

The First 50 Years of Independent Finland



Last year I covered the pre-historical and historical periods of Finland and concluded the remarks with Finland becoming independent. Now I will cover the first 50 years of Independent Finland.

1. Declaration of Independence

When the Russian Empire collapsed, Finland's right-wing Senate and Parliament saw a long-awaited opportunity for independence. The Senate prepared a Declaration of Independence and the Parliament approved it on December 06, 1917. Russia acknowledged Finland's independence on December 31, 1917, France and Sweden on January 04, 1918 and Germany on January 06, 1918.

The independent Finland had about 3 million citizens as a new country.

2. Civil War

The Finns were far from being united as a people in the beginning. The Social Democrats wanted to unseat the elected right-wing government and launched a coup, which led to a Civil War on December 27, 1918. The 'Reds', the left-wing side, controlled Southern Finland and Helsinki, whereas the 'Whites', the right-wing side, controlled the rest of the country and governed from Vaasa. The Reds were supported by the Soviet Union

and the Whites by Germany. The Civil War ended on May 16, 1918 to the capitulation of the Reds. The war caused about 37,000 casualties, 75% being Reds and the balance Whites, Soviets and Germans. About 13,000 Reds died while being interned in camps after the Civil War. The end result caused deep bitterness and division that lasted up to the Winter War.

3. The Early Years

Early on Finland considered becoming a monarchy, but ended up being declared a republic on July 17, 1919. The first elected President was K. J. Ståhlberg, who served in 1919 – 1925. The 1920 Treaty of Tartu set the border between Finland and Russia and gave Finland access to the Arctic Ocean through Petsamo area.

After the Civil War a Land Reform made 126,000 farms private properties in a country with 70% of people being involved in agriculture and forestry and 10% in industries. The scars of the Civil War continued to create infighting between the left and right-wing supporters. On the legislative side Finland had a Prohibition in 1919 – 1932, which had a good intent, but it caused serious challenges in both abiding with laws and health of the people.

4. Winter War, Continuation War and Lapland War

Winter War was a 105-day heroic effort to save the country from Soviet occupation, the Continuation War an effort to get the lost areas back and the Lapland War was a condition of the peace treaty. The end result was an independent Finland, which most Finns regarded to be worth the sacrifices.

5. The Rest of the First 50 Years

The wars caused the loss of 93,000 soldiers, cities and towns in ruins, economic hardships and war reparations. The Finns re-built their country, built a new economy, paid all their debts and turned the country into an industrial producer with new machinery and factories. After the War Reparations were paid off, the Soviet Union continued to buy Finnish industrial goods through a Bi-Lateral Trade Agreement and helped the industry grow and also extend the export activity to the Western customers.

1960's was the decade of fast growth in industrial fields. At the same time the Finns got serious about creating a society with equal rights and treatment between men and women and in general between people of all ranks. Optimism started taking over the people's minds.