

National Socialist racial doctrines, *Lebensraum*, and the New European Order

Germany's aggressive military policy towards the East in 1941 was constructed upon those key Nazi doctrines that had been nurtured systematically within German society since the early 1930s, when the NSDAP under Adolf Hitler had assumed absolute political power in the country. Among the core tenets of National Socialism were the belief in the superiority of the Germanic [Aryan] race, the concept of securing *Lebensraum* or "living space" for the Germans – and for other peoples deemed racially and genetically superior – through territorial expansion to the East, and the elimination or resettlement of racially inferior peoples. The ultimate goal was the building of a New European Order (Hitler's proclamation in Berlin in January 1941 of *...einer großen Neuordnung Europas*) on the lands that had been colonised and Germanised.

The National Socialists sought to validate their racial doctrines scientifically by appealing to evolutionary theory and Social Darwinism. As seen from the Nazi viewpoint, racial and national groups were in an existential struggle, in which the strongest would ultimately survive and triumph. One of the key German proponents of Social Darwinist ideas was the zoologist, naturalist, and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Haeckel's views on the evolutionary struggle between races and peoples based on natural selection were in turn influential for the Nazis' thinking. Social Darwinism and race ideologies took a strong hold in Germany, but it is fair to say they were common throughout the Western world.³⁰⁴

In addition to military prowess, tools to be deployed in the Social Darwinist struggle included positive and negative eugenics or "racial hygiene", the nurturing of physical fitness and healthy habits, a strong sense of ideological unanimity, and ultimately a willingness to use any and every means to reach the final objective – the triumph of the best and the eradication of weaker peoples, races, and individuals. Jews and Bolsheviks were branded as the worst adversaries, together with the Communist Soviet Union itself – built as it was on the framework of the teachings and activities of these reviled groups – and the USSR's spheres of influence and its ideological partners. They were viewed as the archenemy of Germany, which was fighting on behalf of Europe and the Germanic race. Propaganda had an important role in all aspects of education, including military training.³⁰⁵

The Finnish SS-volunteer Kauko Suonto wrote in a lengthy preface to his diary:

"There must have been many among the recruiters who hoped that we would get political training, that we would derive good new ideas from National Socialism, and that we would

subsequently become the builders of a new and more blessed Finland. In the very first volunteer unit, set up in Vienna, we were to be given political instruction, in Obersturmführer Boiske's company. I suppose the German leaders, too, thought we would be the bearers of the ideals of National Socialism in Finland. We had time for a couple of lessons before the war in the east broke out, and then the officers had to go off to the front. The new intake and the start of the fighting changed all the plans. We had no political indoctrination after that, not until Graz in the spring of 1943, with the Replacement Company. It was here that Oberscharführer Alhainen delivered his "beloved words".³⁰⁶

The SS-volunteer Tauno Polón also noted in his diary entry for 23.11.1942, at a training course at the Bad Tölz SS-Junkerschule:

"Completely out of the blue, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler turned up at our school and spoke to us for nearly two hours. He discussed the current struggle on the basis of racial doctrine and referred at the same time to the coming Europe, to the new Germanic society".³⁰⁷

SS-volunteer Pekka Kurvinen, for his part, wrote of a political lesson on racial traits and doctrines delivered on 25.6.1941, at the very beginning of hostilities on the Eastern Front:

"Race. All individuals and races are not created with equal abilities. A number of races throughout history have been talented and creative, while others have not. The most creative [races] are dominant: Germany, part of France, England, the Baltic States, Scandinavia, Finland, Denmark, Aryans. The Jew is of mixed racial origins and is industrious, but has inherited the bad qualities of other races".

Three weeks later, on 16.7.1941, Kurvinen wrote in his diary:

"But in the evening, there was a huge surprise! Uscha [Unterscharführer] Arnolds came in and asked me to the Schreibstube for a few moments. I went there, and he started to explain National Socialism and other principles he held. It was interesting to listen to, and when we stopped talking it was pitch dark and approaching midnight."

In Finland, international racial theories and eugenics were an extremely contentious issue. As far back as the early 19th century, European research had classified the Finns as being descended from

the Mongols, and this was the prevailing interpretation in German encyclopaedias from the 1840s onwards, even right up to the post-WW2 era. Ernst Haeckel categorised the Finns as Mongols, and a further prominent German scholar, Friedrich Müller, took the view that the Finns were a kind of halfway house between the Caucasian and the Mongol types. This same theory of the Asian origins of the Finns was also to the fore in Scandinavian encyclopaedias and reference books. The Scandinavians were regarded as the purest representatives of the Germanic peoples. The ancient Baltic-Finnish tribes, or the Chudes as they are sometimes known, represented Asian, racially inferior peoples. In a widely used and influential textbook by the Swedish historian Clas Theodor Odhner (1836-1904), the Finns were described as having lived in small communities and as being of a low level of development.³⁰⁸

Race theories in Finland were bound up with the long-standing language dispute between the Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking populations. The Swedish-speaking philologist Axel Olof Freudenthal accentuated the ties of the Swedish-language Finns to Swedes and Germanic peoples. In his own research into the racial perceptions of Swedish-speaking Finns at the time of the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War (1917-1918), Pekka Kalevi Hämäläinen has observed that racist notions became more common among the Swedish speakers at the beginning of the 20th century and particularly during the Civil War. From the 1910s onwards, Swedish-speaking students (undergraduates) had brought these views into the foreground among the wider Swedish-speaking population in various parts of Finland. Hämäläinen notes that “the experiences of the Civil War reignited in the educated class a resistance to political egalitarianism and a disappointment with democracy”. The events were also interpreted through the filter of racial biology theories, for instance in articles published in *Nya Argus* by the Finnish geneticist and eugenicist Harry Federley.³⁰⁹

The approach to Finland and the Finns was something of a thorny issue for the German National Socialists. In the autumn of 1940, when Germany began overtures to Finland on political and military grounds, the question arose once more of how the Finns were to be seen in racial terms. Finns could not as such be classified as Germanic, nor could they even be included, on linguistic grounds, among the Caucasians speaking Indo-European languages. In order to explain the matter to German soldiers posted to Finland, a guide by Dr. Arthur Ruppert was handed out, entitled *Waffenbruder Finnland – Ein Buch für die Deutschen Soldaten in Finnland* (“Our Brother-in-Arms Finland – A Guide for German Servicemen in Finland”, 1942, 283pp.). The preface to this work was written jointly by the influential Nazi Party ideologue and Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories Alfred Rosenberg and the former Finnish President of the Republic Pehr Evind Svinhufvud. A Baltic German born in Tallinn, Rosenberg took an understanding attitude towards the Finns, whom he categorised – for ideological reasons – as being among the peoples who had adopted the “Nordic way of thinking” (*Der Nordische*

Gedanke), although they were not racially Germanic. Nevertheless, it was not thought desirable that German soldiers stationed in Finland should marry Finnish women. Permits to marry in these cases were often very difficult to obtain.³¹⁰

The race card was also reflected in the recruiting of SS-volunteers. SS-Brigadeführer [later SS-Obergruppenführer and General of the Waffen-SS] Gottlob Christian Berger, who was responsible for the recruitment to Waffen SS-Division Wiking, had set the objective that there would be a Finnish battalion in the division. On the Finnish side, it was not considered a good idea that the Finns should be placed in the same units with volunteers hailing from occupied Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Despite the resistance, this was eventually done because of strong pressure from the Germans. Then again, Berger had also hoped that for racial reasons it would be particularly the Swedish-speaking contingent of Finns who were targeted and recruited. This aspiration went unrealised. The thinking behind this had undoubtedly been that the Swedish-speaking Finns were viewed as Germanic Aryans, while the “ordinary” Finns were not.³¹¹

Attempts were made to spell out relations between the Finns and the Germans in the SS-units. One example indicating that the Finns were regarded as acceptable colleagues-in-arms surfaces in the infamous 1942 propaganda brochure *Der Untermensch* produced on the initiative of Heinrich Himmler and Gottlob Berger for distribution among the troops fighting on the Eastern Front. One picture spread shows a Finnish officer, a Spanish fisherman, a Dutch sailor, a young Italian man, a North German farmer, and ‘people from all European nations and races’ hoping for the elimination of the “Subhumans”.³¹² The message comes through loud and clear: to point out to the soldiers of Germany and its allies that the Finns are fighting alongside them on behalf of shared European goals.

The racial acceptability of the Finnish brothers-in-arms was nevertheless not always so transparent for their German comrades in SS-Division Wiking, and the Finns were left in no doubt of this. For example, SS-Schütze (Private) Olavi Liesinen wrote in his diary: “The Germans viewed us with indifference and let it be understood that we were granted an equal status only as a consequence of Hitler’s permission”.³¹³

In 1941, the Finns were a great deal more enthusiastic about German *Lebensraum* expansionism, the determination to take additional territory in the East for Germanic peoples to settle in, than they were about racial doctrines. Many political and military leaders in Finland espoused a belief in the creation of a “New Europe”. In its advances in 1939-1940, Germany had succeeded in rapidly occupying Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, a large part of France, and Denmark and Norway, all without facing any serious resistance. German military power appeared more or less invincible. When the preparations for the Eastern Offensive (Operation

Barbarossa) were launched in the autumn of 1940, few believed the Soviet Union had the means to stop the German war machine.

From the Finnish perspective, the situation was equivocal. On the one hand, there was a fear that German troops in the north would take over areas with Finnish-speaking populations and that Germany would seek to annex these regions. At the same time, there was a sense of excitement that Finland might be offered an opportunity to get its share of the “new European order” spoils to be dealt out. Consequently, when the fighting started in June 1941, the Finnish forces did not halt their advance at the old [pre-Winter War] 1939 borders, but marched on into the Soviet Union, into Eastern Karelia. The Finnish C-in-C Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim had declared on 10.7.1941, in his famous “Sword Scabbard Order of the Day” (actually a second such order, echoing one delivered in 1918 during the Civil War, where Mannerheim pledged not to sheathe his sword before Finland and White Karelia were freed from the Russian yoke):

“You, fighters of the War of Independence, valiant warriors of the Winter War, my brave soldiers! A new day has dawned. Karelia is rising, her own battalions march alongside us. A liberated Karelia and [the emergence of] Greater Finland glitter before us in the great maelstrom of history. May providence, guiding the destinies of peoples, assist the Finnish Army to comply with the promise I made to the Karelian tribe”.³¹⁴

Mannerheim’s declaration prompted intense discussion of Finland’s real war objectives. The United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union took the view that Finland was seeking to expand its territory, which triggered a diplomatic storm. Domestically, too, there was criticism on several fronts. The taking of Eastern Karelia was rationalised on solid military grounds, but at the same time there were quite overt references to Finland’s aspirations to secure “natural borders” for itself, both ethnically and geographically. The flame of a “Greater Finland” flickered in many imaginations, and its achievement was seen as possible in partnership with Germany. On the initiative of the Finnish political leadership, the geographer Prof. Väinö Auer and the historian Eino Jutikkala from the Finnish State Information Agency wrote a volume justifying Finland’s aspirations, entitled *Finnlands Lebensraum. Das Geographische und Geschichtliche Finnland* (“Finland’s Living Space – Geographical and Historical Finland”, 1941). Professor Jalmari Jaakkola’s study of Finland’s policies towards its eastern neighbour *Die Ostfrage Finnlands* (“Finland’s Eastern Question”, 1941) complemented this by presenting the broad lines of Finnish policy towards the Soviet Union. Finland’s then President Risto Ryti expressed his thinking quite explicitly when handing the task to Väinö Auer: “If Germany

wins and the Soviet Union loses, then Eastern Karelia will be ours. This needs to be clearly brought out".³¹⁵

Both these German-language volumes were published by Alfred Metzner Verlag in Berlin. The books were directed towards the German leadership, in an effort to persuade them to take Finland's objectives into consideration. Assisting in the editorial work, above all in the shaping of the content of the manuscripts to suit a National Socialist readership, was the Finnish anthropologist Yrjö von Grönhagen, who had served at the Finnish State Information Agency's bureau in Berlin. Yrjö von Grönhagen knew Heinrich Himmler personally, and had worked from 1936-1937 at the Ahnenerbe ["Ancestral Heritage"] think tank and research institute, founded and headed by Himmler. Ahnenerbe was charged with providing scholarly evidence for and promoting Hitler's racial doctrines. Ancient history and folklore were studied through a National Socialist lens.

The National Socialists' vision of a New European Order and the Finnish nationalists' hankering after an expanded "Greater Finland" became part of the mission of the recruiters of the Finnish SS-volunteers. Yrjö von Grönhagen's German wife Herta von Grönhagen served as editor-in-chief of *Suomi-Saksa* ("Finland-Germany", 1941-44), a cultural propaganda magazine published in Germany but written in Finnish for a Finnish audience. The couple published more than 20 pieces in the magazine, in which they addressed such topics as the similarities of the SS-volunteer battalion to the *Jäger* movement of the First World War (and the Finnish Civil War), Finnish-German blood-brotherhood, and the New Europe and Finland's position therein. Articles also stressed the multinational nature of SS-Division Wiking and its "pan-European" representation. In this way, the division met the propaganda aims that Himmler and Berger had set out when establishing a unit drawing its troops from several countries. In November 1941, this same periodical carried a piece on the SS-volunteers, written by Gunter d'Alquen, the commander of the Waffen-SS combat units' propaganda formation (later known as the SS-Standarte Kurt Eggers) and the editor-in-chief of the official SS weekly newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* ("The Black Corps"). The writer attached great emphasis to the fact that the SS-Division Wiking was a multinational and multi-ethnic force.³¹⁶

The ideas of a New Europe in the making and the associated Finnish *Lebensraum* dogma of a "Greater Finland" can be seen in the diary entries of many of the Finnish SS-volunteers and in contemporary newspaper and magazine articles about the volunteers. This is also one reason behind the actions of the SS-volunteer Olavi Karpalo and his colleagues in writing to the military chaplain and Finnish Liaison Officer Ensio Pihkala on 24.7.1941, in the hope of securing a transfer from the repair-shop in the rear to the battlefield troops at the front:

“We have been getting steamed up here for some time now, while the other Finns have been able to take out as many pointy-hatted Ivans as they can – and we have been abandoned here ‘by the factory wall’. What have we done to deserve this, when we have been deprived of the joy felt when a Russkie appears in the sights of our Mausers? We cannot return home with heads held high unless we have fought in arms for the greatness of Finland”.³¹⁷