The short but raw Civil War in Finland in 1918 engaged women as well as men. Women on both sides worked in maintenance troops. In addition, women on the Red side served as combatants as well. Approximately 2000 armed women operated as guardians and soldiers. Their participation triggered intense emotional reactions in the White and Red camps. Especially the right wing found this military activity reprehensible. Women who engaged in the battles acted against the set expectations for their gender and were punished severely after the war. Beyond the sentences given in the court, the women were also confronted with moral condemnation by the surrounding White society. The winners considered that women had acted disgracefully and thus regarded them as ineligible citizens. All the rebels were seen as traitors, but after the war the (White) public opinion judged female soldiers more sternly than male soldiers. Other Red women were despised as well. By “Red women” I refer to those women who actively supported the Red Guards. Their support was shown in several ways, which will be discussed later in this chapter.¹

The aim of this chapter is to examine women’s different roles in the Finnish Civil War and explain why some of those roles were seen as so unpalatable. This chapter also seeks to address the following questions: what was the ideal image of woman maintained by the Whites on the eve of the Civil War; and how did the Red women fit into this image? what were the consequences? how did the Reds themselves react to the arming of women? And, finally, women’s military activity will be compared to women’s participation in revolts in other European countries during and after World War I. In the pages that follow, it will be argued that Finnish Red women had very much in common with their sisters in Russia, Germany, Hungary, and Spain.

¹ Equally, the term “White women” will be used to refer to women who supported the Civil Guards.
Women’s Standing and the Expectations of Society

Both Whites and Reds accepted women’s participation in the war, provided that they were acting in nursing and maintenance duties. When women exhibited interest in actual fighting, they were rejected, as fighting was regarded definitely as a male occupation. The rejection was a natural consequence of the prevailing conception of the ideal gender roles.²

According to the conservative viewpoint, in the beginning of the 20th century, the woman’s natural operational environment was the home. Home was considered the basic unit of the society, which had an important role in maintaining the morality of the nation.³ Given the spirit of the time, women were not supposed to work outside the home.

Nevertheless, the position of Finnish women differed greatly from that of women in traditional patriarchal societies, where women’s duty was to be *la perfecta casada*, a perfect housewife, who obeyed the husband and were dominated by their partner. Finnish women did not fit in this picture. This resulted from the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century, Finland was an agricultural country where nearly 90 per cent of the population still lived the rural life, and women participated in the hard work in the farms. Tending cattle was often their job, and especially in the small crofts they also worked in the fields. On a smallholding, the work contribution of the both spouses was vital, and they worked side by side. In addition to the independent and tenant farmers, there was also a large group of landless people, men and women, who were agricultural laborers.⁴ Irma Sulkunen writes that the “subjection of women’ was not a dominant feature of the old agrarian social order, instead the gender relations were understood as one and indivisible in accordance with the collective concept of man.”⁵ There was division of work between the sexes in the agrarian culture also, but it did not produce antagonism in the gender

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