The War of Liberation, the Civil Guards and the Veterans’ Union: Public Memory in the Interwar Period

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During the interwar period, the commemoration of the Great War focusing on remembering the fallen became a strong ingredient in European cultures. The commemoration was embodied not only as a stately orchestrated manifestation but also as a vernacular mass movement, deeply connected to the emergence of post-war modern civil society. The fallen were linked strongly to the home parish with local memorials and Remembrance Day parades. Gatherings of war veterans, war monuments, and military graveyards became part of the European landscape. The popularity of the commemorative movement was based not so much on an ideological or political conformity but, rather, on the possibility to act collectively without being excluded on political or social grounds. Especially in France and Great Britain, the public memory of the war stood firm against attempts at ideological monopolization and included expressions that varied from pacifism to conservative patriotism. In defeated Germany, however, the memory concentrated more on the heroic, masculine, and even revanchist aspects accompanied with an enforced consensus. The commemorative movement emerged strongly also in Finland, with similar cultural expressions and symbols. In Finland, however, the overwhelming aspect concerning the public memory of the war was the character of the Civil War conflict.1

The problems of remembering a civil war derives not only from the fact that the adversaries continue to share the same public space after the conflict but also from the ideological concept of a nation-state. How to honor a war that in its structure is an anomaly of nationalism and shakes the very foundations of the nation state, the collective experience of the unity of the people?

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Concerning the public memory of a civil war, there is usually no room for a display of a wide range of experiences. Tensions in a post-war climate, when the enemy continues to live among us after the killing has ended, promotes simplified narratives even to a degree of denial regarding the characteristics of the domestic conflict. This is commonly done by positioning the enemy outside the national-ethnic sphere and placing the disturbing elements of national unity outside the definition of the nation. When shared remembrance becomes impossible and when glorifying and honoring the victory is problematic, a collective oblivion and demand for silence becomes an alternative.2

It is pretty much a rule that there will be difficulties overcoming the crisis of a domestic war that includes a traumatized memory, but there may be inherent in the very idea of a nation-state certain factors that support re-establish-