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## A Concise History of Finland

Few countries in Europe have undergone such rapid social, political, and economic changes as Finland has during the last fifty years. David Kirby here sets out the fascinating history of this northern country, for centuries on the east–west divide of Europe, a country not blessed by nature, most of whose inhabitants still earned a living from farming fifty years ago, but which today is one of the most prosperous members of the European Union. He shows how this small country was able not only to survive in peace and war, but also to preserve and develop its own highly distinctive identity, neither Scandinavian nor eastern European. He traces the evolution of the idea of a Finnish national state, from the long centuries as part of the Swedish realm, through self-government within the Russian Empire, and into the stormy and tragic birth of the independent state in the twentieth century.

DAVID KIRBY is Professor of Modern History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies of University College London. His previous publications include *The Baltic World 1772–1993: Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change* (1995) and *The Baltic and North Seas* (with Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen, 2000).

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For the two Ls in my life –  
Laurie and Louis

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## PREFACE

Finland can fairly lay claim to have been one of the big success stories of the modern age. The transformation of what less than a century ago was a poor agrarian land on the northern periphery of Europe into one of the most prosperous states of the European Union today is a remarkable story, but is by no means an uneventful one. The gaining of independence from Russia in 1918 was accompanied by a bitter civil war which left its scars upon the body politic of Finland for decades. Finland fought three wars between 1939 and 1945, twice against the Soviet Union and once against Germany, and suffered grievous loss of life in addition to almost a tenth of its territory. The political history of the independent republic was for much of the twentieth century conflict-ridden and far removed from the image of consensual stability and good European membership that is projected today. The reinvention of Finland over the past two decades as a confident and assertive Eurostate, no longer in the shadow of the Soviet Union, has also been paralleled by a re-evaluation of the nation's history and identity. In particular, Finland's recent past has come under severe scrutiny, as part of what may be seen as a purging process not dissimilar to the examination in eastern European countries of 'blank spots' in the recent past.

This reassessment of the nation's past constitutes one of the starting-points for this book. It is primarily a political history, though due consideration is given to the social, cultural, and economic forces which have shaped that history, both in the short term and over the centuries.

Whilst adopting a conventional chronological structure, I have attempted to highlight those features which have made Finland what it is today. In particular, I have highlighted the spatial, temporal, and political dimensions that have helped determine how language and culture have evolved. The ways in which the inhabitants of a cold and rather infertile northern land have sought to adapt and innovate, how the land has been a means of sustenance and a symbol of nationhood, are at the heart of being Finnish. The struggle to wrest a living from the soil is an epic and abiding theme, running from the earliest days of human settlement as the massive ice-cap began to retreat, right up to the huge efforts in the late 1940s to resettle thousands of refugees. In this sense, Finland has been very much a frontier country, and this may well account for the two contradictory and conflicting forces that have made their mark in Finnish life over the centuries. The first seems to be strongly driven by a desire to harness and utilise all possible resources. It has created a strong tradition of obedience to authority, reinforced by the Lutheran church, strong bureaucratic institutions, and a rigid respect for the law, but it has also preferred co-operation and consensus to coercion. The second is a far less formally defined tradition, of wildness, lawlessness, a kind of frontiersman mentality that ignores or disobeys the law. The seven brothers of Aleksis Kivi's eponymous nineteenth-century novel, who flee the constraints of civilisation to live a wild, free life; the *puukkojunkkarit* or roaring boys of Ostrobothnia, with their big knives and boastful swagger; the bootleggers of the inter-war prohibition era, purveying lethal alcohol for thirsty customers around the land; even the lost, pathetic characters of Aki Kaurismäki's films: all stand within this loose tradition of truculent defiance, with its deep distrust of the *herrat*, or gentlefolk. This is a tradition that is easily lost in the glossy presentation of the success story, but it has also played a part in shaping the Finland of today.

The history of modern Finland seems to alternate between long periods of relative tranquillity and little visible change and short, intense bursts in which everything is transformed, and it appears to be going through one of these periods at the present time. I have attempted to understand and make sense of these changes against the background of a recent past that I myself experienced at first

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hand, and which shaped my own perceptions of and ideas about Finland, and I freely admit that many of my conclusions may be coloured by this experience. Over the years, I have benefited greatly from discussions with colleagues in Finland and the UK; without this, I would not have been able to write this book, and I would like to thank them all for their kindness and support. I must also thank the personnel of the National Board of Antiquities and of the Labour Archives in Helsinki for their help in the selection of the plates. I also wish to thank the trustees of the Presidential Archive for allowing me to reproduce the photograph of President Kekkonen being welcomed by President Kennedy in 1961.

Finland is officially a two-language state, and much of the historical terminology is of Swedish origin. Where I have deemed it appropriate, I have given the Swedish term with a Finnish equivalent. The names of provinces, counties, and towns are given only in Finnish, except in cases where historically the Swedish term is better known, for example, in the Treaty of Nystad of 1721. I have also given in parentheses, and in some cases used, the Finnish term for major institutions, such as the parliament.