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The near-famine in Finland 1917-1918: the State Committee for Household Counselling and other consequences

During the years 1917-1919 there was a near famine in Finland. It was not a real famine since very few starved to death – except among the prisoners after the civil war, a black page in the history of Finland. But many Finns had constant hunger those years. From its predecessors this hunger time was different in several ways, it could be said that it was a modern hunger. It also was tried to manage with modern means.

Earlier famines in the agricultural Finland were due to crop failures. Some of them hit more or less the whole country but frequent years of starvation were a constant plague among (small) farmers and their dependants in northern and north-east areas. In worst cases the state tried to take some help measures. Charity by the little class of local wealthier people or from better areas was another way.

In 1917, in the slightly industrialised country, the hunger crisis was different from the previous ones. It hit first of all the non-farmers who were dependant of imported grain. A completely new phenomenon was that even wealthy people experienced the shortage. The main method to manage the shortage was rationing. An auxiliary method was counselling in food managing through printed media and circulating counsellors.

As often, even this crisis had consequences far beyond its actual scope. It led to a change in the Finnish agricultural policy, which was formed after the real famines in 1860s'. Finland was not alone. Some other European countries were even worse affected during and after the First World War and again during the Second World War. Those experiences are to be traced even today in the WTO negotiations on alimentary trade and subsidies. This is the macro level I will refer to.

The micro level here is mainly represented by a prominent lady, journalist and politician Hedvig Gebhard, of whom I recently (with her grand daughter) wrote a

biography¹. Hedvig Gebhard became the chair of one of those state organs, which were established for “organising the hunger” as was the half humorous expression, the State committee for domestic economics. The task was a turning point in her career and even marriage. I claim that the hunger and the ways to fight against it also influenced the feminist movement in Finland.

The political background to be known

Finland was from 1809 an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian empire. Since the 1890s’ the harmony between the tsarist regime and Finland was broken. The former tried to unify and russify its border areas, Finnish elite carried a national resistance campaign where internal solidarity measures were on a high place. At the same time labour movement was growing. In 1905 the national and labour campaign together had been successful leading to a radical parliamentary reform where full political rights (not yet on municipal level) were achieved for both men and women. With the reform social democrats became a strong, demanding factor in the political life. The tsar however had the highest power and often passed over the will of the parliament.

Although a part of the Empire, Finland did not participate in the First World War. The first war years were even economically positive as had been the previous years. The negative economic consequences met Finns only from 1916 on. In spring 1917 the Russian March revolution led to a politically unstable situation both externally and especially internally. However the government was again Finnish. In December 1917 the Government and Parliament declared independence. In January 1918 arose a red revolution, leading to civil war. The whites won in April 1918 and also draw away the last Russian troops.

Import grain – export butter –policy failed

Before 1917, in a well situated working class family about half of the daily consumption consisted of grain. In the first place was rye. The use of wheat was growing, but it meant a kind of light luxury. Milk products, butter included, gave more than 1/4 of calories. Potatoes were important, too. Vegetables had hardly any role.² The upper classes consumed more meat, dairy products and vegetables, the really poor ate even more than a half of their consumption as rye and barley.

Since the famines of 1860’s of which Antti Häkkinen told here, the pursuit in Finnish agricultural politics was to improve dairy production and let bread grain be imported, mainly from Russia, later also from Germany. The reason for this

¹ Mäkinen - Sysiharju

² Vera Hjelt 1912, according to Rantatupa.

policy was simple: the climate here is not very favourable for grain whereas it is suitable for cattle feed. Butter was a good export product especially to England and gave exchange to be used in grain purchase. The policy worked out well until about the year 1916, when the World War really started to hamper the traffic, even between Russia and its autonomous grand Duchy Finland. The March revolution 1917 in Russia stopped nearly all grain import. In the eve of the war, in 1911 – 1913 the grain import was about 340 million kilos, whereas the total domestic harvest was double³ – but it included also cattle and horse feed (oat). The self-sufficiency in bread grain in the eve of the war was 35-40 %.⁴

Farmers – the largest folk group in Finland - used to cultivate grain, rye, barley and oat for their own use. In Northern Finland grain harvest was uncertain, there even the farmers often bought their bread grain, at least a part of it. The main part of the grain in sale was of Russian or German origin.

In summer 1917 it became clear that the country was threatened by a famine. The rye sprouts had during the winter suffered by the capricious weather and the summer 1917 was dry. Thus two reasons for a bad harvest. The third was political unrest, which in some areas led to strikes by farm workers. With the lack of import the shortage became imminent and all food prices raised. The fourth reason for shortage was speculating – farmers, who had extra grain, tended to take higher than regulated prices or in expectation of further higher income tried to hide their extra grain. Speculators did their deal. And the cattle production had also suffered from dryness.

Of course poor people suffered first, especially because of the raising unemployment. In summer 1917, before the new harvest, bread grain was finished in some areas. The famine, however still existed more in fears than in reality. But the distance between normal times and famine is wide. It was clear that spring and summer 1917 were not at all normal any more.

“Organising the hunger”, Public action for food rationing

When it became obvious that the need can not be satisfied with normal import the government introduced rationing, sugar as the first article in December 1916. Marginal prices were also set, with unstable success, as mentioned. Similar measures were taken in other European countries, among which Germany was a kind of model – as it had been in social politics. Other governments had been quicker in executing rationing and other measures to prevent hunger. Meanwhile

³ Suomen taloushistoria 3 – The Economic History of Finland – Historical statistics, table 2,9.

⁴ Rantatupa 2004: 205.

many Finnish municipalities, at least cities and towns had established boards for nourishment. They bought and stored grain, sometimes also other food stuff.

These municipal boards were forerunners for municipal democracy. Until now only propertied classes could take part in the municipal administration. In these boards also working class members and women were appointed.

In February 1917 representatives of those boards established a national board – the government, which consisted of Russian born senators, was still rather passive.

The situation changed radically after the March revolution 1917. A new Finnish coalition government was established. One of its main tasks was to improve the nourishment situation and it prepared quite soon a proposition, which touched the proprietary right in question with food supply. It was vehemently debated in the parliament. The principle of rationing was hardly questioned but the execution as well as the social injustices and conflicts of the time. In June 1917 the organisation of the Alimentation Department was fixed. Certain other departments and several committees in the state level were set for crisis matters. Municipal Alimentation boards became very important, too.

New kind of distribution of the shortage

The last crop failure year had been in 1902. There was an economic depression at the same time but the year was catastrophic only for the poor. Charity actions were taken by the better situated. Many socially active people like the Gebhard family tried rather to develop means for permanent rise of agriculture. They had already started a co-operative movement for the peasants, now it was time to start co-operative banks according to the Reiffeisen system.⁵ But the family itself was not affected by the crop failure in any way. They were members of the growing middle class who could buy what they needed.

Only a 15 years later the society had changed so much that sharing and rationing among all citizens was expected. Even the wealthy classes were affected by the shortage, if they were not landowners. This was something new in the Finnish history. It was not only the rationing that affected the food supply of the urban middle class. The amount of consumers who did not have any contact with farming, had grown, thus the dependence of food trade and because of the dairy cattle trend in agriculture, the dependence of import.

A nearly moving indication of the new situation among middle class is some pages in the weekly journal Suomen Kuvalehti (Finnish Illustrated Journal), mainly

⁵ See for ex. Hannes Gebhard's article in Kansanvalistusseuran kalenteri 1903 [The calendar by the Society for Popular enlightenment].

circulating for educated class. In summer 1917 it gave recipes consisting of leafs, spinach, onions and potatoes, completes with some eggs and a little bit of butter and milk. But all courses had a French name, which gave some upper class glitter to the simplicity!

Until now the cultivated classes did not bother too much of food. They could afford it without problems and servants took care of the kitchen. But now, from summer 1917 on, food concerns spread out to their letters. Many had some modest food sources in the countryside but the transfers had to be organised and since the telephones were scarce at the countryside they had to write. Reports on what kind of food had been gathered and at what price was another subject. In August 1917 the daughter-in-law of Gebhards' apologised in the end of her letter: "Now my letter is full of food matters, but when everybody is talking about hunger next winter, you can't help thinking of it." - The family Gebhard had celebrated the wedding of their son in July 1917 at their villa. They managed to find a fatted calf for dinner and enough cream for ice cream. But the invitation card included an extra request, please bring along your own bread and sugar. The request indicated that black market material were not in use.

The rations and prices were a subject of comparing and lamenting. After having told about the diminished milk supply in autumn 1917 baroness Elisabeth Järnefelt, widow to a general and senator and mother-in-law of the great composer Jean Sibelius complained: "Everything else is so expensive, that you don't know, with what money you can buy something"⁶. 20 marks for one kilo butter was a huge price even for her pension.

"Most regrettable is that food matters have taken my time so that I could not do any literary work", complained novelist and poet Joel Lehtonen in June 1918. He had managed to get barley and vegetable seeds for his land plot. After the summer with hard work he lucky to look confidentially towards the next winter.⁷

The best situated group was the farmers in south and west, although their traditional economic freedom was "organised" by marginal prices and since the new rationing law from June 1917 all farmers were obliged to announce the amount of their grain to the authorities and to deliver the surplus at a regulated price. The rations, which they could keep for their households were bigger than those for the consumers, since it was supposed that the system would not work otherwise. - Who would work hard for his crops if it would mostly be confiscated.

⁶ Elisabeth Järnefeltin kirjeitä.

⁷ Lehtonen, Putkinotkon herra. See also Mäkinen 2003, where more examples of letters and memories from 1917-1919.

Even now the system leaked, but how much, was bitterly debated. There were rumours about big stocks of food. It is also claimed that bitterness was purposefully fomented by the left in order to strengthen the revolutionary spirit. For good or exaggerated reasons, it is obvious that bitterness towards farmers remained for decades among the working class. The farmers again were bitter because of the strikes of agricultural labour in some areas. Especially insulting was that some were prevented from working themselves.

In August 1917 there occurred riots, called butter riots. There were some butter stocks, which the rioters wanted to open and let for sale for 5 marks per kilo. Urban workers, a growing class, did not resign to be hungry and hope for charity as did the poor inhabitants of the north. These riots, like strikes in farms are seen as one forerunner for the unsuccessful revolution of the reds in winter 1918.

In some northern areas, where near hunger was felt even in normal years, the situation was worst but the people were used to yield to its fate. Even in normal years bark bread, where a part of the flour was made of sieve tissue of pine, was used in many families. But the need of substituting or at least unusual foods was recognised also by other groups. Organising counselling in these matters was the task of the State committee of domestic economics.

Public action for counselling

The idea of famine relief by counselling the affected in using substituting foods was an old one. The Rumford soup is an example well known. To use lichen flour as a part of bread had for two centuries been propagated in Scandinavia⁸. It neither was a new idea to set up a state committee or a voluntary ladies' committee for hunger relief.⁹ What was quite new in the State committee of domestic economics, was its consistency, both bourgeois and socialists, the majority being women. The relief organisations for the crops failures in the beginning of 1890s' and 1902 had however been a kind of forerunners for the organisations of 1917 onwards.¹⁰

But where did now the idea come from? There is no clear answer. In April 1917 a parliament proposition on allowance for cooking and household counselling in the countryside was made. The proposition was not a direct reason for the committee but maybe an indication of the need felt and discussed.

There were also fresh models in other countries. At least in Sweden same kind of councils, one under the name "consumers' ", the other "womens' " had been set a

⁸ Nelson, see especially her note 32.

⁹ See Turpeinen 1991, esp. p. 172.

¹⁰ Op. cit.,

little earlier.¹¹ It is remarkable that in Finland the committee had a full official status (no “ladies’ committee”) and fairly good resources. The chair was a doctor of medicine, but since he very soon happened to become ill and die, the vice chair, Mrs. Hedvig Gebhard, became the leader of all activities.

Hedvig Gebhard (who was born in the great crops failure year 1867) was the first female chair in state committees in Finland. She was no household specialist, but a good organiser. As the “mother of Finnish co-operation” and former Member of Parliament she had a wide view and experience of organising nationwide campaigns.

Other members were three headmistresses of schools for domestic economics or gardening, an appreciated civil servant in the agricultural administration, the headmistress of cooperative folk restaurants in Helsinki, and two female social democrat MPs, one of them, Miina Sillanpää, a well known politician and the inspector of the mentioned folk restaurants. Later another doctor of medicine, with specialisation in nutritive physiology, was appointed. Gebhard and Sillanpää were the leading figures in the committee. In spite of their opposite parties they were already used to work together and they became to be a kind of working partners for a further couple of decades.

The first measure taken by the committee was to organise a big meeting. In spite of strikes in railways and in newspaper presses 340 specialists in nourishment and household matters or with the working class mothers’ point of view gathered in Helsinki in August 1917. There were nine lectures and lively discussion about the use of unusual food stuffs, traditional surrogates or new inventions, and other measures for relieving the hunger. Municipal kitchens preparing cheap meals for the poor was one of the most important suggestions, which also was going to be realised.

The meeting was again a modern feature in the famine relief or prevention – a national meeting with mainly female participants, demonstrating trust on the experience of “the field”, even on the “old folks”. The pursuit to find cheap food stuff or substitutes was, as already mentioned, not new. Even now especially the commons were obviously thought in first place, but the rhetoric was general. The dominant mode in use was “we”. “We must save food stuffs, we need so and so many calories, we can use more mushrooms etc.” - Also the parlance in all the material published later by the committee was general and neutral without any smell of patronizing. In fact the leaflets supposed the reader to have good reading abilities. For example the cooking book “Cheap food” by doctor Carl Tigerstedt first presented nutritive physiology in a rather theoretic manner. No emotional or

¹¹ Rantatupa p. 107, footnote 62 (Mannerfelt)

religious expressions were in use in the information printed. Rationality was characteristic for all printed information.

The problem, which in our days is called the acceptability of (aid or relief) food was recognised by the committee. One of the lectures dealt with taste habits and possibilities to enlarge them. The lecturer who had been widely travelling in Finland as an inspector of agricultural schools could tell about remarkable differences in the wideness of taste habits. In some areas for example nearly all vegetables were considered to be “cow feed”. Cooking lessons in schools and varying meals served in school kitchens were considered to be the surest ways to enlarge the habits permanently, but in this critical situation strong propaganda was needed, was the conclusion.

The main lines in the work of the committee became local counselling by temporary counsellors and information through leaflets and material sent to newspapers. A third line was experiments in war-time cooking and research about the nutritive, that is, mainly calory value of unusual foods. First leaflets were prepared soon and also the training courses for counsellors – most of them were young women with some suitable education – were quickly organised. Then they were employed by municipalities or voluntary organisations, which got money for the salaries by application from the committee. In autumn 1917 all activities were already in full swing.

The 25 leaflets of the year 1917 gave advice mainly in two lines; how to keep and store food in order to avoid waste as well as possible, and what unusual foods can be used and how. Some leaflets gave new recipes for well known but not very appreciated foods. Turnip, cabbage, Baltic herring and blood were cheap and widely known foods but the committee gave advice how to vary the dishes.

Unusual foods and surrogates recommended included lichen, rowanberries, juniper berries and beetroot tops. Mushrooms were quite unknown for people in western Finland, although in use in the east and propaganda was done for them. More substantial was horsemeat – traditionally there was a kind of tabu against eating it. Later the entrails like brains of slaughtered cattle was also a subject for an advice leaflet.

In autumn 1917 it was too late to give advice in the preparing and use of the traditional flour surrogate of pine bark, because it must be started in spring. Since the early spring 1918 even that information was spread. The committee first believed in less used lichen as a good surrogate for grain and organised its collecting, drying and storage. Since bread was the basic nourishment, many new recipes with other partial surrogates of flour were given, especially in 1918. Nettles were one of the favourites but more usual was oat flour that usually was given for horses and cattle. Even cellulose was used as an ingredient for bread.

Some loads of corn was imported from somewhere and the committee gave a leaflet how to use this nearly unknown grain. Thus this aid became beneficial – unlike during the great Irish famine when corn was imported but as completely strange could not be used¹².

About one fifth of the information leaflets were about storing food, obviously a very reasonable way to improve food situation. It must be remembered that no electric methods were in use. Successful storage not only helped to keep up the quantity of food but also maintained the quality so that it was not necessary to eat spoilt and unhealthy food.

A very important subject in the counselling since the spring 1918 was gardening. As mentioned, among less well off people vegetables were hardly known except in the most developed areas. Later, gradually, a vegetable garden round the house was seen as a sign of an enlightened family.

Who were the over 200 counsellors who got their salary through the committee? I have not found any statistics or summaries, but obviously they usually were young women who had gone through some schooling in household or gardening. The counsellors were usually employed only for the summer half of the year. The one I know was my grandmother, born in 1896, educated in the middle school, garden institute and as a teacher trainee in folk high school. She was employed by the organisation Martha in the district of Kuopio, eastern Finland, later by a local youth organisation and travelled by bike round her district. – The nationwide Martha organisation was established in 1899 for mobilising family mothers for improved household, in the spirit of national awakening.

The committee did not send any counsellors directly. Because there must be the municipality or an organisation applying money for the payment, some kind of local interest was secured. Of course such a new and temporary activity included many drawbacks, which were discussed in the committee and later even in the parliament when the allowances for the committee were in budget reading. On the other hand, ambulating counsellors was already an accepted phenomenon in the countryside. Most of them gave advice in agriculture or animal husbandry but household counsellors, especially those from the Martha-organisation were also known.

There is no method to measure the real success and effectiveness of the activities. Only participants of the meetings, practical demonstrations and courses could be counted. Already during a couple of autumn months 1917 170 000 participants were counted. Far more could read advice in leaflets and newspapers. Even the wide spread Calendar for the year 1918 of the Society for Popular Enlightenment ,

¹² Nelson, p. 15, referring to Woodham-Smith 1969.

which normally published enlightening articles about national and cultural matters used 24 pages for cheap recipes. Those recipes were not so different from those in Suomen Kuvalehti but certainly there were no French names for the dishes! – In the copy which I happen to have, about half of the recipes are marked, obviously used.

A third line in the work of the State committee was statements and recommendations on the request of the Alimentation Department. The committee was seen as the specialist organ in household and cooking and for example tested foods that might be imported. Vegetable oil from Shanghai was one of the most remote suggestions.

Back to the normal

In this paper I do not discuss the dramatic political development. From the nutritional point of view the times got better since the autumn 1918. The harvest was good but far from sufficient.

An interesting detail is one of the leaflets published by the State committee for domestic economics. In November 1918, when the war was ended, Doctor Carl Tigerstedt, who was the nutritional specialist in the committee, gave out results of calculations on the nutritive value of substituting bread ingredients. Until then he had propagated for them, but now his conclusion was: “Although many substituting food can be used, we must admit that it is impossible to build up the nourishment on them. Many of us only hope that we as soon as possible would get enough of stable food from other countries with better situation.” The most prominent Finnish politicians were travelling round persuading those countries for food aid or export. In this situation and when better times were to be seen it was no more wise to propagate for bark and lichen. The politicians were successful. A large storage of lichen stayed unused forever.

Aid was received especially through the *American Relief Administration* which was led by Herbert Hoover. These shipments were often called in the Finnish way “huuveri”. Even president Wilson got his name known. The welcomed pork fat was called “wilson’s skin”. The early year 1919 was still considered as emergency time, but rations were getting greater. The municipal soup kitchens added variation in their menu. After the harvest in 1919 rationing gradually finished. Sugar was the last rationed article and it became free in March 1921. At the same time all still remaining rationing organs were withdrawn.

The state committee for domestic economics obviously was the last crisis time organ. During the year 1920 it published 15 leaflets but none of them was any more about food surrogates. One leaflet was about childcare. The committee tried

to adapt its activities to be a permanent public organ for developing homes and household management. Hedvig Gebhard was a member of parliament since 1919, as was another influential member of the committee, the social democrat Miina Sillanpää. Together they managed for a couple of years to keep up some allowances from the state budget although the government was prepared to withdraw the committee. The end was however to come, in December 1923.

An astonishing curiosity from the beginning of the 1920s' is that Germany got voluntary food aid from Finland. For example student organisations called German students for summer vacation to enjoy strong meals. The Union of Civil servants sent butter to their German colleagues. Still in 1924 one of the prominent social democrats proposed in parliament that Finland should take into its state budget an allowance for aid to hungry people in Germany.

Consequences in micro and macro level

It is impossible to say how much the teachings of the State committee influenced in later years. Obviously only few of the unusual foods and recipes stayed in use. Even if some of them had been tasty they bore the burden of the poor and unhappy times. But if someone had learnt better methods for food storage she hardly abandoned them after the bad time. Cultivation and use of vegetables developed little by little thanks to the strong propaganda of several counselling organisations like 4H and Marthas.

For Hedvig Gebhard the committee time was a turning point. Until 1917 she had worked eagerly besides her husband Hannes Gebhard, who was the "father" in the co-operative movement in Finland. Some knew that Hedvig was "the mother" but for the great public she had been quite invisible, at least until her MP time 1907-1909. The new role as chair of a committee proved to be very suitable for her, too. At the same time Hannes Gebhard had a personal and professional crisis and he was obviously a bit jealous for the new position of her wife. Hannes travelled abroad to look after his health and stayed away a couple of years. In fact the couple was at the brink of divorce.

He returned to home but the old roles never returned. She was no more his assistant but an independent and prominent actor in the society. One of her main concerns was the raising of the level in the domestic economy, especially of the lower classes. This happened in spite of her earlier orientation, where the domestic matters were not in the first place. The main way to improve Finnish homes was schools and courses in domestic economy in all levels, including teacher education. She worked hard for their development.

The vital attention that systematic and scientific domestic economics got in the western world since the 20s' and which even can be called a home or household ideology, has in recent years got many theoretical interpretations.¹³ My suggestion for Finland is: For the first, shortage of food during and after the war raised the mental significance of it and its preparation. Another reason for the interest for domestic economics was the observation that on this sector women could proceed without to need to rival with the men. The third reason was the regress in women's position in the society. During the fight for autonomy and independence women were appreciated as co-combatants and they had received the full political rights. Since the national struggle was settled down they were pushed aside – as in many countries. Raising the status of women trough raising the status of the traditional feminine tasks can be interpreted as a strategy number two of active and practical women, like Hedvig Gebhard.

Public health, preventing the tubercle, developing the quality of life, developing the national economics through rational use of resources in private homes were also very good reasons for the attention to better home economics.

Another macro level consequence of the fear famine was the change in Finnish agricultural politics. Instead of concentrating in dairy production a new goal was fixed: self sufficiency. At the same time a great land reform was introduced and crofters got the ownership of their plots.

The famine was not the real reason for the land reform, which had been under discussion during many years, nor war the civil war – a draft for the law was already in the parliament, when the war broke out. But obviously both experiences influenced in the forming of post-war politics. The state supported small holding with money to farmers' organisations, education etc.

A new threat of near famine ocured during the second World War. All people who were adults in those years remember hungry moments but there was no real starvation. The country was better prepared, thanks to the agricultural policy of 1920s' and 1930's. Obviously the "organising of hunger" was developed and the national solidarity greater. However there was not enough grain. Germany sent grain to Finland, but the price was not only money but political concessions, too.

When Finland wants to keep up a full-scale food production in spite of the unfavourable climate it is not only a question of farmers' income but food security. Other European countries have similar experiences of failing food

¹³ Ehrenreich & English, *For Her Own Good. 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Worcester, Pluto Press 1979) started the critical theoretical discussion.

production and import. Food is different from any other merchandise. That is why it is so difficult to negotiate about it even in the WTO.

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