

# Soldier's Death and the Logic of Sacrifice

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*From ancient warriors through to the Crusaders, all the way to the modern citizen soldier, death in war has been praised as the most glorious death. All modern nations have harnessed this image for their own use to some extent. Nationalism has been claimed to have replaced older belief systems like religion, yet it itself has had and still has many transcendental features.*

*In this article I consider a very special form of this ideology, the logic of sacrifice. Finland during the Second World War is particularly in focus. The logic of sacrifice as a coherent ideology is typical of war-faring nations, yet it has lost some of its relevance since the Second World War. It is also useful in tying women and children to the nation's struggle. It promises to give meaning to every soldier's death as well as consolation to mourning families. In reality it was often only a partial aid. Yet the entire nation adjusted its mourning practises to the idea that the fallen were the most important dead and that, for example, civilian losses were considered only secondary compared to them.*

The soldier's death has throughout human history been understood as a very special kind of death. As long as there has been any kind of organized warfare, various meanings, hopes and dreams have surrounded it. Death in war has been the surest way to heaven or similar otherworldly place; most often dead warriors have gained the admiration and gratitude of others. The rational age of modern nations may seem very different from ancient tribal societies, but some things have remained the same. At least until the Second World War many nations cherished the idea of a heroic soldier whose death would be a blessing, not only to the soldier himself who would surely go to heaven, but to the entire nation which needs such pure sacrifices.

Sacrificial ideas are practical in connecting people with larger entities and entire nations. There may not be much to be gained in return, but the entire system of love and sacrifice, giving everything only for the greater good of everyone in the group, has enthralled human minds for centuries. In the same vein, religions may have trouble explaining their power when divine interventions are not easily

Outi Hakola, Sara Heinämaa and Sami Pihlström (eds.)  
Death and Mortality – From Individual to Communal Perspectives

COLLEGIUM

Studies across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences 19.  
Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 179–201.

observed, but ideas on joining the divinity in rituals and with offerings render them meaningful. Also those members of the community with little or no authority and voice, like women and children, may feel empowered by their power to sacrifice their all.

Christianity, with its central doctrine on love and sacrifice, is essential for understanding nationalistic sacrificial ideals in the context of this article. Nationalism has been claimed to belong to a new, rational age in which religions and older belief systems have lost their impetus, but nationalism itself has included mystification and otherworldly motivations – in many cases it still does.

The background of this article is Finnish military history and especially Finland during the Second World War. I will make some comparisons with other nations, especially to Great Britain, whose social history of modern warfare is well researched in many aspects. German 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas on men, women and families in connection with nations and nationalism also seem to have been particularly well embraced in wartime Finland. It can be argued that nations do not always live in the same time frame; some nations may approve of certain ideals that other nations have already found outdated. Death is a phenomenon closely tied to religious belief and custom, and secularization has caused many changes in death rituals. Nationalism and wars have also played their part in this process. Also the general understanding on war death and its meanings is dependent on the modernization process.

## The Birth of the Citizen Soldier

The age of the citizen soldier has often been claimed to have begun in the French Revolution. When we think of the honor of common soldiers, this seems especially true. Heroes of the revolution were praised and their sacrifice was understood to be part of a greater whole.<sup>1</sup> As nation-states were created in Europe and around the world, the role of the common soldier changed everywhere, especially at the ideological level. The common soldier was no longer thought of as a paid mercenary, and the idea of forced conscription was replaced by the image of more or less voluntary, highly patriotic men.<sup>2</sup>

Instead of fighting for an often distant ruler the soldiers in conscript armies were said to fight for the nation, which included also their home and families. The honor was theirs, because they were supposed to be willing even to give up their lives for the nation, but essentially the honor was the nation's, because it was for the greatest value of everyone. Soldiers fought to safeguard the nation's destiny; their bravery was proof of national virility, personal manhood and national honour.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Mosse 1990; Hobsbawm 1992; Anderson 1991.

2 Mosse 1990, 15–33; Smith 2003, 223.

3 Mosse 1996, 108–110.

In this they were not alone, for their families were also said to be offering a great sacrifice.

The most evident feature of the citizen soldier is that every man is supposed to defend his country. The definition of man is obviously quite limited here, because armies do not have much use for children and the young, the elderly, crippled or mentally challenged.<sup>4</sup> If dying for one's country is supposed to be the ultimate sacrifice and only the best citizens can manage this, being an able-bodied male is the first qualification.<sup>5</sup>

In Europe, the upbringing of children and the young has been heavily loaded with nationalism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The developing educational institutions recognized their responsibility in this process, but originally love for the homeland was supposed to be taught at home, especially by mothers. This was considered to be their essential role in the nation, apart from giving birth to children. Educational institutions continued the task of the family, so by the age of conscription young men would be more than willing to do their duty. Yet the seeds of patriotic spirit were sown at home. It is no surprise, then, that when the actual war began, and even before that, families and especially mothers were also praised. They were, it was said, also giving a great sacrifice, to which their entire lives and even giving birth to their sons had aimed at. Their deepest wish was supposed to be to send their sons to war and solemnly, if not happily accept their deaths.<sup>6</sup>

The reasoning is the following: the death of a soldier is proof that the family (mother) brought him up to be a valorous and patriotic man. Hence the family (mother) must be patriotic and cherish the ideal of sacrifice. There cannot be one without the other. There are no fallen soldiers whose mothers did not raise them to be just that; there are no mothers of fallen soldiers whose sons were unwilling to die for their country. And no mother would mourn their son without feelings of gratitude and sense of purpose; mothers were also supposed to be exemplary in their grief for the entire nation.

## Nationalism and Religion

As Eric Hobsbawm and others have pointed out, whereas religion is often thought to belong to an earlier phase of human thinking, nationalism is more associated with modern rationalism. In this context nationalism is usually seen only as a political movement in which people would realise their mundane goals and ideals. Religion or religiously inspired thinking is not part of nationalism's mental structure in this context; nationalism has no otherworldly goals or justification from above.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Loriga 1997.

5 Mosse 1996.

6 Yuval-Davis 1997, 22–23, 26–67; Hagemann 2000; Gullace 2002, 53–69.

7 Hobsbawm 1992.

Yet when it comes to matters of death and sacrifice it is obvious that religion and similar ideals are not left to ancient times. Benedict Anderson, while not placing very much emphasis on the theme, nevertheless felt it important to consider not only why men are willing to kill for their nation, but why they are willing to die for it.<sup>8</sup> The nation gives people (men) something so precious that they are able to have a sense of belonging and acquiring something essential from it. More cynical analysts may find that nations and nationalism have skilfully played on human emotional and social needs to attach people to the nation. They may feel they must follow the example of the nation's ancient heroes, forefathers, founding fathers or other figures<sup>9</sup>; national rituals and commemorations are centered around common history and myths.<sup>10</sup>

Anthony D. Smith has attempted to place nationalism in a continuum with earlier thinking and traditions rather than emphasizing the break with the past. His “ethno-nationalism” is, of course, applicable only to those nations which have strong written or oral traditions and an actual connection with their past.<sup>11</sup> In nations like Finland the modernist approach is clearly valid: Finland really is a “constructed” nation, whose creators had to find (and create) the national past and teach it to the people, who for most part were unaware of it or knew only fragmentary parts of it via church teaching and folklore. Especially the idea of the Finns being one nation with one language and common pursuits was a creation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> We must not confuse actual nationalism with earlier identification with the state and monarch. Like in many other Protestant nations, in Sweden (of which Finland was a part until 1809) obedience to earthly rulers was preached from the pulpit. Also, after Finland became an autonomous part of the Russian empire, the church remained loyal to the state.<sup>13</sup>

Countless wars have been fought in the name of Christianity.<sup>14</sup> The original passive attitude of martyrs towards violence against them has been replaced by a more belligerent image of believers. In Finland, the Lutheran conception of a just war has been powerful in theological discussions but also in secular political interpretations of present political and military developments. This religion-centered thinking and especially language, when propaganda was needed, was based on the history of Finnish nationalism. As Jouko Tilli states:

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8 Anderson 1991.

9 Eliade 1954.

10 Mosse 1975.

11 Smith 1999.

12 Smith 2003, 191–195.

13 Heininen & Heikkilä 1997; Tilli 2012.

14 “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13.

since Finnish nationalism relied on religious conceptions of the political community and the convergence of a Lutheran identity with national identity, the national community was still conceived in theological terms in the twentieth century as well.<sup>15</sup>

In this combining of religion and nationalism men are usually the primary subjects in both contexts; gender relations are hierarchical and women's acceptable role is focused around reproductive activities. Yet traditionally women have passionately promoted both religions and nationalism, either as almost or completely otherworldly symbols, or by finding the right of existence and salvation in motherhood.<sup>16</sup> The nationalistic logic of sacrifice has taken particular advantage of these aspirations.

## The Logic of Sacrifice

The ideology used in describing both the sacrifice of the dead soldier and the supposed attitudes of his family can be called "the logic of sacrifice." This theoretical construct owes a lot to the classics of nationalism, gender studies and military history. The core of this ideal comes, at least in this article, from Finnish military history, especially in the years of the Second World War, in which this ideal can be found on various occasions, often clearly formulated and articulated.<sup>17</sup> Between the World Wars the gender order war was considered to be in crisis in many countries; both militant anti-feminism and ideas of camaraderie between the sexes were found.<sup>18</sup> In wartime, culture contrasts become clearer and ideologies more unambiguous, even if the reality of war often demands that women take up many previously exclusively male tasks and occupations. The logic of sacrifice can also be used to explain away such discrepancies: women are not being unfeminine; they are denying their true selves for the homeland.<sup>19</sup>

The logic of sacrifice includes numerous intertwining issues. First, it must be recognized that the nation needs sacrifices. Its existence is not to be taken for granted, even if the nation always has ancient roots and the present generation only has to revive it if the nation does not have a state of its own and a distinct, widely acknowledged common culture. The nation is in danger of oblivion if its (male) citizens are not willing to fight for it. This requirement is essentially moral in nature; actual military and political concerns are only partially present while talking

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15 Tilli 2012, 62.

16 Mosse 1985, 90–113.

17 The family orientation and relevance of feminine sacrifices found in World War II Finland was more clearly expressed in Germany earlier during the time of the Napoleonic Wars (Hagemann 2000).

18 Kundrus 2002; Nevala-Nurmi 2012, 176–190.

19 Junila 2012, 207–213; Kemppainen 2005; Nevala-Nurmi 2012, 388–390.

about national destiny, as Anthony D. Smith has demonstrated in his book *Chosen Peoples*.<sup>20</sup>

Older, established nations may seem less eager to ask people to make the ultimate sacrifice in order that the nation may survive, but new, upcoming nations almost always do this.<sup>21</sup> Put in *realpolitik* terms, a war of independence is good; if there isn't such a war, then a civil war makes it clear the country is a nation, justifying even the loss of one's own people countrymen. The Finnish Civil War on 1918 is a good example of this: the winners called it a war of liberation, yet the war was about many things, was mainly fought between the Finns themselves and the nation had become independent before the outbreak of war. Lesser sacrifices like hard work, giving birth and raising children are to be praised, but the ancient ideal of blood sacrifice is always present in this kind of nationalistic imagery.<sup>22</sup>

Secondly, the fatherland is not merely a merciless Moloch, but also, and unquestionably, an object of love. In nationalistic thinking it is the greatest love object of all. People do not really exist without a nation, just as the life of the nation comes from its people. "Fatherland, he got everything from you – his life and his heroic spirit,"<sup>23</sup> it was often claimed in newspaper death notices in Second World War Finland. The nation was pictured as the most important source of identity for men, especially in times of war. It had replaced the family, local community and other ties. It is often reported how the reality of the military front is very special and civilian realities lose their meaning<sup>24</sup>; the logic of sacrifice attempts to imitate and reproduce this state of mind even in times of peace. In this respect it is essentially militaristic and used with general consent only in war-faring nations. The Finnish national identity has relied heavily on this kind of imagery. The Finnish fatherland may be poor, barren and small, but even though it gives little to its people they must be ready to die for it. The national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg writes in the Finnish national anthem: "Our country is poor and will stay so if one is looking for gold; a stranger will proudly pass it by, but we shall love it."<sup>25</sup>

The third prerequisite of the logic of sacrifice is that the nation's right to exist is proven through sacrifice. Sacrificing oneself is presented as something natural to "our" people. The nation's male population must be masculine, healthy, and spiritually and mentally strong – of course, the female population has to be similar to be able to give birth to the nation's sons.<sup>26</sup> In times of war the nation's place

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20 Smith 2003.

21 Smith 2003, 218–253.

22 Marvin & Ingle 1999; Tepora 2011; Kemppainen 2009.

23 "Isänmaa, sulta hän kaiken sai, sai elon ja sankarihengen", *Helsingin Sanomat*, July 6th 1940.

24 Fussell 1977, 36–74.

25 "Vårt land är fattigt, skall så bli/ För den, som guld begär. En främling far oss stolt förbi: Men detta landet älska vi ...." Runeberg 1992 (1848; 1860), 7; <http://fi.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maamme>.

26 Cf. Hagemann, 2000.

among nations is at stake. A nation of weak, effeminate men does not have a right to exist. George L. Mosse has described the process in which European nationalism developed into this kind of masculine, physical, heteronormative and even racist ideology.<sup>27</sup> Yet the logic of sacrifice itself omits many things, such as: “our” nation is pure, strong, worthy of sacrifices. Those people or qualities that would compromise these “facts” are not considered to be part of the nation.<sup>28</sup> A war can also be a proof of the nation’s adulthood: according to Tuomas Tepora the Winter War was interpreted as a “celebration of a coming of age” for the entire nation. In this war the Finns would become mature men, who had left childish disputes behind them and could stand united against the enemy.<sup>29</sup>

There is a certain passive tone in this kind of nationalism, which may be typical of Finnish nationalism.<sup>30</sup> The men who are asked to give their lives for the nation do not actively *create* the nation; they are given a task by the nation itself and by their forefathers. This is one way to disguise the recent nature of nationalistic thinking in one particular country; it may also be an attempt to obliterate the fact that the nation was not in the first place created by a spontaneous people’s uprising but by upper-class writers and politicians, as was the case in Finland.<sup>31</sup> According to their writings, the nation is eternal and cannot be changed. It can only be improved by conquering more land and working harder than ever. The personal glory that can be expected from these enterprises is small. On the other hand, because the purpose is common and defined in the ancient past, this kind of thinking can be very democratic. Every man – which in this case means every soldier – can be given the name of hero, because everyone is a son of the nation.

Nationalism takes many of its ideals from the past, the nation’s own real or imagined history or the common Western or other military history. Yet the ancient heroes and their attitudes toward death in war differed from nationalism’s particular form of the logic of sacrifice. One of the earliest idealizations of death in war can be found in Gilgamesh, which dates from 1700 B.C. The hero Enkidu is only satisfied if he dies in and only in war. In ancient Athens Pericles praised the Athenian warriors for their military prowess in his famous speech recorded by Thucydides. According to Pericles, these deaths should not be mourned, because they were the best deaths of all. The Vikings could only go to Valhalla by dying in war, and the Germanic tribes also considered the structure of the afterlife to follow the values

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27 Mosse 1996, 40–55.

28 Ibid; Mosse 1990.

29 Tepora 2011, 236–237.

30 Here Finnish militarism seems to differ from the more active and aggressive German model. George L. Mosse also emphasizes passivity as a central theme in British post-First World War literature (Mosse 1996, 111–112; cf. Kemppainen 2006b). Yet many other features in Finnish nationalism imply connections with German ideals, like family roles during crises (Hagemann 2000).

31 Nieminen 2006.



of this world.<sup>32</sup> Not everyone would go to the best place in the afterlife, not even every man who fought in war. One might always die in one's own bed, which was considered a tragic fate for an otherwise great hero.<sup>33</sup>

In these ancient imaginings of death and war the personal honor of the warrior was central. The modern(izing) logic of sacrifice is something else, although it does borrow phrases and attitudes from earlier times. The reason for war is something quite outside the experience of an individual soldier; as the military needs are concerned, they are not expected to seek personal excellence but to fight alongside others. In modern armies independent, warrior-like actions can be dangerous to others and will almost certainly get the soldier killed. Military training, discipline and recruitment practises for higher positions all aim to ensure that any foolhardy actions are made improbable, if not impossible.<sup>34</sup> A soldier is not supposed to actively seek his death in battle; only orders from superiors can justify so-called suicide missions. The reality of war is often different, for “going over the top,” preferably with a sword in one's hand soon proved ineffectual in the First World War and has, of course, disappeared from modern warfare. Paul Fussell named one of the chapters in his book *The Great War and Modern Memory* “Never Such Innocence Again.” But in addition to tactics and personal heroism there were many other kinds of innocence to be lost.<sup>35</sup>

The fourth central feature of the logic of sacrifice is a certain ranking of men: the best are taken first. Not everyone dies even in the bloodiest of wars. Mourning families were consoled in Finland during the war with this ideal; in general it also means that the fallen soldiers are the best of men.<sup>36</sup> One must not speak ill of the dead, but nationalism has sometimes taken that to unexpected lengths. Death in war is even supposed to wash away all sins, whether we understand this literally in a religious sense or more generally on the level of society.<sup>37</sup> This sanctification of certain deceased has also led to a very unequal commemoration of war victims: fallen soldiers have been remembered while civilians have often been neglected. Those who gave only their limb or their mental health may have been left without necessary support.<sup>38</sup> The fallen are easier to glorify: they only ask for a gravesite and a cross.

This kind of thinking is not limited to Finland, of course. Pat Jalland has written in her book *Death in War and Peace* how the priority given to war death made civilian deaths seem insignificant during and after the First World War. This is one

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32 Davies 1994; Hakapää & Marjomaa 2000.

33 Whaley 1994.

34 Cf. Mälkki 2008.

35 Fussell 1977, 18.

36 Cf. Mosse 1990, 70–106; Smith 2003, 230–235.

37 Kempainen 2006a, 158–159.

38 Kivimäki 2013.



of the reasons why a “stiff upper lip” culture became the common attitude toward death in Britain between the World Wars, like toward many other of life’s negative aspects. People can only suffer a certain amount of death and tragedy; it was easier to “carry on” than dwell upon the losses.<sup>39</sup> Mourning for fallen soldiers was difficult in First World War Britain, as it was also later and in many other countries. Families were expected to act bravely and be happy they had such a heroic son; they must also be exemplary to others in how they carry their grief. One could not “spread one’s own sorrows, when tens of thousands were suffering in silence far worse pain than we are”.<sup>40</sup>

In Finland in the Second World War the clergy’s role was to assure families that because their sons had been so brave as to die for their country, they must have had a living faith in God and therefore these families would meet them in heaven. No man without that faith could have done what they did. The fallen soldiers should not actually be mourned, for as was said about the Christian dead in general, they had gone to a better place and for the best of reasons.<sup>41</sup>

“Their sacrifices must not be in vain” is a common theme in war-faring nations. So too in Finland. One of the greatest fears of leaders at the battle front and on the home front is always that people will begin to revolt. When news about losses reach the people, they will ask why are we at war? The obvious answer may be because the enemy attacked us, whether that is true or not. Another response, connected directly to the losses, is that their deaths will build a better future – whatever the national self-image demands. Few fallen soldiers actually uttered their final wishes, but the propagandists and other eager writers did this for them. Soldiers’ funerals, which in Finland were held on the home front, were naturally suitable occasions for these self-defining moments.<sup>42</sup>

The last letters of the fallen were read carefully and often interpreted according to the logic of sacrifice: “The war has become a promoter of the powerful self-esteem and purposeful manhood of the young Finnish men,” wrote the priest and politician Paavo Virkkunen in 1941.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, final letters could go uncommented on in published letter collections, like in a collection made by Rolf Tiivola in the same year.<sup>44</sup> The tradition of knowing for certain what the fallen had fought and died for was of course long: according to Benedict Anderson, Michelet wrote about those who fell in the French Revolution in much the same vein.<sup>45</sup> It was essential to assure fellow countrymen that the sacrifices of the fallen would

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39 Jalland 2010, 123–124, 34.

40 Jalland 2010, 157. Citation from Prof. Geoffrey Bickersteth.

41 Cf. Kemppainen 2006a, 87–92.

42 Kemppainen 2006a, 156–160.

43 Virkkunen 1941, 71.

44 Tiivola 1941.

45 Anderson 1991, 197–198.

become national history and be forever remembered, like the sacrifices of one's forefathers.<sup>46</sup> Mircea Eliade's theory of the myth of the eternal return is brought to mind.<sup>47</sup>

## **Sacrifice and Religion in Finland during the Second World War**

The logic of sacrifice is a spiritual construct as such. Yet it is never entirely in line with religious authorities, because it is a construct created by mostly earthly rulers and ideologists. One must make a distinction between social constructs using religious language and concepts and actual theology. Christianity, which is the essential background for any study whose main material is from 20<sup>th</sup> century Finland, is a universal religion. Its origins are revolutionary: the early Christians denied the authority of the emperor and refused to participate in his cult, which led to persecution and martyrdom. The Roman Empire was religiously tolerant, that is if each cult accepted the superiority of the emperor. Later Christians became more moderate in their attitudes, and many nations have adopted Christianity as their state religion. In Finland's case during the Second World War, almost 100 per cent of the population were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>48</sup>

The Winter War of 1939–1940 against the Soviet Union was the first of three wars Finland fought during the Second World War. Apocalyptic discourse was used in the popular imagination and also in official texts, from newspapers to the clergy. The way the Finns fought was considered a miracle, and miracles of course come from God. The working classes participated eagerly for the most part, and the military successes were remarkable in comparison with expectations.<sup>49</sup>

This phenomenon is often called “the miracle of the Winter War.” This phrase has been used and misused in Finnish politics and popular history so often that many people believe it to be altogether mythical, even untrue. This is not the case, however. After quite a recent civil war, which had divided the nation entirely, it was a surprise to many parties at the time that the former “Reds” of the 1918 Civil War did not take the side of the Soviet Union, the so-called workers' paradise. It has been suggested that the closeness of Christmas made religion especially important for many people; eyes turned more easily toward the cross. The people seemed united under the common nation and common symbols. These kinds of “moments of madness” cannot last for long, and the Winter War itself lasted only

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46 Anderson 1991, 205–206.

47 Eliade 1954.

48 Heininen & Heikkilä 1997.

49 Ahto 1990.

for three and a half months. Yet the feeling of togetherness was very real already during the war.<sup>50</sup>

The soldiers who gave their lives in the Winter War were therefore treated with utmost respect and admiration. They were called crusaders – after all the war was fought against the Bolshevistic and atheistic Soviet Union, which in religiously based imaginings was the realm of the Devil – and their place would surely be in heaven. In the context of the time this was not considered exaggerated or suspect in any way. Yet it was not taken much further, either; the attention was on the war itself and the fallen soldiers were part of this greater whole. The sacrifices were a natural consequence of the national struggle. The “miracle” of the Winter War was also recognized while it was happening. The war was even called a blessing, because it had united the discordant nation. It was a gift from God, though it was not an unproblematic gift. The Finnish people had (it was said) sinned so badly that they needed this kind of hard “gift” to mend their ways.<sup>51</sup> Even the enemy was part of God’s plan. This may be one of the reasons why the enemy has played and still plays such a small role in many countries’ wartime propaganda. The war isn’t just about beating the enemy; it is about “us,” it is about what kind of nation we are and want to be. Counting the odds and probabilities, not to mention asking why there must be wars in the first place, is not proper. Believing that war refines and purifies us is more suitable for a war-faring nation.<sup>52</sup>

The Continuation War of 1941–1944, again against the Soviet Union, was a very different war in many respects. It may be called a more “modern” war in terms of national attitudes. In this war Finland was allied with Germany; the entire war was a part of international military plans, while the Winter War had been the Finns’ private enterprise. Although it was also part of the ongoing international conflict, the Continuation War ended up being between Finland and the Soviet Union. Many negotiations about foreign military intervention were not realized<sup>53</sup>. In the Continuation War connections with other theaters of war and the alliance with a powerful state were well known, and imaginings about the war were based on these facts, even in the minds of the common people. Western civilization and Christianity were at stake once more, but the apocalyptic tones and sense of national destiny could not be maintained for ever. By 1943 it was clear that this was war, a normal war in many senses, and not a Biblical battle between good and evil.<sup>54</sup>

Yet in the beginning of the war military and ecclesiastical leaders tried to evoke sacrificial fervor and crusading images. The best known of these efforts is probably Marshal Mannerheim’s order of the day from early July 1941, in which he calls

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50 Cf. Ahto 1990; Kemppainen 2011.

51 Virkkunen 1941.

52 Pajari 2014b, 34–39.

53 Vehviläinen 2002, 55–59.

54 Kemppainen 2006a, 113; Tilli 2012, 121–125.

Finnish soldiers to a holy war “for this final time.” As Jouni Tilli has analyzed in his dissertation, the scene was set for “an eschatological battle for the redemption of the nation”.<sup>55</sup> In the beginning of the war these sentiments were easy to maintain because of the rapid advancement of positive messages from other theatres of war. Later, when the war had turned into a “sitting war,” and especially when the fortunes of war seemed to be changing, confidence in the holiness of the war and the Finns’ sacred duty faltered.

Some members of the Lutheran clergy started to criticize the logic of sacrifice and its theological implications as the war continued. They refused to accept the salvation some members of the clergy had promised to every fallen soldier. They reminded people and particularly their colleagues of the nature of the Lutheran teaching: no good deed can save a man, only personal faith and God’s mercy. Earlier it had been considered obvious that no man could die for his country without personal faith; now the battlefield lost much of its sanctifying effect and the soldier started to seem like any man where matters of life and death were concerned.<sup>56</sup>

It may seem like a minor discrepancy between theologians, but in fact this argument is a clear sign of the nation gradually giving up on the logic of sacrifice as such. Godless men could now die in war, even though fighting for their country. This was revolutionary thinking in comparison with the ideals of the Civil War of 1918 and the Winter War. New images of soldiers came to public consciousness: the clean-shaven, Christian warrior was now turning into the rugged, weathered *jermu* or “old lag” Such soldiers could even be criticized and their behavior, while on leave in the cities and around the country, was often considered offensive.<sup>57</sup>

Of course a living soldier is a different matter than a dead one. The mourning rituals and commemorations remained the same. The clergy also commented upon the lavish and mostly secular program of the military funerals, but their basic contents did no change through the years<sup>58</sup>. And most people continued to believe the fallen were the best people of all and to console the mourning families with this thought.

The third war Finland fought during the Second World War was the War of Lapland in 1944–1945, in which the Finns had to drive the remaining German troops out of Northern Finland, according to the armistice treaty with the Soviet Union. There was no salvation to be gained from this war, and the tones for example in the newspaper death notices are grim. The fatherland and God are missing, only mourning and loss remain.<sup>59</sup>

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55 Tilli 2012, 56.

56 Kempainen 2006a, 158–160, 87–88.

57 Pipping 1947.

58 Kempainen 2006a, 152.

59 Kempainen 2009, 140–142.

The logic of sacrifice was and is, in many ways, very much a creation of the rather peaceful 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its high ideals and superhuman aspirations are difficult to maintain in actual war. A modernizing culture finds faith in God and salvation problematic in the first place, let alone at war whose reality became more and more inhuman and brutal. Few men died with a bullet through their noble chest; most died in indirect fire, buried in collapsing dugouts or in otherwise unclear situations.<sup>60</sup> Many nations had to face this reality already in the First World War, but the Finnish Civil War was in most cases of a different nature: often unprofessional, sometimes very local, certainly problematic even during the war itself. But the “trench experience” and moral decline brought by the wearing war years was not present in this war, which lasted only a few months. It was only in the Continuation War that the common global war experience became familiar to the Finns, in which both the battle front and the home front started to suffer from war fatigue. War became a normal state of affairs, not an apocalyptic moment in national history which would bring immediate salvation to the just and punishment to the unjust. People had their own experiences of war, death and suffering, and it was exceedingly difficult to propagate the most enthusiastic visions of a holy war and personal sacrifice.<sup>61</sup>

Different churches in different countries have survived wars in varied conditions. It has been said that the Church of England lost its chance to become more familiar to people during the First World War.<sup>62</sup> Also in Germany the churches lost their ability to console people in their loss and anguish during the First World War: the constant death messages that priests had to bring to the families alienated people from the clergy.<sup>63</sup> At the same time, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland clearly took the side of the winners in the Finnish Civil War, which was noted with bitterness in the working class.<sup>64</sup>

Even if the church itself was quite alien to most people, they may have had strong yet indefinite religious beliefs. “There are no atheists in the trenches” – also the British soldiers believed in God in the First World War, even if they knew little about the official teachings of the church.<sup>65</sup> The Finnish soldiers often knew their particular national version of Christian teaching better than their English counterparts because the church had quite recently been and still was part of the nation-building project; both the Finnish evangelical Lutheran Church and the Church of England had constitutional positions at the time.

Yet also in England and throughout the British Isles religious or religiously inspired interpretations of the Great War were common. Jon Davies has analyzed

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60 Kronlund 1988.

61 Favorin & Heinonen 1972.

62 Davies 1994, 160–164.

63 Daniel 1997, 148–149.

64 Peltonen 1996, 218–222.

65 Davies 1994, 160–164.

the local war memorials and has observed how distinctly Christian imagery dominates them, even if direct quotations from the Bible or hymns are omitted. Davies concludes that the sacrificial ideal of Christianity has penetrated people's thinking, even if they cannot or will not express it directly. The idea of sacrifice also takes people's minds off the fact that soldiers do not only die; they kill. In general, the enemy is not central in the logic of sacrifice. The willingness of those who sacrifice is. Davies also emphasizes the pre-Christian nature of sacrificial ideals.<sup>66</sup>

In Second World War Finland the Lutheran church had a special asset, which in the end may have played against it but in general was considered a positive effort. Unlike in other war-faring nations at the time, Finland brought the fallen soldiers to their home parishes whenever it was possible. There are still "heroes' burial grounds" everywhere in the country.<sup>67</sup> Funerals were also held at the home front, and civilians flocked to these services. They came to mourn the deceased, to console the families, to find consolation in their anguish within the church and also just to see how war came to their villages and towns in the form of white wooden coffins.<sup>68</sup>

In many other countries the clergy on the home front had a more abstract role in consoling mourners. In Finland they actually created the funeral ritual for them and had the chance to express the Lutheran doctrine and its adaptations in wartime Finland. For Finland the Second World War lasted for five years, and the solemn atmosphere of the first soldiers' funerals during the Winter War could not last until the end. Many people preferred smaller funerals after the war, and turned away from traditional Christian teaching if not the entire church.<sup>69</sup> It may have been too closely connected with death and the oppressive war years.

## Mourning the Sacrifices

The logic of sacrifice was created within the highest political and ecclesiastical elite and communicated to the masses through educational institutions, religious teaching and propaganda. In many cases people did embrace it to some extent; it was especially applicable to expressions of condolence mourning. Finding reason in death, or on a more general level, in war, was comforting and gave words and phrases to people in a delicate, emotionally challenging situation. Whether the the words and phrases were enough, and whether the sacrificial ideal actually consoled most people, that is another matter.

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66 Davies 1994.

67 Kempainen 2006a, passim; cf. Edkins 2003, 95–98.

68 Kempainen 2006a, 170.

69 Pajari 2014b.



If the consolation was considered effective, the logic of sacrifice could, to a certain extent, prevent or lessen the trauma caused by an untimely death of a loved one. If the words echoed hollow and, as a result, the mourning person felt alienated not only from his or her emotions but also from the entire society, the logic of sacrifice could actually be a traumatic construct in itself.<sup>70</sup>

Finland during the Second World War is no exception to mourning and its difficulties. It is heartbreaking to read the letters of mothers who have lost their sons. The official routine consolation would praise them for giving the ultimate sacrifice through their sons, and most mothers tried to cope with this ideal, although it was often hard. They may begin their letters with familiar phrases about the nation and the beauty of a heroic death, but soon lapse into familiar and intimate discourse about their son, the way he looked after death and how he was as a little boy. The mothers seem to try to adjust their grief to the present culture and how others had described what had happened to them and their son, but the language of military death went only skin-deep and beneath lay a traditional feeling of real emotions.<sup>71</sup>

Even more heartbreaking, in a way, is to read the letters of people who truly and personally believed that dying for one's country was the greatest deed a man or a woman can do, and the pride of the family. They had sent their sons to war quite happily. They may even have been the ones creating the culture of mourning for the fallen soldiers and propagating the ideals of heroic death. When the son died, they not only lost their child but also a very important part of their identity. Somehow the ideals they themselves had been brought up to believe in, and to which they had educated their children, did not work as they were supposed to. They did not take away the pain; they did not make sense anymore, when the actual death had taken place.<sup>72</sup> Yet this was exactly what the logic of sacrifice had promised: the bitter sting of death would be taken away because of the noble cause of death.

The modernization of attitudes and changing emphases of family relations and nationalism during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Finland may have caused the responses to so-called heroic death become more difficult to express. The example of the mother of a young patriotic man, Bobi Sivén, who took his own life during the so-called Kinship Wars in 1921, was hard to follow. His mother had not been heard to criticize her son's personal response to the nation's foreign policy in any way, and later she commented on his suicide, "not as a great sorrow but a great joy".<sup>73</sup> Sivén's family had been personally involved in many processes of the Finnish independence struggle, and the upbringing of the children had been particularly idealistic. A couple of decades later, during the Second World War,

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70 Cf. Edkins 2003, 57–110.

71 Kempainen 2006a, 96–99.

72 Cf. Äyräpää 1985.

73 Niinistö 2001, 213–214.



the same attitude was, at least in theory, asked of all families, independent of their worldviews and patriotism.

In reality, most men were not so eager to die for anything, and their families recognized this. They did their duty, but did not see death in war as their ultimate goal in life, especially in peacetime. After their military service as conscripts most of them built completely different careers, raised families, and led their own lives. Mourning these men as military heroes may have seemed appropriate to most people at the time, yet the family may have felt uneasiness in their afterimage of the person. The picture on the living room wall, medals of honour for the fallen and the family, the letter of condolence from commander-in-chief Marshal Mannerheim, told certain things about the death of the person, but sometimes very little about his or her life.<sup>74</sup>

The wartime image of a nation is often simpler than reality. It is a common procedure that nations have censorship and propaganda during wartime; all the varieties of public opinion, not to mention classified information and other information which may be useful to the enemy, cannot be voiced at the time. People may also feel the need to support the war effort; after all, war is a national crisis which causes fear and uncertainty. Even some pacifists may moderate their expression at the time, to support the ordinary people if not the government.<sup>75</sup>

Like official and ecclesiastical texts, private letters and newspaper death notices also went through changes during the Second World War. In the Winter War both were quite traditional and relied on the national canon dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the beginning of the Continuation War patriotic enthusiasm was high as were the millennial and even apocalyptic visions. Later, especially after 1943, the soldiers and their families started to concentrate more and more on everyday matters; especially the death notices describe personal grief, not so much heroism and the cause of the fatherland as such. "I was left alone to walk the path of life/ and to take care of the little orphans."<sup>76</sup> The War of Lapland was, as has been mentioned above, void patriotism and most meanings a war can have. This was also mirrored in private and semi-private texts.

Mourning is a multifaceted phenomenon, and the letters written right after death may not be entirely representative. What is important to question here is the pressure that was laid upon families at the time. In Finland most soldiers were brought to their home towns and villages to receive their funeral service and burial there.<sup>77</sup> This meant that the local community could participate in the ritual, which had many civilian features even if they tried to make things as military as possible. This also meant that even if the family was not particularly patriotic and happy about

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74 Kempainen 2006a, 112, 235; cf. Orlamo 2005.

75 Lindstedt 1999, 434; Vilkuina 1962.

76 "Jäin yksin polkua kulkemaan/ ja pieniä orpoja hoivaamaan." Cf. *Keskisuomalainen* 31.7.1942.

77 Lehtonen 1973; Saario 1989.

their sacrifice, the last rites were saturated with these ideals. In most countries, soldiers' funerals were brief and dominated by the military; in Finland it is possible to say these funerals brought the values and rituals of war to the home front. Yet they were quite civilian, with few soldiers present and local notables speaking and showing their respects to the family. But if the family wanted to have a private funeral for their fallen son, it was difficult and even impossible to organize.<sup>78</sup>

We must not exaggerate this, of course. In the 1940s in Finland the funerals were not such private occasions like later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>79</sup> Neighbors were almost always invited, especially in the countryside; if people had the means to give a large funeral feast it was common to do so. But the large military funerals, with up to 20 coffins at the altar were not only important for the mourning families but for the entire community. The memorial service was often held by the White Guards and Lotta Svärd.<sup>80</sup> Curiosity, the need to console the families, the need to deal with the various emotions the war had evoked, all these were reasons for people to attend military funerals at the home front.<sup>81</sup>

For poorer people the large funerals and place in the military burial ground may have felt a great honor. They could rarely get such attention for their dead in any other setting.<sup>82</sup> There are examples in fiction how the families were quite excited and touched about it all, yet the actual mourning process may have been much more difficult. The rituals did not concern the person but an ideal. One of the best-known fictional descriptions of such an occasion is written by the Finnish author Väinö Linna. In his trilogy *Under the North Star* the village harlot Aune loses her son Valtu in the Winter War. Valtu happens to be the first local casualty of the war, and the village elite are more than eager to celebrate him as a great hero of the nation and to forget his bad deeds and suspicious origin. Aune, a simple woman, is more than happy to be part of this and takes her role as a mother of a hero. But after all is said and done and the last visitor leaves her cottage, she moans the death of her son like any mother at any time. In a way she has now been used by the villagers like she has been used sexually all her life – her personal experience has not been changed.<sup>83</sup>

Another problem in 20<sup>th</sup>-century warfare was, and still is, the actual anonymity of death. Heroic ideals were congruent with ancient warrior ideals, but the modern-day soldier may have died without firing a single shot or seeing actual battle. This made the reality of war death difficult to compare with the logic of sacrifice. When

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78 Pajari 2014a.

79 Pajari 2014b.

80 The White Guards were a paramilitary organization in Finland in 1918–1944; Lotta Svärd was its female wing, which had a certain role in wartime Finland as well as at the front.

81 Kempainen 2006a, 143–144. Cf. Merridale 1999.

82 Talve 1990, 231–240.

83 Linna 1970.

the war went on and these facts became well known to the general public, the ideal shifted from the heroism of the individual soldier to the collective sacrifice. There may have been more realism in the image – like the memorials in which the nude classical poses changed to more modern ones – but also this collectiveness was problematic in its own way.<sup>84</sup>

## Conclusions

One must not forget that in the middle of all the sacrificial fervor, losses are always a problem to the military. The logic of sacrifice is used by the military to justify its activity, but it is usually created and proclaimed by other quarters. It is not good for the morale of the troops to learn about endless numbers of fallen heroes, even if the most intense nationalistic texts would hint at just that. And the military needs men and women alive, not dead or fatally wounded. The fact that war may cause people to lose their lives must be explained somehow, especially in conscript armies, but dying in war is the goal of an ancient warrior or a poet, not a modern soldier.<sup>85</sup>

The logic of sacrifice has faced many social and political challenges in the decades after the Second World War. The case of Israel may highlight what has happened in many other countries, although Israeli history and especially its recent military history cannot be compared with most nations. Udi Lebel has analyzed the cult of the fallen soldier in independent Israel. In the first phase, the logic of sacrifice was applicable and the sacrifices were almost unanimously praised until the 1970s. It was then that people started to criticize the errors of the political leaders and wars in general. Only in the 1980s could the military be criticized and its often unnecessarily cruel practises be questioned.<sup>86</sup>

The thing many of us tend to forget is that soldiers also have personal needs when it comes to death, and not only as concerns their own death. In Second World War Finland they usually could not participate in the funerals of their fellow soldiers, because the funerals were held back in the home towns and villages. Nowadays they have an expressed wish to do so, if possible. They want to be the coffin bearers and pay their own respects to the family. Death is always an emotional thing and in a close-knit community it is even more so. When studying military death this fact cannot be ignored.<sup>87</sup> During the Second World War the soldiers may not have been able to participate in the funerals of their fallen fellow soldiers, but they could place a death notice in a newspaper.<sup>88</sup> They also felt the need to write to

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84 Kormano 2001.

85 Hakapää & Marjomaa 2000.

86 Lebel 2011.

87 Aalto 2012.

88 Kemppainen 2006a, 125.

the families to tell more about the conditions of death, or visit the family when they got a chance to do so. A kind of “adoptive kinship” may have developed from these contacts. The living comrade in arms may have partially replaced the dead family member.<sup>89</sup> These contacts may have begun along patriotic lines and admitting the importance of the logic of sacrifice, but continued as private and unofficial ties.

The logic of sacrifice may have lost its position as the core of a certain kind of nationalism and nationalistic propaganda in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not many nations can ask their soldiers to die for them in such elevated tones; and, for example, in the United States the homecoming of the fallen soldiers has been a publicity problem for the military.<sup>90</sup> Yet nationalism has not died, as recent history, for example in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, shows. Also the Finnish national identity has acquired some “retrospective” ingredients from the past after the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>91</sup>

To die for something requires that that something is the most important thing in the world; the greatest good there is. The logic of sacrifice has been able to openly declare the nation – often called the father- or motherland to emphasize the familial bonds among the nation – to be this greatest good. Most nationalistic and patriotic speech about and around military death includes these themes, but only in some countries, at some time in history, has this particular cultural construct been as clear and well-defined as in Finland during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Female citizenship was a controversial issue in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The logic of sacrifice offered women special roles in the national scene. They would be the mother who would raise their sons to be able to play the role of a warrior hero, and the first mourners of their sons when they had given their lives to the fatherland.<sup>92</sup>

Some women truly believed in these ideals and tried to fulfill them. When the fulfillment of a patriotic mother’s life came, the ideals often seemed empty and inadequate for consolation. This was a disappointment to many families, because the logic of sacrifice specifically promises that grief would be lighter and sorrow easier to bear when the cause of death was the greatest sacrifice of all. Many people recognize a sense of sublimity after an elderly person has died after a long and full life. The logic of sacrifice tried to create a similar ideology around military death, but often failed.

In Finland in the Second World War the cult(ure) of the fallen soldier was strong and families found it hard to discuss these matters without officially approved words and phrases. From the first announcement of death though to the military funeral to letters of consolation, people used phrases like “he has given the greatest sacrifice”

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89 Winter 1998, 29–36.

90 Troyer 2009.

91 Kivimäki 2012.

92 Cf. Hagemann 2000.

and “it is easy to rest after dying with honor.” Older and less heroic expressions were still at hand, like describing the body after death, speaking about the deceased as a beloved child and not a soldier, and, naturally, traditional religious discourse without patriotic tones.

Most often religion has been connected with nationalism in the modern era, especially in nations in which one denomination has been the dominant one and has had a constitutional position. War may have been given an apocalyptic interpretation – it has been called the final battle between good and evil after which a new era would surely dawn. Even in less inspired interpretations, wars are usually not only a political and military matter with purely mundane motivations. If nothing more, they can be said to purify the nation and to prove its valor and virility, its right to exist as a nation among nations.

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