

## **”Einsatzkommando Finnland”: Finland and the Holocaust**

Oula Silvennoinen

When the Holocaust is discussed, be it either among the public or among scholars, Finland is usually not mentioned. Despite having fought as a German ally in 1941-1944, the general line of interpretation has usually been that Finland managed to stay uninvolved in the genocide of the European Jews. Scholarship in the area has, however, made progress during the last decade, and it has transformed our understanding of Finland’s relationship to the Nazi policy of mass violence and genocide.

The Finnish Security Police, alongside the military security organ, emerge as the key players involving the Finnish state in the Holocaust. The Security Police had established relations to the German Security Police already during the Weimar era. Ties to new Nazi security authorities were quickly formed after Hitler’s ascension to power. The war-time co-operation between the German and Finnish security police authorities was thus established upon a basis of long and cordial companionship in the common fight against communism. In time, it became a crucial link that tied the Finnish state into the Nazi project of mass murder and genocide.

The German combat troops entering Soviet territory upon commencement of hostilities on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941 were followed by special task forces of the German Security Police and the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD). These task forces were organized into four *Einsatzgruppen*, roughly thousand-strong each, which divided into smaller *Einsatzkommandos*. Their intended use was to pacify the occupied territory, and prepare it for the future German overlordship by liquidating those strata of society deemed capable of resistance and leadership: that meant Soviet functionaries, Red Army political officers, active Communists - and any and all Jews.

The planning for a war of extermination in the east had originally excluded the northernmost part of the front in Northern Norway and Finland. To cover this area as well, the SS leadership set up in June 1941 a separate Security Police and SD *Einsatzkommando* destined to work on the German-controlled part of the Finnish-Soviet front, in Finnish Lapland. Its official name was bureaucratically clumsy, *Einsatzkommando der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD beim Armeeoberkommando Norwegen, Befehlsstelle Finnland*. In everyday use, it was shortened to *Einsatzkommando Finnland*. The designated leader of the unit, *SS-Sturmbannführer* Gustav vom

Felde, arrived in Helsinki in the last days of June, as the assault into the Soviet Union was already in full swing further south.

In Helsinki, vom Felde contacted the leadership of the Finnish Security Police, and the guidelines for joint action in the coming campaign were laid out. The competence of the German security police and the *Einsatzkommando* would not extend to Finnish citizens, but both sides accepted the need to hasten the destruction of the Soviet Union, and ease the future governance of former Soviet territory. This would be done by destroying the perceived mainstays of the Soviet system: communists and Jews. The Finnish Security Police therefore detached several officials from its own personnel to work under vom Felde's command. After the meeting was concluded, vom Felde departed for Lapland, where the opening of hostilities was by now imminent.

The Finnish were under no illusions as to what, exactly, co-operation with the *Einsatzkommando Finnland* would entail. Neither were they in the dark about the general mission of the unit. The first significant population centre expected to fall immediately into German hands was the port of Murmansk, where the *Einsatzkommando* was preparing its first big roundup of archival material and persons deemed unwanted. As a security police official in Lapland wrote to the main office in Helsinki after having been briefed by vom Felde, the expected operations would consist of:

interrogations of politically active persons and prisoners-of-war, [and besides that] also putting sentences into effect, [that is] (executions by shooting).

As it turned out, Murmansk would remain outside the grasp of the Germans, and the German army made little progress in the arctic part of the front. The practical work of the unit concentrated upon rooting out the undesired elements from among the prisoners-of-war.

The failure of the German arctic campaign meant that also the number of prisoners falling into German hands there remained meagre. But further south, Finnish troops made good progress and took ultimately a grand total of 70 000 Soviet prisoners-of-war. The Finnish military authorities adopted the German practice of separating the prisoners suspected of political activity, Red Army political commissars and *politruks* into a separate camp. From there, the Finnish military authorities funnelled the most undesirable into the hands of the *Einsatzkommando Finnland* in the north. A total of 521 Soviet prisoners-of-war are known to have been handed over this way, among them 49 prisoners registered as Jews. The most likely fate for all prisoners thus handed over was death by shooting.

With the German security police present in the area of Finland, the Finnish security police engaged in a murderous co-operation with it, and Germany still enjoying military successes elsewhere on the Eastern front, the looming question was what would become of the Jews in Finland?

### **Deporting the Finnish Jews?**

The later notorious Wannsee conference January 1942 gives an important The theme to be discussed in the conference with the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the consolidated SS security apparatus, the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, was a solution to the so-called Jewish question. The solution would be final. By the time of the conference, the German administrators had become frustrated by the ineffectiveness of other solutions, like emigration and resettlement, and a decision to simply kill the Jews had already been taken. To assess the size of the task at hand, estimates of the Jewish population in all the European countries were circulated. For Finland, German intelligence had arrived at a remarkably accurate figure of 2300 persons.

It was clear to the participants that the destruction of European Jewry would be an immense undertaking, and so it soon came to a discussion of priorities and marching order. An undersecretary at the German Foreign Ministry, Martin Luther, rose to speak. He underscored his belief that a blunt attempt to put the envisioned operation through in the Nordic countries would lead to “difficulties”. A local postponement of the Final Solution would be in order, especially as the Nordic Jewish communities tended to be very small. Luther’s suggestion was accepted and duly entered into the minutes of the conference. This meant also that the Finnish Jews would, for the time being, be outside the German sphere of interests.

It is a further illustration of this basic policy decision that Germany never presented Finland with an official request to deport the Finnish Jews. Heinrich Himmler visited Finland twice during the war, and while he inofficially broached the subject, the window of opportunity when Germany could have presented Finland with an official request to deport either all, or the foreign Jews in Finland, had by 1943 closed.

While all the Jews in Finland had been earmarked for destruction in due time, Finland was never put to the ultimate test. As was fitting for a small country, throughout the war Finland had sought to maintain relations to the Western Allies. Even the British declaration of war in 1941 did not frustrate this policy of insuring oneself for all eventualities. After Stalingrad, United States’ support came to be seen as increasingly essential for a successful exit from the war and Finland’s continued

existence as an independent state. It was also important that Sweden remained a relatively free enclave, where the politicians, press and public both followed, and were keen to comment on, Finnish affairs. The SS leadership did not forget the Jews in Finland, but there were strong arguments for Finland not emulating German Jewish policy, at least until a decisive German victory would have been secured.

The high-water mark of Finnish-German cooperation was reached in 1941-1942. The ebb began with the waning German fortunes of war. In November 1942 the Finnish Security Police could still arrange a deportation of eight Jewish refugees from Finland into German hands, but the ensuing press clamor was already a symptom of the weakening grip of censorship, and doubts about Finland's future in the war. The German attempt to deport the Danish Jews in late 1943 caused even such highly visible friends of Germany as the philosopher Eino Kaila to publicly denounce Nazi Jewish policy in the major daily of the Finnish political Right. Finland was looking for a way out of the war, and there was less and less reason to remain politely silent about such matters.

As a final development in the case of the Finnish Jews, Himmler's personal masseur Felix Kersten arrived in Stockholm in May 1944 on his way to Finland. He spent the evening dining in the Finnish embassy, and in the process said something on the aim of his mission: Kersten was to urge the Finnish leadership to finally round up the Finnish Jews in preparation for their eventual deportation into German hands. Whether Kersten simply spoke too much, or dropped this hint in order to frustrate his master's plans, is not known, neither is it crucial here. The anecdote shows that late in the war Himmler and the SS-leadership still continued to harbour designs also on the Finnish Jews. What is also obvious, is that by May 1944 such exhortations had become just wishful thinking on the part of the Germans. Finland was busy seeking a way out of the war, and would never jeopardize that process by such measures.

The Finnish Jews were saved from the Holocaust by the lack two crucial developments. Finland was never occupied by Germany, and thus continued to exercise sovereignty over its own citizens throughout the war. Most of the Finnish Jews were also citizens of Finland, and there was never enough political pressure to effect changes in that status. It is quite likely such pressure would have manifested itself if the war had progressed to German advantage, but it never came to that. Finland was never seriously tested in this regard.

However, the situation was radically different when we consider the status of the non-Finnish Jews in Finland: refugees and prisoners-of-war. The refugees enjoyed no protected status, and twelve of them were indeed deported into German hands. The best-known case, the November 1942

deportation is particularly illustrative of the willingness of parts of Finnish administrative machine to act as aiders and abettors in the Holocaust. The youngest deportee was a child less than two years of age. The November deportation is also illustrative of the ability of other parts of the administration to curb the most radical impulses. Although there was willingness among the State Police to deport all Jewish refugees from Finland, this never came to pass. Deportations continued on an individual basis, and the first option for an unwanted Jewish refugee was to seek a possibility to move on to Sweden and safety.

The prisoners-of-war were the group that suffered the most. As Soviet citizens, Jewish prisoners were in a particularly precarious position, as they were until late 1942 handed over to the Einsatzkommando Finnland as the military security saw fit. The Finnish authorities handed over a total of 49 Soviet Jewish Prisoner-of-war out of the total of 405 prisoners in Finnish hands registered as Jews. The military authorities seem not to have handed anyone over simply because of a Jewish identity, though, but Jews apparently were considered more likely to be active communists, and were therefore turned into German hands in disproportionate numbers.

## **Post-war**

The war-time co-operation between German and Finnish security authorities was successfully buried in the archives after the war. The only Holocaust-related court case in Finland arose from the November 1942 deportation, and as a result the wartime chief of the security police, Arno Anthoni, was given a warning for “carelessness in duty”.

Finland was never occupied, and while the communists immediately returned to the political scene after the Finnish-Soviet armistice in September 1944, they failed to gain control of the key state institutions. The majority of the parliament, the civil service, courts and the military remained in the hands of non-communists. *Status quo ante bellum* prevailed, and most members of the pre-war political elite and civil service were able to continue their business as usual also after the war. In 1941 Finland had been taken to war by a broad based coalition government including the Social Democrats, and had been governed during the war in an atmosphere of *Burgfrieden*. After the war, the Social Democrats emerged as perhaps the most active anti-communists in the battle to limit the growth of the Far Left influence. While the communists and their allies sought to change the *status quo* also through accusations of Fascism and war crimes, their efforts were eventually frustrated by the fact that the vast majority of Finnish politicians had little interest in burrowing into the embarrassing details of the very recent past.

Immediate post-war political necessities have continued to shape the discourse on Holocaust in Finland, to this day. Suggestions of connections between war-time Finland and the Holocaust still tend to bring forward defensive reactions, consisting of comments seeking to relativize or belittle Finnish responsibility. A typical rhetorical tactic is to divert attention to Stalin's crimes, which supposedly makes it superfluous to even speak about those of Hitler. The number of Jews victimized through direct acts of Finnish authorities is quickly declared so low as not to warrant any further discussion. Or, it is said to be preposterous to pay so much attention to the victims, when there were so many Jews who on the contrary found refuge in Finland, and whom Finland can be said to have protected. To any of these tropes a hardly veiled allegation of Far Left political sympathies can be added, intended to demolish the credibility of anyone seeking to connect Finland's history with the history of the Holocaust. They still simply have nothing to do with each other, runs the creed of Finnish exceptionalism.