CHAPTER 1

The Expected and Non-expected Roots of Chaos: Preconditions of the Finnish Civil War

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It is difficult to understand and explain the crisis, political violence, and the Civil War in Finland in 1917–18. The difficulty stems from the prevailing image of Finland as a distant, quiet, peaceful, harmonious, homogenous, and industrious society. That was the reality in the 19th century, when Finland was a loyal Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire without an army, and after World War I, when Finland became a democratic republic and later a welfare state of a Nordic model. Things look different if we look at the years of the early 20th century only, and with contemporary eyes. Even then the overall image is not one of crisis but one of progress, growth of wealth, and rapid change in all spheres of life. The optimistic view was reflected on the pages of a book titled Modern Times, published in 1908: “If a man came from the distant past like in a fable – how strange the world would look to him! By every step he would be confronted by things whose significance he could not understand ... And today this fable is clearly among us.”¹ The evidence for this view was not only the technical miracles of the time but also a claim, that “we think and feel unlike before” and that people were aware of the world around them: “It is as if the great historical moments happened right under our windows. We are living it all through; our spiritual life becomes all the more fuller and richer.” Among other things, the Finns were witnessing the birth of New Russia. This is what the author believed ten years before the Russian revolution: “As radical as the French Revolution in the end of the 18th century will be the Russian Revolution in the beginning of the 20th century. It will be the spring before a new summer dawns.”

This optimism was not ungrounded. It was the tone and spirit of the time, which will be described further below, but it included the option of crisis, too. Not all of the people were satisfied with modern times – or cultural decay, as they called it. New tensions were in the air. New kinds of debates and clashes emerged concerning values, religion, the rules of everyday life, and politics.

New steps towards democracy caused as much distrust as hope. All this went
through the minds of the people as well, and it is well recorded in the discus-
sions of the time, private and public. There were also great changes, which
were not so visible but deeply affected peoples’ conditions, expectations, and
possibilities. Societal life was changing, but why and to what direction re-
mained unclear and uncertain. That is the normal case in human history, and
such changes can be analyzed only afterwards. Now, one hundred years later, it
is much easier to see and explain which factors shook the world. Among those
were new kinds of demographic, economic, and social changes that were re-
lated to the rapid growth of global markets, industrialization, power politics,
etc. In the case of Finland, most of those factors were “external,” an outcome of
things that happened in Europe, North America, and Russia. This chapter dis-
cusses those structural determinants of Finnish society and the resultant inter-
nal and external preconditions for the political crises of 1917 and 1918. How
people reacted to those changes in their life caused by World War I and the
Civil War will be analyzed in detail in other chapters of the book.2

Special Economic Zone

Early 20th-century Finland was an agrarian society in which farming directly
supported two million people out of a total population of three million. The
country was peripheral when compared to most parts of Western Europe, but
it was not as backward as often believed. In fact, Finland was driven and
changed by the same factors that drove and changed the most developed areas
of the world. The most important was capitalistic industrialization, which re-
sulted from the so-called first globalization between 1880 and 1910. Finland had
been a part of the northern European economy for centuries, exporting mainly
wood and tar, but now the scale of foreign trade exploded and began to domi-
nate economic and social development through creating new jobs, relocating
population, and by reacting to economic fluctuations. Both exports and im-
ports more than tripled between 1890 and 1910. The greatest economic boom
was experienced in the 1890s when industrial production, employment,
exports, GDP, and wages raised more than ever. In Finnish historiography the
decade is usually presented as the “golden age” of Finnish art, when the

2 A more detailed analysis of the social conditions of the time and references can be found in
Pertti Haapala, Kun yhteiskunta hajosi (Helsinki: Painatuskeskus, 1995); and Pertti Haapala,
“Suomalaisen yhteiskunnan rakennemuutos,” in Juho Saari, ed., Historiallinen käänne