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Coming to Terms with a Dark Past

How Post-Conflict Societies
Deal with History



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3 Dealing with Representations of Guilt and Victimhood in Finland, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina

3.1 Guilt and Victimhood in Post-Civil-War Finland

The representations of guilt and victimhood were shaped by the deep social and cultural division during and after the civil war in 1918, and impeded political reconciliation for two – three generations.

The creation of moral representations intensified after the overwhelming victory of the White Army and the subsequent disaster of the concentration camps. To the victors, claims of victimisation and guilt justified the ruthless strategic cleansing measures. To the defeated, they helped in coming to terms with the painful losses. The enemy needed to be portrayed as perpetrators and one's own party as victims.

Finnish historians like Jari Ehrnrooth (1992) and Juha Siltala (2009) have sought to explain the persistent Red–White antagonisms in terms of social psychology of ancient hatreds embedded in group identities. In the work in hand, the mutual accusations and victimisations will be regarded as cultural representations in the post-war public memory. Apart from political rhetoric, monuments, commemoration rituals and school books are used as evidence of guilt-and-victimisation talk. Among secondary sources, studies by Turo Manninen (1980) and Esko Salminen (2007) provide examples of media representations during and after the war, and by Ulla-Maija Peltonen (1996), oral history testimonies.

3.1.1 Ascribing Guilt and Victimhood to the Reds

Red Guilt

Guilt was ascribed to the Reds by their adversaries, the Whites. Moral judgments evaded structural explanation and references to an institutional evil, and, instead, pointed at individuals and groups. The main bearers of guilt in White social memory were the local Red Guards and the Red leaders. The content of the attributions of guilt comprised *terror* against White civilians and *high treason* committed against the young nation-state.

The guilt in terms of *terror*, appearing as abject atrocities, was attributed to the Red Guards.

The atrocities were interpreted by the adversaries as acts of savage barbarity. The accusation of barbarity was elaborated by intellectuals, who, in the winter 1917–1918, were horrified by the Red terror and became disillusioned about the common people. Santeri Alkio, a writer and the founder of a socially liberal small farmers' party, accused the Reds of anarchism, presenting them as rogues who threatened the legal social order.⁹⁰ Another prominent author, Eino Leino, who previously had welcomed the March Revolution in Russia as a victory of the people over tyranny and light over darkness, wrote in 1918 about the Reds:

“[The rebellion] released all passions, lifted guns against legal government and parliament, felled all courts of justice and civil institutions, spread blood, death, horror and devastation even into far-away villages. It was like letting the devil free.”⁹¹

Leino regarded the Red revolution as a dark force that was unexpected, unreasonable and uncontrollable: “It was indeed a revolution of the poor, but of the mentally poor, who had nothing new or original to present.”⁹² Leino refused to consider that social and economic deprivation was the cause of the Red uprising.

Accusations against the lower classes reflected either condescension or straightforward class hatred. Condescension was to be expected as Finland at the time was an old-fashioned agrarian society where social relations were hierarchic and based on patriarchal control. With the patriarchal bond between the upper and lower strata loosening due to the modernisation of society, and socialism teaching the workers to assert themselves, the upper classes felt threatened. They personified the threat as a shapeless, malevolent crowd. Mistrust of the common people, or a straightforward class hatred, was instigated by a best-seller of the time, Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* and echoed in Finnish media and literature.

Accusations of a barbaric blood lust and bestiality were presented, not just in the declarations of the commander-in-chief of the White Army, but in a variety of public documents. For instance, according to the communion register held by the church in the parish of Akaa, an unemployed worker Juho Viktor Vuori was executed “as one of the biggest monsters of the Red terror”. Vuori had indeed been the leader of a group of 12–15 Reds who, as a special mobile contingent were to help to secure Red Finland from counterrevolutionaries. Vuori's group had murdered White suspects either shooting them or stabbing them with bayonets.⁹³ Similar characterisations of Reds were common in the documents of the military courts.

90 Manninen 1982, 206.

91 Quoted in Kunnas 1976, 102.

92 Quoted in Kunnas 1976, 103.

93 Tikka 2006, 148.

The case of the vicar of Mouhijärvi, a parish in Red Finland, illustrates the creation of myths of Red barbarity. Newspapers in White Finland quoted in early April 1918 a Swedish volunteer officer, who reported having found the vicar dead, with his tongue torn out from his mouth and his body slashed from the chin down to his genitals, with salt spread in the wounds. In documented reality the vicar had not been killed, neither had the officer visited the site. The same “eyewitness” reported that another vicar elsewhere had his eyes put out and his dead body positioned on a bayonet.⁹⁴

Folklorist Ulla-Maija Peltonen traces such stories of tortured priests back to myths originating in the time of the Great Wrath in the early eighteenth century, when Finland was invaded by the Russians and the consequent years of occupation left traumatic memories, which were processed into a rich tapestry of old-foe myths. The myths were reproduced in the context of 1918. Stories of cruel violence against clergymen were an essential part of the tapestry and became common in White propaganda. The Reds were dehumanised as “murderers”, “rogues”, “robbers”, “torturers”, “hooligans”, “a mob”, “arsonists”, “devils”, “wild beasts”, “jackals” and “human beings crueller than bloodthirsty beasts”, who “in a beastly way slaughtered and maimed their opponents”.⁹⁵ The imagery was often reminiscent of biblical stories of the ordeal of the Israelites harassed by Philistines. Such biblical stories were well known to rural church-going people.

The mythically loaded imagery was used by the Whites to deny the Reds dignity in the military courts and to refuse them amnesty. According to the protocols of the military courts the Reds were judged as ill-meaning individuals. Their life histories were checked in order to find proof of a criminal mind-set. The excessive violence was represented in terms of an atavistic blood lust, irrational hatred and individual revenge.⁹⁶

In White propaganda and publicity the Reds were juxtaposed with the virtuous God-fearing independent peasants that made up the core of the White army. The commander-in-chief of the White Army, General Mannerheim, addressed his soldiers as “the heroic White peasant army”. The moral contrast bolstered the fighting moral of the White troops and the determination of the members of military courts. The evil had to be rooted out by the Whites in order to purify the body of the nation. Terms like “purification”, “using a knife to cut off a cancerous lump” and “violence as a necessary purgatory” added a racist tune to the war rhetoric.⁹⁷ The harsh punishment of Red troops in the aftermath of the war was

94 Manninen 2006, 167. Orig. source Kaleva 29.4.1918.

95 Manninen 1982, 167; Peltonen 1996, 171–2; Tikka 2006, 35–6; Huhta 2008, 8.

96 Tikka 2006, 69, 73.

97 Manninen 1982, 158–160; Tikka 2006, 151

presented by the Whites as divine justice with reference to the righteous God of the Old Testament.⁹⁸

In the town of Viborg the White martial courts used an illustrative categorisation of the guilt of Red suspects:

“Primary group:

Leaders, chiefs, provocateurs, snipers, murderers, robbers and other violent offenders.

Secondary group:

All those who do not belong to the first and third group, in other words:

a) persons who have voluntarily joined the Red guard and participated in fighting,

b) persons who . . . have not participated in fighting but in other ways promoted the work of the Red Guard, and those who after having been forced to join the Red Guard volunteered to take part in fighting, and those who, not being members of the Red Guard, have aided it through criminal acts.

Tertiary group:

Persons who having been by force incorporated in a Red Guard have not taken part in fighting or in any other way aided the enemy, and can be proved to have left the Red Guard or taken the first opportunity to surrender as prisoners.”⁹⁹

The Viborg court represents an attempt to prevent arbitrary executions through a set of criteria, which, however, could be misused to make any villager into a suspect.

In his orders to the White army General Mannerheim spoke of “Red barbarism” and “Red terror”. In his address to the Finnish people at the victory parade on May 16 he praised the White guards for having defended the values that were the most vital to the nation and threatened by the Reds:

“[the defence] has succeeded in ending the terror that threatened to drown our young independence and freedom in blood. The scorched villages and the pillaged manors and cottages you see all over Finland show what kind of Asian culture was about to be sown in our country. The desecrated churches you have read about in papers tell you what kind of freedom of conscience the Red government wanted to endow our people with.”¹⁰⁰

His accusation was clear: the Reds wanted to deprive Finland of civilisation. In White rhetoric, the Finns had fallen victim to a Bolshevik attempt to deprive them of their homes, religion and Fatherland and make them into slaves. The Red rebellion heralded the coming of Anti-Christ.¹⁰¹ Mannerheim aligned himself with the disillusioned intellectuals mentioned above. Only a few intellectuals openly dissociated themselves from the Red scare regarding such violence as an understandable response to deprivation and inequality.

98 Huttunen 2011.

99 Tikka 2006, 128–9.

100 Quoted in Tikka 2006, 117–8.

101 Siironen 2006, 174.

The heaviest price for the attributed guilt was paid by thousands of ordinary Red Guards, who were executed in military courts and the Tribunals for High Treason. White executioners tended to pass down death sentences for Reds merely for carrying a gun. Judges focused primarily on ordinary troops instead of the commanders. Though the Whites in other rhetorical contexts referred to corrupt leadership as the cause of the Red rebellion, at the courts the command chain was ignored. The ordinary troops became indicted as dangerous thugs.¹⁰²

Stories of Red atrocities continued to be elaborated and mediated during the post-war years. In the spring of 1919, in a parliamentary discussion about the plight of the Reds, emotional counter-accusations were made of bloody Red attacks on White homes. Mythical, often biblical, imagery of mutilation and maiming was utilised in the discussion.¹⁰³

Particular moral indignation was provoked by female Red troops who wore trousers and carried guns. Bourgeois Finns regarded their attire and appearance as a betrayal of national moral standards and called them “bitches of wolves”. The dehumanisation of Red women was so excessive, that there were even plans in some places to brand them like cattle.¹⁰⁴

Red leaders and agitators were a special target for accusations by the Whites. When blaming the leaders, “the masses” were regarded as misled fools, deceived by their leaders’ false promises of redemption. The leaders misused the workers’ feeble judgment and fooled the workers into follow them.¹⁰⁵

At the end of the war, the majority of Red leaders fled to Russia. In the aftermath, the Whites, with moral indignation, pointed out that apart from betraying their Fatherland the Red leaders had betrayed their own troops. In Red history the accusation was refuted on the grounds that the escape to Russia was the only way to save the remnants of Finnish socialism.¹⁰⁶

Being guilty of *high treason* made the Reds into traitors of the young Finnish nation-state. This accusation was launched above all against the Red leaders.

In the White patriotic rhetoric the members of the self-appointed Red government, the People’s Deputation, were called Lenin’s lackeys and accused of having relied on Russian bayonets in order to destroy Finnish independence. The People’s Deputation was portrayed as a Trojan horse in Lenin’s plan to finish Finland.¹⁰⁷

In the course of the war, White political leaders moved the focus of their accusations from the Finnish Reds to the Russian Bolsheviks. When asking Germany

102 Tikka 2006, 150.

103 The Diet of 1919, protocol 30.4., 260–2.; Peltonen 1996, 191–200.

104 Pekkala 2011.

105 Manninen 1982, 122. A typical socialist agitation is portrayed in the novel *The Red Stroke* by Ilmari Kianto (1909).

106 Hyvönen 1977, 130.

107 Manninen 1982, 165–6, 219.

for military assistance, the White Senate referred to the Russian threat which was constituted by the remains of the Russian troops in Finland. A pamphlet in November 1917 lamented:

“the worst of nightmares has settled among us in the form of Russian soldiers. Our previously peaceful country has been converted into a jousting field of Russian beasts.”¹⁰⁸

Russophobes ignored the fact that Russian troops for the most part remained neutral in the Finnish conflict and during the first weeks of the war rapidly withdrew from the country. This discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality was driven by a pragmatic assessment of the situation: German aid would depend on there being an international element to the war, and moreover, any moral scruples among the White guards about fighting their own nationals were eliminated by seeing the war as a fight for freedom against the Russians. The argument was bolstered by the use of imagery of vast hordes of Red Bolsheviks, described as “scum” and “robbers”, on their way from Russia to Finland and providing guns and bayonets to the Finnish Reds.¹⁰⁹

Volter Kilpi, a prominent author, in the autumn of 1917 articulated this fear of the Russians by contrasting East and West:

“Only the West can endow us with the inner and external power that enables us to protect ourselves from the deathly hug of the shapeless East, be it either the strangling tyranny of the Tsar or the drowning, devastating and senseless chaos of the lunatic Red raving hordes. . . . We are the vanguard of the West, and only through preserving our bond with the West intact may we possibly defend our precarious position and national existence.”¹¹⁰

Another popular author, Eino Leino, asked the Finns to fight against the Russian plague that had been contracted by the Reds. He portrayed the Red menace as the Beast of Genesis that had taken hold of Finland and made brothers kill each other. The guilt lay ultimately on the Russians, but Russian contamination was no excuse and did not reduce the aversion felt by the nationalist Whites against the Reds.¹¹¹

White pamphlets portrayed Bolshevism as “rule by scum”.¹¹² The White Senate declared in early February 1918 that the war was fought against misled criminal revolutionaries, supported by undisciplined Russian soldiers. When launching universal conscription, the Senate declared that the war was being fought against anarchy, the root of which was the Russian troops.¹¹³ Anarchy and crime were regarded as an Eastern antipode to Western political order. Socialism was

108 *Vapauden irvikuva*, 1917, 5. Similar rhetoric presented in Manninen 1986, 179.

109 Manninen 1982, 98–9, 179.

110 Kilpi 1917, 168–9.

111 Kunnas 1976, 48.

112 Quoted in Paavolainen II 1967, 27–31.

113 Manninen 1982, 79–81.

identified with Russia and portrayed as a doctrine that promoted savagery, wild behaviour and loose morals.¹¹⁴

General Mannerheim, when negotiating with the Germans, warned Europe about the Bolshevik flood that had rolled over Finland and carried her into the vortex of revolution.¹¹⁵ Later, after the decisive successes of the White Army, Mannerheim told his troops that victory was redemption from perdition and the rescuing of civilisation.¹¹⁶

The attribution of guilt to the Russians was favoured by the writers of school textbooks. Authors accused the Russians of aggression and devastation, and called Red repression in Red-occupied territory “the Russian way”.¹¹⁷ The blaming of the Russians went on throughout the 1920s and 1930s. As late as in 1945 a leading school textbook claimed that the Red rebels fought in cooperation with Russian troops. The book explained the war time famine in terms of Red Guards burning the crops, thus presenting the famine not as a cause but the consequence of the war.¹¹⁸

Red Victimhood

The Reds represented themselves as *terrorised* by the White Guards and *betrayed* by bourgeois political leadership.

In numbers of casualties, the defeated Reds were the main victims of the terror of the winter 1917–18. Outside the actual battlefield more than 7,000 Reds were killed by the White Guards, the “White butchers”.

During and immediately after the war, workers became the victims of lethal strategic cleansings by the Whites. Workers were hunted, punished and executed by the White Guards, who suspected every member of a workers’ union to be a Red rebel. The terror intensified at the end of the war, when the White Guards aimed at cleansing the whole country of potential rebels.

In the vernacular Red memory the Reds were victims of class hatred. In the narratives of victimisation, unarmed Reds were shot on the spot and their wives and children harassed by the class enemy. Suspect Reds were listed and brought to military courts, which, according to the Reds, acted in terms of class hate instead of justice.

Red rhetoric, appearing in the colourful language of socialist agitators and publicists, was founded on the Marxist theory of class struggle. The theory was translated into strong vernacular expressions, many of which were a kin to ar-

114 Manninen 1982, 8.

115 Manninen 1982, 88–9.

116 Quoted in Manninen 1982, 117.

117 Mantere and Sarva 1920, 231.

118 Mantere and Sarva 1945, 403.

chaic biblical language. The bourgeoisie was called “blood suckers”, “robbers” and “tyrants”. The expressions were morally loaded, insinuating the victimisation of the working class.

According to Irmari Rantamala, a popular working class author, the war was provoked by the bourgeoisie, while the workers were forced to take up guns and defend themselves. The working masses were called to make the world a better place.¹¹⁹ Rantamala saw the masses as bearers of a mission instead of guilt, and victims instead of perpetrators. Another nationally recognised author who expressed sympathy with the common people was F. E. Sillanpää, whose character Juha Toivola, in the novel *Hurskas kurjuus* (Pious Poverty, 1919), was a victim of White terror and as such rather tragic than monstrous. However, Sillanpää was not coherent in his judgement, as in other contexts he resorted to victimising the Whites.¹²⁰

The concentration camps were in Red memory portrayed as death camps: “From early morning to late night a black horse pulled cartloads of corpses to mass graves. The gravediggers were picked from among the prisoners by force and promises of extra slices of bread. It often happened that a picked comrade was so weak that he fell dead into the grave he had himself just dug.”¹²¹ Concentration camps appeared in Red memory as the ultimate sites of lethal class hatred.¹²²

The hunt for suspected Red rebels continued long after the war. Reinforced by the rightwing extremism of the 1930s, it remained the habit of victors, and perpetuated the victimisation of the Reds.

The Red myth of victimhood was bolstered by the collective memory of ancient wrongs. The Reds had centuries of social oppression to lament. The local folklore of any parish in southern Finland included stories of cruel landlords. In the lore, homeless beggars bemoan their plight, poor landless lads mourn for having their marriage proposals turned down and overworked crofters sigh under the burden of hard work. The moon is the sun of a crofter, stated an old saying referring to the long working hours of a crofter. When dealing with their victimisation in 1918, the Reds referred to the historical oppression of the poor.

While resignation rather than anger prevailed in the traditional lore on poverty, socialism brought an aggressive tune to the talk about poverty. Ancient, partly mythical memories of poor peasants rising up against their landlords were cherished in socialist rhetoric. Socialism was intertwined with nationalism, with both nationalist and socialist writers in the nineteenth century referring to historical peasant uprisings. The most famous story tells of an Ostrobothnian peasant Jaako Ilkka, who at the end of the 16th century led an uprising against the nobility

119 Kunnas 1976, 76, 95, 101.

120 Kunnas 1976, 188–190.

121 Quoted in Mäkelä 1947, 212.

122 The Diet of 1919, Protocol 30.4., 244–67.

and was eventually hanged. A popular poem about him from the late 1800s ended with the statement: “Death on a gibbet is better than life as a slave.” It was natural for the Reds to adopt Jaakko Ilkka as an advocate of the poor and a victim-hero of class struggle.

By the outbreak of the civil war in January 1918, the Reds had fresh examples of class-based victimhood to which they could refer. Mass evictions resulting from economic structural change had left numerous crofter families homeless. In socialist rhetoric the evictions were regarded as acts of cruel oppression, and the subsequent crofters’ strikes as class struggle. Victimhood was thus already before the war part of public memory and used as a call to collective resistance. “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains”, said the Communist Manifesto of 1848, concluding that revolution was the only way to redemption. For the church-educated rural poor, redemption made sense through the biblical imagery of heavenly resurrection.¹²³

The Reds considered themselves politically *betrayed* by the White leaders in the power-sharing arrangement made after Finland’s secession from Russia in 1917.

After the Russian March revolution, the Finnish parliament, with a socialist majority, passed an Enabling Bill, which delegated national sovereignty to the parliament. When the bourgeois leaders persuaded the Russian Provisional Government to dissolve the parliament, the socialists felt unduly deprived of political power and regarded themselves as the victims of betrayal.

Further victimisation of the Reds happened in January 1918 with the recognition of the White Guards as official government troops. The decision by the Senate was regarded by the socialists as aggression. The Social Democratic Party declared:

“The Senate wants to attack the working class using butcher troops. . . . Let the bourgeoisie know that it means attacking the whole of the Finnish working class. . . . class struggle will get exacerbated.”¹²⁴

The sense of being betrayed by the bourgeois nation-state was maintained among the Reds after the war. It was fostered in Red counter-culture, where the White nationalist lessons of the state school were defied. When asked later in the 1960s about their school memories from the 1930s, the children of the Reds spoke about repression by their teachers, but also about the youthful protest against White history lessons. In silent protest, working-class children distorted textbook pictures of Mannerheim, as illustrated in the following story of the solidarity of parents and children against White teachers:

123 Huttunen 2011.

124 Quoted in Hyvönen 1977, 97; Roselius 2007.

“In my first history book there was a picture of the White General Mannerheim on a horse. A cousin of mine defaced the picture, and his mother was called to account for the mischief. The mother, who was my aunt and a working-class mother with a big family, told the teacher: I agree with my son, and left.”¹²⁵

Despite being underdogs, Red children could tease and bully White children. A White commemorator tells how provoking any references to Mannerheim, “the White Butcher”, could be:

“ my brother and I had a Mannerheim-cap, a white fur cap. . . . We were called names like “little butcher”. The naming was done mostly by the kids of the farm-hands of the manor. The cap was sneered at and called a milk bowl.”¹²⁶

The Civil Guards and the Workers’ Unions organized separate activities for children and young people. While the former practised nationalistic military training, the latter involved children in working class culture. Working-class children were made aware of the contradictions between their school education and working-class traditions.

In school, virtually all teachers were White, most of them members of the Civil Guards and other right-wing organizations.¹²⁷ White Finland harnessed schools to defend nationalist values against the Red threat, while the workers felt bitterly that they were victimised by a repressive class-society.

3.1.2 Ascribing Guilt and Victimhood to the Whites

White Guilt

The Reds accused the White Guards of class hatred, which led to *terror, denial of justice and political betrayal*.

The issue of White war crimes was raised by the Reds immediately after the war. The vast number of executions by the White military courts caused a public outcry. However, the State responded in December 1918 by granting impunity to the White Guards, including members of military courts. For more than two decades, public accusations against the Whites appeared only in socialist discourse, where guilt was attributed to the White Guards, the members of military courts and the Tribunals for High Treason as well as to the administrators of the concentration camps, and not least to General Mannerheim who was called the main butcher of the Reds.

125 Quoted in Peltonen 1996, 236.

126 Quoted in Peltonen 1996, 234.

127 Rantala 1997, 27–36.