

FINLAND TO-DAY Her Coming of Age

(By a correspondent in "The Observer," London)

TO the far north of Europe, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Arctic, lies a country called Finland. Russia marches along its eastern frontier: the Bothnian Sea, Sweden and Norway hug the western. It is not very large, though the seventh largest in Europe. Nor very familiar. Yet it is remarkable in every way, and the time has come to say so.

For this year, Finland proper came of age. It is twenty-one years and some months since General Mannerheim marched his White Guards into Helsinki, ended the War of Independence, and established Finnish freedom on Finnish soil for the first time for seven and a-half centuries.

The tale of their history during that time—that is to say from 1154, when Sweden, with the Pope's backing, launched a first crusade to redeem the pagan Finns from their darkness, to 1809, when Russia at last secured the coveted land—is the tale of a plain dog-fight.

The Swedes and the Russians

The Swedes were good and sympathetic conquerors. They had affinities of all kinds with the slower race. But for all the good Sweden did—and it was definite—Sweden's other entanglements in Europe were too much. She gave laws, religion, learning, and language—a double-edged privilege this last—but at length had no strength to curb the unruly invading Russians.

Through centuries, a story of civil progress under Sweden is interrupted by wars with Russia. And though, when the end came and Russia, conquering, was at first as generous as the Swedes, the harm was done. From 1894 on, under Nicholas II., one by one she infringed every sacred right and promise, and fulfilled her legendary character of big bad wolf.

In December, 1917, Finland declared her independence. In May she got it. As Tartu, Estonia, in 1920, it was duly signed and sealed.

Liberty is one thing. What you do with it another. It is significant that the Finns, a slow, peaceable, strong, contained people, should have settled down with the Swedes and made do so long. In fact, not Sweden's strength, which they drew on—you have only to look at the magnificent towers of fortresses like Viipuri and Olavinlinna—but Sweden's ultimate weakness after harsh wars determined matters.

Nationalist Movement

In 1740 already there was a nationalist movement afoot. In the early decades of the next century it flowered in literature ("Kalevala," the national epic, dates from 1835, though Elias Lönnrot compiled it from age old tunes, songs and legends), in education (the first secondary school to teach Finnish was founded in 1858), and influenced both politics and economics. In the second decade of our century it achieved its end. Finland is one and united. What she has done with her liberty is plain to be seen. But like the iceberg, two parts of it are under water and established in the past.

In these twenty-one years she has developed her assets and multiplied her

talents in a way that hardly any nation in Europe can equal.

There is space here merely for a few figures. It is an agricultural, a farmer's country, and has suffered from outworn forms of exploitation by the aristocracy. Now, the number of freehold farmers is more than doubled—300,000 as against 125,172 in 1910. And the President himself regards "the conversion of leasehold into freehold and provision of new freehold farms as the greatest reform accomplished since 1918."

Self-Supporting

Before that date Finland was dependent on the Russian market for grain. Now she is nearly self-supporting, and there is a steady and lovely—for the fields of wheat, barley, oats, and rye are lovely in their summer lustre—increase in the cultivated fields and crops. Cattle-farming shows the same upward tendency. So do the industries that depend on the great forests and their timber. So does transport (2,927 buses in 1938 against a poor 174 fifteen years earlier).

So do the civil services, the defence forces, education, and the medical services. Unemployment has dropped in five years (1932-1937) by some 60,000, and railways, air routes, roads, and all means of travel increase and improve. Further, their trade balance is favourable, their budget balanced, and their foreign debt reduced from 2,957 millions in 1933 to 811 millions last year.

The Secret

What is their secret? Beside this steady growth in material prosperity they grow in other ways. Their architects are among the first in the world—witness Elial Saarinen, who built the noble railway stations at Helsinki and Viipuri, and Arvo Aalto, whose cool and beautiful library at Viipuri is a place to dream on. Witness Aaltonen, the sculptor of Nurmi, the runner. Sibelius and Palmgren vouch for the music that bubbles and flows over in all of them. Aleksis Kivi, Sally Salminen, Linnan-koski, Sillanpää, and Aino Kallas (whom we knew here as the wife of the Estonian Minister) all vouch for the root strength and sturdy plant of their literature.

Their towns are clean, shining, and quiet, as though the imaginations that built them were still filled with memories of a beloved landscape, part luminous with lake, part ribbed and stressed with ridges and spines of trees.

Fir, spruce, alder, and the lovely dappled birch. . . There is no room to expatiate. But next year, the Olympic Games are to be held at Helsinki—the Stadium is characteristically strong and graceful in line and sweep—and all the world may see for themselves a small, indomitable nation, feet in earth and head in cloud, a nation who believe, like ancient Greece, in harmony of body and mind for the soul's sake. A nation content with what it has, and wise in its generation.

—V.G.G.

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