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Feeling the Fatherland
Finnish Soldiers’ Lyrical Attachments to the Nation during the Second World War

Direct poem citations from Finnish translated by Hannu Tervaharju

Introduction: Patriotism Revisited

The ability of nationalism to foster wilful sacrifice on behalf of the community is one of the peculiar features that separates national belonging from many other identities. To understand this willingness has motivated some of the key works in nationalism studies, from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* to Michael Billig’s *Banal Nationalism*;¹ yet the issue remains open for new interpretations. The present chapter will, for its small part, search answers for this same question by looking at the Finnish soldiers of the Second World War as ‘artisans’ of nationalism – i.e. as active participants in ‘doing the nation’. It seems evident to me that to explain soldiers’ suffering and dying for the nation requires paying attention to the emotional dimension of how the nation was experienced. Therefore, my focus will be on the soldiers’ attachments in relation to national belonging.

Finnish participation in the Second World War can be divided into five distinctive phases. First, in the Winter War from 30 November 1939 until 13 March 1940, Finland faced the Soviet Union’s unprovoked aggression, which tended to bring people together, level earlier social and political schisms, and ease the traumatic memory of the fratricidal Civil War in 1918 – at least momentarily. The peace terms of March 1940 were consequently experienced as utterly unjust, causing wide-spread bitterness and revanchism.² These emotions ripened in June 1941, when

² For a recent ‘emotional history’ of the Winter War, Tepora, *Sodan henki*. 
Finland joined Operation Barbarossa in the so-called Continuation War. The areas lost after the Winter War were recaptured, and the Finnish Army advanced far into Soviet Karelia, which had never been part of Finland. In this second phase of war, from June to December 1941, the Finns seemed to be on the winning side of the now global conflict and thus able to fulfil the old nationalist dream of Greater Finland: the incorporation of large Eastern Karelian and Ingrian territories to Finland Proper. For the time being, the fall of Leningrad and the city’s desolation was considered a realistic scenario.3

Third, from the beginning of 1942 all the way through June 1944, Finland remained on the quiet margins of the war in the east. The frontlines remained in place, occupied Soviet Karelia was administered as part of Greater Finland (although not formally annexed to Finland), and as long as Leningrad was under siege, the Finnish heartland was safe from serious threats. Nevertheless, after the German defeat in Stalingrad in January 1943, the Finns started to observe their prospects much more cautiously: in public opinion surveys, the faith in Axis victory collapsed,4 as did the siege of Leningrad in January 1944. The fourth phase of war – the Soviet offensive against Finland in June–July 1944 – was thus not a total surprise, yet the strength and determination of the attack were a shock both to the Finnish soldiers and to the population at large. Although the Soviet offensive was eventually halted, the summer of 1944 and the ensuing armistice terms in September 1944 were a sobering and demoralising event for the Finns: the high expectations of 1941 had experienced a definite defeat. In the fifth phase of war, from late September 1944 till April 1945, the Finnish Army fought to drive off the German troops in Northern Finland, an area devastated by the German scorched earth tactics.5

At the end of the Second World War, Finland remained independent and unoccupied and was spared from the most violent hardships experienced in East and Central Europe. Yet the war’s outcome approved the moral and political bankruptcy of those passionately nationalistic sentiments that were bound to the ideology of Greater Finland. After the military desertions, the waves of panic, and the near-collapse of the front in the summer of 1944, even the solemn

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3 For concise English overviews on Finland in the Second World War, please see Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War*; Kinnunen and Kivimäki, *Finland in World War II*.
5 For the analysis of general emotional dynamics in the Finnish war experience of 1939–45, please see Kivimäki and Tepora, ‘War of Hearts’; Kivimäki and Tepora, ‘Meaningless Death’. 

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patriotism of the Winter War now seemed partly compromised. In addition, during the long and passive trench warfare period in 1942–44, Finnish officers’ views of their soldiers and their motivations had started to change, gradually emphasising the importance of group dynamics and pragmatic leadership instead of ideological devotion and inherited patriotism. At the same time, similar observations on the nature of soldiers’ behaviour were made in the emerging faculty of military sociology and psychology, developed especially inside the US Army. The soldiers’ will to fight and to fulfil their duties were no more a simple matter of ‘moral fibre’ and ‘patriotic spirit’, but a more complex social psychological and situational phenomenon.

Perceived from this perspective, wartime expressions of patriotic emotions are easily seen as a matter of top-down propaganda and manipulation. In Finland, this view was immortalised in author (and frontline soldier) Väinö Linna’s immensely influential war novel *Tuntematon sotilas* (‘The Unknown Soldier’, 1954), which cemented the stereotype of Finnish soldiers as a bunch of unruly, grumbling, ironic fellows, who usually did their share but ridiculed anything too abstract or bombastic. Patriotism as a motivation was put aside; or at least redefined as something much more down-to-earth than the military chaplains’ zealous sermons or the educational officers’ elevated lectures.

There is much to agree with in the above-mentioned observations of modern military sociology and Väinö Linna alike. In my own reading of both wartime materials and the Finnish soldiers’ post-war reminiscences, it is obvious that the frontline soldiers often reacted allergically to any patronising attempts to promote patriotism from above. It is also clear that the soldiers grew disillusioned with the lofty nationalistic rhetoric during the long war years. But to become disillusioned, there must first be something that is consequently exposed as an illusion. This is

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6 On the immediate postwar ‘emotional landscape’ in Finland, Kivimäki, ‘Hämärä horisontti’.


8 Wessely, ‘Twentieth-century Theories’, pp. 274–276. In 1947, Finnish sociologist Knut Pipping published his doctoral dissertation on the frontline soldiers’ small-unit community, attitudes, and behavior in 1941–44, based on his own observations as a wartime non-commissioned officer. This pioneering work was ahead of its time, and it posed very much the same questions and conclusions as the emerging American military sociology of the late 1940s.


the topic of this chapter: Finnish soldiers’ emotional attachment to the nation before the apparent disillusionment; and what this tells about the power and attraction of nationalism.

Research Question and Sources: A Wartime Collection of Soldiers’ Poems

In modern wars of the twentieth century, the soldiers have formed a very distinctive group of a nation-state’s citizenry. This was true also in wartime Finland: the soldiers in uniform embodied the collective ‘Finnishness’ as a national-masculine self-image. Yet the patriotic civic education of the soldiers-to-be had, of course, started already long before the war. In the Finnish public school system and in the various children’s and youth organisations (some of them paramilitary), boys were brought up as the future defenders of the fatherland from early on. The pre-war conscription service complemented the training: ideally, a collective spirit of comradeship and patriotism should have been forged among entire age cohorts of young men, overwriting their social and political differences. During the war, the Finnish practice of repatriating all the fallen soldiers to be buried in their home parishes in the so-called ‘Hero’s Cemeteries’ emphasised the emotional link between the war front and the home front and situated the soldiers’ sacrifices at the heart of each locality, both physically as well as symbolically. As in Germany and many other war-waging countries – in 1914–18 and again in 1939–45 – there were aspirations in the Finnish wartime rhetoric to import the ideal of frontline comradeship as an overarching ideological model for social relations to civil society at large, thus revitalising and unifying the Finnish nation. This idea became institutionalised in the Union of Finnish Brothers-in-Arms (Suomen Aseveljien Liitto), a soldiers’ and veterans’ organisation founded after the Winter War in 1940 and banned under Soviet pressure in 1945.

The Finnish patriotic civic education of young boys and men was not uniform. There were, for instance, evident differences in its reception according to social class, political affinity, and

11 Kemppainen, Isänmaan uhrit, pp. 219–226.
12 Tuomaala, Työtätekevistä käsistä, pp. 195 ff.; Nevala-Nurmi, Perhe maanpuolustajana, passim.
15 E.g. Kärnä et al., Arkielämän aseveljeyttä; Kulha, Aseveljien aika; cf. Kühne, Kameradschaft; Mosse, Fallen Soldiers.
family background.\textsuperscript{16} The prime point I want to make here is that there was a strong ideological invitation to the patriotic duty of soldiering, aimed at male citizens who were either about to enter their military conscription or who were already serving in the army. There were distinct cultural roles reserved for the conscript-soldiers in the collective mindset of the nation. As Michael Billig has stressed, those national sentiments that become fervent at the times of crises are created already in peacetime, in the everyday routines and repetitions of banal nationalism.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, as I will soon proceed to study the wartime manifestations of soldiers’ attachments, this background in pre-war civic education is important to keep in mind.

My claim in the following is that – in contrary to post-war (and post-defeat) descriptions – the Finnish soldiers were not immune to the nationalistic education so forcefully thrust upon them. The key question is, how did they themselves respond to the call to defend the fatherland and even to die for it? How did the soldiers describe their affection for the nation and relate it to other attachment relations? What does this tell about the personal experience of nationalism and the phenomenon of national belonging as ‘emotional practice’? Although the chapter is empirical in nature, I will back my findings by drawing ideas from the existing research literature on affective dimension of nationalism and from the history of emotions.

In order to answer the above-mentioned questions, I have used a special wartime source material: a collection of Finnish soldiers’ poetry. The Information Department of the Finnish Army High Command gathered the poems from ‘ordinary soldiers’ with the apparent aim to document an authentic, lyrical voice of the frontlines to be used in propaganda purposes. The unpublished, archived collection contains close to 850 poems.\textsuperscript{18} It is somewhat unclear when exactly the gathering of poems started. In early 1943, the Information Department announced an official war poetry competition, but most of the archived poems seem to have been written in 1941–42. Probably they were subsequently submitted to the competition in 1943. In any case, they were written at the height of Greater Finland enthusiasm following the army’s victorious advance to the east in 1941. But some soldiers also sent their earlier poems written during the Winter War in 1939–40, and new poems kept arriving until the spring of 1944, albeit

\textsuperscript{17} Billig, \textit{Banal Nationalism}, pp. 6–7.
\textsuperscript{18} National Archives of Finland (NAF), T 10602/16–17, Finnish Army High Command, Information Department (PM Ttus.os.), collection of soldiers’ poems in 1942.
in much smaller quantities. Many of the poems had been originally submitted for the divisional and regimental frontline papers, which were the army’s semi-official publications printed for the soldiers of different front sectors.¹⁹

Later in June 1943, the Information Department decided to select a number of poems to be published. The anthology Täältä jostakin: Suomen kenttäarmeijan runoja ([From the Front: Finnish Field Army’s Poems], 1943) included a total of 140 poems and was edited by the famous Finnish author Olavi Paavolainen, who was serving as a lieutenant at the Information Department. Interestingly, as the book was published in November 1943 – after Stalingrad and all the following German setbacks – its content is much more reserved than the overall collection would have allowed. By then Finnish officials had given instructions to avoid public rhetoric that would have unnecessarily annoyed the Allied Powers. Thus, for instance, the many enthusiastic poems on Greater Finland were never printed. This may also have to do with Paavolainen’s own literary distaste with overly pathetic verses.²⁰

As a historical source, the collection has its limitations: most importantly the fact that the poems were requested and gathered by the army officials. The unpublished poems were not censored in any way; only the poems selected for the anthology had to be approved by wartime censors. But although the soldiers could send their texts under a pseudonym, this was clearly not the right place to be overly disillusioned or critical. Understandably, the poems are not representative of the overall mood among the troops, but rather of the most elevated, nationalistic perceptions of war. Yet as such they serve as an interesting contrast to the post-war reminiscences, which – written from the post-1945 perspective – have the tendency to downplay vigorous patriotism or anything resembling war zealotry. Furthermore, borrowing anthropologist William M. Reddy’s concepts, the poems can be read as emotives – as verbal expressions of feeling – which the writers fashion to bring together their personal experiences at the frontlines and the socio-cultural norms of feeling in the ‘emotional regime’ of a nation at war.²¹ Although I will not follow Reddy’s theory systematically, I take from there two useful insights for the understanding of the poems: first, their character as in-between the personal

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²⁰ Paavolainen gives an account on his work with the anthology in his published wartime diaries Synkkä yksinpuhelu, pp. 590, 610, 634–637, 642–644, 655, 661–662, 669, 682, 684, 736.
and the cultural, and second, their role as acts or practices, which create emotions instead of just describing them. Seen this way, the poems offer a rare view into the reciprocal interaction between the national systems of meaning and the soldiers personal feelings and attachments. Olavi Paavolainen wrote in his wartime diaries that the abundance of ‘patriotic phraseology’ in the poems showed how ‘our official propaganda has been able to corrupt and stultify the fresh, original imagery of the common man’. True as this may be, I think it is more fruitful to read the poems as an active response to the invitation to patriotic, martial masculinity, demonstrating that the call had been understood.

Unfortunately the background information on the writers of the poems is very limited – usually only the name, military rank, and the unit are given. Thus, not much can be said about the social distribution of the collection’s authors. The number of junior officers, NCOs, and lance corporals among the poets seems to be disproportionately high, which would make sense: the motivation shown by their above-average military rank reflected on their above-average dedication to the war effort and its national meanings. But the poems of ordinary privates are also very common. By using a considerable amount of time and energy, it should be possible to link most of the authors to army’s personnel documents. I had to decline from doing so for the reasons of work economy: such an effort would have multiplied the time required.

Lyrical Attachments I: Addressing the Nation

By its very nature, lyrical poetry provides a way to express sentiments which would seem too naïve, pompous, and out-of-place in prose. Despite all its horrors, the battlefield’s dramatic scenery, extreme conditions, and existential challenges have often been glorified and aestheticized in poems. In this regard, the Finnish soldiers had a rich genre of literature to draw from. Patriotic war poetry occupied a prominent place in the elementary school curriculum; most importantly pupils often learned by heart national poet J.L. Runeberg’s (1804–1877) *Vänrikki Stoolin tarinat* (‘The Tales of Ensign Stål’). This national-romantic

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23 For this invitation or ‘call’, see Ahlbäck, *Manhood*, pp. 141–144.
24 On poetry and the ‘beauty of war’, as well as on poems as means to contain and control the horrors, see Winn, *Poetry of War*, pp. 1–11.
collection of martial poetry – the canonic anthology for Finnish nationalism – depicted the sacrifice, bravery, and stoicism of the Finnish soldiers in Sweden’s lost war against Russia in 1808–09. Similar themes were repeated in a multitude of patriotic songs, poems, and stories learned at school, in civic organisations, and in the army.25

This cultural repertoire of patriotic verse echoes strongly in the collection of Finnish soldiers’ wartime poems. The total of ca. 850 poems naturally includes diverse topics and styles; yet the more surprising thing is the collection’s uniformity. Notwithstanding a few odd outliers, the collection is generically consistent. First, the poems can be tagged into two groups according to their type of address: 1) the poems addressing an abstract collective, usually the nation or an entity closely related to it; and 2) the poems addressing specific human individuals, the soldier’s close ones. In many poems, of course, both addressees are present, thus reflecting an intertwined attachment between one’s nation and one’s specific fellow citizens. The poems in these two groups can then be further tagged by their central themes, as will be detailed below.

Starting with the poems addressing the abstract collective, the first theme consists of narrative poems, kind of broadsheet chants, which tell the story of a given battalion or regiment in war, chronicling the main events, special incidents, remarkable personalities, and famous commanders. The style of these poems is often rakish and humorous. They connect a unit’s particular expeditions to world historical events, and especially in 1941 they depict the Finnish soldiers as taking part in making history. One’s adventurous military unit and its personnel become an object of attachment and affinity, expressing a joyful esprit de corps. A soldier’s personal journey with his unit becomes aligned with the collective narrative of the nation, whereby the given regiment or battalion embodies both the individual soldiers as a group and the nation as a band of brothers, led by a charismatic commander. The military unit is an object of affection and pride, instilling its collective strength to individual soldiers.

In a similar fashion, albeit less folksy in style, many poems consist of heroic, march-type lyrics celebrating the victorious Finnish Army and its soldiers fighting and conquering to liberate the country and the ‘Finnish tribe’ from the threat of the East. These poems extol the ‘dawning new day’ and the ‘bright future’ of the Finnish nation, redeemed by the soldiers:

We want to crush the Eastern hordes,
our strong blows know no mercy.
The spirits of our heroes
from ages gone by
join us in our struggle.

Our girl remembers us with longing,
for us her dear heart beating.
Do not worry,
soon we’ll meet
when the heavy work is done.

We shall bolt and bar the border.
The Eastern filth to vanquish.
Therefore always forward side by side
the invincible regiment marches.26

As the poem shows, the collective theme (regiment as the embodiment of the nation) and the
quasi-personal addressee (‘our girl’) join here seamlessly to create an image of male warriors
crushing the nation’s enemies under the longing gaze of young women. In this vein of poems,
many authors dedicate their writings to Greater Finland and to the liberation of Eastern Karelia.
Although the ideology of Greater Finland has often been understood as the fanciful project of
Finnish nationalist elites and therefore not influencing the common people, the theme of
expanding Finland’s territory inspired many in the rank-and-file, too.27 The Greater Finland
poems are one of the most common types in the collection, especially among the poems written
in 1941–42:

To the bosom of mother Finland
return these dear brothers.
Borders on which it is easier to build,
with bolts against the Eastern threats.
It is our goal,
we will not leave undone,
we must make our Finland greater
twine together the roots of our kin.28

26 NAF, T 10602/16, PM Ttus.os., Private M.N., untitled, dedicated to Infantry Regiment 6, 1942.
27 Kivimäki, ‘Rintamamieisten Suur-Suomi’, pp. 290–294. The pre-war Greater Finland activism was,
indeed, mostly an academic phenomenon; Nygård, Suur-Suomi, pp. 234–238. But during the
successful Finnish offensive in 1941 the expansion to the east was more widely accepted, even among
some social democrats; Manninen, Suur-Suomen ääriiviivat, pp. 222–227.
Here, references to the Finnic population of Soviet Karelia as ‘our kin’ and to the borders of Greater Finland expand the national attachment to new people and territory. Obviously, such an expansion has an aggressive edge as a revenge and final victory against the ‘eternal enemy’ in the East. Easily overlapping with the previous themes, poems of patriotic sacrifice, oath, and flag contrast the purity of the soldiers’ mission to the dirtiness and destructiveness of ‘Asian Bolshevism’. These poems connect Finnish men on the frontlines with the ancient Finnish tradition of fighting against the East, with natural warrior skills and instincts, and with the demanding and timeless example set by the forefathers in sacrificing for the Finnish nation, now followed by their sons in arms.

Look! past centuries watch you,  
with brothers long since fallen,  
and mothers, fatigued with woes…  
See our orphans’ ample tears.  

Like a high priest you are destined  
to sacrifice on your people’s altar.  
Swear in the name of freedom  
that you will give it all you can.

The ethos of these grandiloquent verses paints a dramatic picture of the front as a borderland of death, where men are ready to give their lives for the nation. The Christian motifs of sacrifice, martyrdom, and redemption sound loudly through the whole collection, but the most explicitly religious poems often take the form of prayers or hymns, thus intertwining the transcendental qualities of religion and nationalism. These poems ask for heavenly protection, usually for the soldier’s fatherland and family rather than for himself. Christian themes easily integrate with national-patriotic passions. Especially later in the war some contain more desperate cries for God’s help and guidance in an insecure future. Quite conventionally, the poems depict the soldierly sacrifice as a Christ-like offering:

29 These enemy images come close to those represented in war propaganda of the Finnish conservative press at the same time; Luostarinen, Perivihollinen, passim.

30 On these same features in the Finnish war novels, see Jokinen, ‘Myytti sodan palveluksessa’, pp. 142–143, 147–150; on the similar ideological education in the pre-war Finnish conscript army, see Ahlbäck, Manhood, pp. 120–125.


32 On the Finnish religious rhetoric of sacrifice in war, see Kemppainen, Isänmaan uhrit, pp. 223–225 and passim; Tilli, Continuation War, passim.
The sacrifice of the warrior was great, when he gave his blood. So did the Saviour suffer, carrying our sins to the cross.\textsuperscript{33}

There is nothing disillusioned or ironic in the poems above, not to the least. Instead, they substantiate a deeply-felt attachment to the nation and its embodiments. They draw from a compound of ‘traditional’ religious and nationalistic cosmology.\textsuperscript{34} Even though there is no material at hand to compare the poems to a similar collection of young men’s poetry from the pre-war era, it seems that the war experience had only intensified and concretised the nation as an object of affection. This reminds me of the debate concerning the consequences of the First World War to British culture. Although for the much-cited, highly educated poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon the shattering war experience led to a breakthrough of novel poetry, the Great War as a cradle of literary modernity seems too straightforward an explanation. In popular and ‘less educated’ war poetry, patently patriotic, romantic, and religious motifs kept flourishing. Having witnessed devastating human losses, common people in 1914–18 and afterwards actually tended to return to traditional, classical verse to find consolation for their hardships.\textsuperscript{35}

Similarly, the Finnish soldiers of the Second World War searched for assurance that their sacrifices had not been in vain and that they had a collective, lasting meaning. The heavier the losses, the more significant their purpose had to be. Taken together, the Winter War of 1939–40 and the offensive of 1941 had caused the loss of well over 50,000 Finnish lives (out of a population of ca 3.7 million). By addressing the nation and investing it with personal attachment, the soldiers bound themselves and their hardships to the fate of the collective. In the nationalist rhetoric and imagination, the young men at the front have been presented as in imminent contact with their parent community; as the ‘chosen delegates’ presenting the nation in its existential struggle. Their sacrifices have been placed at the centre of collective

\textsuperscript{33} NAF, T 10602/17, PM Ttus.os., Lance Corporal Y.P., ‘After the Battle’, undated.

\textsuperscript{34} The ‘traditional’ quality of this rather modern religious-nationalistic amalgamation must be observed with caution, of course; cf. Hobsbawn, ‘Introduction’.

The first set of poems here above shows that the Finnish soldiers understood this role and responded to it. One could claim – as author Olavi Paavolainen did – that the official war propaganda had turned the soldier-poets into simple automatons of nationalistic rhetoric. I would, instead, argue that as repetitive and unoriginal as these poems were, composing the verses, writing them down, and learning them by heart were acts of feeling the fatherland and giving this feeling an emotional expression. And in feeling the fatherland, the soldiers were also ‘doing the nation’ for themselves. In addition to Reddy’s above-mentioned theory, I am drawing here from Monique Scheer’s thinking on emotions as embodied practices.

Lyrical Attachments II: Empowering and Comforting

In contrast to the abstract, sublime poems of the first category, the second one subsumes more personal poems that tell of concrete events and impressions, and that are often dedicated to specific persons. Probably the most important addressees here are one’s fellow soldiers and especially the fallen comrades. Such obituaries usually contain a mix of emotions: sorrow and bitterness come together with a defiant determination to uphold the memory and take revenge. Individual sentiments of loss often reach the collective level as the fallen comrades join the abstract army of the departed: the memory of the fallen in the Winter War challenges the still-living soldiers to continue the battle; the heroes under the grave mounds call the soldiers to follow their path. In this way the fallen are turned into an empowering resource, instead of causing depression or anxiety. Fighting and dying together as brothers-in-arms becomes a great leveller of earlier social and political boundaries:

The day has come, but the tired brothers
still remain in the field
In this night of battle they too have
become equally big and rich!
Together they have found the father’s land.
Forgotten their gaping wounds.
It is enough – when they could die for their fatherland!

36 On the military community as delegates and border crossers, see Marvin and Ingle, Blood Sacrifice, pp. 98 ff.; Tepora, Lippu, uhri, kansakunta, p. 46; Siltala, ‘Sodan psykohistoriaa’, pp. 50–53.
The poems for one’s living comrades, on the other hand, embrace the warm and secure atmosphere in the dugouts. In contrast to the more pompous, patriotic poems of sacrifice and martial heroism, they depict the soldiers at the frontlines as the guardians of home, living and fighting side-by-side on the border of their national community. There is also a spatial dimension to the experiences of empowering solidarity at the front. For those soldiers situated on the River Svir front in Eastern Karelia, for instance, the great stream itself, separating the homeland and ‘Finnish culture’ from the unknown and ‘cultureless’ enemy territory, becomes a mighty, inspiring symbol for war’s liminal experience.40 As has been noted in cultural heritage and memory studies, the visitors of age-old battle sites often construct an affective, visceral relation to these places, which easily turn into sites of national sentiment and belonging.41 It is no surprise, then, that the soldiers, who had seen several of their comrades die for an unmarked acre of forest or field, could create strong affective ties to such terrain. As the sites of battle, small rivers, tiny hills, and unspectacular villages could grow into emotionally charged symbols of the whole nation. But for the soldiers risking their lives on these very sites, this affection was also a strongly embodied experience.42

Thus, the intimate vicinity to the violent, liminal battlefield was an identity marker for the brothers-in-arms. Another spatial dimension in the poems is constructed through geographical distance: even if the soldiers are taken away from their homes and sent to the far borders of the nation, this distance is overcome by the intensity of feeling. Just as prominent as the poems for one’s comrades, are the verses dedicated to one’s mother. The mothers seem to symbolise the essential idea of home and all its security and warmth. In these poems the mother is often praying, asking for protection for her sons. This emotional support worked both ways; many poems ask for endurance and consolation for the worried mothers. Even if the poems for mothers and homefolks often have a longing tone, they reassert, rather than question, the meaning of the war: ideally, the poems depict the sons at the front as protecting their praying

40 On war as a liminal experience, see Leed, No Man’s Land, pp. 12–33.
41 See, e.g., Waterton and Watson, ‘War Long Forgotten’; Raivo, “‘This is Where They Fought’”. Cf. on war tourism and the feelings of empathy towards the ‘enemy’, McKay and Harman, “‘It Was Like Swimming through History’”.
42 In the Finnish case, for instance, the Winter War battle sites of Kollaa, Taipale, Summa, and Raate became legendary already during the conflict and have remained so ever after. For the Finnish soldiers’ emotional attachment to their site of battle, Jalonen, Summan tarina, pp. 159 ff. For recent initiatives on the spatial and material dimensions of national affections, see Merriman and Jones, ‘Nations, Materialities and Affects’; Stephens, ‘Affective Atmospheres’.
mothers back at home. It is interesting that poems written for wives are rare in the collection. This poetic silence traces back, of course, to the youth of the majority of the soldiers, but it may also illustrate the special symbolic and emotionally comforting role of mothers in the mindscape of war:\(^{43}\)

Mother, I recall your grey hair, 
recall your gentle care
Here where the best of men now are
I feel the beat of your heart.

Mother, I ask you
not to let sorrow break you
Carry your burden like others do,
I’ll stand guard here for you.\(^{44}\)

Besides of their mothers, the soldier-poets write about other women, too, but more commonly than wives or even girlfriends the objects of these admiring, romantic ‘serenades’ are the lottas (members of the Lotta Svärd women’s auxiliary corps), nurses, and canteen keepers close to the frontlines; the soldiers’ ‘smiling flowers’ and ‘caring sisters’. Obviously, soldiers in the trenches actually talked about women in less sublime and less asexual ways,\(^ {45}\) but the poems tell, nevertheless, of the other aspect of feminine reinforcement for soldiers’ masculine identities: women were offered the role of the admiring audience for manly heroism, reinforcing and encouraging the boys/men to fulfil their soldierly duties.\(^ {46}\) The idealised image of pure, innocent, gentle, and beautiful maidens gives comfort to young soldiers:

As the night grows dark above the hospital,  
the nurse is awake and tends to us all.  
Someone thanks her quietly, without words  
that friendly soul so busy.

And as the night turns to dawn  
the sister goes, another takes her place  
And just like that nightly friend of ours,  
as gentle and sunny is she.\(^ {47}\)


\(^{46}\) Goldstein, *War and Gender*, pp. 301–322; Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism*, pp. 373–382; on the specific role of female nurses in this regard, see Hallett, *Containing Trauma*.

\(^{47}\) NAF, T 10602/16, PM Ttus.os., unknown author, ‘In Military Hospital’, undated.
Such an ethereal description of young women bears close resemblance to the Finnish Maid, which was an image constructed to symbolise Finland at the turn of the twentieth century. This innocent maiden was the object of male fantasies and simultaneously threatened by foreign aggression and rape by Russians (at this time Finland was a part of the Russian Empire). Furthermore, as Johanna Valenius has noted, we should not see the nation only as symbolised by a young woman, but also to see the nation as a woman, a beloved virgin to be desired and protected by men. 48 This amalgamation of the national and the feminine is vividly present in the soldiers’ poems, too.

Finally, we have impressionistic elegies, which ponder existential issues and often borrow their motifs from nature. Their direct addressee is more difficult to point to than in the other poems: they seem to have been written for the author himself or for his anonymous peers. Although rarely directly pessimistic, they nevertheless create a more melancholic and reflective tone than poems in the other sub-groups. The collection does not contain many of these poems, and they seem to be somewhat more common among the poems written later in war. This chronology hints at a change in the soldiers’ way of seeing their service at the frontlines, although the poems from 1943–44 are too sporadic to allow for a more comprehensive comparison. The apparent change may also be due to the fact that the original collection of poems was supplemented later in 1943 by allowing soldiers to send their texts directly to officials at the Information Department and thus not through the hands of their own near-by officers, which seems to have been the earlier procedure. 49

Summing up the poems’ personal addressees, the gendered distribution of characters is quite revealing. Soldiers’ fathers are mostly missing, or the fathers come to present some archaic ‘forefatherhood’ or the nation as the fatherland. Also the soldiers’ biological siblings are rarely mentioned, but on the other hand ‘brothers’ and ‘brotherhood’ are key concepts referring to one’s comrades-in-arms. As noted, both real and imagined young women are often attributed ‘sisterly’ qualities, and they overshadow the role of soldiers’ wives. Together with their fellow soldiers, mothers are the single most important theme in poems referring to soldiers’ concrete human relations.

48 Valenius, Undressing the Maid, p. 207.
49 Paavolainen, Synkkä yksinpuhelu, 634–635; openly critical or bitter poems are very rare, but not wholly non-existent.
It is worth noting in this regard that a great many of the frontline soldiers were too young to have had intimate relations with women, and that the most important person in their lives was still their own mother. In spite of all the boasting and tough guy talk in the trenches, women of the soldiers’ own age were often distant and unobtainable figures, and the soldiers felt insecure of their manliness in relation to them.\(^5^0\) It makes sense, then, that the Finnish wartime gender ideology was so focused on the role of soldiers’ mothers. As historian Ilona Kemppainen (now Pajari) has shown, the idealised mother figure was central in the Finnish culture of conferring meaning to fallen soldiers. In public discourse the mothers’ sacrifice in willingly giving their sons to the fatherland overshadowed the more troublesome fate of war widows.\(^5^1\) As the many affectionate references to mothers in soldiers’ poems demonstrate, the image of a loving and caring mother, whom the young soldiers were expected to protect on the front, was an extremely important personal and cultural focus of emotions, even for older reservists. In order to make sense of all the filth and brutality of the frontlines, there had to be something good and pure to defend; motherly figures back home became both the concrete and symbolic repository of these essential, positive qualities.\(^5^2\)

Personalising the Nation, Nationalising the Personal

Taken together, what can be said about this plethora of overly patriotic, religious, and passionate verses? It would be tempting to attribute the collection’s elevated, almost naïve pathos to a marginal type of soldier, the outliers in their communities.\(^5^3\) Yet this conclusion would not do justice to the poems. Most importantly, the poems are plentiful and still very uniform in their basic nature. This sameness reveals a strongly shared cultural and ideological ethos, not the idiosyncratic scribblings of a few odd poets. Even if the poems do not articulate an all-embracing sentiment common to all Finnish soldiers, taken in sum they do express the


\(^{51}\) Kemppainen, Isänmaan uhrit, pp. 233–245, 255.

\(^{52}\) For a similar analysis on British soldiers’ maternal relation in the First World War, see Roper, Secret Battle, esp. pp. 1–4, 22–27, 250–254.

\(^{53}\) This is exactly what author Väinö Linna did in his Tuntematon sotilas: practically the only patently ‘patriotic’ soldier among his rank-and-file characters, Private Salo, is described as a very naïve person, not taken seriously by his fellow soldiers.
war effort as a personally and nationally meaningful endeavour; an experience at its strongest in 1941–42. We can justifiably interpret these poems as lyrical expressions of these high-flown sentiments, which were, in various degrees, familiar to a large body of soldiers.

If we agree that the poems can be used to analyse one aspect of soldiers’ war experiences, what can we learn from them about the subject of this chapter, the attraction of nationalism to the common soldier? Quite clearly, the nation with its various symbols acts as an empowering collective force, which demanded sacrifices but also ‘nourished’ the soldiers:

The Fatherland did not drink the blood of our fathers and brothers in vain.
Your daughters fed us with that mighty blood and made us so much stronger.54

In the midst of violence, fear, and personal insecurities such a national grounding anchored things in their right place and promised a reason for all the hardships. When the individual felt that he was at the mercy of forces beyond his control, the nation – often depicted as a mother figure – could be experienced as a protective cover which lifted the abstract moral and existential concerns from the soldiers’ shoulders. It was enough to take care of one’s immediate practical duties; the nation itself had given them larger meaning. Consequently, the nation as an imagined collective reflecting one’s identity was an object of keen admiration and love; a kind of narcissistic object of attachment, as historian Tuomas Tepora has written. Invested with positive emotions, the nation helped individuals to define the nature of their belonging, to cherish this idealised self-image, and to draw a clear line to the destructive and negative emotions projected onto the enemy.55

A specific feature of the poems is how they nationalise individual relations as ties of family or friendship. A concrete mother–son relationship is raised to an abstract one between the soldier and ‘Mother Finland’; a dead comrade comes to represent all the fallen ‘brothers’; departed ‘fathers’ challenge their ‘sons’ to defend the nation. The soldiers themselves are not merely individual beings, but avatars of quintessential ‘Finnish men’ with their mythic qualities; they line up with the timeless national continuum of men from ancient times to the future. Thus, the poems tend to see concrete human relations as mirroring their nationally defined ideals – and

vice versa. If we apply Michael Billig’s idea on how the everyday events, objects, and experiences are discursively ‘flagged’ as national, thus constructing a national identity, then what happens here is a flagging of personal human relations and attachments as a matter of national belonging. As was noted earlier, such a flagging must be rooted in the pre-war civic education and banal nationalism, so that the soldiers were already primed to nationalise the personal. In the context of the front, this preparedness was then actualised with apparent ease.

The conjunction of the personal and the national illustrates the above-mentioned aspect of experiencing the nation as an emotionally supportive entity, and it constructs a rhetorical device to describe the intensity of emotions – one feels for the nation as if it was one’s mother. But it also tells of a need to imbue the actual war experience with lasting, transcendent meanings and to find comfort in them in the face of brutal personal losses. Through the concept of comradeship, for instance, the dead close friend at the front lives on as an abstract idea worth defending, and through the motherly attributes of the nation the bloody acts of soldiering become analogous to defending one’s loved ones. By blurring the concrete and the abstract so effortlessly, the poems emphasise the extraordinary place of war and soldiers in the national cosmology: in having such collective meanings so readily at hand, the writers showed that they understood the mythic aspects of war and their own special role in the civic religion of nationalism.

The high pathos and national-romantic voice of the poems invites contemporary readers to see them as an embellishment of war’s brutal ‘real’ face. To some extent this is true; there was, for example, no well-known Finnish literary tradition from which the soldiers could have drawn to depict the destructive experiences of violence and shock. The writers were inclined to use the same nineteenth-century Runebergian tone of patriotic, martial heroism they had learned about in classrooms and heard in public speeches. Yet the literary genre of war’s romantic embellishment should not be understood only as something inauthentically superficial and learned by rote. The soldiers used the public language most readily available to them for

56 In the same vein, see Anderson, Imagined Communities, esp. pp. 142–144; Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality, pp. 72–80.
57 Billig, Banal Nationalism, pp. 6–11, 93 ff.
58 On the cult and significance of soldiers and their sacrifices in nationalism, see e.g. Anderson, Imagined Communities; Koselleck and Jeismann, Der politische Totenkult; Mosse, Fallen Soldiers.
making their experiences meaningful. ‘Embellishment’ was also a coping strategy to counter the fundamental horrors of the front. Parallel with the experience of disillusionment ran the phenomenon of idealisation; the violence and filthiness of the front required an embrace of a pure and beautiful *raison d’être* to make the horrible experiences meaningful.59

Rather than delusional imagination or manipulative retouch, the embellishment of war was actually a capacity to see an allegedly deeper, ideal content behind the concrete objects of war: the mutilated body of a comrade became an allegory for the body of Christ; the battered swathe of the frontline became an existential border between the warring nations; the spring flowers at the ruins in Eastern Karelia were a symbol of the dawning of Greater Finland. The poems throughout the collection are saturated with religious meanings and metaphors, either explicit or implicit. They position the soldiers within the violent, liminal outskirts of their society at the frontlines, but also within the historical continuum of the nation. The poems’ connection to the army’s ideological and religious education is evident.60 Yet importantly, even if the poems echo and renew the nationalistic war discourse, no one had forced the soldiers to put a pen to paper: this was a voluntary, deliberate act of imagining the nation.

In the practice of composing the poems, the soldiers were active participants in personalising the nation and nationalising the personal. Both in embedding their personal experiences to the collective imagery of the nation and in flagging their interpersonal relations as reflecting the national bonds of attachments, the soldiers created an empowering, comforting, and binding nation for themselves. As I have shown, this was a strongly emotional process.61 Furthermore, following Monique Scheer, I see the acts of writing the poems as a practice which mobilises the emotion. In so doing, they *are* the emotion – and it is thus rather irrelevant to ask, whether or not the poems correlate with some ‘genuine’ feelings beyond the lyrical verses. Although the English translations cannot mediate the rhyme of the original versions, composing the stanzas and reading them was also a material exercise, which inscribed the poems’ rhythm together with their national sentiments to the body and the mind.62

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60 On the scope and content of the army’s ideological and religious education, see e.g. Salminen, *Propaganda rintamajoukoissa*; Kemppainen, *Isänmaan uhrit*; Tilli, *Continuation War*.


Concluding Remarks: Artisans of Patriotism

In a nutshell, the stereotypical, idealised mindscape of war which the soldiers’ poems depict can be quite easily described. The central ethos of the poems is to see the soldier and his group of comrades as manly guardians of the nation, most forcefully symbolised either as an omnipotent collective or as a motherly/fatherly figure. Thus the nation is, at the same time, a demanding and a protective entity. Especially in 1941–42, the poems have an aggressive edge in stressing the crusader spirit and the virility of the conquering soldiers, who come to represent the imagined ideal of ageless Finnish masculinity. Besides the caring mothers, the women in the poems act as objects and spectators reinforcing soldiers’ martial masculinity. Through the concepts of frontline comradeship and patriotic sacrifice the violence of the front turns from a destructive threat into a productive experience, fostering community under fire and strengthening the nation. Furthermore, the religious rhetoric of passion and martyrdom gives the soldier’s death a spiritual aura and promises salvation. The Christian tradition is rich with the images of redeeming sacrifice, egalitarian brotherhood, and martyrdom in ennobling suffering, and the poet-soldiers used this archaic cultural resource to make their hardships explainable and tolerable.

This is, in short, a Finnish example of canonic pro patria mori nationalism. The national cosmology, so vivid in the poems, is not without occasional gaps and ruptures. The poems include some moments of disillusionment, irony, and doubt – and these moments would deserve an analysis of their own. But here, my key observation has been the poems’ striking uniformity and cohesion, which tells of a shared cultural recognition of the national call to arms and of the strong emotional support provided by the nation amidst the soldiers’ fears and insecurities. As foreign and unironically romantic the style and content of the verses may be for a modern reader, it is worth taking seriously the power of such nationalism to inspire, to give meaning, and to set the larger cultural framework for the soldiers’ war experience. Indeed, I see the authors of the poems as the artisans of patriotism – not as passive receivers of nationalist manipulation from above, but as the active producers of the object of their own passions and attachment.
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