

Review - Churchill and Finland

Written by Keith Olson

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KEITH OLSON, JUN 7 2013

Churchill and Finland: A Study in Anticommunism and Geopolitics

By: Markku Ruotsila

Routledge: London and New York, 2012

Finnish historian Markku Ruotsila opens his excellent book with a clear subject statement: "This book examines the intertwined dynamics of Churchill's anti-communism and geopolitical thought" (p.i). Ruotsila uses the Churchill-Finnish relationship to describe and explain Churchill's geostrategic interests and anticommunism. A major strength of this study is the length of time covered. The Churchill-Finnish relationship started in 1919 and continued until the early Cold War.

Churchill held various government positions, including Secretary of State for War and Air in 1919, First Lord of the Admiralty from 1939 to 1940, and Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945. These years experienced the titanic upheavals of the Bolshevik/Russian civil war, the Second World War, and the onset of the Cold War. Churchill considered these events as threats to civilization and used his formidable rhetorical skills to consistently speak out accordingly. In office or out of office he attempted to build public opinion for his proposals and actions.

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Ruotsila's book comprehensively documents the incorporation of Finland into Churchill's broad foreign policy conceptualization during this time period. In 1919 he tried without success to pull Finland into a Grand Alliance to attack St. Petersburg as part of the intervention to defeat the Bolsheviks. Twenty years later he attempted, again without success, to form a Grand Alliance of northern countries to counter Germany. The third time Finland entered Churchill's Worldview was during the Second World War.

When the Soviet Union invaded Finland in November 1939 the Finns fought and won respect from Churchill for their anticommunism. His plan to aid Finland involved an Allied military force occupying northern Norway and Sweden to prevent Swedish ore from export to Germany via Norway. The aim of aid Finland, however, was "solely against Germany" (p.101). In March 1940 the Finnish-Soviet Winter War ended with an armistice that ceded territory to the Soviets.

On June 22, 1941 Germany invaded the Soviet Union and that evening Churchill spoke to the nation: "No one has been a more consistent opponent of Communism for the last twenty-five years," he declared and added that he would "unsay no word I have spoken about it." He promised, however, to aid any country or person "who fights on against Nazidom...." Which for him included "Russia and the Russian people." [1] Churchill consistently referred to the Soviet Union as Russia. From 1941 to 1945 Churchill became an ally of the communist Soviet Union to help defeat the greater danger of German Fascism.

In June 1941 Finland became co-belligerent, but not an ally, with Germany against the Soviet Union. Finns hoped their "Continuation War" would result with the return of the territory lost in the March 1940 armistice with the Soviets. In December 1941 Churchill yielded to the Soviet demand and declared war on Finland. To Churchill, Germany was a greater threat than the Soviet Union.

Starting with the armistice of September 1944 Finland replaced its anticommunism with Soviet cooperation and continued this policy into the Cold War. Finland consequently became irrelevant to Churchill. At times, nevertheless, "he helped make sure that Finnish independence was preserved and that communism did not subjugate the country." His motive was not "any great love for Finland, a country of which he knew little" (p.164). Churchill did not like Finland's post-1944 foreign policy of neutrality but hoped that the countries closer to home would remain anticommunist. Anticommunism always dictated his position toward Finland.

Markku Ruotsila's book also documents the important and close relationship that developed between 1919 Churchill and Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, who commanded the victorious whites in the 1918 Finnish civil war, and how this relationship developed Churchill's geostrategic interests and anticommunism. During the Finnish civil war Mannerheim served as Interim Regent of Finland from late 1918 to July 1919. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution he was a distinguished general in the Czar's army. In 1919 he and Churchill worked together to establish a Grand Alliance so Mannerheim could attack Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg. Neither Churchill nor Mannerheim, however, could build sufficient support from their governments to carry out their plan.

The two men first met in London in October 1919 and continued to meet as they shared their mutual hostility toward communism. During the 1930s they met several times regarding Germany. After the outbreak of the Winter War Churchill attempted to enlist Mannerheim in another attempt of forming a Grand Alliance that targeted Germany.

During the Winter War and the Continuation War Mannerheim commanded Finland's military forces. He won election as president in August 1944 and the next month he helped end the Continuation War with an armistice. In 1946 Mannerheim retired and wrote his memoirs. Churchill never developed a relationship with another Finn that remotely approached what he had with Mannerheim. Ruotsila wrote that Churchill "admired Field Marshall Mannerheim as he admired few of his contemporaries" (p.162). Apparently Churchill's view of small nations blocked transfer of respect for Mannerheim to Finland.

Ruotsila's discussion of the Churchill-Mannerheim relationship is especially useful as he concurrently analyses Churchill's ideology as it played out against a small nation. Churchill's "two dominating impulses were anticommunism, and geostrategic" (p.163). The two impulses, Ruotsila makes clear, were inseparable. Churchill

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“regarded all small nations as the proper tools of the Great Powers....” (p.163). The three times Churchill concerned himself with Finland from 1919 to 1945 related to the role he wanted Finland to play in anticommunist crusades. Ruotsila points out that at times Churchill “was obsessed” with anticommunism (p.139; also see 160, 24).

Because of Finland’s neutrality during the Cold War and from 1951 to 1955 when he again served as Prime Minister, Churchill “had no reason to be interested in Finland” (p.156). Moreover, after Mannerheim retired from public life Churchill no longer had “personal contacts in Finland” (p.57). To repeat Ruotsila’s basic conclusion, “Churchill’s engagement with Finland was strictly tied to military anticommunism” (p. 158).

Despite not looking beyond 1948 Ruotsila has based his study on thorough research. The primary source was the extensive collection of Churchill’s correspondence and informal writings, portions of which scholars had not previously used. Research also included a wealth of diaries, memoirs, newspapers, and secondary accounts in the United Kingdom and Finland. In addition Ruotsila researched manuscript collections in both countries and the United States. The book’s structure and writing style further enhance Ruotsila’s research and analysis.

To his research for this book Ruotsila brought extensive knowledge of Churchill, anticommunism, and Great Power geopolitics, making this book particularly appealing for people interested in gaining an in depth understanding of Winston Churchill’s political ideology

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Professor Emeritus Keith Olson taught United States history and occasionally Scandinavian history at the University of Maryland, College Park. Three times he held Fulbright appointments to Finland.

[1] World War II Multimedia Timeline: 1939-1941 “Speech n the German invasion of Russia”