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"We had no food at home" :

Women's explanations for joining the Red Guard in 1918¹

Finnish women in the Civil War

Civil War broke out in Finland in January 1918, less than two months after the country gained its independence. Officially the bloody war between the Reds and the Whites² lasted for only three and a half months but approximately 35 500 Finns lay dead in its wake.³ Several women also took part in this war: about 2000, mostly young women acted in the Red Guard as soldiers.⁴ Their role models were the women of previous revolutions, especially Russian women who had actually fought with rifles in their hands. A majority of the women in the Red Guard, however, worked as nurses, cooks and cleaners. Their contribution to the Revolution⁵ was significant.

After the unsuccessful uprising, both armed and unarmed Red women were taken to court. I have studied the court cases of the unarmed women (N= 267) from the region of Pori⁶ who were prosecuted after the war in courts dealing with crimes against the state. In this article, I will discuss how these women explained why they enlisted in the Red Guard in court, and how they tried to justify their actions. I shall also briefly discuss the significance of these statements for the sentences given.

For decades after the Civil War, Finns who fought for the Red side were ashamed. In other words, those who had lost the war kept silent about their experiences. Within the family, tales were told, but in public the losers were silenced by shame. Not until in the late 1960s, when the political atmosphere changed, were the Reds finally entitled and ready to express their feelings and proffer their version of what had happened during the war. During the 40 years' interim, many had already died and many remained silent. Most of those who were interviewed and whose narratives have been archived were armed women. Those

women who worked in the service troops did not attract as much public interest. Most of this latter group did not think their role was sufficiently significant to be worth sharing with others or writing down. For this reason, first-hand information about the real reasons why women joined the Red Guard is very difficult to obtain. Fortunately, the official records of the pre-trial investigations and the trials are available. These records contain, among other things, the answers the women gave when asked why they had joined the Red Guard.⁷ In the following section, I will outline the main categories of response in order to suggest their relative order of importance.

The reasons given

Several reasons for joining the Guard were given. Discrepancies between the reasons stated and the actual truth are likely and should be taken into consideration. Discrepancies are most likely to have occurred when the plaintiff's commitment to the cause was a central component in the sentencing process. The truth is less likely to be uttered in cases where a lie might save the person's life or reduce her sentence. On a subject like this, determining when a woman was lying was impossible and so stretching the truth was quite safe.⁸ Finding out how these women tried to get out from an unpropitious situation is interesting. Table 1 shows how many of the examinees were willing to explain why they had joined the Guard.

Table 1. Number of women giving reasons for joining the Guard.⁹

	N	%
Revealed the reason	174	65.2
Did not belong to the Guard	76	28.5
Did not reveal the reason	17	6.4
Total	267	100.1

In the hearings, 93 (34.9 %) of the total 267 women did not give a reason for joining the Guard. This high figure is not surprising: 76 of these who did not answer had not actually

been a member of the Guard at all, but were being suspected of crimes against the state for other reasons (for instance for possessing stolen goods). Those who had left their homes as refugees were also included in this group; thousands of civilians had, in fact, fled to the East before the approaching White troops, who had been said to be revengeful and violent. These refugees travelled together and were arrested with the Red army. They were taken to the same prison camps to wait for the investigations.¹⁰

Only 17 (6.4 %) women who had worked in the Red Guard did not want to reveal the reasons for their actions. They considered it safer to remain silent. The rest of the women, 174 individuals (65.2 %), explained why they joined the Guard (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reasons given for joining the Guard.

	N	%
Economical reasons	124	71.3
Ideological reasons/Voluntarily	29	16.7
Social pressure	18	10.3
Other reasons	3	1.7
Total	174	100

The given reasons can be roughly divided into four categories: economical, ideological, social and other reasons. In the following, we will have a closer look at these specified reasons.

Economical reasons

The most frequent reasons given for joining the guard were economical. There were 124 women (71.3 %) who justified their actions on economical grounds. Most of these women (75 %) cited unemployment as the more specific reason for their actions. According to an enquiry by the National Board of Social Welfare, 14 industrial premises were completely shut down and eight functioned only partly in the hometown of these women.¹¹ Thus

unemployment was, indeed, very common in the city of Pori prior to and during the Civil War.

The better wages offered by the Guard had tempted 24 women. At the beginning of the war, the Guard promised notably higher salaries than most workers received at that time. For example, Rauha Lampi who had previously worked at an office more than doubled her salary when she started to work in the administration of the Red Guard.¹² The Red Guard could not maintain its promises about good wages for long, however. Already in February after the first month of the war, it was clear that their resources were insufficient, and in March the troops were informed that from then on they would receive only 11 % of their wages in cash and the rest in cheques, which would be honoured later. This change in the payment of the wages also applied to craftsmen, including many of the women focused on in this study.¹³

Seven women claimed that hunger had made them join the Guard. Hunger was, of course, related to unemployment. The shortage of food was severe and inflation was strong throughout the country due to the war. The Red authorities tried to improve the situation by strictly rationing food, but the results were unsatisfactory because the rules were not obeyed and food was often illegally confiscated.¹⁴

Some of the defendants had specified their economical situation and included details about their family lives in their pleas. The court records include comments such as:

"There was no work, her husband was lazy and they lived separately."¹⁵

"Her husband was sick and she had to get a job somewhere."¹⁶

There were also some explanations, which suggested the women were unselfish and/or disinterested: "They had no food at home and she wanted to take care of the wounded."¹⁷

"After staying unemployed at her parents flat for four weeks, she felt obliged to make her own living."¹⁸

Some nurses were stunned to discover that they were being suspected for crimes against the state. This was a really unpleasant surprise for many of these women: they thought that

they had joined the Red Cross, not the Red Guard! They considered their work to be humanitarian aid and not revolutionary activity.¹⁹ One nurse had stated for the court records:

"When the defendant joined the Red Cross she was led to believe that it was an independent institution. She would not have joined it if it had been a partial institution. The Whites were treated as well as the Red patients. "²⁰

These explanations did not help. Nursing was considered to be the second most seditious job in the Guard (after military service). In my research material, as many as 92.5 % of nurses were convicted and only three were exonerated.²¹ It is interesting to note that professional and unprofessional nurses were not treated equally in court. Those who had not been trained for nursing tasks until the war broke out were generally convicted, whereas those who were professional nurses were not treated as criminals, even though they had worked on the Red side.²²

Ideological reasons/Voluntarily

Only one woman openly declared ideological grounds for joining the Guard. Emilia Kantola was a 30-year old cotton factory worker from the city of Pori. She was married but did not have children. Her activity in the craft union had started in 1913. According to the White authorities, she was one of the movers and shakers in her union. Emilia admitted joining the Guard on the first day of the Revolution with enthusiasm. Her husband Kaarle was in a noteworthy position in the Guard, he worked as the prosecutor of the revolutionary court of Pori. Her own role in the Red Guard was much more minor: she worked in the kitchen making tea and coffee for the guardsmen. When the defeat became clear, Emilia and Kaarle joined the withdrawing Red troops and started their journey to the East hoping to escape to Russia. Their flight was abruptly stopped in Hollola by the Whites. Emilia was not arrested and she returned to Pori. Her husband, however, was sentenced to death at a court-martial held shortly afterwards. Emilia continued her life quietly, but in the autumn she was denounced. She was taken to court and was finally given a three years' suspended sentence.²³

In reality, she was unlikely to have been the only one who tried to change society and the social conditions by participating in the revolution.²⁴ 16 % of the examinees stated that they had joined the Guard voluntarily. They did not reveal their actual reasons, but voluntariness indicates that they were ideologically committed, even though they did not directly state this. A closer examination shows that all the women who joined voluntarily were politically active: they were members of the labour party or a craft union. This supports the view that these women were politically committed to the revolution.

The labour movement had distributed propaganda earlier in order to incite the workers to action. The First World War and the Russian revolution had caused a shortage of food and increased unemployment, which made the time very convenient for the enlightenment of the labour movement. Political awareness caused a rush to join trade unions and the labour party in 1917.²⁵ This change could also be seen in Pori.²⁶ 57 % of the women studied declared themselves to being a member of either the labour party or labour unions or both. In addition, the local White authorities recognised several other women who were also known to be politically active, although they did not admit this in court. Altogether, 69% of these women were also at least on some level politically active. Therefore, it is very plausible that there were more women who were ideologically motivated to join the Red Guard than those who were willing to admit it.

Social pressure and other reasons

Approximately every tenth woman claimed that she had joined the Guard under some sort of social pressure. According to their statements, half of them had practically been forced to become a member of the Guard and the other half said that they had been lured and urged to follow their friends' example. There were statements like: "I went to help in the kitchens, because I was told to."²⁷ "I was asked to follow the soldiers to the front, because there were not enough nurses."²⁸

Those women who worked in places that had been taken over by the Red Guard felt that they had been forced to join the Guard. These women stressed that they had no other choice, when all the tools were confiscated and staff was mobilized.²⁹ Presumably they were not kept in their jobs by force, but the labour market of the time was so poor that there were no other jobs available. Thus, in practice, they had no alternative but to work for the new master. Therefore, these women had also actually joined the Guard under economical pressure, although this was not the reason they stated. One could argue that they had joined the Guard automatically and unintentionally. In his dissertation Klemettilä has claimed that the working community often played an important role when men joined the Guard.³⁰ The women's explanations do not imply that they were pressured to join by fellow workers or that the joining took place as some sort of group movement.

The other reasons proffered the harshness of the former job or medical reasons. For example, one of the defendants had worked in a lumber mill. Some also had doctor's orders to ease their work.³¹ This was a factor that these women emphasized in court. They thought that this doctor's order would make their actions more acceptable. This factor, however, had no effect on the sentence.

The women's reasons for joining the Guard were not always straightforward. Some of the women pointed out that, in addition to financial matters, social pressure also played a part in their participation. This was especially true for young girls. For example, a 17-year old girl said she joined because she was unemployed and needed some money, but admitted that an additional motivational factor was that "her brother and others encouraged her to join the Guard". The investigators suspected that her parents may also have affected her decision, because they both were in the Red Guard.³² In many cases, the influence of a man could be seen behind a woman's decision. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Finnish society was very patriarchal and women were supposed to follow men's lead. That significant man could be, for example, a father, a brother, a husband or a fiancé. Furthermore, if the whole family took a positive attitude towards the revolution, it was natural that women also joined the Guard.³³

In conclusion, we can propose that the *given* main reason for joining the guard was unemployment. Some said that they had been tempted by the better wages the Guard could offer in the beginning of the war. The Guard could not afford to pay the promised high salaries, and those who joined the Red Guard towards the end of the war had to settle for board. That means they received only food as a reward for their military services. This indicates clearly that money was not the primary motivation for joining the Guard.³⁴ In addition, the political activities of the defendants show that there must have been an ideological interest below the surface, although revealing this in court would have further endangered them. Most women tried to present an explanation, which they thought would sound more acceptable and less dangerous for themselves.³⁵

The significance of the reasons

Finally, I will briefly discuss the significance of the given reasons for the sentences given. No correlation or other statistical significance between them could be found. As far as the sentences are concerned, the women's statements were not as decisive as other matters. For example, the women's actions during the war were naturally matters of crucial importance, but their behaviour prior to the war was also investigated closely. For instance, membership in the labour party and the craft unions proved to be statistically significant when tested against the sentences issued.

Although there is no direct correlation between these given reasons and sentences, I believe the way these statements were given did affect the attitudes of the judges and investigators. There are several notes in the official records that some examinees had been acting either arrogantly or regretfully during the examination.³⁶ Defendants' behaviour during the hearings was very important, because after these pre-trial hearings, the White authorities decided who were less dangerous and could be sent home pending the trials and who should remain in custody until their trials. Naturally the actual deeds committed during the war were the most decisive factors in determining the punishments, but attitudes were also evaluated. Here are examples of both cases:

"During the hearings the defendant was arrogant denying everything and even threatening by saying: "There will come another time."³⁷ "She looks like an honest and decent girl."³⁸

Showing regret and being humble was vital, because the winners disliked the Red women. They disliked all Red people and women did not get away easily. Only a minority of the women had fought as soldiers, but they stigmatised all Red women. Finnish society, which was run by the Whites, was shocked that women had taken part in the war. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was thought that a woman's duty was to maintain life, not to destroy it.³⁹ Some White women had also shown interest in fighting at the front, but these intentions were abandoned very quickly by the administration of White troops.⁴⁰ The army had always been a patriarchal institution, and women soldiers were regarded as 'unnatural' creatures. The wild reputation of women soldiers harmed all Red women.

The Whites considered that, by undertaking the Revolution, the Reds had jeopardized the independence of Finland and acted against the legitimate government. Everyone who joined the Revolution had been disloyal to the new nation and should be punished, regardless of their role in the Red Guard. In White eyes, cleaners, nurses and cooks had supported the Red Guard, and were therefore guilty of assisting high treason. The court did not seem to believe or give credit to the non-political motives the women gave for joining the Guard. As far as the Whites were concerned, these women's work had helped the Red Guard in its illegal enterprise.

The author is a Licentiate of Social Sciences, who is writing her doctoral thesis for the Department of Contemporary History at the University of Turku.

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Notes

¹ This paper develops part of my unpublished licentiate thesis (Lintunen 2006).

² The Reds were mainly people from the working class and the Whites mostly bourgeois people.

³ Of the total number of 35 500, ca. 1/7 were Whites, 6/7 Reds. Approximately 10 000 Reds were shot after the battles and ca. 13 200 Reds died in concentration camps after the war, mostly due to hunger and diseases (Westerlund 2004, p. 15; Mäkelä & al. 2004, p. 123).

⁴ Piironen-Honkanen 1995, pp. 36f.

⁵ The Reds referred to the war as a 'revolution', whereas the Whites used the term 'liberation'. Since then, the war has also been called: the War of Classes, the War of Citizens, the Rebellion, The Civil War. Historians have been arguing about the name of the event for a long time, but the right term depends on one's perspective. For more about the names of the war, see *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* 2/1993, pp. 98-120.

⁶ Pori is a small city, located on the western coast of Finland. The number of inhabitants was ca. 17 600 in 1918. In addition to the city of Pori my study also includes the rural commune of Pori (ca. 7700 inhabitants) and the borough of Ulvila (ca. 8300 inhabitants).

⁷ Lintunen 2006, p. 69.

⁸ Lintunen 2006, p. 70.

⁹ Due to decimal rounding, the sum of the percentages is 100.1%.

¹⁰ Lintunen 2006, p. 71.

¹¹ SVT XXXII sosialisia erikoistutkimuksia 1, pp. 172f.

¹² Vryo 19658, KA.

¹³ Lappalainen 1981, pp. 187f; Piilonen 1993, p. 570.

¹⁴ Lintunen 2006, 67f; Rinta-Tassi 1986, 379, 388, 392f.

¹⁵ Vryo 3255, KA.

¹⁶ Vro 141/384, KA.

¹⁷ Vro 41/117, KA.

¹⁸ Vro 45/79, KA.

¹⁹ Vro 142/704, vro 143/276, vro 7/495, vro 9/210, vryo 24380, KA.

²⁰ Vro 6/201, KA.

²¹ Lintunen 2006, p. 119.

²² Lintunen 2006, p. 122; See also Tikka 2004, p. 343.

²³ Vro 142/878, KA.

²⁴ Compare these answers with the answers of female warriors: Piironen-Honkanen 1995, pp. 26f and Hakala 2004, pp. 88-90. See also Alenius 1997, pp. 68-70 and Lähtenmäki 2000, p. 82.

²⁵ Alapuro 1988, p. 154.

²⁶ Saarinen 1972, pp. 544f.

²⁷ Vro 56/255, KA.

²⁸ Vro 41/22, KA.

²⁹ Vro 141/177, vro 39/245, vro 143/8061, KA.

³⁰ Klemettilä 1976, p. 241.

³¹ Vro 141/139, KA.

³² Vro 141/73, KA.

³³ Lintunen 2006, p. 78.

³⁴ Lappalainen 1981, p. 188. On the other hand, one should bear in mind that, in the spring of 1918, the shortage of food was so severe that proper meals were a great temptation to the hungry, unemployed workers.

³⁵ All women, but especially young women, did not realise the severity of the situation before they were taken to court and the sentence was given.

³⁶ Vro 141/62, vro 141/7, vro 143/320, vro 29/253, KA. See also Siltala 1996, p. 16.

³⁷ Vro 143/320, KA.

³⁸ Vro 141/62, KA.

³⁹ Latva-Äijö 2004, pp. 56f; Olsson 2005, p. 58; Enloe 1986, p. 22. See also Johnson 2000, pp. 543f.

⁴⁰ Lintunen 2006, pp. 21-23; Latva-Äijö 2004, pp. 54-57; Ilvonen 2002, pp. 49f, 106-108.