

“NEVER SATISFACTORY, ACCORDING TO THE FINNISH STANDARDS”. FROM OPTIMISM AND INTEREST TO DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISILLUSION: FINNISH VIEWS ON THE NATIONS IN EASTERN CENTRAL EUROPE BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

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Abstract:

The questions of national prejudices, xenophobia and enemy images have been lately popular issues. The creation of the "Other" has been evident in racial issues, like in the ideologies of imperialism or anti-Semitism. However, it is important to see the same mentality inside the European political culture itself, because the images often did and still do divide the nations into different categories. This mentality gained even more impetus after the collapse of the empires in 1918 and yet again in the discussion about "Old Europe" and "New Europe". My purpose is to study how Finland saw Eastern Europe and its political systems and national peculiarities between the World Wars. Finland formed an interesting hinge between Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. On the one hand it wanted to emphasize how Western its mental heritage was; on the other, it had to fight off assumptions that it was still "half-Russian" and behaving in a "Balkan" manner. In the early 1920s there were also ideas of similar interests in European politics and similarities of the social structure. In the longer run, the Finns saw Eastern Europe as an area which was not ready for democracy, because it lacked the elements of national cohesion and basic people's education. Argumentation resembles the German one, but was not necessarily decided by it – rather by own experience or Scandinavian and sometimes Hungarian information. For the Finns, Hungary formed some sort of exception of the prejudiced view because it was considered to be a kindred nation, but the experts could see little similarities even between Finland and Hungary.

Rezumat:

Chestiunea prejudecătilor naționale, a xenofobiei și a imaginii inamicului au reprezentat aspecte populare în ultima vreme. Crearea „Celuilalt” a fost evidentă în problemele rasiale, ca și în ideologiile imperialismului sau antisemitismului. Cu toate acestea este important să observăm aceeași mentalitate și în interiorul culturii politice europene în sine, deoarece imaginile de multe ori au împărțit și încă mai împart națiunile în diferite categorii. Această mentalitate a câștigat un impuls și mai mare după prăbușirea imperiilor în anul 1918 și încă o dată în discuția despre „Vechea Europă” și „Noua Europă”. Scopul meu este de a aborda modul în care Finlanda a perceput Europa de Est, sistemele sale politice și particularitățile sale naționale în perioada interbelică. Finlanda a constituit o „balama” interesantă între Scandinavia și Europa de Est. Pe de o parte, a vrut să sublinieze cât de occidental era patrimoniul său mental, pe de altă parte, a trebuit să lupte împotriva asumțiilor că ea era încă „jumătate-rusească” și că se comporta într-o manieră „balcanică”. La începutul anilor 1920 au existat, de asemenea, concepții cu privire la interese similare în politica europeană și la asemănări ale structurii sociale. Pe termen mai lung, finlandezii au văzut Europa de Est ca o zonă care nu era pregătită pentru democrație, pentru că îi lipseau elementele de coeziune națională și educația de bază a oamenilor. Argumentarea se asemăna cu cea germană, dar nu a fost neapărat decisă de aceasta – mai degrabă a fost preluată prin experiența proprie sau prin informațiile provenite din mediile scandinave și, uneori, din cele de limba maghiară. Pentru finlandezii, Ungaria a format un fel de excepție în ceea ce privește aceste prejudecăți deoarece era considerată a fi o națiune înrudită, dar expertii au putea observa puține asemănări chiar și între Finlanda și Ungaria.

Keywords: nation-building; identity; nationalism; Finnish foreign relations; Eastern European image abroad; the “Other”

The issue

The terms “exoticism” and the “Other” are nowadays usual among researchers while talking about the differences between Europe and other continents (mainly Third World countries). In cases where the differences between the observer and the subject are very evident these terms are, of course, very clearly useful. This is also what the most authoritative and well-known scholars on the issue of the “Other”, like Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson, Hugh Honour etc.¹ refer to – not to mention the less academic commentators. In most cases, the research of “Us” and the “Other” deals with nationalistic or even xenophobic phenomena. And the

¹ See for example Stuart Hall, *Identiteetti*, suom. ja toim. Mikko Lehtonen ja Juha Herkman (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2002), 47, 122; Peter Haslinger, Klaus Holz, „Selbstbild und Territorium. Dimensionen von Identität und Alterität,” in *Regionale und nationale Identitäten. Wechselwirkungen und Spannungsfelder im Zeitalter moderner Staatlichkeit*, ed. Peter Haslinger (Schesslitz: Ergon Verlag, 2000), 17.

fact that the outward differences of the “Other” are as obvious as possible, like the clothing of the Orthodox Jew, the peculiarity of a skin of another colour or the strange prayers of a Moslem, certainly help to create the image of the “Other”, and the stereotype carries more easily mental and political weight.

But in those cases the terms become also problematic; one is almost tempted to say that when the differences between the observer and the subject are very obvious, the shades between these two very different entities easily disappear altogether, and the two extremes inevitably become “Us” and the “Other”, “Normal” and “Exotic”.

It might be even argued that the terms are in fact more useful in milder contexts than when comparing two extremes. In this paper I concentrate on a subject where the differences were clear, but not equally imminent nor carried such a historical burden: the Finnish, or, seen more widely, Scandinavian, views on Eastern Central Europe. By this, I mean the area between the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean, and between the German, Russian and Turkish areas. Russia as such is not included, although its – or Germany’s for that matter – influence can not totally be neglected. The period in scrutiny is the time between the World Wars – the time when this area had gained independence of the Old, collapsed Empires, but also the time when the domestic policy meant for almost the entire area the failure of parliamentary democracy and the introducing of a strong-man Government.

It might be asked, whether this question is at all worth research, since it does not carry great drama. Finland and Eastern Central Europe were neither enemies nor allies. Eastern Central Europe was never vital to Finnish identity or Finnish nationalism. Events in Eastern Central Europe did not cause changes in Finnish society, domestic or foreign policy, as the policies of Russia, Scandinavia, Germany and even to some extent England or the Baltic states did. Eastern Central Europe was too far to have common interests with Finland and far enough not to cause any trouble, let alone dangers, to Finland. It was not only geographically remote, but also mentally far. Whereas most people in Finland had some idea or knowledge, some even experience of what Sweden, Germany, Russia and England were, Eastern Central Europe was something that was strange to them. There was little that would have connected even an educated Finn to, say, Bulgaria, or that would have compelled him or her to have any opinion on Serbs and Croats. It was like Neville Chamberlain defined Czechoslovakia in 1938: a far-off country, about which we know nothing.

However, this is precisely one reason why the question of the Eastern European image is interesting: it was a good instrument to form stereotypes, and these stereotypes could have both “good” and “bad” features. The area did not consist of fairy tale countries, but nevertheless of countries which could be very easily represented either as a good reference group in the New Europe or as something that was “un-Finnish” or otherwise strange – the “Other”. Eastern Central Europe was a fertile and safe ground for stereotypes to entertain, especially in a time, when the Finns were exceptionally free to make their own choices in seeking their own identity, their own role models and the warning examples. Thus the view on Eastern Central Europe, which seemed to be developing into an entity of its own, was relevant, even though this area did not concretely influence Finnish policy and choices.

I must point out that this is not a study on Eastern Central Europe as such or on the domestic or foreign policy of the Eastern Central European countries, but on the reactions and mentalities of the Finns. Thus I do not claim that the Finnish stereotypes on the area which stretched from Poland to Greece were reasonable or truthful. They were mainly myths and generalizations. But they were true to those people who expressed these views, and since there were very few experts on the issue in Finland, the few ones who could claim any sort of expertise had almost a monopoly on the general opinion – or, to be more precise, to that part of the general opinion which had any interest in Eastern Central Europe. I only explain the Finnish mentality by the myths which it expressed; I do not make statements on Eastern Central Europe itself.

Of course, the Finns had also another stereotype of a culturally inferior, definitely “Eastern” nationality in the 1920s and 1930s. This was the image of a Russian.² The Russian was simultaneously stupid, childish, drunken, dirty, cowardly, devilish and dangerous – and always lacking any self-control or the sense of sacrificing himself for a higher cause. However, the Finnish Russophobia cannot be compared to the views on Eastern

² Russophobia is an extremely thoroughly studied theme of Finnish history. See especially Outi Karemaa, *Vihollisia, vainooja, syöpäläisiä. Venäläisviha Suomessa 1917-1923*. Bibliotheca Historica 30 (Helsinki: SHS, Hakapaino, 1998); Matti Klinge, *Vihan veljistä valtiososialismiin. Yhteiskunnallisia ja kansallisia näkemyksiä 1910- ja 1920-luvuilta* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1972); Sinikka Wunsch, "Lupa vihata – propaganda ja viholliskuvat mielipiteen muokkaajina konfliktitilanteissa," *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 2 (2003): 263-277; Sinikka Wunsch, *Punainen uhka. Neuvostoliiton kuva johtavassa suomalaisessa sanomalehdistössä maaliskuusta 1938 talvisodan päättymiseen maaliskuussa 1940* (Oulu: Pohjois-Suomen Historiallinen Yhdistys, 2004); Heikki Luostarinen, *Perivihollinen. Suomen oikeistolehdistön Neuvostoliittoa koskeva viholliskuva sodassa 1941-1944: tausta ja sisältö* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1986).

Central Europe as such, since in the case of Russia, the outward feeling of superiority actually covered the feelings of fear and danger (or, to some, also the wishes for expansion at Russia's expense). No such feelings could be attached to the stereotypes on Eastern Central Europe, which was far and harmless, and could not offer much help either.

I maintain that the Finnish reaction towards the Eastern Central European features, policies and national habits *can* be compared to identity-building, with some exaggeration almost to a sort of "neo-nationalism", and to the sense of "Otherness". Also criticism against Eastern Central Europe or emotional "Balkans"-labelling between the World Wars can be seen as methods of creating and defending one's identity against an alien, the "Other". It is the same mechanisms that apply even in a case where the outward differences are not so striking. It is possible to create one's identity – or, to put it more unscrupulously, to convince oneself of being better than the other – also by more conventional and less extreme means, but basically using the same kind of psychology. It was a way to prove that Finland had a different cultural and political background than Eastern Central Europe and was a more developed and "civilized" country than those in the East (although, in fact, Finland was itself geographically more Eastern than they were – this seldom comes to mind as Finland is usually seen to be a part of the "North", so that the actual geographical West-East-dimension is forgotten).

The Finnish mentality, consciously or subconsciously, needed this kind of stereotype of a less developed, strange and exotic area – otherwise there would have been only a sense of inferiority towards the more developed Scandinavia, Germany and Western Europe. Moreover, there was a need to fight against the stereotypes which one knew to be entertained about Finland itself – especially the notions that the Finns were themselves "Mongols" or "Russian".³ But I will now look more deeply into the stereotypes which the Finns entertained about others.

A possible reference group?

The real differences between Finland and Eastern Central Europe were actually not as big as we might now think. Most definitely, they were not as big as between, say, Sweden and Romania or Germany and

³ Of the Finnish views of other nations and of one's own place in the world, see also Vesa Vares, *Suomen paikka Euroopassa maailmansotien välillä*, in *Suomi muuttuvassa maailmassa. Ulkosuheteiden ja kansallisen itseymmärryksen historiaa*, toim. Erkka Railo ja Ville Laamanen (Porvoo: Kleio, Edita, 2010), 135–191.; of the foreign views on Finnish "race", see for example Aira Kemiläinen, „Finns in the Shadow of the "Aryans". Race Theories and Racism,” *Studia Historica* 59 (1998).

Yugoslavia. Finland was a new state, independent only since December 1917, and its society was equally agrarian and rural as in most Eastern Central European countries. It was far less urbanized and industrialized than Scandinavian countries; even as late as the end of 1930s, about two thirds of the population earned their living in agriculture and lived in the countryside.

There is also good reason to question how it was even possible for the Finns to have feelings of superiority towards Eastern Central Europe. The prestige of the Finns was most probably not very high in Eastern Central Europe. Most of the population had probably not ever heard of Finland, and if they had heard the name, they considered it Russian or just as one of the new Baltic states in the far North. Even the Hungarians, who had at least some interest in Finland because it was considered to belong to the same Fenno-Ugrian kin, talked semi-contemptuously of the "fish-smelling cousins in the north" in the late 19th century. After the First World War, seeking friends after the Trianon trauma, they were more eager to cultivate relationships with these cousins.

And why would anyone have heard of Finland anyway? Whereas almost any Eastern Central European nation had some period of glory to remember and to be nostalgic for – Poland and Hungary had been mighty Empires, the Balkan nations had fought courageously against the Turks etc. – , the Finns had been a bunch of provinces of Sweden for 650 years and then an autonomous state in the Russian Empire for 108 years. Not much to boast about or to have nostalgia for past greatness – or to raise envy in others.

Thus it is not strange that some Finns thought in the terms of trying to become one of the Eastern Central European nations as quite a reasonable goal, not as degeneration. For a short period after the First World War some Finns dreamed of an alliance of new, rising and dynamic nations which reached from the Black to the Baltic Sea, and these circles were not totally out of influence.⁴

For example, some representatives of the powerful Agrarian Union, practically always in the Government and the biggest non-Socialist party in Finland in the 1920's and 1930's, thought that the political position of Finland and Eastern Central Europe was the same, the main enemy was the same (Russia), the social structure was the same, the idea of rising nationalism was the same, so Eastern Central Europe could be quite a natural reference group for Finland – provided it stayed radical and

⁴ See for example Vesa Vares, „Creating a State and National Identity: Finland and Europe 1918–1922,” *Vlahia Journal of Historical Studies* 14 (2010): 79–104.

democratic. When the reactionary landlords – often speaking foreign languages – would be thrown away in the vast area between the Black Sea and the White Sea, Finland, the Baltic states and Eastern Europe would all become progressive, democratic peasant nations.

The spiritual leader of the Agrarian Union, Santeri Alkio, even visualized in 1919 how the area from the Black Sea – including also the Ukraine and Belarus – to not only the Baltic Sea, but all the way to the White Sea, would become a nucleus for a “New Europe”. The “Old” Europe, the Western one, had exhausted itself in the war and was degenerated by cosmopolitan, individualist, urban and secular vices and by its former sinister imperialism. The new dynamic nations in the East were free of all these shortcomings. As Alkio put it: “Europe must be reborn in order to survive.” The “new Europe” could also defend itself against Russia – be this Bolshevik or Czarist – because it would have more population, more industry and would be more educated and nationally awokened than the eternally backward Russia.⁵

Also the Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti, who belonged to the liberal-minded National Progressive Party and held office in the early 1920s and late 1930s, had same kind of ideas. He wanted to create a security alliance, which would include Finland, the Baltic States, Poland and possibly some members of the Little Entente, at least Czechoslovakia. Even in 1934, when he was not a Foreign Minister but held the position of the Finnish representative in the League of Nations, he considered Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania as vibrant and dynamic nations, which had fervour and courage and which would be future European super powers.⁶

There were also all the time at least some Finns who thought that Finland and Poland had the same interests against Russia, no matter what the differences between the countries were. It is also interesting to note, that the Finnish Social Democrats, whose sympathies had been in the Polish-Russian War of 1920 rather on the Russian than on the Polish side, by and large accepted and even defended the Józef Piłsudski coup in 1926 against Finnish Liberals and Agrarians, who were very critical against it. The leading newspaper of the Social Democrats did not support anti-Parliamentarism and authoritarianism as such, but it interpreted that had

⁵ Ilkka, 16.12.1919.

⁶ Heikki Roiko-Jokela, *Ihanteita ja reaalipoliittikkaa. Rudolf Holstin toiminta Baltian maiden kansainvälisen de jure -tunnustamisen ja reunaavaltioyerityön puolesta 1918-1922* (Saarijärvi, Studia Jyväskylänsia, Jyväskylän yliopisto, 1995), 130-135; Keijo Korhonen, *Turvallisuuden pettäessä. Suomi neuvostodiplomiassa Tartosta talvisotaan 2* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1971), 31.

Pilsudski not taken the power, the Fascist circles would have done it, since the reactionary forces had already been on the move, and right-wing Fascist rule would have been far more harmful to Polish society than Pilsudski's. According to the newspaper, it had rather been a revolution than a coup, and the Polish democracy supported Pilsudski, who was politically rather a liberal non-socialist than anything else. "The socialist labour has been ready to take Pilsudski's rather than the Fascists' side."⁷

Some Finns stretched these dreams to Romania, and the Finnish envoy had very encouraging discussions with the Romanian politicians in the early 1920s.

The Romanians were not totally uninterested in the possibility to raise political capital in Finland because of this constellation. The Finnish envoy Väinö Tanner⁸ reported in October 1920, that the Romanian Prime Minister Averescu had suggested a joint conference of all border states from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and Tanner wrote to Helsinki that the idea was worth considering, since Finland was for the time-being isolated from Scandinavia. Of course this would have to be done with all due caution, since the position of these countries was not stable nor out of danger.⁹ "We both considered that domestic peace and eagerness to work hard were dominant in Finland and Romania and that both countries were going towards a glorious future in economy."¹⁰

Meeting with King Ferdinand was even more encouraging. The King was staunchly anti-Bolshevist, glorified the Finnish struggle against Bolshevism and advised to make no compromises. He considered Bolshevism a "sort of religious madness" which represented "the worst and cruellest features of the Slavs". The only trouble for the King was to understand why the Finns had had so close relationships with Germany in 1918. Tanner was apologetic: there had been no choice, since Sweden had not helped.¹¹

The Romanian King and Government did not make any concrete offers, and as the King expressed in the second meeting in February 1921, it was best to get to know each other first and leave the paragraphs to a later date.¹² In his report to Helsinki Tanner made no qualms that he did not

⁷ *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti*, 14.5.1926. Vallankumous Puolassa Pilsudskin johdolla, Mitä Sasulle kuuluu, 15.5.1926. Puolan sotilaskumous, 20.5.1926. Puolan tapahtumat.

⁸ Professor of geology and geography – not the Social Democratic Minister Väinö Tanner.

⁹ Tanner to UM (Finnish Foreign Ministry) 12.8.1920, 21.10.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest; Tanner to UM 22.2.1921. UM 5C 14, Bukarest. – The text is very dim.

¹⁰ Tanner to UM 5.8.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹¹ Tanner to UM 12.8.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹² Tanner to UM 22.2.1921. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

trust much the Romanian ministers or society, since these were not Western, but the King was different – him you could trust.¹³ Tanner’s own goal – or as he expressed it, “working hypothesis” – was an alliance of Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Serbia and Greece, and “naturally Finland shall be there too”.¹⁴ Actually he had offers of cooperation from even a farther country – from his Persian colleague, of whom he had quite a high opinion, even better than of most Romanians.¹⁵

Later on even Tanner was not very optimistic about the proposed alliance with Romania; he was frustrated by what he considered to be Romanian dishonesty, bribery and sheer crimes – even the Legation of Finland fell victim to a robbery. Besides, after some time he concluded that Romania could not become interested in a country which lay so far from it.¹⁶

Some of the positive stereotypes were not always directly connected to politics. Also some pragmatic features, like the democracy of Czechoslovakia¹⁷ or the military achievements of the Serbs, might be appreciated. Sakari Pälsi, an author who wrote several travel books about Eastern Europe, commented in Belgrade to his wife, that the military uniform had showed that the man was actually the crown of God’s creation, and the Serbian officer in his uniform was the most beautiful jewel of this crown. The wife admitted the Serbian part of the comment.¹⁸ Another reporter wrote in the 1930s, that Bulgaria was the most democratic country in the world – since it had abolished party politics and the economic and social differences between the classes were so small.¹⁹ And even though most Finns would not have recognized Polish politicians by name, many of them had noticed that Janusz Kusocinski was the only non-Finn who had won the Olympic Gold Medal in track-and-field long distance running between 1924 and 1936.

However, the problem of the “pro-Eastern” circles was that they had hardly any following that would have carried real political weight. The bulk of Alkio’s party, the Agrarian Union, was totally uninterested in any foreign matters, and when Eastern Central Europe gradually turned to right-wing authoritarian governments, there was little for the Agrarians to

¹³ Tanner to UM 22.2.1921. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹⁴ Tanner to UM 17.8.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹⁵ Tanner to UM 6.9.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹⁶ Tanner to UM 9.9.1920, 23.10.1920. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

¹⁷ See for example Idman to the UM 8.11.1928. UM 5C 13 Varsova.

¹⁸ Sakari Pälsi, *Päävänpaisten mailla. Matkakuvia Unkarista, Serbiasta ja Sardiniasta* (Helsinki: Otava, 1928), 101–103, 123, 129, 132.

¹⁹ *Suomen Kuvallehti*, 29 (1938): 1102, 1103. Albert Hämäläinen: terveen demokratian maassa.

identify oneself with – those governments were seen as the return of the feudal landlords. Also the Progressives were more interested in getting security guarantees from England and France. When Holsti introduced a military alliance treaty which he had signed with Poland, Latvia and Estonia in 1922, he was dismissed by the Finnish parliament, which also refused to ratify the treaty. The majority thought that this kind of alliance would have meant more trouble than security. And if you would have gone still more south, the common interests – and the advantages for Finland – would have become still weaker.

Most countries of the area were already on the “wrong” side: Czechoslovakia had a military agreement with the Soviet Union, Poland and Romania would make Finland a tool of France’s anti-German policy. The Finns did not want to ally themselves with Germany either, be it democratic or National Socialist, but since they had no quarrel with it, they had no wish to make it an enemy either – one great power was more than enough for this. All in all, the Russian / Soviet challenge could not be answered by cooperation with Eastern Central Europe.

The Scandinavian, Lutheran background

For the vast majority of the educated Finnish class any kind of identification with Eastern Central Europe proved to be impossible.²⁰ The intellectuals were mainly Conservatives, who had previously studied in Germany and were grateful for the German intervention in the Finnish Civil War in 1918. It was not that they would have been entirely on the mercy of German prejudices of backward Eastern Europe. They were no doubt influenced by it; German was the foreign language which they mastered, and German scientific literature was the one foreign literature which they knew. But previously they had also been critical of German minority policy which had been directed against the Czechs and the Poles. It was mainly the Scandinavian, Lutheran background and the Finnish nationalism which emphasized the national cohesion and the importance of the education of the common people and education as criteria for governing the society, which made the Finnish intellectuals see Eastern

²⁰ I have previously discussed the theme in shorter articles: Vesa Vares, „Rajankäyntiä sivistyksen nimissä. Suomalaiset ja Väli-Eurooppa maailmansotien välillä,” *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 2 (2003): 248-262. Most parts of the analysis in these chapters are conclusions of wide source material, so I will refer to specific sources only when they deal with the specific examples mentioned in the text.

Central Europe as the “Other”. It was precisely on such matters that Eastern Central Europe was seen lacking.²¹

The Finns did not feel that history would have made Eastern Central Europe in any way superior to Finland. Quite the contrary. True, there had been no Finnish Empire, but there had been 650 years as part of Scandinavia (belonging to Sweden), then 100 years of autonomy in the Russian Empire. For the Finnish intellectuals, this meant that Finland had always been a part of the West and was now a ripe, Scandinavian nation and state; the only trouble was to make others realize this as well. Independent Finland might be something new, but the state institutions had in fact been founded already in the beginning of the 19th century, and the Finns had ruled their own country as an autonomous state quite freely (with the exception of years 1899–1917). This Scandinavian cultural influence, the German connections and the existence of the state institutions long before independence made the Finns think that they belonged to the nations which were “ready” and that there was a sense of national cohesion and civilization in Finland – they had been educated and trained for independence, whereas Eastern Central Europe mostly did not have this sort of background.

True, nations in Eastern Central Europe might have a glorious past, at least some of them. But where had the Polish nation been for the last 150 years? Hadn’t Hungary been conquered by Turks and Austrians? Had the Balkan countries yet really recovered from the Turkish rule? Were not literacy and hunger for education in general far more widespread in Finland than in Eastern Central Europe? All in all, Eastern Central Europe was seen as an area which had lived so long under Russian and Turkish influence that it had gone backwards and degenerated for hundreds of years and had now much more catching up to do than Finland in the rule of law and Western civilization.

True, there had been a bloody Civil War in Finland in 1918, which did not give a good picture of Finnish inner cohesion either. But this could conveniently be explained to be the fault of Russian agitation and infiltration and to some domestic traitors. It was not seen as a permanent feature in the Finnish society.

²¹ Of the general views of the Finns, see for example Juhani Paasivirta, *Suomi ja Eurooppa* (Kirjayhtymä, 1984); Vilho Harle ja Sami Moisio, *Missä on Suomi? Kansallisen identiteettipoliittikan historia ja geopolitiikka* (Vastapaino, 2000); Vesa Vares, *Suomen paikka Euroopassa maailmansotien välillä*, in *Suomi muuttuvassa maailmassa*, eds. Erkka Railo and Ville Laamanen (Porvoo: Edita, 2010), 135–191.

It is illuminating that it was precisely the most pro-Scandinavian circles which had the lowest opinions of Eastern Central Europe. The Social Democrats admired the rising Swedish welfare state and considered Eastern Central Europe as politically reactionary, socially unstable and backwardly agrarian. The Finnish Conservatives appreciated the "Old Scandinavia" as the bastion of the West, as the source of Finnish political and judicial culture and the way of life of the middle estate. Eastern Central Europe was too unstable and too uncivilized to fit this pattern. And the Jews had far too important a role among the meagrely educated classes in Eastern Europe, so the national awakening had not even had a real chance.²²

The "democratic", free peasant

The general Finnish view was that even the same kind of agrarian social structure did not make Eastern Central Europe equal or even comparable to the Finnish case, because the Eastern European peasant had a long history of serfdom and was still practically at the mercy of his landlord. Because the peasants were uneducated and the landlords egoistic and reactionary – and the independence did not seem to change much of this –, the area had remained backward. It might have had a glorious past, but it had missed out the development of the 18th and 19th centuries and failed to create national cohesion and true, Protestant work ethics (in the Weberian sense of the word).

The Finnish intellectuals thought that their own position and mentality differed radically from that of Eastern Central Europe. They thought that they represented a new, rising class which had created its position by merits, not by birth. Thus they were not subject to the same egoism and degeneration as the upper classes in Eastern Central Europe (or in Russia and Southern Europe).

Also the Finnish peasant was something else: he might be difficult and it was regrettable that he so often voted for the Agrarian Union (which was often considered, though patriotic, even less educated and more greedy than the Socialists), but he was and had always been an

²² On the other hand, Finns were usually not openly anti-Semitic themselves since the number of the Jews was so small in Finland. They often pointed out to the anti-Semitic policies and laws of Eastern Europe as uncivilized conduct, not acceptable for a Western way of thinking nor considering the principle of equality in front of the law. Even the Jew should have the same citizen's rights as the others, no matter what you thought of him. Open, hostile anti-Semitism was not proper conduct of a gentleman. The Finnish attitude resembles the mentality, which a Jewish sarcastic expression describes: "They say that an anti-Semite is someone who hates the Jews more than is absolutely necessary."

independent peasant. It was always pointed out that the Finnish peasant had never been a serf, and he had enjoyed the right to send representatives to the Parliament already for hundreds of years. And in 1918 he had risen to arms when there had been a Red coup in the South of Finland. The peasant had to be romanticized because of this, since the peasant had created the nucleus of the victorious White Army in the Civil War. In the national myth, he was seen as the defender of Christian and Western values, who never submitted to tyranny – in the way the “Eastern” peasants did.²³

The Finnish observers – mainly diplomats or writers of travel-books – often pointed out in the 1920s and 1930s how helpless and poorly educated the Eastern Central European peasant was. This was not necessarily his own fault: the peasant lacked any ability to progress, because the time of serfdom was still so near, and the society was still essentially feudal. Therefore it was easy to manipulate the peasants in the elections which were thought to be dishonestly conducted anyway. Due to the lack of the same kind of tradition of education and representation which was typical for Scandinavia, the Eastern Central European electorate was uncivilized and unindependent and thus easy to manipulate, and the

²³ The Civil War is an extremely traumatic issue in the Finnish history. The reasons of the war were largely domestic – the struggle for power (after the collapse of the Russian Empire in spring 1917) between the parliamentary almost evenly represented non-Socialists and Socialists, social want, disagreements on independence policy etc. – but here it is more relevant to present only the general outlines and the foreign political aspect. The war started simultaneously as a Red coup in Helsinki and in South Finland and as an uprising against the Russian garrisons in Ostrobothnia (Western Finland) at the end of January 1918. The most densely populated and industrialized part of Southern Finland was occupied by the Reds and the rest of Finland by their non-Socialist opponents, the so-called Whites. The Reds got military assistance from Soviet Russia and the Whites from Imperial Germany; the latter also intervened later in the war and conquered Helsinki in April 1918. The war resulted in a White victory in May 1918. Historians have usually estimated that the Whites would have been victorious even without the Germans because their military discipline and training was considerably better, but the war would have lasted longer. It can be said that more important than sending one German military division to Finland was the fact that Soviet Russia had to conclude in March 1918 such a peace treaty (Brest-Litovsk) with Germany which practically prevented it from further assisting the Reds. It is also usually estimated that had the Reds won, Finland would have sooner or later been annexed to the Soviet Union. However, the reputation of the war is also sinister because of the extensive White Terror after the war (which outnumbered heavily the Red Terror that had taken place before it). It is also important to note that the most right-wing elements were marginalized from the power in 1919 and practically all right-wing elements after 1944 – whereas the party defeated in the Civil War, the Social Democratic Party, was soon rehabilitated, returned to the Parliament already in 1919 and has been an almost constant government party in Finland since 1937.

elected MPs had no respect towards the law like their Scandinavian counterparts did.

This had led to a state of things where no government ever lost an election and was replaced only by coups and revolutions (as indeed happened; no Eastern European Government lost an election between the wars). And the Eastern Europeans were mostly Slavs – which meant that they came uncomfortably close to the hated Russians.

So, in the opinion of the Finns, the Eastern European nations simply lacked the necessary education, and therefore they lacked the essential national cohesion. Upper and lower classes were hopelessly apart and hostile to each other, and the middle class, which was making Finland truly Western, nationally awakened and educated, was in Eastern Central Europe scarce, not educated enough, and – as already noted – often even “non-national”: German or Jewish.

Because of this lack of national cohesion the Eastern European countries could not be counted as really dependable and worthy allies against the Russian and Bolshevik menace either. The uneducated lower class was considered easy prey for either Communism or Fascism.

Some of the countries in the area seemed to be hopeless cases right from the start, because they were in some ways artificial: they were not nation states, which, according to the Finnish mentality, was the only natural form for a state. This artificiality applied especially to Austria, which ought to have been a part of Germany, and to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, because these were conglomerates of several nationalities. And that was regarded neither healthy nor sound.

Stereotype nation by nation – the ultimate “Other”

If one reads the reports from the Finnish legations in the Eastern Central European capitals or the travel books on the area, one sees constantly that every envoy and author seems to have thought that it was just his host country where politics was the most passionate national sport and where things did not run smoothly and by the book, but everything had to be ensured with connections and often also with bribes. No matter whether the report came from Poland or Greece, Romania or Hungary, Yugoslavia or Bulgaria, these kinds of prejudices can be found, and the explanation was almost without exception the national character, which seemed so strange for a Nordic mind. One did not hesitate to state this difference and set the Nordic way of life as a model for proper conduct – and to be flattered, when for example a Romanian minister praised the incorruptibility and honest nature of the Finnish civil servants to the

Finnish envoy and complained how badly things were in Romania with all the corruption.²⁴

As a nation which has always feared that no one notices it, the Finns are always grateful for any kind of flattering.

Some Finnish expressions on Eastern Central Europe are quite revealing where the stereotypes and prejudices are concerned. Especially in diplomatic reports the statements could be very straightforward and even hostile, because they were not public. There were expressions like "mixed races" and "nonexistent national spirit, due to the primitiveness"; "below every standard", "uncivilized ministers", "Russian", "a country of bribery", "the barbarian village", "skinning the population", "dishonesty", "rule of thieves", "the state of domestic policy is never satisfactory, according to Finnish standards", "lack of culture", etc. Also Czechoslovakia, which should have scored sympathy points as the only other newly-independent country that had remained democratic, was, according to the Finnish envoy in Prague, "a democratic dictatorship".²⁵ The state of culture in Eastern Central Europe was no better; for example the revues in Belgrade were replaced by "hundred-kilo belly dancers".²⁶ One of the envoys traced the national mentalities to pre-modern times – according to him, the Greeks, for example, and Venizelos as a person, behaved like a character in an ancient Greek play.²⁷

Of course the harshest expressions were not a rule, but exceptional outbursts of frustration. And if you compare them to the expressions about the Russians, often openly hostile and some even racist, they were of course milder. They did not include the menace of Bolshevism either, which the Finns were beginning to see as almost a special Russian racial feature. But especially as such outbursts these expressions reveal the paternalist spirit in relation to the Eastern Central European – which was considered more "Eastern" than "Central" – the "Other".

In the case of Romania, there had been some renewed hopes about the Maniu regime at the turn of the 1930's. According to the reports, it was an improvement, closer to democracy than its predecessor, opposed to bribery and in general a sign that the country would become more "European". However, disappointment followed quickly also in Maniu's case, and anyhow, seen by the Finnish mentality, the Romanian electorate

²⁴ Artti to the UM 12.4.1929. UM 5C 28.

²⁵ Hellström to the UM 16.11.1933, Yöntilä to the UM 5.12.1935. UM 5C 28.

²⁶ Mauri Honkajuu to J.K. Paasikivi 2.4.1921. Paasikivi Archives, VA Y 4398, KA (=Finnish National Archives).

²⁷ Artti to the UM 28.3.1935. UM 5C 23.

seemed to be easily manipulated. The Finnish envoy explained in his report that the peasants hardly even knew to whom they were cheering, and they considered political rallies as trips of amusement to Bucharest. But, the envoy added, this was easy to understand since it was only 70 years ago since serfdom had been abolished, and the government had never made any effort to educate the peasants politically.²⁸

The mentality of the people was, according to the envoy, totally different from the Finnish one: much more realistic and selfish, and law and order were not appreciated as such, but as means to provide material and political advantages to oneself and one's party.²⁹ The most serious problem was that there was no one in Romania, whom the Romanians would trust. On the contrary, they were ready to believe unfavourable things about everybody.³⁰ And the Romanian Parliament was "the nicest and most obedient Parliament in the world", since its MPs always almost totally belonged to the ruling Government Party.³¹ "Romania is a country, where you always wait for the Messiah to come."³² And as another Finnish diplomat pointed out: love affairs disturbed Romanian politics, since they and politics were often so intertwined to each other.³³ The Finnish envoy considered one of the Romanian agrarian politicians outright "peculiar", since this politician always wore a national costume – which included a short skirt.³⁴

A Finn who always considered that his own people represented the sensible, practical and matter-of-fact, no-nonsense type, could hardly have given a more devastating verdict than to point out to bribery, lavishness, pomposness and ineffective naivety, and to deficiencies in morality and in "serious" thinking. Even the Iron Guard was seen mostly as a reaction to all this corruptness.³⁵

By and large, in the 1930's the minister in Bucharest seems to have been the most frustrated Finnish representative abroad – he even wrote to Helsinki that "negotiations with Romania belong to the punishments which one gets for his sins".³⁶ According to him, dishonesty was rather a system

²⁸ Idman to UM 21.11.1929. UM 5C 13, Varsova.

²⁹ Idman to UM 14.6.1930. UM 5C 13, Varsova.

³⁰ Idman to UM 16.10.1930. UM 5C 13, Varsova.

³¹ Idman to UM 20.5. ja 14.6.1930. UM 5C 13, Varsova.

³² Idman to UM 22.4.1931. UM 5C 13, Varsova.

³³ Artti to UM 20.1.1933. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

³⁴ Idman to UM 1.6.1937. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

³⁵ Idman to UM 15.1.1938, 28.2.1938, 18.5.1938. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

³⁶ Idman to UM 21.6.1935. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

than an exception.³⁷ However, he admitted that there many extremely civilized personalities among the Romanian ruling classes.³⁸

If you sum up the national stereotypes of the Finns (meaning those few Finns who had opinions and knowledge about the area), the Romanian was corrupt and dishonest. The Bulgarians were backward but showed some signs of appreciation for education and had a good opinion of the Finns. The Serbs and Croats were too hot-headed, but had military virtues, and there might be some similarities between Serbian nationalism against Turkey and the Habsburgs and the rise of Finnish nationalism in the 19th century, and also between Finnish independence in 1917 and Croatian fight for independence. However, they represented the stereotype of the strange "Balkans", were Members of Parliament shot each other and the Moslem population meant that a piece of Arabia had penetrated Europe.

Of the more "northern" cases, the Czech was efficient, but he oppressed unjustifiably the German minority. The Poles were brave and heroic, but almost too brave and heroic for their own good, paid no attention to every-day improvements like the Scandinavians did, and were very quarrelsome also amongst themselves. Since the Poles also were anti-German, they had more shortcomings than their evident Russophobia could compensate. They would be a dangerous nation to ally oneself with.

Mainly, the picture was critical and the Eastern European was always seen as less advanced than the Finn.

The Hungarian exception?

There was one slight exception to this rule: Hungary. The spirit of the day was that there was a bond of kinship between the Finns and the Hungarians and that they came from the same ethnic background. Even though most pro-Hungarian Finns knew that this was not scientifically true, whereas ethnicity was concerned, there were still enough similarities in the grammar and the "Fenno-Ugrian" idea to make Hungary special. Hungary was also the only country in Europe outside Finland and Estonia where you could find academic people who might master the Finnish language.

It was also usually accepted by the Finns that hard as the Hungarian rule might have been against the minority nations in the Habsburg Empire during the late 19th century, this had essentially benefited these minority nations as well, since Hungary was more advanced than

³⁷ Idman to UM 2.12.1935. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

³⁸ Idman to UM 20.11.1934. UM 5C 14, Bukarest.

them. And in any case, the Peace Treaty of Trianon – as the Peace Treaty of Versailles – was considered in Finland totally unreasonable.

The Hungarian fierce patriotism and love for their country was also appreciated, especially as the Finns themselves were usually too shy to show any public emotions, and there seemed to be something “romantic” and “chivalrous” left in the Hungarian culture and way of life which you could not find anywhere else in Europe. Some comments also reveal that the silent and sullen Finns envied the way the Hungarians could feel and express their emotions and make a party of their life. There was some positive exoticism in Hungary.³⁹

The exoticism was not, however, a one-way street. A Finnish politician, Edwin Linkomies, describes in his memoirs, how Regent Horthy had talked to him about a plan to settle tens of thousands of Finnish men to Hungary so that they would marry Hungarian women and cultivate the land. They would thus upbring a new generation which would reform the Hungarian blood by introducing Finnish guts, stamina and persistence to it. After some time the men would be free to return to Finland if they wanted to, but the Hungarian wives and the children would stay in Hungary.⁴⁰ It is difficult to confirm if such a plan ever actually existed, but nevertheless the story represents very illuminatingly national stereotypes.

But even bearing all this in mind, even Hungary could not be as familiar as Sweden or even Norway and Denmark, or Germany. The Hungarian mentality was too fierce and open, the ways of behaviour too bombastic for the Finnish standards, the cultural background was totally different, the work ethics not on a Lutheran standard (“the Hungarian mind is not suitable for scientific work”, wrote a Finnish Professor, himself a very pro-Hungarian personality and later the Finnish envoy in Budapest, in a letter already in the 19th century⁴¹). The Finnish diplomats also considered Hungary’s domestic policy undemocratic and criticized the indifference of the Hungarian Government when social policy and the lot of the lower class was concerned. The failure to issue a land reform in Hungary was considered strange, and the Hungarian way to manipulate

³⁹ See Vesa Vares, “Isten vidám, nagy gyermeket, akik nagyon jó véleménnyel vannak magukról – s gyakran joggal”. Magyarország képe Finnországban az 1920-as és 1930-as években,’ “Kutatási Füzetek 16. Magyarságkép 19-20. századi útleírásokban. Pécsi Tudományegyetem (Pécs, 2010), 63-88.

⁴⁰ Edwin Linkomies, *Vaikea aika. Suomen pääministerinä vuosina 1943-44* (Keuruu: Otava, 1980), 124.

⁴¹ The person in question made also other similar pejorative remarks in his correspondence. See for example E.N. Setälä to Almberg-Jalava 15.2.1889. Sign. 212, Finnish Literary Society; Setälä to Lauri Palonen 16.2.1889 and 12.3.1889. Setälä archives, VA Y 5508, KA.

elections surprised even the conservatives. The Finns also found the anti-Semitic laws peculiar – and the rise of the Arrow Cross Movement worrying.⁴²

The main difference was that also the Hungarian was a “person of a moment”, not of endurance, which trait the Finns have always appreciated more than fierce emotions. The Hungarians were, as one Finnish author put it, “God’s big, joyful children, who have a good opinion of themselves – often justifiably”.⁴³

Conclusion

As Stuart Hall has stated, the national culture is, more than anything else, a discourse. Also Benedict Anderson refers to the nation as an “imaginary community”.

Essentially the case of the Finns and Eastern Europe was the same as for the Europeans in relation to the new continents: there was idolization, fantasies of lust and contempt and inability to recognize and accept differences, the only measurement being one’s own categories. All these elements can be found in milder form in the Finnish thinking on Eastern Central Europe; the latter was not the “Enemy”, but very definitely the “Other”, which was inferior. Thus the opinions on Eastern Central Europe were a part of the Finnish identity – and state-building process. They showed a reference group which Finland did not find suitable and which according to the Finns could be considered “less developed” than Finland.

But it should also be remembered, that the Finns were not often very successful in their efforts to represent themselves as more “Western” than Eastern Central Europe was. Actually all the time during the 1920s and 1930s, there had often been a very similar stereotype about Finland in the West that they Finns themselves entertained about Eastern Central Europe.

In the various Western analyses the Finns seemed to be a people which did not quite live up to the Scandinavian and Western standards, but were strangely “Eastern” and “Baltic”. They could be accepted as equals only after they had matured in their political life. Their mentality, however, seemed peculiar for example, for Swedish, British or German observers. This mentality was sometimes fierce, sometimes passive and melancholy, sometimes hardworking, sometimes helpless. According to these analyses, the Finns seemed to concentrate on politics with a passion that was strange

⁴² See Vares, Isten vidám..., 63-88.

⁴³ Arvi Järventaus, *Itkevien pajujen maa. Unkaria sieltä ja täältä* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1939). 91-96.

to the matter-of-fact and efficient Scandinavians or other peoples that had been more accustomed to a democratic and liberal society. Only after the Second World War – and as the Finnish society began to resemble the Swedish society more and more – did the Finns become more acceptable and it became self-evident that they were not to be compared with Eastern Central Europe, but to Scandinavia.

Maybe this paper can be concluded by the report which the Swedish envoy wrote to his Foreign Ministry in May 1921 from Helsinki. It was about the circumstances in Finland and concentrated especially on the person of the Finnish Prime Minister:

“ --- he is naive, childish, pleased with himself, open-mouthed, a busybody and shallow in his analysis. A person told me that he has read everything and assimilated nothing, and I agree with that analysis. Furthermore, it appears that he thinks that the dunghill from the top of which he greets the rising sun every morning is the greatest and finest in the world.”⁴⁴

It is very likely, that the viewpoint of Eastern Central European diplomats about Finland was very much the same as that of the Scandinavians and Western Europeans.

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