

Summary

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Väinö Voionmaa – politician and geopolitician

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Väinö Voionmaa (1869–1947, Wallin until 1906) was a Finnish politician, cabinet minister and member of parliament and also professor of Scandinavian and Finnish history at the University of Helsinki.² The present work describes and analyses the evolution and significance of his thinking with regard to the Finnish-Russian border and Finland's geopolitical policies, and also his position within the field of activity of

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- 2 He was a member of the Tokoi Senate (i.e. cabinet) in 1917, with responsibility for transport, a parliamentary representative for the Social Democrats in 1919–1947, Foreign Minister in 1926–1927, Minister of Trade and Industry in 1937–1939, deputy Foreign Minister in 1938 and Chairman of the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee in 1931–1937 and 1940–1946. One biography of Voionmaa has been written that extends to all aspects of his life: Aimo Halila, *Väinö Voionmaa*. Tammi, Helsinki, 1969.

the Finnish Social Democratic Party. Voionmaa was a member of the Finnish delegation at both the Finnish-Russian peace negotiations in Tartu in 1920 and those held in Moscow in 1940 following the Winter War, and similarly in the peace process in Paris in 1946–47 that brought the Second World War to an end.

The principal conclusions reached are concerned with 1) his development of the culturally defined concept of a “natural Greater Finland”, 2) the armed conflict and propaganda war over the Finnish-Soviet boundary, and 3) his vision of Finland as an Arctic country. Given that the prevailing train of thought at that time emphasized Finland’s role as a western country primarily destined to act as a sentinel against the threat from the east, Voionmaa, as a pacifist, laid stress on the forging of lasting relations with the Soviet Union. Among other things, he was instrumental as deputy foreign minister in 1938 in gaining an audience with the prime minister for the Russian negotiator Boris Yartsev and he supported continuation of the border negotiations in Moscow.

The theoretical basis and metadiscourse for the analysis presented in this work is built up from a number of controversial, highly sensitive and constantly relevant themes such as the geopolitical roles of small nation-states, the justifications for their existence, their territoriality and the definition of their boundaries. At the time when the term was coined in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, geopolitics referred above all to the territorial power struggle that took place between states, but later, and especially from the 1980s onwards, the concept broadened considerably, to include not only states and the power relations prevailing between them but also features of international politics at many levels in the form of inter-state political relations and foreign policies, as the geographers Vilho Harle and Sami Moisio have observed.³ In the present connection geopolitics is a convenient conceptual tool for analysing the overall theme of the work, as it lies in principle at the intersection between three branches of science that were of exceptional importance to Väinö Voionmaa: history, regional geography and political science.

3 Harle & Moisio 2003, pp. 9–10.

One may very well say that Voionmaa was a geopolitician before the term had been created.

The point of departure for the present geopolitical discourse consists of the reminders issued by Barry Buzan, a political scientist who stressed the significance of history for the process by which states develop, that a state is constituted precisely through the practises adopted by the international community and not as a self-created legal or administrative entity, and that the question of its security concerns its ability to preserve its independent identity and functional integrity. This drive for security was indeed Finland's principal political objective in the days of the first republic. The security ideal put forward in the European statehood discourse of that time was that of a sovereign state, a nation-state whose ethnic and cultural boundaries were coincident with its political boundaries.⁴ Only in rare cases, however, was such a propitious situation achieved, and many exceedingly bitter disputes have taken place in the course of history between regions desirous of establishing themselves as states. Even in the present decade there are innumerable sovereignty issues involving nations, autonomous regions and transnationally distributed ethnic groups seeking independence or a particular status within the European family of allied states that are still unresolved, as indeed is also true in general terms of the role of small states in a Europe dominated by its large ones. In the words of the historian Michel Foucault, Europe was characterized in the past and is still characterized today by a geographical distribution into regions with many states lacking in unity, but there is nevertheless a significant, if not fundamental or at least interesting, distinction between the large ones and the small ones.⁵ In order to guarantee themselves a secure position, it is essential for the small states to ally themselves either with each other or with larger ones. In Esko Antola's opinion the best future alliance for a small European state is not necessarily with the European Commission or with other small states but with a major power.⁶

4 Buzan 1991, pp.18–19, 57–69, 101; Korhonen 2008, pp.235–254.

5 Foucault 2010, p. 284.

6 Antola 2004, pp. 21–23, 34, 38, 52, 73.

Voionmaa's academic work also consisted in part of applications of his geopolitical ideas, in the form of ground-breaking innovations in the fields of economic and social history, the history of the family, working-class urban research and geopolitical history. He was already using personal interviews as a research method in the early years of the 20th century, making him Finland's first exponent of the oral history methodology.⁷ A staunch believer in the civilizing influence of education, his great vision was to transmit academic knowledge to the general populace through non-fictional books and informative popular magazines. This prompted him to build up a discipline of public history long before the birth of the oral history movement.⁸ In these respects Voionmaa was closely engaged in drawing the map of the independent state of Finland in both a physical sense, as a statesman, and in a psychological sense, as a cultural figure, as well as being a visionary with a flair for experimentation and a pioneer in the field of public history.

Small nation-states and their right to existence

The foundation for Väinö Voionmaa's political philosophy lay in his ability to compile historical, geographical and constitutional evidence to justify the existence of Finland as a small state in the north of Europe and to construct political arguments on this basis. This broad-based approach of his meant that he was in effect a geopolitician even before the concept of geopolitics was invented in the late 19th or early 20th century. At that time the term *geopolitics* referred above all to territorial power struggles, and Voionmaa sought his inspiration predominantly from the Finnish political philosopher J. V. Snellman, the German

7 In his *History of the City of Tampere*, 1903–1910.

8 He was already active in both the temperance movement and the Finnish Society for Popular Education (nowadays the Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation) towards the end of the 19th century, and inspired by these experiences he set about organizing education for the working classes. He was involved in the founding of the Workers' Educational Association of Finland in 1919, the Workers' Folk High School in 1924, and the University College of Social Sciences (later the University of Tampere) in 1925. He also published numerous historical works and newspaper articles intended for the general public.

geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel and the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén.⁹ His “natural Greater Finland” doctrine implied in its most concrete form that, viewed in the light of both *physical* and *cultural-historical* arguments, the eastern boundary of Finland should run along the waterways on a line Gulf of Finland – Lake Ladoga – Lake Onega – White Sea – Arctic Ocean and that the areas of Russian Karelia and the Kola Peninsula were “natural” parts of Finland (see map 1 p. 114). This same line had been quoted earlier by the 19th-century Scandinavianists as the “natural” boundary of Greater Scandinavia, and the Finnish nationalist, or Fennomans, party similarly regarded it as the eastern limit of the culturally defined territory of Finland. In the north, the Finnish cultural sphere was also taken to include the Finnish-speaking migrant communities of Northern Norway and the ethnically Finnish areas of Northern Sweden. When the Civil War in Finland broke out in 1918, Voionmaa assisted the Reds by drawing a map of the eastern border of Socialist Finland, and the Reds who fled from Finland to Soviet Russia, most notably Edvard Gylling and Otto-Wille Kuusinen, made use of these boundaries of Greater Finland when the puppet Terijoki government published its map of Finland in 1939 (see map 4 p. 310).

A moderate opposition supporter and pacifist

The second purpose of this work is to assess Voionmaa’s position in the Social Democratic movement and within the party itself. His interest in political affairs had arisen out of an enthusiasm for Finnish nationalism inspired by the example of his parents, and it was his teachers at the Imperial Alexander University (of Helsinki), most notably professors E. N. Setälä, J. R. Danielson-Kalmari and Y.-S. Yrjö Koskinen, who convinced him that one could combine an academic career with

9 See also Lähteenmäki, Maria, *Landet, staten och dess gränser. Beståndsdelarna i Väinö Voionmaas geopolitiska program*. In: Elenius, Lars (ed.), *Nordiska gränser i historien: linjer och rum, konstruktion och dekonstruktion*. Publications of the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, 2014.

a political role in society. His interest in politics grew considerably as a result of experiences on journeys to Germany and England around the turn of the century, and by 1903 at the latest he had committed himself to the Social Democrat ideology. Contrary to previous assertions,¹⁰ he evidently joined the SDP during the General Strike in the latter half of 1905 and stood as a candidate in the first parliamentary elections in 1907,¹¹ although he lost his battle with the radical wing of the party led by Edvard Valpas and failed to be elected. Since leadership of the party was very much in the hands of its radical wing, Voionmaa was largely inactive until 1918, when the moderate approach advocated by him gained the ascendancy following the defeat of the Reds in the Civil War. He was then elected to parliament, where he served continuously until his death in 1947.

Voionmaa was to become one of the party's chief spokesmen on foreign affairs and a specialist in issues concerned with the eastern border. He first emerged as foreign minister in Väinö Tanner's cabinet of 1926–27, and the present investigation points to his having had a much greater influence on the outcome of the Tartu peace negotiations than has previously been realized.¹² On the other hand, his works *Suomi Jäämerellä* (Finland on the Arctic Ocean, 1918) and *Suomen uusi asema* (Finland's New Status, 1919), were both available for all the negotiators to read. Eventually his agitation on behalf of a land corridor to the Arctic Ocean bore fruit, and the Petsamo (Pechenga) area was annexed to Finland in the treaty of 1920. To his dismay, however, Finland lost this corridor to the Soviet Union in the settlement following the Continuation War in 1944.

10 All previous publications dealing with Voionmaa claim that he did not join the party until after the Civil War, i.e. late in 1918.

11 Under the electoral reform of 1906 all Finnish citizens who had come of age were eligible to vote and to stand as parliamentary candidates. Finland was the first country in Europe, and only the third in the whole world, to allow women to vote. The SDP obtained 80 seats in the 200-seat parliament of 1907 and was thus the largest single party.

12 The picture of events during these negotiations has up till now been formed largely on the strength of the memoirs published by the most prominent figure in the SDP at that time, Väinö Tanner (*Tarton rauha: sen syntyvaiheet ja -vaikeudet*. Tammi, Helsinki, 1949), in which Voionmaa is mentioned mostly in less significant connections.

Within the party, Voionmaa gradually shifted in the course of the 1920s and 1930s from the inner circle of its leading figure, Väinö Tanner (1881–1966), to the role of one of his most merciless critics. This new stance in turn moved him a fraction further to the left, and during the Second World War he openly sided with the opposition. Relations between the two men were finally broken off when Finland allied itself with Nazi Germany during the war. Voionmaa was violently opposed to this alliance, the granting of permission for the Germans to advance through Finnish Lapland to Northern Norway in 1940 and the establishment of a German military administration in Northern Finland in 1941–44. When the war came to an end he was prominent in demanding the trial of the leading political figures for war crimes, including Tanner, who had been a member of the wartime governments.

The outbreak of the Second World War, the failure of the League of Nations and the internal strife within the SDP wore the ageing professor down both mentally and physically, almost to the point of collapse. This work also discusses his wartime experiences as an elderly, sensitive politician and his physical and mental exhaustion in the face of the bombing of Helsinki and the conflicting feelings aroused by the gradual crumbling of the Finnish-German alliance. Fear of the total destruction of Finland in the war between the Great Powers and horror at the thought of its annexation to the Soviet Union caused almost all the already elderly wartime politicians in Finland to age further and fall ill, and this was true of Voionmaa as well. He did take part in the preparations for the Paris peace negotiations, but he died in May 1947 before the final treaty was signed.

Looked at from a broader, European perspective, the present study in Finnish history provides a concrete example of how complex, laborious, protracted and dependent on others is the task faced by a small state that wishes to achieve and maintain sovereignty on its own terms amongst conflicting internal and external political tensions. Perhaps it is quite simply not possible. In its yearning for sovereignty, Finland turned first to membership of the League of Nations and then to the United Nations, having previously glanced in the direction of a putative

Greater Scandinavia and contemplated plans for an Alliance of Border States, while later generations have sought security in the European Union and some have dreamt of protection within NATO. The need for forming alliances and seeking security from larger friends has been and still is deeply embedded in Finland's political structures, as with many other small states, and this was particularly true during the international crises of 1917–20 and 1939–44, when Finland sought protection from Germany (See the new border plans of Nazi-Germany in Lapland, maps 5 and 6, pages 333, 334). Throughout the period when Väinö Voionmaa was a member of parliament (1919–47) Finland was living beside a Soviet empire that was gaining in stature and strength, and the awareness of this also affected the way in which he wrote about politics and defined the position that he should take up within the spectrum of the Social Democratic Party.