

Finland during the Cold War – Diplomatic balancing act or anxious subordination?

Why would a German student group researching the Cold War visit Finland? As Finland played a unique role in the delicate bipolar constellation of the era in question, it certainly represents an interesting aspect in this matter. Based on our seminar readings as well as on the exchange with our fellow Finnish students and our own experience in Helsinki, we will furthermore try to give a short insight into the ongoing debate over Finland's distinct role and motivations during the Cold War.

Finland's special relationship with the Soviet Union is partly due to the immediate legacy of the Second World War, but also goes further back, when the predecessor of the Soviet Union used to be Finland's ruler. The fruits of this close historic relation were to be seen very early in the Cold War. Already in 1952, at the culminant point of the Korean War, Finland hosted the Olympic Games which both 'Germanies' as well as the Soviet Union attended. In accordance to the theories of the Cold War Research Group from the Aleksanteri Institute, we can see that sports, thanks to its actual apolitical character, always seem to have been important and influential on a communicational level.

Additionally, as the Soviet Union won the Second World War, the Paris Peace Treaty from 1947 as well as the Friendship Cooperation for Mutual Assistance between Finland and the Soviet Union dating back to 1948, both turned out in favor of the Soviet Union. In both treaties, the special, friendly and trustful relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union (SU) was underlined once again. In the FCMA for instance, Finland promised not to join any organization directed against the Soviet Union, and in the Paris Peace Treaty, the Soviet Union was designated Finland's 'most favored nation'. Both treaties set up the institutional frame in which the Soviet-Finnish relationship was going to develop. The prominent role the Soviet Union played in Finland in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War can also be determined by the Soviet (nowadays only Russian) Embassy in Helsinki – a manifestation of its power and influence.



But after all, this relation was not as one-sided as it may seem on the first sight: For Finland's own security and good traditions, it was very important to maintain good relations with the Soviet Union as well. This double-sided game which was Finland's foreign policy was probably best summarized by our guide at the *Urho Kekkonen Museum*, who described it as 'the art of bowing to the West without showing your naked butt to the East'¹. And of

¹ See more: http://www.nba.fi/en/museums/ukk_museum

course, according to the museum, no one else than Kekkonen himself, the man who molded Finland during most of the post-war period, brought this technique to perfection. The museum, placed in Kekkonen's private 'White House' that was offered to the public after his death, certainly gave an extensive and impressively intimate insight into his lifetime, but was unfortunately lacking a certain critical distance. It was a very interesting, but less challenging tour that we were well able to follow.

Finland under Urho Kekkonen – Problematic inner affairs

However, Urho Kekkonen is not evaluated this positively by everyone. Having governed for 25 years as the president of Finland, he almost became a synonym for Finland abroad. But back then as well as today, he is a very controversial figure in Finland, still provoking passionate discussions. Interestingly enough, his politics enjoyed more acceptance within Finland during the 1970s than nowadays, as they are strongly criticized and examined for their motivation.

Being a public figure for over four decades, he always had to stand against an unstable political landscape and intriguing political parties that never got tired of criticizing him. For the right wing representatives, Kekkonen's cooperation with the Soviet Union went too far, for the left wing representatives, his integration into the Western economic sphere was a betrayal. In order to fight the "labile state of Finnish party politics"² and to establish inner political peace, Kekkonen seemed to follow a strategy of bringing the opposition into the government, so that they would get to know the meaning of responsibility and would be less eager to criticize every single decision. In order to counteract people in his own government who were knowingly given Soviet instructions, he also took a lot of other, unconventional political measures that added to his reputation as a ruthless intriguer and manipulator not much trusted in the West. In order to weaken his adversaries from right and left, he is said to have arranged surprise meetings with Khrushchev, assumingly used KGB contacts to secure his own position, discussed and thereby probably tried to influence Finland's internal affairs with Soviet politicians, and definitely linked important political decisions to the question of him being reelected or not. It is indeed sure to say that not only Kekkonen was a player, but also Khrushchev knew his politics and was determined not to lose Finland too much to the West. As a matter of fact, the CPSU tried to influence who was in power in Finland - sometimes by using the FCMA Treaty in order to obtrude to certain coalitions and governments 'hostile' to the SU, sometimes trying to get or maintain the Communist Party in the government. So, we can assume that Moscow's opinion was never unimportant when forming a government in Finland.

² KIRBY, David (2006): A Concise History of Finland. Cambridge, 251.



Kekkonen claimed that this close cooperation and intense relationship was not only necessary to control the Finnish political landscape, but also that thanks to this close cooperation, he wouldn't have been that much influenced as he succeeded in influencing the Soviet leaders. Whatever the purpose of the cooperation, it was certainly always helpful for Kekkonen that he and Khrushchev did not only get along on a political level but were very close friends as well. Still, this extensive degree of cooperation led to the question of how much influence the CPSU was actually able to exert on Finnish politics, and convinced his international critics back then and his opponents within Finland of today that Kekkonen made himself and Finland more dependent on the Soviet Union than it would have been necessary or good.

The culminant point of this dangerous game was the so called Note Crisis. It is said to have been initiated by Kekkonen himself in order to be able to dissolve the parliament as well as to split his enemies and to ensure a stable government after the elections. The crisis is about a Soviet note given to the Finnish ambassador and suggesting joint military consultations against Western Germany as well as asking to destroy anti-Soviet forces within Finland, like the free Finnish press, which was accused of agitating against the SU and thereby operating against the Peace Treaty and the FCMA. By reassuring the Finnish foreign policy line of neutrality and friendship to the SU, Kekkonen succeeded in convincing Moscow to abandon both ideas mentioned in the note. After all, Kekkonen at least partly

profited from these events, since it led his only opponent in the presidential race to drop his candidature. Even though it can't be said with certainty whether the Note Crisis was manufactured by Kekkonen himself, the crisis and its solution definitely reinforced the impression of Finland as dependent on the Soviet Union in Western countries.

Balance and Neutrality?!

Kekkonen not only had to constantly fight a never ending battle within his own country, but also had to prove himself on the international terrain. Finland's status of neutrality was his life work. His main interest was to maintain good relations with the SU and also to keep on integrating into the Western trading sphere. This trade was a very important component for Kekkonen in order to secure inner peace, stability and security in Finland. However, this security was never really given in times of the arms race and Cold War. As already said, this Finnish policy was a very complex balancing act. Even Kekkonen - in spite of his close personal relationship with Khrushchev – always had to fight for and often to abandon some of his ideas in favor of Finnish interests. For instance, when wanting to enter EFTA, the SU even brought forward the FCMA and Paris Peace Treaty and led Kekkonen to set the talks on hold. In the long run though, Khrushchev was more preoccupied of having Kekkonen in power and backed down. Thanks to a secret treaty between Helsinki and Moscow, which was a prerequisite for Finland's ability to enter the free trading market, the SU also profited from the same tax reductions as the Western integrated markets. When it came to the Finnish membership in the EEC, much depended on the SU attitude again. It wasn't until the oil crisis in the 1970's that the SU finally agreed to the Finnish membership in the EEC – unless, of course, Finland would also join the Soviet counterpart to the EEC. Actually, the Finnish politicians didn't necessarily want to become a member of the EEC since they were afraid of political concussions coming along with it, but preferred an economic integration of only the Scandinavian countries without any political or institutional bonds to the Western bloc. In general, Finland was always preoccupied, for its own security, to lead the Scandinavian countries into neutrality and independence from NATO or any other blocs. Even so, all these initiatives remained mostly unsuccessful due to lacking interest from the other Northern countries.



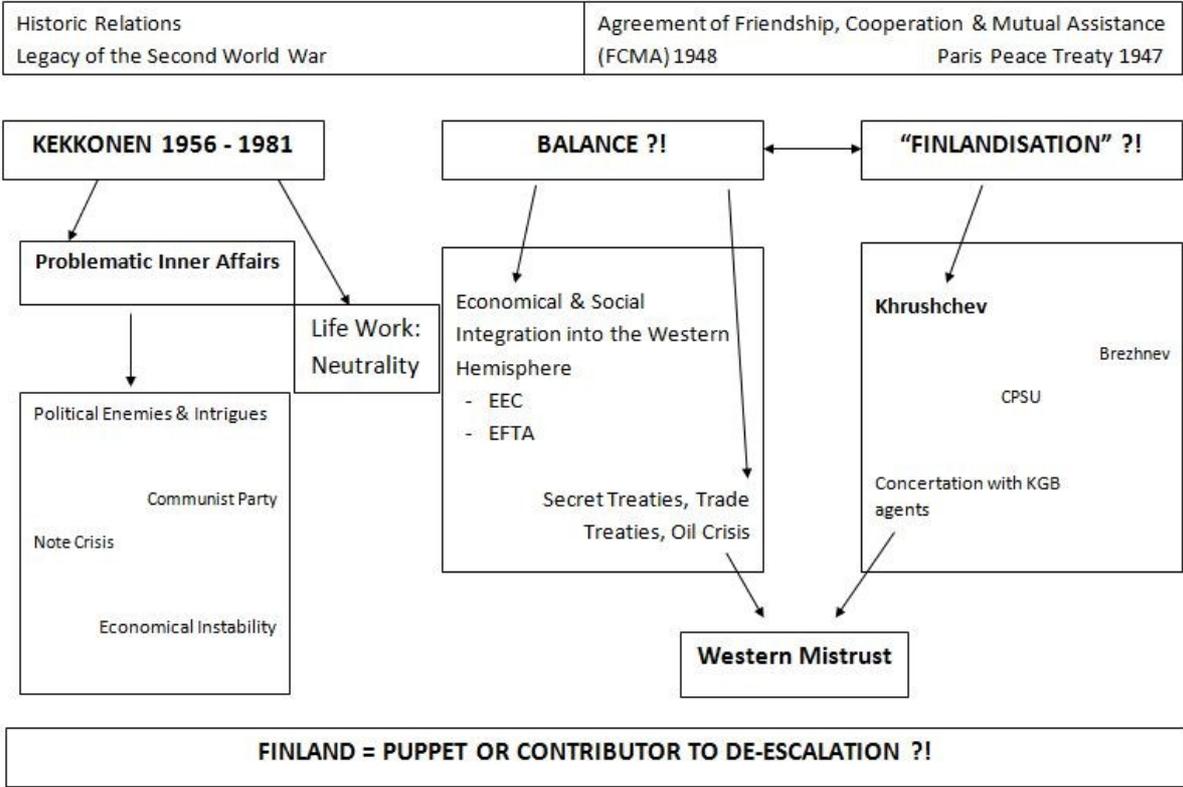
When more and more Finnish politicians finally began to stand with Kekkonen's foreign policy of neutrality and friendship to Moscow, the Soviet expectations of Finland as a partner rose. As the personal relationship between Brezhnev and Kekkonen was less confident and friendly than the one to Khrushchev, the Soviet Union's attitude towards Finland became stricter, especially after the Brezhnev doctrine. Brezhnev didn't speak of Finnish neutrality anymore, but emphasized the Friendship Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Treaty. His efforts didn't completely destroy Kekkonen's life's work of maintaining neutrality, though: During those last years of Kekkonen's reign, Finland was able to host the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the strategic arms limitation talks. Thanks to the Cold War trip offered to us by the Aleksanteri Institute, we were able to stand in front of the historic ground of the Finlandia Hall, where the CSCE took place. As we heard, the idea was to bring together as many countries as possible to discuss. Still, it wasn't self-evident to organize this conference. Since the idea first came up in 1969, diplomats of the Soviet Union, Finland and bloc-free states were travelling around the World in order to win over participants. The long developed neutrality status was very favorable for Finland at this time and contributed to its status of a mediator.

“Finlandisation”?!

Simultaneously to these events, the emergence of the term ‘Finlandisation’ showed that Finland kept losing its reputation in the same amount as Western mistrust rose. First

mentioned outside of Finland, the term actually designates the inducement of a weak neighbor by a stronger one, which at that time was synonymous to too much control of the strong neighbor per se, the Soviet Union. Although Kekkonen tried to give the term a positive glance, it persisted as a negative connotation. The two different perspectives in which one can see the term ‘Finlandisation’ brings us back to the initial question of how Finland’s role in the Cold war and its behavior towards the Soviet Union is to be evaluated.

Was it always the villain Soviet Union that tried to manipulate Finland, bound to the FCMA and the Paris Peace Treaty, or is Finland under Kekkonen’s reign less a victim to the SU than one might think? Was the dangerous and unconventional game of consorting this close with the Soviet leaders and agents Finnish politicians played really a way to gain some influence on real decision-makers in Moscow, as Kekkonen claimed? How much self-Finlandisation, how much self-censorship was actually going on? With that, we are in the middle of the already mentioned passionate debate going on in today’s Finland. His opponents don’t get tired of accusing mostly Kekkonen of being so cautious and anxious not to “show his naked butt to the east” that he even took political decisions in favor of the Soviet Union without them even pressuring him. Some say that having good relations with the Soviet Union almost became an obsession for Kekkonen. He, on the other hand, has always been preoccupied to convince the Western countries that Finland was not a puppet of the Soviet Union, but that “the better Finland’s relationship with Russia, the freer it was to pursue close co-operation with western countries”³.



³This slide was created in the frame of the seminar

³ KIRBY, David (2006): A Concise History of Finland. Cambridge, 259.

Even though the ambitious, politically interested new Finnish generations are right in questioning Kekkonen's personal distance to the Soviet Union and analyzing if he couldn't have been a little more emancipated than he seemed to be, one also must not neglect the plenty positive effects Kekkonen's complex balancing act had on Finland. Yes, his degree of collusion with KGB agents is more than questionable but at the same time, one can observe that he was determined not to lose track concerning the economic and social integration into post-war Western Europe. He certainly succeeded in creating a feeling of stability, continuity and security within his own country that was strongly uncommon in those times, and was also able to keep the influence on the personal sphere in Finland by the Soviet Union at a minimum. On an economic, social, ideological and cultural level, Finland was certainly more integrated into the Western sphere than into the Soviet world, as Finland was able to develop well organized social welfare system and people enjoyed broad personal freedom. The biggest balancing act of Kekkonen's life certainly was to maintain good trading relations with the West and further integrating into the growing common market and at the same time not to lose the Soviet Union as a security and economic partner. After all, Finland succeeded not only to enter the EFTA and EEC, but also profited from the 5-year trade treaties with the Soviet Union and other economic or energetic advantages.

Summing up, Kekkonen succeeded in leading Finland into prosperity and security. But the question still remains: Was it because of him, that Finland was neutral, and on occasions even a contributor to de-escalation and to an exchange between East and West? Or was Finland, as the West persistently saw it, more a puppet of the Soviet Union than anything else?