 of the newborn Finnish sovereign nation-state, the state has had two official national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Swedish is spoken as mother tongue by approximately 6 percent of the population (about 300,000 people). Both language groups have their own distinct and independent school systems, at least when it comes to school cultures, although the curricula and school laws are shared by both language groups. It is compulsory for every student to study the other national language in school, which should guarantee some kind of functional bilingualism. Fluency in both languages is required for work in state service, and also in officially bilingual municipalities (official bilingualism is reached when the minority language is spoken by 8% of the population, or has reached a number of 3000 persons). For a contemporary overview, see Sjöholm 2004 and Hansén 2004.

majority of the citizens of Finland. No official declaration about the reasons behind flying the flag has been made on that day, apart from the situation in many other European states. But, as has been mentioned many times in the academic discussion about the Holocaust in modern historical culture, the Holocaust is today an entry ticket to European values and identity, which was something that Finland actively strove for (Karlsson 2008; Levy/Sznaider 2006).

In comparison with Sweden, and also partly in comparison to the other Nordic countries, there seems to be a more remarkable political silence in Finland, especially in relation to the debate of the co-operation with Germany during World War II. The reason for the unwillingness to discuss the Holocaust theme has to do with the degree of involvement in the war. Sweden was indirectly involved through the active "non-military" co-operation with Germany, but Sweden was not occupied, as was the case with Norway and Denmark, and did not fight side by side with Germans at the front, which was the case with Finland during the period 1941-1944.The co-operation with Germany seems to be more politically sensitive than could be expected over a half decade after the war. An example of this sensitivity is the reaction that was provoked when the Swedish journalist and writer Henrik Arnstad during the autumn of 2006 tried to discuss Finland's close co-operation with Germany from a moral point of view. The core of Arnstad's argumentation was that Finland's choice of side was immoral and that Finland in reality fought for the same goals as the Third Reich. These reflections were very eagerly attacked by nationally oriented Finnish war historians (Forss 2006). It seems that it is more comfortable to play down the co-operation with Germany than to reflect upon what the co-operation looks like from a post-Cold War perspective.

The history of Finland involves all the crucial keywords that make an open discussion about the Holocaust sensitive. Finland has its own history of concentration camps, massacres and expropriations, and may therefore not have the same access to moralize about the inhuman actions during the World War II.

The Finnish Civil War

One of the crucial historical events that have had consequences for the attitudes today towards the discussion of the Holocaust is undoubtedly the Finnish Civil War during the spring of 1918. The Civil War is still a very sensitive event to handle in the Finnish political and historical debate, and also in history education in school (The article by Sirkka Aho-

nen elaborates the question on the relationship between the legacies of the Finnish Civil War and the Holocaust). One of the more delicate questions is connected to the naming of the event: "Civil war" is said to be the most neutral name, although it indicates that it was a war between two different political and ideological parties of Finnish citizens. For some right-wing "White" groups it is still important to talk about the "Freedom War", to mark that it was first and foremost a war against Russian bolshevism and a war for freedom from Russia. For some more left-wing "Red" groups it is, on the other hand, still important to describe the war in terms of a class struggle.

Irrespective of the name of the war, the Civil War is still a trauma in Finnish debate, not least from a human rights perspective. Terrorism, in the form of executions and both mental and physical torture, was common on both sides during the war, although the victorious White party's vengeance after the war is more known and debated. The documentation of different mass executions and massacres has been intensified since the 1990s, after being denied and silenced during many decades. The World War II and the more complicated relations to the Soviet Union did not make the discussion about these actions easier.

Besides massacres and executions, a prominent feature of the period immediately after the war were the concentration camps holding Red prisoners. About 50 000 Red soldiers or sympathizers were taken prisoner in May 1918, and the only available places to keep such a huge amount of people were at the evacuated Russian garrisons. The most infamous of the Red concentration camps – because of the high mortality – were those in the fortress of Sveaborg outside Helsinki and the garrison Dragsvik in Ekenäs, today functioning as the Swedish-speaking brigade of the Finnish army. The official reports for Dragsvik states that the camp had a total of 9 313 prisoners, of which over 3 000 died. The biggest mass grave in Finland is situated just outside Dragsvik. Most of the prisoners died of hunger, although hundreds were also executed (Lindholm 2005). Even though the grave was well-known by the older local inhabitants, the first official memorial at the place was not dedicated until 1988.

In the history culture of Finland a debate about historical inhuman actions, such as the Holocaust, easily turns into a discussion about inhuman actions within Finland. Mass graves, concentration camps and executions during the Civil War were not a part of the national success story. The Holocaust comes too close to the national trauma – and the non-usage of history has been the most-used method for avoiding painful discussions, not least on an international level.

Expulsion of Jews

One of the most sensitive questions in the Finnish World War II debate is, not surprisingly, the Jewish question. For several hundred years Finland had a small Jewish minority, which was well integrated into Finnish society, and with full religious rights. The Jewish minority was immediately entitled to vote when the universal suffrage (for men) was introduced in 1906. Like other minority groups, the Finnish Jews also served in the army during the war, both in the Winter War of 1939-1940, and in the Continuation War – in collaboration with Germany – in 1941-1944. This meant that Jewish soldiers in the Finnish army were under the risk of being confronted with German Nazi officers, a situation that actually occurred several times.

The Finnish government and army officers' defense of the Jewish minority is well documented, and it has been politically unproblematic to discuss the position of the native Jewish minority during the war. A crucial detail of the debate is connected to the group of Jewish refugees that arrived from Germany to Finland. As early as 1970 the journalist Elina Sana (Suominen) described how eight Jewish refugees were sent back to Germany in 1942. She could track the refugees, of whom two were children, to the concentration camp in Auschwitz. Her book "Kuolemanlaiva S/S Hohenhörn – juutalaispakolaisten kohtalo" (The Ship of Death S/S Hohenhörn – the Fate of the Jewish Refugees) was considered a very impressive academic work – it was even awarded the information prize of the state – but the issue was very sensitive, not least from a political perspective (Suominen 1979). Despite the encouraging critic of Sana's book, it did not result in a more visible debate about Finland's policy in relation to the Jewish refugees.[3] The expulsion of Jews was politically sensitive in a double sense. It was painful for both Finn-

3 This has been a general trend in the discussion of sensitive historical issues during the Cold War era in Finland: It has been possible to research in even very politically sensitive topics in narrower academic circles, the results have been made public, but a debate in a broader sense has been toned down. There has never existed any form of formal censorship, but editors and politicians have – in the politically very sensitive environment of the Cold War - not been very eager to debate sensitive aspects of national history in the public sphere: it was more important to take the sensitive relation with the Soviet Union into consideration. Therefore results of research from the 1970s could again be considered as "sensations" 40 years later. The Finnish use of concentration camps during the Continuation War is a good example of this phenomenon. Antti Laine wrote about the camps in his dissertation as early as 1982, but Henrik Arnstad (2009) could nevertheless write about the camps in his new book as if he was coming out with hitherto unknown facts.

ish historians and politicians to publicly discuss an act that in the 1970s was deemed as both politically and morally wrong. But the question of the expulsions also had a connection to the politics of 1979. When the first Austrian refugees of Jewish origin arrived at Helsinki on the ship *Ariadne* in the summer of 1938, the government and its minister of civil affairs, Urho Kekkonen, were implementing a very restrictive policy towards refugees. The refugees from *Ariadne* were allowed to stay in Finland, but the reason why remains unclear. One theory is that the Finnish consulate in Vienna had stamped a visa in the passports of the refugees without consulting the government. Still, the next ship that arrived with 53 refugees four days later was immediately sent back to Stettin. It is said that this happened on the direct order of the minister of civil affairs. These refugees, of whom some of them are said to have committed suicide, were later called "Kekkonen's Jews" by different historians. One outspoken motive for the government's policy at that moment during the war was to avoid "a Jewish question" in Finland.

In 1979, Kekkonen was already a legendary figure and president of the Republic of Finland, so the political climate did not lend itself to speaking openly about the Finnish actions towards Jewish refugees during World War II. At the end of the 1970s, President Kekkonen was considered to be the only political leader capable of handling the sensitive relations with the Soviet Union, which made it politically expedient to leave his reputation untarnished. This might be the main reason for toning down the academic discussion about the Jewish refugee-question during the War.[4]

The collaboration with the GESTAPO

Sana's book about Jewish refugees (1979) was quite eagerly criticized both by politicians and nationally oriented historians, and her audience was almost even more critical in 2003, when she followed up with the book "Luovutetut – Suomen ihmisluovutukset Gestapolle" (The Extradited – Finland's extraditions to the Gestapo), in which she describes the relation between Communism, Jewish ethnical background and extraditions (Sana 2003). Her theories about direct contacts between the Finn-

4 This so called "Finlandization aspect" was discussed in relation to historical research as early as 1991 by Timo Vihavainen. The concept "Finlandization" is generally understood to mean the Finnish adaptive policy in relation to the Soviet Union, characterized by informal ways of self-censorship and a tendency not to criticize the policy of Moscow.

ish Secret Police (VALPO) and its German counterpart the GESTAPO were too sensitive even in 2003.

On an academic level, the dissertation of Oula Silvennoinen (2008) on wartime relations between the secret police in Finland and in Nazi Germany seems to have started a more open and critical debate, although the theme is still regarded as politically and morally sensitive. Silvennoinen has been able to describe the growing co-operation between the two secret police organizations in a very convincing way. He quite laconically notes that the VALPO had to strengthen the co-operation with the GESTAPO in 1941 due to political reasons, with the aim to be perceived as a good ally. On the other hand, he also notes that several high-ranking figures in the VALPO had right-wing leanings, indicating how it might not have been so difficult for them to take such a radical step. The co-operation seems to have been very pragmatic during the war – sources confirm that the Finnish army systematically sent over Soviet war prisoners to the Germans, in several cases with the direct aim to execute the representatives of a common enemy (Silvennoinen 2008).

During the Cold War, Finland was handed over from the influence of one dictatorship to another, from Berlin to Moscow. From this point of view it is quite obvious that it was, not least on a political level, not very easy to debate the wartime relationship between Berlin and Helsinki in the new Cold War atmosphere. The handing-over of Soviet prisoners to the Germans was considered to be a war crime, and was not the most convenient issue to discuss with the Soviet leadership in the context of the problematic Finnish-Soviet relationship after the war.

In connection with the debate on the infrastructure of the Holocaust, it must also be mentioned that the Finnish authorities undoubtedly sent about forty Jewish refugees to build fortifications in Salla and the railway line to Kemijärvi. This is also mentioned in the supplement of "Tell ye your children", but in the text from the National Board of Education it says that "it is, in retrospect, difficult to understand why these Jewish refugees were sent up to the north as a labor force" for the German troops. Sana had a straight answer to that question already in her book from 1979. She mentioned that in July 1942 the minister of civil affairs, Toivo Horelli, had admitted that the reasons behind the measures were purely political.

In the supplement of "Tell ye your children" the co-operation between Finnish and German secret service authorities is not discussed at all. A general tendency in the Finnish historical debate is to tone down the active relationship between the Finnish secret police (VALPO) and its German counterpart, the GESTAPO. Elina Sana is almost the only one who has attempted to discuss those connections since the 1970s, and

for that reason she has obviously not been very popular in leading political circles.

Concentration camps in Eastern Karelia

As already mentioned earlier, the co-operation with Nazi Germany is still a very sensitive issue in Finland. The establishment and use of concentration camps by the Finnish army during the Continuation War 1941-1944 has made the connections to German war history and the Holocaust even more painful, and an open discussion about the Holocaust even more difficult.

During the autumn of 1941, the Finnish troops launched a powerful offensive into Soviet Union's Eastern Karelia, subsequently occupying Soviet territory. The military commander Mannerheim had beforehand given instructions on how the local Russian population was to be dealt with. It was clearly pointed out that the Russians should be detained and placed into concentration camps, and these were also established. The Finnish military authorities used the concept of concentration camps, which complicates the discussion of the possible links to the Holocaust even more. Every ten years, there is a surge of sensational articles about the Eastern Karelian concentration camps – "never exposed before" – and after a brief rush of media excitement the topic is once more buried in silence by, as it seems, a process of collective self-denial. The latest example is from spring 2008, when the historian Osmo Hyytiä published his new book "Helmi Suomen maakuntien joukossa – Suomalainen Itä-Karjala 1941-1944" (The Pearl of Finnish Provinces – Finnish Eastern Karelia 1941-1944). Hyytiä very systematically describes the Finnish administration of Eastern Karelia during the occupation period, including the concentration camps.

The book "Suur-Suomen kahdet kasvot" (The Double Faces of the Greater Finland), which was published by the historian Antti Laine in 1982, was the first study that initiated a debate about the Karelian camps. He was himself very careful to point out that there are no parallels or similarities between the German concentration camps during the war and the Finnish methods to isolate the Russians in Eastern Karelia. A big concentration and labor camp was opened in Äänislinna (Petrozavodsk; today Petroskoi) in October 1941. The highest number of inhabitants in the camps was reached during spring 1942, when up to 24 000 persons lived in different camps around Petrozavodsk. Laine estimated that the number of inmates made up 27 per cent of the total population in the occupied territories (Laine 2002; Lindholm 2005).

Following the public debate, it seems to be easy to associate the term "concentration camp" with the Nazi annihilation camps, although the Finnish concentration camps in Eastern Karelia had totally other functions. For political or military reasons a part of the Russian population was regarded a security risk for the occupying power. The Finnish military authorities in Eastern Karelia needed to transfer a lot of people to other parts of the territory for different reasons: Some of them were a security risk, others just needed protection, and some were marked out for expulsion but needed a place to stay during the waiting time.

Because of diseases and famine the mortality was quite high in the camps as well as outside the camps, but in general the camps were not places of executions and systematic torture. Still, the selection for the camps was based on nationality and ideological criteria, so from the selection perspective the Karelian camps could be compared with the German concentration camps. Irrespective of similarities or differences with the Nazi-German camps, the existence of Finnish concentration camps in Eastern Karelia has always been politically sensitive.

In public debate the existence of the concentration camps in Eastern Karelia has often been related to the cooperation between Finland and Nazi Germany. The animosity against a deeper discussion about the Holocaust is not only caused by the debate about the camps. When Hyytiä, in his book, pointed out that the military commander-in-chief, Marshal Mannerheim, established the camps on a direct order, the debate focused even more on how the legendary national hero was treated in relation to the concentration camps. Critical comments – not always based on facts – maintaining that Mannerheim's co-operation with Hitler and his employment of "Nazi methods" was more of an ideological than of a pragmatic nature, met with a strong reaction from the nationalist camp in defense of the Marshal.[5]

This nationally quite sensitive issue, indicating that there was a strong relation between the Finnish concentration camps and Nazi ideology, definitely reduced the chances for an open debate about the Holocaust in Finland. There was an obvious risk that some could draw the conclusion that Finland was involved in the structures of the Holocaust – which seems to have generated silence as well as a focus on the more heroic aspects of the war.

5 The debate on the website of the popular scientific journal Tiede, www.tiede.fi, gives illustrative examples.

Conclusions

History is in daily use all the time, and for different purposes. Some aspects of history are used very actively – for example for political or ideological purposes. Some other aspects of history are used more seldom or are actually denied – also for political or ideological reasons.

The lack of discussion concerning various chapters in the Finnish World War II history is best understood when interpreted in light of political or ideological reasons. Particularly important reasons are, as argued in this article, the co-operation with Nazi Germany, the extradition of Jews, the establishment of concentration camps under the territorial expansion during the Continuation War 1941-1944, and not the least, the massacres and mass graves from the Civil War 1918. These are all aspects of a past where the Finns have been victims, perpetrators, collaborators and heroes. The uses of national history in relation to a past that has been closely tied up to international events might create an existential void in the Finnish memory culture. As Karlsson makes clear in this volume, individuals have a need to arrange their histories "in order to uphold or intensify feelings of orientation, anchorage and identity in a society". Especially traumatic events need to be integrated into larger, common narratives. Such a void could create uneasiness both in the political institutions and estrangement amongst Finns from their established past.

The unwillingness to debate Finland's role in relation to the Holocaust, has also had consequences for the didactics of history, especially when it comes to education in schools and the content of the curricula. As already mentioned, the Swedish-speaking schools readily imported didactical and practical working methods from Sweden and Norway, while there has been more genuine passivity in the Finnish-speaking schools, although with some exceptions. The national history of patriotism and courage has overlooked – and continues to overlook – the more painful aspects of history of Finland. To all this should be added the complex political situation of Finland during the postwar period until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Bearing the position in the shadow of the Bolshevik Kremlin in mind, it is quite obvious why the discussion of the Holocaust and the relation to Nazi Germany was not at the top of the political agenda. The fate of Finland was to change from having close relations to Nazi Germany to being part of the sphere of interest of the Soviet Union, and with the strong influence of Moscow it was not appropriate to raise the question of concentration camps and executions. This might be quite understandable when discussing such a young na-

tion state as Finland; especially taking into consideration how young the nation state of Finland was in 1939-1945.

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