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Lars WESTERLUND

**The Finnish SS-Volunteers and Atrocities 1941-43 against Jews, Civilians and Prisoners of War in Ukraine and the Caucasus Region 1941-1943
An Archival Survey**

Helsinki : Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura and Kansallisarkisto, 2019, 248 p.

Finland's World War II history is the story of a nation caught in an impossible dilemma largely a result of its geographic location and the vicious politics that defined relations in inter-war Central/Eastern/Scandinavian politics. Simply put, in terms of the greater conflict that was World War II, Finland found itself in the unenviable position of allying itself with Nazi Germany to protect its autonomy that was persistently threatened by Stalin and the Soviet Union. Finland's survival became a burning issue in the aftermath of the Winter War as well as after the 1940 occupation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union and the Nazis' conquest of Denmark

and Norway also in 1940. As with every other European nation in World War II, Finland also had choices to make about the Nazis' other war, the racial or ideological war, otherwise known as the Holocaust. In this regard Finnish academics, most notably Hannu Rautkallio in his 1987 *Finland and the Holocaust: The Rescue of Finland's Jews*, posits the idea that the Finnish government led by Marshall Mannerheim defended Finnish Jews from the horrors of Nazi persecution, a policy broadly supported across the country because there was very little Antisemitism. Indeed, such an interpretation fit nicely with the widely held belief that all the Scandinavian countries – especially Denmark – did more to protect their Jews than the rest of Europe combined. Recently, publications such as Tiina Kinnunen and Ville Kivimäki's *Finland in World War II: History, Memory, Interpretations* and Simo Muir and Hana Worthen's *Finland's Holocaust: Silences of History* have further developed our understanding of Finland in World War II. The result of these efforts has been the emergence of a split in historiographic interpretations on Finland in World War II. The vital question about Finland in World War II is: did they become co-belligerents with the Nazis and willingly collaborated on many previous not known or little understood levels with their racial policies or was Finland a Nazi ally only in an effort to maintain its freedom and democracy in the struggle against the Soviet Union?

Lars Westerlund's new publication makes an important contribution to the question of the role of the Finnish State and of Finns in Hitler's ideological war. The book is richly steeped in archival sources, not only from Finland but also from Germany, the UK, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United States. Readers should know that the author's goal is very much to provide information directly from his archival sources, hence the subtitle *An Archival Survey*, which results in a book long in content and short on analysis and assessment. Nonetheless, this study cannot be overlooked for the story that it tells. What Westerlund is mainly interested in studying is the role of the 1,408 Finns who volunteered to serve in the German armed forces beginning in the Spring of 1941 in the aftermath of the Winter War. These men ended up being assigned to the Nazis' Waffen SS Division Wiking units who saw action in Ukraine and the Caucasus between 1941–1943 before being demobilized so they could return to Finland and fight in the Continuation War and the short Lapland War of 1944–1945. By way of introducing the chain of events that led to the posting of Finns in a Waffen SS Division, the author briefly discusses the Winter War and its impact on Finnish politics and society in an effort to demonstrate that Finns volunteered to join the Waffen SS largely out of very deep anti-Soviet beliefs. In so doing, Westerlund marginalizes the role of Antisemitism and right wing politics; although he does acknowledge that these practices did exist in Finland in the 1930s and into the World War II period.

What Westerlund is genuinely interested in, and the most significant part of his study, however, is the level of participation of Finnish soldiers in the ideological war that Hitler and the SS waged in Ukraine and the Caucasus where the Finnish volunteers in the Wiking SS division were serving at the time that the Nazis were waging genocidal warfare. To better understand the relationship

between Finns and their potential participation in crimes against humanity, the author examined 76 war-time diaries of soldiers who served at the Nazis' pleasure in both the Wiking Division and the Finnish Volunteer Battalion of the Waffen-SS in addition to documents from both Finnish and German archives about the operations of these units in Ukraine and Caucasus. The bottom line on this investigation according to Westerlund is that without a doubt Finnish soldiers witnessed atrocities committed against civilians and POWs. He further concludes that Finns were more likely to participate in the abuse and murder of Soviet POWs and commissars than innocent civilians. He stops short, however, of making definitive conclusions about either case pleading that his sources, especially the dairies, refer to atrocities (hence the assertion that Finns were aware) but, as is common throughout the memoirs of World War II era perpetrators of crimes against humanity, neither clearly admit that they or other soldiers around them participated in the murder of anyone.

In addition to offering information specifically about the role of Finns in the operations of the Waffen SS Wiking Division, this book also provides a wealth of information on topics ranging from the recruitment of Finnish soldiers into Germany's armed forces through the participation of these troops in the Eastern Front Conflict. The information on the challenges confronting Finland and its citizens during the World War II gain further illumination from this investigation. Westerlund makes clear that Finnish troops had to have witnessed the razing of villages and the execution of civilians and Soviet POWs since one of the basic tasks of the Waffen SS was to support the *Einsatzgruppen* (in this case Unit C) as they waged their murderous rampage through Ukraine and the Caucasus. The choices that all Finns had to make during the war were not obvious or easy but, in the end, they chose to ally themselves with Germany – despite the Nazis' draconian and inhumane racial policies because it was viewed as their best course to take to safeguard the autonomy of Finland. Westerlund remains on the side of history that concludes that allying with the Nazis was the only choice that could be made if Finland had any chance of emerging from the conflict as an autonomous nation.

This book is an important contribution to World War II history because of its investigation and explanation of the role of Finland and Finnish soldiers in the ideological conflict or the Holocaust during World War II. Yet, while we now have a stronger image of what Finns knew about the violence their soldiers witnessed and even about the conduct of the Finnish troops in the theater of operations, still more research needs to be conducted before the question of the motives and the role of Finland's participation and complicity in the Holocaust are completely answered. Perhaps this book will encourage further research on the role of the other Scandinavian States along with the role of the Baltic States in the Nazi's ideological war.

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