



Hannu Soikkanen

*4.8.1930 † 9.5.2020

PROFESSOR EMERITUS of Social History Hannu Soikkanen passed away on 9th April 2010. He was born on 4th August 1930.

Hannu Soikkanen was born as the eldest son of a working-class family in Kuusankoski, one of the oldest paper industry centres in Finland. That he became the “grand old man” of Finnish working-class history seems, in hindsight, almost predestined. This, however, was not a future he was aiming at when he began studying history at the University of Turku. In fact, he started to research the labour movement only after passing his master’s degree (which included a thesis on antiquity) when he was engaged as research assistant to Professor Einar W. Juva, who was writing the biography of President P. E. Svinhufvud. This led Soikkanen to study Svinhufvud’s relations with the working-class movement and resulted in a licentiate thesis in 1965, when he was just 25 years of age.

Moving forward, Soikkanen then started a much more ambitious doctoral thesis on the diffusion of socialist ideas and the beginnings of the Finnish socialist labour movement. This was an almost untouched area of research in the Finnish academic world, making the work truly challenging. There was even another challenge, an eco-

nomic one: research grants were in short supply at the time and, at least as far as history was concerned, many students secured a tolerable subsistence by taking on some additional commissioned work, such as writing local, parish or urban histories. Soikkanen, too, followed this pattern by signing an agreement to write the history of an industrial centre in Eastern Finland, Varkaus. This, of course, implied double the workload and delayed the dissertation. In April 1961, he defended his doctoral thesis, *Sosialismin tulo Suomeen* (The Coming of Socialism to Finland). It is worth mentioning that the history of Varkaus (c. 800 pages) still made good progress – it was published in 1963.

Soikkanen’s dissertation had a very favourable reception and also gained exceptional popularity. Just two years earlier, Väinö Linna’s novel *Täällä Pohjantähden alla* (Under the North Star) had aroused animated discussion and increased interest in the class conflict at the turn of the previous century and especially in the events of 1917 and 1918. A kind of social demand made Soikkanen well known and, in the next few years he was one of the most active popularisers of history in Finland, on the radio as well as in print media.

Sosialismin tulo Suomeen is now regarded a real classic. It also earned Soikkanen the appointment of lecturer (adjunct professor) in Finnish history at the University of Turku. Later, in 1967, he moved to a similar position in the Department of Economic and Social History in Helsinki. However, such part-time positions did not secure sufficient income and, for a number of years, Soikkanen was still employed by various commissioned history projects. The history of Varkaus was followed by a history of rural municipal administration (a 900-page book *Kunnallinen itsehallinto – kansanvallan perusta*, published in 1966), the history of the Karelian working-class movement (*Luovutetun Karjalan työväenliikkeen historia*, 1970) and, finally, the history of the Finnish Social Democratic Party. In spite of being commissioned writing, all these books dealt with important topics in the history of Finland and could be regarded as valuable fundamental research. This concerned, in particular, the history of the Social Democratic Party. The publication of the first volume (1899–1937) of this work in 1975 became a kind of turning-point in Soikkanen's career: at the end of the same year, he was appointed Professor Extraordinary of Social History at the Helsinki University.

Hannu Soikkanen worked in this position until his retirement in 1993, most of this time also as the head of department. A substantial share of his research activi-

ty was still devoted to the history of the Social Democratic Party, with the second volume of the work being published in 1987 and the third in 1891. He was, however, increasingly employed by various important historical projects. Some of them, such as the history of the Finnish "Red" government in 1918 and Finland in the Second World War, were joint enterprises involving historians from several universities; whereas a few others, *Income in Finland 1850–1913*, *Great Famine Years of the 1860s* and *Social History of Old Age*, were initiated by the Department of Economic and Social History and led by Soikkanen himself.

Soikkaen was invited to be a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1985.

Throughout his career Hannu Soikkanen was exceptionally open to influences from different quarters. Thanks to this, his studies are characterized – in addition to a solid empirical basis – by breadth and a richness of interpretations. He did not favour the theoretical frames of reference of the social sciences, but rather always aimed at presenting the events and phenomena in a proper, wider context. He never acted as a great proclaimer who believes to have discovered the one and only truth: in line with his modest nature and his desire to understand others, he was always cautious in his interpretations, never losing touch with the everyday realities of the past.

Obituary by Yrjö Kaukiainen

Photo: The Finnish Heritage Agency