An established academic consensus states that Red interpretations and memories of the Civil War entered the mainstream publicity and the “grand narrative” in the 1960s. This view is definitely accurate insofar as it concerns the transformation of the pre-World War II Red narrative from an underground script into a generally accepted one. It is also historiographically accurate, as until the late 1960s the academic history of the Civil War had belittled the scope and purpose of the White Terror and effectively downplayed – if not denied – the class conflict in the background of the events of 1918. Nevertheless, the first, even if small, steps towards reconciliation between drastically different White and Red interpretations had been taken already in the late 1930s. The political center of the small farmers and the social democrats strengthened its status as a worthy political force after the tumultuous early 1930s. This process was signified in the rejection of the uncompromising White interpretation propagated by the Veterans’ Union of the War of Liberation, many of the Civil Guard leaders, and the far Right in general, for whom the War of Liberation myth served as an ideological guarantor not only against communism as such but also against everything associated with socialism and social change. For the far Right, the War of Liberation cult served as a vehicle of the interwar European trend of fascism.

World War II continued reshuffling the collective memories of 1918 and established for the first time shared commemorations of the Civil War victims on the state level and locally. It is interesting that popular opinion and popular historiography have emphasized the impact of World War II and especially the Winter War (1939–1940) on reconciliation in the society more than academic historiography. The latter has perhaps treated the unifying effect of the “miracle of the Winter War” as, if not superficial, at least to some degree a propagated concept. According to this view the reasons behind the changes in the interpretation of the Civil War were the establishment of the welfare state policy and generational rebellion in the 1960s. This chapter sets out to show, however, that both the popular and academic narratives as described above may be somewhat biased. First, contrary to the widely popular layman’s view, the
conciliatory gestures and memory politics and practices began before the Winter War. Second, World War II had a profound effect on the collective memories of the Civil War. Namely, World War II replaced the “flawed” birth myth of the nation with a viable one, and this downplayed the narrative frictions between the Reds and the Whites. Obviously, this is not to deny the fact that during the Cold War the influence of the Soviet Union limited the expression of Civil War remembrances. The Soviet presence strengthened the turn of focus of remembrance of class conflict away from Russian or Bolshevik involvement to the conflict propagated in the interwar period.

The Changing Political Landscape at the End of the 1930s

The coalition of the Agrarian League and the social democrats together with other centrist parties (so-called “red-earth coalition”) formed in March 1937 and governed until the beginning of World War II.¹ The government initiated the first move towards Nordic welfare state policy by establishing, for instance, the Social Insurance Institution and started a universal pension program. Finnish society recuperated from the depression, and economic activity increased markedly towards the end of the decade.

The Independence Day celebrations on 6 December 1937 marked the twentieth anniversary of independence. The wintry date had, during the last two decades, been undermined in favor of 16 May, which celebrated the end of the War of Liberation. However, Independence Day had constituted a somewhat neutral date that even some social democrats had been able to celebrate before they held a governmental position. Now, in the late 1930s, the importance of Independence Day rose. In 1937, the partly “socialist” government organized this important national anniversary. This motivated the best-known female character of the far-right Hilja Riipinen, an MP of the Patriotic People’s Movement, to renounce the celebrations altogether.² The far Right, which had already started to lose its credibility in the eyes of the general public, became further marginalized, and the liberal press continued to ridicule their fascist postures under national symbols.³

The War of Liberation cult, however, still retained its character as a unifying element among the middle classes. The view was not uniform – a couple of

¹ Practically, the government lasted until the end of the Winter War, although the key ministers changed immediately after the war began.
² Ajan Suunta 8 December 1937; Helsingin Sanomat 8 December 1937.
³ Helsingin Sanomat 3 May 1934.