The Civil War of 1918 was in many ways a turning point in the history of male citizenship in Finland. The century preceding World War I had been a peaceful period, when most Finnish men had little or nothing to do with military matters. With Finland’s independence, the Civil War, and the subsequent build-up of national conscription-based armed forces, soldiering suddenly rushed into the lives of Finnish men and their families. For some, this meant participation in military action in 1917–18; for others it meant compulsory military service in the regular peacetime army after the war or voluntary membership in the Civil Guards. During and after the Civil War, new militarized images of Finnish masculinities and ideal manliness emerged. This militarization of manhood was heavily propagated by pro-defense nationalists but also met with widespread reluctance and skepticism in Finnish society.

A group that was central to this transformation process was the so-called Jägers. They were a group of about 1900 young men who clandestinely left Finland during World War I to get military training in the German Army. Their aim was to soon return to Finland and lead a national uprising to detach Finland from the Russian Empire. Instead, they were deployed on the German East Front and eventually returned to Finland only after the declaration of independence and outbreak of a civil war. They trained and led the White Government’s new conscripted troops into battle, mainly against their own countrymen. Since Finland had no domestic armed forces and there was an acute shortage of professional officers and men with military training, the Jägers’ proficiency and leadership were regarded as a decisive reinforcement of the striking power of the White Army. For the same reason, many Jägers rose rapidly in the ranks during and soon after the war. By the late 1920s, Jäger officers had essentially taken over command of the new national armed forces from the older generation of professional Finnish officers who had served in the Russian imperial army before the revolution.

In the conservative and nationalist commemoration of the War of Liberation, the Jägers were presented as war heroes and symbols of the young Finnish nation’s ability to take action. They came to serve as models of a new form of
Finnish military manliness that gained a strong foothold in Finland as a consequence of the events in 1918. A great number of historical and fictional works, articles and short stories in magazines and periodicals, memoirs, stage plays, and motion pictures were produced in the interwar era to commemorate the Jäger movement and the vicissitudes of the Jägers’ journeys, military training, and war experiences. The story about the young men who risked everything to save their country was actively told and retold, not least by their supporters and the Jägers themselves. It became part of the victors’ dominant interpretation of the Civil War.

The Jäger story fit well with the classic pattern of hero myths, where the hero’s quest takes him away from home into the dangers of foreign lands, a perilous journey culminating in a crucial struggle before he can return triumphant, bringing home some life-transmuting trophy to renew the community or the nation. The basic function of heroes, however, is to serve as objects of identification and tell a story of struggle and growth that the collective can recognize as its own. The concepts “heroic narrative” and “hero myth” are used here to apply an analytical perspective highlighting how the Jäger commemoration attempted to convey moral messages and offer objects of identification to its audiences. It was used to legitimize the Jäger movement and the White war effort, infuse the nation with pride of its past and faith in its future, and set a new standard of manliness in order to mobilize the nation for future wars. It was a history directed as much towards how to remember the past as towards prescribing for its audiences how to understand the present and anticipate the national future.

This highly political commemoration was naturally far removed from the private war memories of many people, especially those on the Red side. Forming part of the public and official memory of the war, the Jäger story obscured many other stories about the Finnish war experience. It muted not only the voices of socialists and proletarians who lost the Civil War but also those of the professional officers who had served the Russian tsar, the Jägers who for one reason or another did not return to Finland to fight in the Civil War, as well as the Jägers physically or mentally disabled in the war. Nevertheless, the Jäger

---