Väinö Linna

The Unknown Soldier

Tuntematon sotilas

Presented by: Eric Bergman

Tuntematon sotilas by Väinö Linna (1954) is Finland's most important war novel. Together with Edvin Laine's 1955 film adaptation, which continues to reach vast audiences (it is shown on TV each Independence Day), the memory culture of the 1941–2 Continuation War against the Soviet Union was transformed from an idealized vision of soldiers' self-sacrifice and unquestioning patriotism to messy and tragic realism, a questioning of the elite's political justifications for the war, and an image of the everyday Finnish soldier as heroic in his disdain for old forms of authority. The elite's vainglorious push for a Greater Finland resulted in massive death and suffering for front-line soldiers, which turned the perception of 'regenerating sacrifice' associated with the defensive Winter War (1939) against the Soviet Union into one of meaningless death (Kivimäki and Tepora). Linna's platoon of reluctant, reckless, and irreverent soldiers is contrasted to the officers, who are depicted as either "repulsively militant or as plain fools" (Kivimäki 487), and their covetous support for national expansion is hence critiqued. This class-based clash, canonized in *Tuntematon sotilas*, helped bring about an end to the old order in Finland.

Tuntematon sotilas is powerful due to its characterization of the motley crew of soldiers who run the gamut from Antero Rokka—a pragmatic, irreverent, and fiercely brave soldier known for his wry humor, skill in combat, and refusal to bow to military pretensions (he is most readers' favorite and has entered the pantheon of Finnish 'types')—to Aimo Lehto, a coward, and Riitaoja, a weakling who cannot carry his own equipment on long marches. Scholars (Kettunen 288; Kivimäki and Tepora 34; see also Danielsbacka; Kronlund et al.) have argued that the novel's depiction of a general lack of military discipline and respect for hierarchy, along with soldiers' claims of democratic rights as citizens, is now understood as characteristic of Finnish culture more generally.

The novel is cyclical in a way that echoes war: readers get to know individual soldiers who, through cynicism, gallows humor, and recognizable archetypical traits, invite empathy. Just as their portrayal is coming into full focus via focalization (i.e. from their perspective and free indirect discourse), however, the next battle occurs, and the character is killed. The narrative consists of marching, battles, waiting, and the prosaic happenings of an army at war interspersed with the omniscient narrator's third-person observations that go from the reportorial to intimate interiority. No character is centered at the expense of others; rather, the group dynamic is highlighted and, at times, the narrator switches to the perspective of the group experience. Here is the famous opening paragraph of the novel, which, in an ironic play on the Tolstoyan mode, sets up the subversion of expectations that will occur when the independent-minded soldiers begin to appear soon thereafter:

As we all know, the Lord is almighty – he knows all and sees far. And so, one day, he let a forest fire burn a good swath of state land, laying waste to acres of the dry, pine forest around the town of Joensuu. The people did everything in their power to put a stop to his work, as they always did, but

he burned the forest undeterred, just as far as it suited him. He had his own plans. (Linna, *Soldiers* 4)

God's 'plan' was to allow Finnish soldiers to make camp in this clearing and defend 'Mother Finland.' In this way, the narrator's irony and disdain for national myths is shown to coincide with those of the soldiers.

In the latter part of the novel (and the war it represents), the soldiers are no longer dying to save Finland from Soviet occupation; they are dying for the idea of Greater Finland. The idea of 'Greater Finland' (*Suur-Suomi*) is irredentism: a concept signifying that current-day political borders are not expansive enough. This is a common characteristic for many nations across the world, from Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary to China and the USA. In the Continuation War of 1941–2, Finland continued to push its military campaign past the pre-Winter-War borders of 1939 to conquer Greater Finland from Soviet land up to Leningrad and into Karelia, which is the political context of the novel.

In 1954, when the novel appeared, Finland was following the new foreign policy of 'Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Aid' with the Soviet Union, which meant that right-wing nationalist ideas were self-censored (a process termed 'Finlandization'). However, conservative nationalism and ardent anti-communism flourished below the surface among the official class, from academics to the clergy, civil servants, and teachers. At the same time, the Finnish establishment's ideals of religious patriotism and national sacrifice were being questioned by the soldiers and civilians who lived through the hardships of the wars and their aftermath. *Tuntematon sotilas* hit this nerve of disillusionment among the common citizenry while it annoyed the officer class. The novel was widely accepted by soldiers themselves as being realistic of extant attitudes, wretchedness, and everyday heroism of the common soldier during the war. These aspects are also evidence of Linna's indebtedness to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Kivimäki). Like F.E. Sillanpää before him, Linna used literature in an attempt to realign the prevalent Finnish national narrative concerning the Finnish Civil War of 1918. To do so, Linna mythologized a new type of heroic soldier, epitomized by the character Lieutenant Vilho Koskela, who comes from a working-class family who had fought on the losing side of the Reds (socialists) in the Civil War. Upon the novel's publication, participants and family members of the Reds were still ostracized from the Finnish national narrative, which was controlled by the winning Whites and the aforementioned elite. Through Koskela's heroic death and mythical characterization, the Reds went through a narrative process of atonement in Linna's novel that symbolically brought them back into the national fold. Koskela also represents the positive attributes of Finnish national identity and, specifically, masculinity—a "sense of responsibility, down-to-earth clear-mindedness, and unpretentious bravery"—and becomes a martyr who redeems "a place for the working class and the socialists in the national collective and who, indeed, redeem[s] national independence from the hands of the fanciful 'Greater Finland' idealists and militarists" (Kivimäki 488; see also Varpio 340; Raittila 10–11). Koskela is also a character in Linna's epic *Täällä Pohjantähden alla*, 1959–62, where Linna pushed the Civil War into the public debate more forcefully.

In *Tuntematon sotilas*, Linna gave soldiers critical thinking. In the famous words of Koskela, "We'll do what's necessary — otherwise we'll be like Ellu's chickens." In other words, war and all the hierarchy, suffering, and destruction it implies are unavoidable for these soldiers—and they'll carry out their duty stoically and without flailing about aimlessly like chickens. But don't expect them to grovel or pretend to be idealistic. Overall, Finland's necessity of fighting against the Soviets is not questioned; sometimes, war is necessary. But the common soldier, Linna shows, does not conform to national myths of glory, martyrdom, or heaven-ordained justice. War is much too awful. Depicting

war realistically from the perspective of soldiers (biased, of course, but convincing) is the highest form of honor and it must—for that is the nature of war—double as a form of disgrace.

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