Väinö Linna

Under the North Star

Täällä Pohjantähden alla

Presented by: Eric Bergman

Is it possible for literature to change the course of an entire nation? Could a literary text be responsible for transforming murder, violence, and a high prison population (Pratt and Eriksson, 2013) into social cohesion? Would the political, economic, and social success in the decades to come be due to literature? We've been taught, as politically minded readers, to temper our expectations—and certainly this sounds far-fetched. However, according to scholar Mads Larsen, Väinö Linna's trilogy *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* [*Under the Northern Star*], published 1959–62, is just such a work. In fact, it might be "one of history's most directly influential works of literature" (Larsen, 604) due to the public debate it sparked and, ultimately, because it set Finland on the Nordic course of its neighbors. Until the publication of the novel's second part in 1960, the honest handling of the Finnish Civil War (1918) had been taboo. The official version of the war was dictated by the winning Whites (liberals, landowners, middle class, elites), who framed the Reds (socialists, landless, proletariat) as being deceived by socialist propaganda into fighting against their own interests. The Reds' memory culture, however, also maintained that the Whites executed and starved to death tens of thousands of Reds after the war was over—a bitter crime that had been censored by the official history. Though the injustices that led to the Reds' uprising had been made clear in literature before—notably by F.E. Sillanpää in his novel Hurskas kurjuus [Meek Heritage] (1919)—it was Linna's second installment of his trilogy, which included the Reds' perspective as central, that prompted the public debate that brought a nation, shattered after three wars in WWII, into talking terms and healing about the acrimonious past and simmering class divisions. Edvin Laine's 1968 cinematic rendition of Linna's Civil War episode was also voted by Finns as the country's greatest cinematic achievement (Arto; see Larsen, 604), hence widening the text's cultural impact.

Täällä Pohjantähden alla, a sprawling saga of some 1,500 pages in the original Finnish, traces Finland's turbulent modernization from the 1880s into the 1950s in the sociohistorical mode. The trilogy is set in the village Pentinkulma (Pentti's Corner) and follows a wide cast of characters surrounding the Koskela family, whose paterfamilias, Jussi, creates new farmland from marshes to become a crofter (i.e., he has the right to work land he does not own and, in exchange, provides labor for the landlord, the parish priest). As the generations fold into one another, sons are killed in subsequent wars: two in the Civil War and three in WWII, when Finland fought the defensive Winter War (1939) and the offensive Continuation War (1941–4). Jussi's grandson, Vilho Koskela, also appears in Linna's earlier novel and magnum opus *Tuntematon sotilas* (1954) as an ideal leader in the Continuation War. He dies heroically at the end of the war, which can be taken as Linna's attempt to reconcile the Koskela family's Red past via their sacrifice.

In the third installment of the trilogy, the village teacher, Pentti Rautajärvi, becomes a central character. He is a supporter of the Lapuan Movement (Lapuanliike, 1929–32), which was a radical anti-communist movement that put pressure on political decision-makers with violence and political

terror, including kidnapping, forced deportation, political murder, etc. The movement was born of the disappointment stemming from democratic processes that allowed the Left, vanquished in the Civil War, into politics. It was successful: in 1930, a law was passed barring all communist activities. The peace accords with the Soviet Union in WWII stipulated that communists could once again be active.

Beyond the details of everyday family and village dynamics—such as bringing in the landlord's hay, acquiring a horse, romance, and marriage—is a formal structure of ideological spheres competing at the average person's level. The ideologies are used to interpret big historical moments. When the trilogy begins, Finland is an Autonomous Duchy of the Russian Empire with the Swedish language dominant in all official spheres. National romanticism, often essentializing in practice (i.e. that Finns as a whole have discernable characteristics linked to geography), and the establishment of the Finnish language in officialdom can be seen to be creating the idea of Finland as a nation-state. Linna deploys irony in, for example, setting the priest's right-wing nationalist wife's ideology against the crofters she dominates and keeps in poverty, which is partially why they subsequently side with the Reds. Overall, Linna shows that any one ideology, when taken too fervently, can lead to misfortune. The omniscient narrator indicates, calmly and matter-of-factly, that social dynamics can transform into political entrenchment. For example, Jussi's son Akseli Koskela never did end up becoming a fire chief (palopäällikkö) at the volunteer fire department as promised; but, as readers are informed well ahead of time, he did become a 'red chief' (punapäällikkö), which is a play on words in the Finnish. Through this foreshadowing, readers are alerted into noticing how the seeds of injustice are sown; the harvest is revolution. Individual characters and actions matter but not as much as socioeconomic and historical context.

In conclusion, liberal, fascist, and socialist ideas compete in the village in the longue durée, which acts as a microcosm of Finland as a whole, making *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* Finland's most important sociohistorical political text. As such, it has been chosen by both the public and the culture elite as one of Finland's top two artistic works of the 20th century (the other was Linna's novel Tuntematon sotilas; Halmari, 36; Larsen, 604). Though readers are led to align with the socialist fraction because the story is mostly told from their perspective and the poor and downtrodden are framed as nominally heroic, this is not a clear-cut calculation—all of the ideologies are both exciting and destructive. That the opposed fractions would set aside their differences to fight against Soviet invasions and unite the Finnish political spectrum is important within the storyworld. The trilogy's most lasting political outcome took place outside the text itself, however: by forcing a long-overdue public debate about the past, the public view of the Reds shifted, which contributed to the social reconciliation of the conflicting groups and classes that allowed society to shift towards building up the welfare state and other communal endeavors. It is possible to draw a line, as Larsen does above, from Linna's trilogy to Finland as a contemporary state in the Nordic model.

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LANGUAGE: Finnish/Suomi

This title was not censored before publishing