



Mauno Koivisto

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MAUNO HENRIK KOIVISTO, Ph.D., who was born in Turku on 25th November 1923 and died in Helsinki on 12nd May 2017, was President of Finland for the period 1982–1994, the ninth holder of this office. He was invited to honorary membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1992.

Having been born into a Christian working-class home in Turku, Koivisto found that his education had to be limited in the first instance to the basic elementary school, to be followed at the age of 19 years by conscription into the armed forces and immediate dispatch to the front in the war against the Soviet Union. He frequently recalled his experiences of the war years, and recounted how he would often turn to the Bible for consolation in the difficult days towards the end of the war.

After the war Koivisto began to study alongside his work, completing his student matriculation examinations in 1949 and obtaining the degree of Candidate in Philosophy in 1953. At that point he was seriously considering an academic career. Three years later, in 1956, he submitted his doctoral thesis in sociology on *Social relations at the Port of Turku*, the material for which was derived from his own previ-

ous working environment, this was not merely a thesis but also a record of his observations and everyday experiences of working life.

The most significant turning point in Maunu Koivisto's life was his move to Helsinki in 1957, to become general manager of the Workers' Savings Bank. He had joined the Social Democrats some time earlier, but it was in Helsinki during the 1960s that he became an active politician. One of his advantages was that he could offer the party an opportunity to repair its relations with the then President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, with the Communists and with the Soviet Union.

In the wake of the Social Democrats' huge success in the 1966 parliamentary election, Koivisto became Minister of Finance in the new government, and it was at that time, too, that his exceptional popularity with the general public began to emerge. People remembered such things as his appearances in television talk-shows, which introduced the public to a new type of politician, who considered matters openly in front of his audience and had a mischievous twinkle in his eye all the time. The enigma was whether the curl of hair that flopped down onto his

forehead from time to time was intentional or not.

In the 1970s Mauno Koivisto was governor-general of the Bank of Finland, until his nomination for a second spell as Prime Minister in 1979, in spite of his somewhat strained relations with President Kekkonen. Finally, when Kekkonen tried to dismiss Koivisto's cabinet in spring 1981 something previously unheard-of happened: the Prime Minister refused to stand down on the grounds that he still enjoyed the confidence of Parliament.

President Kekkonen's declining health and eventual resignation in autumn 1981 gave Koivisto the pole position in the 1982 presidential election, and in effect what the people most wanted of him was that he would exercise his powers in a different manner from his predecessor. His popularity thus swept him to an overwhelming victory on that occasion and assured him of a second term of office in the 1988 election.

As President of Finland, Mauno Koivisto set about demolishing the vast power structures that Kekkonen had built up and strengthening the parliamentary system. One of his measures was to restrict future presidents to two six-year terms of office.

Koivisto's own second term coincided with the end of the Cold War and the dis-

integration of the Soviet Union, allowing Koivisto to move ahead boldly in autumn 1990 to lay aside the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between Finland and the Soviet Union in autumn, together with certain restrictions imposed by the 1947 Peace Treaty of Paris. Although Koivisto did not believe that the Soviet Union would collapse entirely, when this did happen in December 1991 he took immediate action and declared his readiness to steer Finland towards membership of the European Union.

The geopolitical position of Finland between East and West increased the interest of the leaders of the major powers in both the country itself and its president, and President Koivisto was engaged in a long exchange of correspondence with George H. W. Bush from autumn 1983 onwards, as also with Mikhail Gorbachev. The existence of confidential contacts in the latter direction made it possible to exchange opinions on both the relations between the major world powers and the internal situation within the Soviet Union. Koivisto published the results of his decades of interest in the affairs of Russia in 2001, in a book entitled *Venäjän idea* ("The Idea of Russia"). This work did President Koivisto much credit as a specialist in Russian history and culture.

Obituary by Seppo Hentilä

*Picture: Military Museum /
Finnish Defence Forces*