

Summary

Coexistence between the Finnish civilian population and the German troops in Northern Finland in 1941–1944

Germany declared war on the Soviet Union in June 1941, and Finland entered the war on the German side a few days later. Detachments of German troops began to arrive in the north of Finland several weeks before the eastern offensive began, to the amazement of the local inhabitants, as Finland was still officially a neutral country at that time. Some of the civilians did not even recognise what country the troops belonged to and wondered greatly where these tens of thousands of soldiers were making for.

Although the people of Northern Finland had not been prepared in any way for encountering large numbers of troops in foreign uniforms, the arrival of the Germans did not arouse any panic or unrest, especially since the Finns were so suspicious of the Soviet Union and so concerned about preserving their independence. The Winter War of 1939–1940 had ended in the ceding of territory to the Soviet Union, an outcome regarded by the Finns as a great injustice, and the arrival of the German forces was widely believed to mean a new war to be waged side by side with the Germans that would finally eliminate the threat to Finnish independence from the east.

Conditions were thus favourable for successful coexistence between the local inhabitants and the German troops, because the majority of people in Northern Finland were ready to accept the presence of the Germans, if only for the sake of the national interest. The political left wing and the working classes were naturally suspicious of Nazi Germany, but no demonstrations were held against the arrival of its army, nor were there any attempts at sabotage. Most people's attitudes were dictated by more mundane and practical considerations, such as their own safety and welfare and that of their families. If having dealings with the German troops and making their acquaintance was likely to further such a cause, this was a wiser alternative than objecting to their presence. In any case, compliance with their own Finnish authorities demanded that they should not seek confrontations with these companions in arms nor incite others to do so.

Both the German officers and the local authorities regarded it as important that the presence of troops in the areas away from the front lines should not lead to conflicts with the local population, and it was firmly instilled into the minds of the German soldiers that they were not an army of occupation but guests in a friendly country.

The opportunities that the local civilians had for either fraternizing with the visitors or avoiding this entirely depended on where they lived. It was impossible to avoid encountering them in the busier transit or billeting areas,

and the nearer the troops were stationed to one's own home or place of work, the more difficult it was to avoid contact with them. Similarly, those local people who had volunteered to work for the Germans or serve German clients, or had been ordered to do so, were inevitably in constant contact with them.

The behaviour of the civilians in Northern Finland seldom gave the German military any cause for complaint, and there were only very isolated cases of vandalism, sabotage, violence against a German soldier, or even threats of such violence. This was a significant fact if only because the German soldiers gave the people of Northern Finland far more cause for annoyance than the Finns gave the Germans, as their arbitrary behaviour and constant stealing reached almost epidemic proportions at the early stages in the war in particular and must have seriously tried the patience of the local inhabitants. Later, as these incidents came to be investigated, compensation was paid for the financial losses incurred and discipline was tightened, the problem shrank to a manageable level and gradually disappeared. In any case, the people showed commendable endurance and restraint in the face of the difficulties caused directly or indirectly by the German soldiers.

The Germans were by no means merely obnoxious intruders or an additional burden to be tolerated alongside all the other ravages of war. The young people looked on the soldiers as individuals of their own age with whom it was easy to make friends. A German soldier could well turn out to be an obliging neighbour or a generous friend. He would sometimes become a friend of the family who might bring a packet of food with him when he visited or help the people of the house in other ways. The German troops would do farm work or carry out repairs, or they might even lend out their horses. Help of this kind was very valuable in the countryside, where in many cases both the farmer himself and the horses were away on war duty. People living in the more remote areas would even consult German professionals such as doctors when the corresponding Finnish services were perhaps hundreds of kilometres away.

The cinemas, theatres, evening entertainments, literature, music, homely pastimes and more sophisticated forms of culture provided people with an escape from the deprivations of war, and people were more than usually ready to take advantage of such opportunities. In this respect, too, the people of Northern Finland were fortunate, as they had both Finnish and German entertainments to choose from. Apart from passing the time, of course, these events were also important because they brought Germans and Finns together in pleasant surroundings on the home front.

A different light was cast on coexistence with the Germans when, instead of financial losses, those left on the home front were presented with the chance to improve their lot under the otherwise harsh wartime conditions. The Germans needed labour, goods and services, for which they were prepared to pay regular prices, which meant better incomes for both private persons and the local authorities.

Although coexistence was a state of affairs dictated by military objectives, it remained unaffected by fluctuations in the strategic or political situation, and its

nature did not alter greatly in response to the military setbacks suffered by the Germans or Finnish attempts to disengage from cooperation with them. People attached more importance to how relations were in their own home districts than to what was happening elsewhere.

Coexistence between the civilian population of Northern Finland and the German troops was not without its problems, however, and cooperation between the authorities of the two countries was required in order to prevent conflicts. There was nevertheless no permanent dividing line in the disputes arising on the home front that always placed the Finnish civilians and the German troops in opposite camps. Sometimes what the Finnish authorities regarded as inappropriate dealings with the Germans, such as barter trading or small-scale evasion of the rationing laws, was a matter of necessity as far as the person committing the infringement was concerned. These market situations were often to the liking of the German soldiers, too, but the German authorities were not always so enthusiastic, especially when the goods involved had originated from their own stores. The willingness of the Finns to work for the Germans was to the advantage of the latter, as they suffered from a chronic shortage of labour, but it inevitably meant that the workers were reluctant to obey their own authorities' command to exchange their well-paid jobs with the Germans for commitment to a Finnish employer.

At the personal level, relations varied from unenthusiastic toleration enforced by circumstances to close, sometimes lifelong friendship. Constant arguments and frequently repeated conflicts were not typical of such relations, and there were many spontaneous contacts between the two groups that did not set out from the official doctrine of military cooperation. Coexistence was at its least complicated when it was built upon shared everyday experiences in which the people got to know each other, treated each other as equals and were engaged in practical, rational cooperation that helped them survive under wartime conditions. It was association of this kind that did most to obscure the realities of the original, somewhat unequal relationship between the armed forces of mighty Germany and the civilians of little Finland.

Translation by Malcolm Hicks