On Monday, 22 January 1918, the police chief of Lappeenranta, a small town in Eastern Finland, reported to the county governor that a shooting incident had taken place the previous night in the nearby country parish of Luumäki; two people had been killed and several wounded. A few days later, the governor of Vyborg County was sent detailed information about the “Lappeenranta Red Guards’ weapons search, during which they threatened and arrested peaceful people at gunpoint, and about a manslaughter near the Taavetti railway station.” During the last week of January 1918, isolated and confusing skirmishes like this fused into a power struggle between the Reds and the Whites. Official documents describe well the confusion and uncertainty into which the weak administration of the newly independent country drifted as a result of skirmishes between armed political groups, soon to escalate into one of Europe’s bloodiest civil wars in the 20th century. The beginning of the war has been dated to the last days of January, when the White Civil Guards began to disarm Russian military units in several municipalities in southern Ostrobothnia and Karelia and the Red Guards occupied Helsinki and seized the power in southern Finland.
The Nature of the War

The Finnish Civil War was essentially a *domestic war*, as the principal parties were the Finnish Red Guards and the White Army. Both the Reds and the Whites were able to gather armies of untrained, mostly civilian combatants. These armies by the end of the war reached almost 100,000 soldiers respectively, although the active forces were significantly smaller, with a maximum of 80,000 Reds and 60,000 Whites.\(^3\) In various stages of the war, the Red Guards received support from some 2000–3700 revolutionary soldiers of the former army of Imperial Russia; it has been noted that for the Reds, material and educational aid from the Russian revolutionaries was more significant than any military support as such.\(^4\) The Whites received support especially from Sweden, with a maximum of 1100 voluntary fighters.\(^5\) In the final stages of the war, 14,500 men of Imperial Germany’s Baltic Sea Division supported the Whites.

Neither side suffered from a lack of arms, since both the Red and the White armies made use of weapons received, bought, or stolen from the 52,000 Russian troops still deployed in the Grand Duchy of Finland in the fall of 1917 as a consequence of World War I.\(^6\) In the fall of 1917 the demoralization of the Russian troops stationed in Finland evidenced itself in the form of weapons trade: individual soldiers of the disintegrating Russian army troops and local soldier committees sold weapons to the Reds and the Whites alike. Later, in January 1918, Russian Bolsheviks supported Finland’s revolutionaries with arms, mainly infantry rifles and machine guns. The Germans, for their part, supported the Whites by delivering arms and trained soldiers. Since 1915, Germany

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5 Tuomas Hoppu, “Ruotsi ja Suomen sisällissota,” in *Sisällissodan pikkujättiläinen*, p. 130.