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Grain and foodstoffs for Finland 1918-1919

This paper deals with the internal problems in Finland to fight the shortage of food and grain 1918-1919. The opposing and fighting groups in the civil war both tried to buy and bring grain and foodstoffs from abroad to Finland. The reports and telegrams from Helsinki and Stockholm/ Copenhagen from diplomats, especially the English and US-American representatives, form important sources to broaden the foreign perspectives by dealing with the famine; both the Reds and the Whites as well as the bank of Finland were active engaged abroad in endeavors to help their mother country.

Background: During the 19th Century Finland experienced some famines due to crop failures, the most serious taking place 1867-68. The country became almost dependent on grain deliveries from Russia, later from Germany. The March Revolution 1917 in Russia however nearly stopped all grain import to Finland. On the eve of the First World War, in 1911-13 the grain import was about 340 million kilos. Finland was in the summer of 1917 threatened by a famine also as a consequence of capricious weather, speculation and political unrest. Political action was taken for food rationing. Even the wealthy classes were affected by the shortage, if they were not landowners. This was new in Finnish history. Rationing affected not only the food supply of the urban middle class, but the amount of consumers who did not have any contact with farming had grown, thus the dependence of food trade and because of the dairy cattle trend in agriculture, import of grain was highly necessary.

The Finnish Senate tried to buy grain from Russia, but the deliveries were too small. Attempts also to buy grain from the United States and neutral powers was not successful because of transportation difficulties. The US government also feared that grain shipments might fall into the wrong hands. In November Herbert Hoover, the American director of the American food aid, suspended grain deliveries to Finland. The allied powers however reassessed the situation in December, and the US-government re-established negotiations on the delivery of cereals to Finland.

Imports from the allied powers became impossible when the civil war broke out at the end of January 1918. The supply of grain from Russia stopped almost completely. This did not come as a surprise to the Finnish food authorities. The local Food boards received circulars in order to prepare them to the fact that the country would have to become self-sufficient in terms of food.

Especially Helsinki experienced great problems to get bread and flour during the civil war. In spring 1918 it was told as a rumor in the city that the Reds destroyed fields of grain and made it almost impossible to feed and transport grain to the inhabitants. At the end of the civil war a Danish newspaper declared on the 3rd of Mai, that the last bread had now been sold in Helsinki.

The shortage of food was severe and inflation was strong throughout the country due to the civil war. The Red authorities tried to improve the situation by strictly rationing food, but the

results were unsatisfactory because the rules were not strictly obeyed and food was often illegally confiscated. During the civil war the social-democrat Oskari Tokoi on the side of the Reds was responsible for providing foodstuffs. He was most active trying to optimize the resources in Finland and to get supplies from Russia, but because of several problems the deliveries at first arrived at the end of March 1918. Greater deliveries of grain were reserved in the inner parts of Russia, but the logistics had to be carried out by the Reds in Finland themselves. Under great difficulties they succeeded to bring 49 wagons with grain to Helsinki on the 31 of March 1918. A second transport was stopped and did not arrive its destiny in Finland.

Because of White Finland's political and military orientation towards Germany it was impossible during the civil war to get supplies from the allied powers and from other (neutral) states. The Finnish ambassador in Berlin told his Government in Vasa, that Germany was not able to deliver grain. The Germans did not find the situation in Finland so alarming as it was in Germany itself and in Sweden. Further negotiations had as a result, that the Finns had to deliver three times more butter than grain received, later this was changed by the German authorities into the relationship 1:13.

The German Baltic division became responsible for the deliveries to White Finland. During autumn bread was strictly rationed. The Vasa-government sought alternatives and experiments of new types of bread were carried out. There were also logistic problems transporting grain and foodstuffs to Helsinki and the German Baltic division was asked for ships in order to transport grain from Nyland to the capital.

The harvest 1918 in Finland was poor and the situation grew worse. In August the Finnish authorities tried in vain to get potatoes and other foodstuffs from Holland. Deliveries of grain from the Ukraine was a possibility. A treaty was concluded on the 13th of September 1918 against Finnish deliveries of pulp and paper, but as a consequence of the development during the next months, this was not carried out.

During the beginning of the month of November 1918 the vice-regent Carl Gustav Mannerheim visited London and Paris and among others successfully negotiated for foodstuffs to Finland. This fact has for long been underlined. The Finnish government had however also representatives in the United States (Reuter, Ignatius), and Herbert Hoover was personally himself most eager to help Finland. During the Civil War Santeri Nuorteva had by the way represented the Reds in the United States trying to secure grain and foodstuffs.

After the Germans had left Finland and the White-government had established full power, the will to help Finland among the allied powers improved. Herbert Hoover also convinced the Swedes and the Danes to send supplies, and coffee and fish was donated from Norway. American citizens donated money to feed Finnish children. The Finnish emigrants in the United States had supported the Whites during the Civil war.

Aid to Finland was received especially through the American Relief Administration led by Herbert Hoover. These shipments were often in the Finnish way called "huuveri". The beginning of 1919 was still considered a time of emergency in Finland, but rations were

slowly relieved. After the harvest in 1919 rationing gradually ended. The United States recognized Finland as a sovereign state at the beginning of March 1919.

The famine-period in Finland from 1917-1919 with shortage of food during and after the civil war caused fundamental significance by politicians and authorities to these aspects. Another reason for the interest for the domestic economy was the observation that in this sector women could proceed and continue their work without competing with men. On the whole the fear of famine changed Finnish agricultural politics during the following years of the Interwar period. Instead of concentrating on dairy production the new goal was self sufficiency. An important land reform, which had been discussed in the Finnish Parliament before the civil war, was among others now introduced and crofters received ownership (Lex Kallio).