

The Flags of the Finnish Civil War 1918: A vexillological survey

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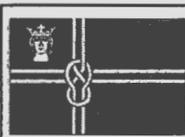
Abstract

Finland won its independence in a short war in 1918. The war was along color lines between the "Reds" and the "Whites" Flags and other symbols were important in distinguishing the sides. Both sides received foreign help. Images of the wide variety of flags used were captured by photographers and many still exist. In this paper we will survey the field.

The country of Finland sits near the top of the world between the Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway, and the mighty Empire of Russia. It is not truly a part of any of them, though it leans more to Scandinavia. The Finnish language is unique and the ethnic traits and ties are very different. For many years Finland was ruled by Sweden and the small minor nobility were Swedish and adopted Swedish customs and culture. About ten percent of the population is still Swedish speaking. As part of the Napoleonic war reparations Sweden gave up Finland to the Russian Tsar in return for the Norwegian holdings of Denmark in 1809. The territory became a Grand Duchy under the Tsar Alexander I and his successors and held a considerable degree of autonomy. It even had its own legislature or Diet. The Russian path to the sea, which was Peter the Great overwhelming ambition, was now larger and better protected and the Tsars could be generous.

The Russian language was needed for many transactions, but Finnish and Swedish were taught in the schools. Finland even had its own army, at least in name, though it was strictly in the Russian empire mode. It was a polyglot army with orders in Russian, the enlisted men speaking Finnish and many of the officers from the Swedish speaking aristocracy. The army had a flag of Russian style but with some Finnish elements in blue and yellow.¹

In the nineteenth century all of Europe was convulsed by a search for ethnic identity. Finland was no different but its status as a Grand Duchy made the demonstrations for autonomy less strident. All this changed when Nicholas II decided to "Russify" his empire. The man he sent to Finland, Bobrikov, attacked the Finnish culture at its core. The army was done away with in 1901. Hundreds were sent to prison or exile. He became hated and was eventually assassinated. Nationalistic sentiment grew even stronger. At this time symbols and flags representing Finland became popu-



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*Figure 1 Some red flags with lion of Finland
(authors photograph from Caius Kajani: Siniristolippumme, 1997).*

lar. This is a discussion in itself and is covered in a number of places (see references 9, 10, 11 and 12 and others). Suffice it to say that the most popular emblem was the old heraldic device of the crowned gold lion with sword in paw trampling another sword on a field of red with silver roses (Fig. 1). Talvio (reference 12) discusses the growth of this symbol. Running second was a white flag with blue Scandinavian cross, popular amongst shipping and naval boating circles because it was in the colors of the Russian naval flag.

The First World War had little effect in Finland. The Finns supplied Russia with military goods but few soldiers except for those career officers serving in the Russian army. When the revolutions started to wrack Russia the Finnish Diet began to discuss separation. With the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution in late 1917 a proposal was made for nationhood. The Bolshevik leadership had declared that they supported ethnic states and the time was ripe. On December 6 the new state was declared. Debate broke out among the deputies over whether they were a state that must be approved by the new Soviet government or by virtue of there being no longer a Grand Duke/Tsar.



Figure 2 A photograph of a white S flag of the White Brigades from Sumoen Itsenaistymisen Kronika, Helsinki, 1992.

The division between the parties of the left, the communists and social democrats, and those of the right, the bourgeois and the farmers, grew wider. Armed conflict seemed unavoidable.

The Left had its color: the red of revolution and this led the opposite side to be called the Whites. Militias of both colors had been forming even before statehood. The White groups were called by many names: Civil Guards or Defense Corps or Protective Corps or Skyddskår or Suojetus. They rapidly adopted a white arm band in contrast to the red of the leftist. On the arm band was a letter S often on a shield of the colors of the province. This stood for Suojetus or for Suomi, the Finnish word for Finland. A wide variety of arm bands were used (reference 16). Officers tended to wear arm bands with the provincial arms on the left arm. These symbols were soon incorporated into simple white flags often with the provincial arms (Fig. 2).

Photography was well developed at the time so that we have a graphic record of the people, the battles and the flags of this conflict. This war was one of the first to be covered by photographs and the many victory parades led to the collection of a wealth



*Figure 3 A red banner with inscriptions.
Aauthor's photograph from the Military Museum in Helsinki.*

of visual information which I have utilized.

The leftist brigades were mainly in the cities and consisted of unemployed workers, union men and Russian sailors who had little else to do. The Russian fleet lay with nothing to do in Helsinki harbor as most officers had been killed or had fled. The Reds had their flags of classic Bolshevik pattern of large red banners with lots of words in both Russian and Finnish (Fig. 3).

As was to be expected a war broke out in January 1918. It is called a variety of names: The War of Liberation, the Finnish Revolution and the Finnish Civil War. All are appropriate depending on one's point of view and the time.

The man who was chosen to lead the White Brigades was a fifty year old former Russian cavalry general: Baron Carl Gustav Mannerheim (1867-1951). He had spent almost his whole life, thirty years, in the Russian army and had been part of Tsar Nicholas' army staff. He had been an explorer of Central Asia and a dynamic leader of troops. He left the Russian army or rather the army left him, during the Bolshevik revolution and had just arrived in Helsinki in late December 1917. On January 27 he



Figure 4 The Prussian/Finnish Jaeger flag. Author's photograph from the Military Museum in Helsinki (probably a reproduction).

was appointed by part of the Senate as commander in chief of the Civil Defense force which had been declared the army of Finland. Shortly thereafter the Reds staged a coup d'état and took over the major cities. Mannerheim had gone to the north to Vasa to organize the brigades into an army.

Young Finns had been going to Germany for training since 1915 and had formed the Royal Prussian 27th Jaeger (light infantry) Battalion of the German Imperial army in May 1916. This unit was 1261 men strong and had seen action on the Baltic front. Germany agreed to let them return to Finland. Their flag or colour was given to them on the 13th of February in Libau as they boarded ships to Finland. The flag was of classic Prussian pattern with cross of blue and corners of white. The Prussian eagles flew in the corners but the emblem in the center was the lion of Finland (Fig. 4). It was designed by Professor A. F. Wetterhof and sewn by Hedwig Hahl, both Finns living in Berlin. The jaegers began arriving in February and acted as an officer cadre for the enthusiastic but untrained farmers and yeomen of the who formed the early White units.

In addition a number of Swedish volunteers arrived. They were experienced offi-



*Figure 5 The white Swedish Brigade flag.
Author's photograph from a book frontispiece in the Swedish Army Museum.*

cers in the Swedish army and still wearing their Swedish uniforms. Sweden as a country had tried to stay out of the wars of the nineteenth century with success. Feeling ran high on for both sides during the First World War. Members of the Swedish army had volunteered in a number of conflicts (reference 1). The Swedish government though officially neutral with respect to Finland, made it very easy for their officers to cross the narrow sea to Vasa. By war's end about 1200 Swedes with a few Norwegians and Danes served in the White Army. The Swedish Brigade wore white arm bands with the Swedish shield on it. They carried two flags in the May victory parades in Helsinki and in Stockholm. The first was a white flag with diagonal blue and yellow stripe with the red shield of Finland in the center (Fig. 5). The stripe is unusual in that it does not run from corner to corner nor does it start at the staff. This is clearly shown by drawings and photographs but is drawn incorrectly but logically on the certificate given to members after the war. The other was a plain blue flag² with four hands clenching wrists in yellow and the words LAGEN ÄR FRIHETENS FORM ('Law is Liberty's Mould') and SVENSKA BRIGADEN (Fig. 6).³

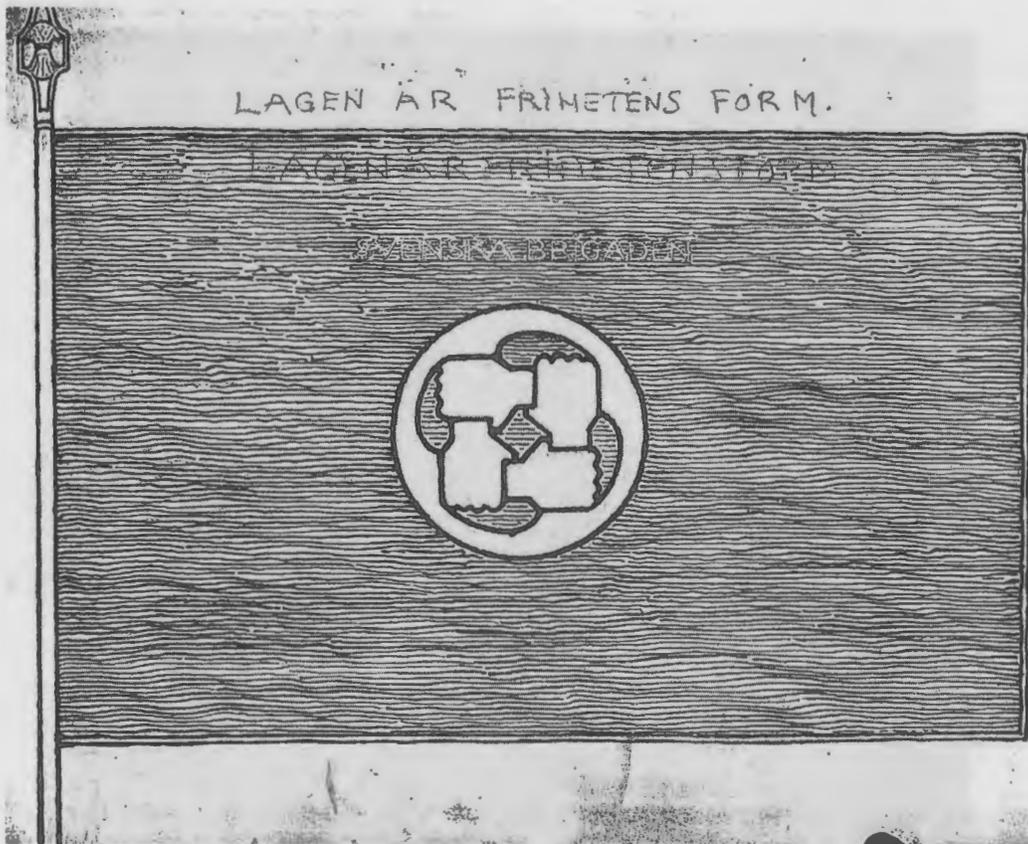
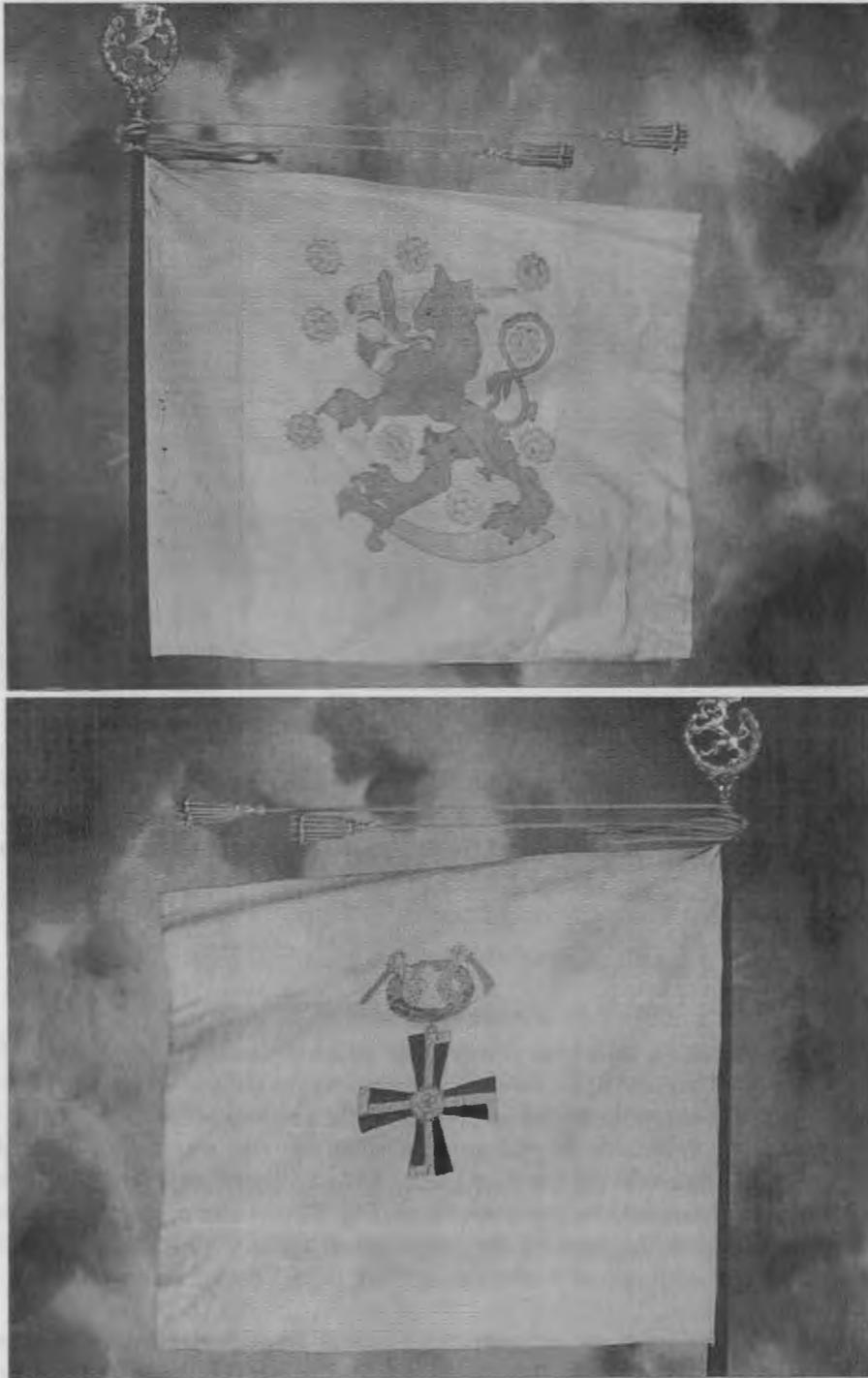


Figure 6 Blue Swedish Brigade flag – from a copy taken by the author of an item in the War Archives Stockholm.

On Mannerheim's staff was the famous painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931). He designed several flags, insignia and decorations for the White army. The red flag and lion was just too much red so various white versions were tried. For an army flag a white flag with the lion in gold was used (Fig. 7). This was designed by Ellinor Ivalo. On the back side was the Cross of Freedom based on the swastika rune designed by Gallen-Kallela. Mannerheim's personal flag (Fig. 8) was also white with his monogram on one side with the arms of the provinces of Finland surrounding and on the other the red shield with lion of Finland on a white field. The White army rapidly grew to a force of 60,000.

Another contribution of a Swedish volunteer was the distinctive symbol of Finland. Count Eric von Rosen flew his personal plane to Finland from Sweden on March 6 to donate it to the White army. On the plane was a blue symbol that we now call a swastika. It was a twisted cross but straight not tilted as it was when it became a Nazi symbol. It was von Rosen's personal badge. Mannerheim and his army adopted the symbol as their own and it soon started to appear on vehicles. Gallen Kallela incor-



*Figure 7 The White Army's flag.
Photographs courtesy of the Mannerheim Museum.*



*Figure 8 Mannerheim's personal flag.
Photographs courtesy of the Mannerheim Museum.*



*Figure 9 Flag used by the German Baltic Division in Finland.
Photographed from Suomen Itsenäistymisen Kronika, Helsinki, 1992.*

porated it into the Medal of Freedom he designed for Mannerheim to give to his troops. Sharp eyed experts have noted that the plane with this symbol also bore an insignia of a flag with a Scandinavian cross.

Against Mannerheim's objections the Senate called for troops from Germany. Mannerheim had fought the Germans for years and in addition thought that it would be better for the Finns to win their freedom unaided. The Germans were therefore put under his command. The German Baltic (Ostsee) Division under General Rüdiger von der Goltz had been wandering around the Baltic provinces of Russia making a nuisance since the treaty of Brest Litovsk which ended the Russian-German conflict. They therefore sailed over to Finland in April and attacked Helsinki while Mannerheim and his troops conquered the cities of the north, east and west. The German troops carried the German war flag of white with a black fimbriated cross with a white shield with the black Prussian eagle on a roundel and with a red white and black striped canton with the Prussian cross. In figure 9 we see a post card showing German and Finnish soldiers with this flag and the new blue cross Finnish flag and the crown over the

shield.

At the major battle of Tampere, Mannerheim sent out an order that the White troops were to wear a fir twig in their caps as a distinguishing sign. This became a popular symbol and was incorporated into many insignia in later years. It was worn by many troops in the great victory parade. Mannerheim's favorite head gear was a white fur cap and this also became a popular insignia and became part of the officers' uniform after the war along with the white arm band.

The war ended with an overwhelming victory for the Whites. This is not the place for a detailed discussion or the unfortunate repercussions that occurred after the war when so many Red prisoners died of neglect.

In each city that fell Mannerheim held a victory parade and the grandest was that held on 16 May, 1918 in Helsinki which has been photographically recorded for posterity. All the troops in their various uniforms marched with Mannerheim and then past Mannerheim through the Senate square and down the tree lined Esplanade. The streets were lined with blue and white and red and yellow bunting. For years afterwards 16 May was celebrated as Finland's Flag Day.

The Senate had already begun negotiations for a German prince, Frederick Karl of Hesse, a brother-in-law of the Kaiser to become king of the new country. The recently approved Finland state flag sprouted a royal or grand ducal crown on 29 May, 1918. At that time many believed that you could not enter the world stage except as a monarchy of some kind. Mannerheim was given a German army liaison to help him. He submitted his resignation in disgust on May 30 and went to Sweden. When the German Empire collapsed in November 1918, Mannerheim who had many friends among the allies was called back to Finland and made the head of state of a free, democratic and independent Finland.⁴

The crown disappeared on February 12 1920 and the flag became close to what it is today. In 1978 the shield was removed leaving the blue cross on a white field. A design attributed to designer O. W. Ehlström. In 1940 the Army Flag Day was moved to 4 June Marshal Mannerheim's birthday.

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Historical Novel

Give Me the Daggers, Catherine Gavin, William Morrow 1972 – this book introduced me to Finland and Mannerheim thirty years ago and I reread it for this article.

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Notes

¹ In 1958 when a design for the flag of Guards Battalion of the Finnish army was chosen they went for a design very similar to the former Russian Finnish Army design in blue and yellow (reference 8).

² Several years ago I found in the Swedish War Archives two sketches of the blue flag. One in black and white looked like an artist's design and was dated 18/4/18. The horizontal hatching is of course the heraldic artist's code for blue. It is shown in figure 6. The second colored in blue and yellow showed the same design. No text accompanied these sketches. Both flags are shown in later photographs but early photos only shown a white flag. The white flag of the Swedish Brigade is from the frontispiece of a book on the Swedish Brigade by H. Hjalmarson "Mina krigsminnern från Finland 1919" which I found in the library of the Swedish Army Museum.

³ Again in the Winter War of 1939 and the Continuation War, Swedish volunteers fought alongside their Finnish cousins. They again carried a distinctive flag designed by E. J. Kedja a Swedish heraldic artist in 1941. The flag was quarterly red and blue with a white center cross. It has a vaguely French design. In the first and third quadrants were the lion and roses of Finland on the red field. The other quadrant was blue with the three gold crowns of Sweden above crossed fir branches recalling the battle of Tampere in 1918 (reference 13). There is a photo of Marshal Mannerheim expecting these troops and their flag.

⁴ Some Finns when their war with the Bolsheviks was over joined with some Swedes and others to form the Pohjanpojat, Sons of the North, a unit of about one thousand men who fought in Estonia. Their flag was also white with a center cross that appears to have tapered at the ends. In the center was the units symbol a polar bear's face in white on blue and black, the colors of Estonia. It is presumed the cross was blue (reference 3).

About the author



Arthur Etchells III, PhD, is a retired chemical engineer who worked for the DuPont Company in the United States for thirty nine years. He has a doctorate in chemical engineering and has written and taught extensively in that field. He has had a life long interest in military history particularly of Europe, and in particular of the color and symbolism such as heraldry, uniforms and of course flags. In retirement he hopes to devote more time to collecting and organizing his knowledge on many topics as publications. He has visited Finland four times to learn more about their military history. He has lived in Philadelphia, the birth place of the United States flag, for all this life. This paper was prepared for the XX International Congress of Vexillology in Stockholm July 2003. A Power Point presentation with many more illustrations was developed for that presentation. Those wishing to see this presentation should contact to the author.

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