FINNISH FINISH

But Why Did They Begin?

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.)

WHETHER the present Finnish-Russian peace negotiations will actually issue into Peace is probably being decided as we read, between Russian bombs over Helsinki and German divisions at Petsamo. But there is no uncertainty that the Finns *want* to get out of the war. What puzzles most of us is why ever they got into it.

When Russians and Finns fought, in 1940, the prelude to this present winter war, opinion elsewhere overwhelmingly favoured the Finns. And not merely as David against Goliath. A half-awakened world, trembling before the lightning evidence of totalitarian power, hailed them as champions of freedom and humbly and fervently gave thanks for their resistance as a sign from heaven that Democracy after all had guts. . . . And then within two years these knights in shining armour, altogether of their own free will, rushed to support the triumphant destroyer of free nations! Now that another full turn of fate's wheel may range them against their present allies it becomes a matter of practical importance to see Finland, and Finland's relations with her neighbours, in proper perspective.

Those of us who grew up with maps on which Finland was marked as part of Russia, find the first step in understanding her people somewhat difficult to take —namely, to realise that, even though *independent* Finland was within 17 miles of Russia's late capital, Finns and Russians are as different as Scotsmen and Portuguese—and quite as conscious of it. Racially, of course, the Finns are from Asia. But, strangely enough, that is not what makes the difference. Indeed, it is they who regard the Russians as still-barbarous Asiatics, and themselves as Europeans, and most European of Europeans.

A Glance at History

We must look to history to find why. Eight hundred years ago the Finns, speaking an unwritten language from the mountains behind China, still lived among their birch forests and interweaving lakes very much like Red Indians. But then came an Englishman, Henry, Bishop of Uppsala, riding beside the conquering foray of King Erik, of Sweden, to incorporate the savages into Christendom and become their Patron Saint. Henry's mass-baptisms were somewhat later consolidated by the evangelism and administration of a second English churchman, one Thomas. So internationally-minded did his converts become that the Swedish Government only just prevented them from declaring Finland a direct territory of the Pope. However, the Swedes gave these newest Europeans full freemen's rights, Finland becoming in effect a new eastern half to their kingdom. Almost alone among civilised peoples, the Finns can boast—and do—that they have never been serfs.

The Russian woodlanders further south and east on the lake-strewn plain, were likewise consolidated into a kingdom by Norsemen. But ever after their development followed a divergent course. Christianity reached them, not from intellectual Rome through the (later Lutheran) North, but from ikonographic Byzantium. Their trade likewise flowed *up* the Black Sea rivers in Greek and Turkish bottoms, not from the German Baltic. Kalmyk and Mongol invaders hitched Russia for centuries to Asia. And serfdom, of a particularly servile sort, continued right into the nineteenth century. The Finns, on the other hand, living in isolated farmsteads (each with its steam bathhouse) considered themselves to be a complete civilisation removed from the still filthy, press-ganged, Asiatically-dressed serfs who every now and then ravaged Finland in the course of their Emperor's struggle with the Swedish monarchy. That war was Darkness against Light, as they saw it, and Finland the Outpost of Europe.

Triumph of Darkness

Then Darkness triumphed. In 1809 Tsar Alexander finally confined the Swedish Kingdom, which for centuries had sprawled across north-eastern Europe, into its own peninsula. Sweden's eastern half, Finland, the Tsar made into a personal duchy which he ruled by himself, independent of Russia. The leaders of its three-quarter million peasants on the edge of the Arctic met this catastrophe with characteristic purposiveness. "We have ceased to be Swedes," said one. "It is impossible for us to become Russians. We shall have to be Finns." But you cannot make a nation without a literature. Finland had not one word written in her native tongue. However, school-teachers went among the people writing down old legends and spreading new knowledge. In a brief century the Finns had become the world's greatest consumers of print. By the nineteen-thirties not one per cent were illiterate, while the highest percentage in Europe were in secondary schools and the highest in the world at universities—particularly good work considering that to-day's three and three-quarter million, scattered among 60,000 lakes and barely-penetrable forests, included a third-of-a-million Lapp nomads inside the Arctic Circle.

In 1905 a National Strike extracted a Constitution from the Russian Government. Votes for all men *and women*, with equal pay for equal work, came in the following year. Later the *Lex Kallio* turned the proportion of owner-farmers from 46 per cent in 1920 to 63 per cent in 1930. And from 1940 a Social Security Act was to have operated. Meanwhile, national output, especially of foods, had increased several-fold. Finland's production remained strictly individualistic. But its marketing was almost as overwhelmingly co-operative.

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