



Tuomo Polvinen

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Professor Tuomo Ilmari Polvinen died in Helsinki on 22 January 2022, having turned 90 just over one month earlier. He was born in Helsinki on 2 December 1931. Polvinen was known as a prominent master of research and style, a historian who also made a significant career in archives. The author of a wide spectrum of works, Polvinen was also pleasant company and would often recall and relate historical anecdotes. Tuomo Polvinen was a reserved gentleman who would carefully consider his statements. His opinions were based on profound expertise and had great authority.

Polvinen's grandfather, goldsmith Tuomo Polvinen, had a famed shop on Gorokhovaya Street in St. Petersburg, creating masterly products that also satisfied the demanding, but often fickle tastes of the aristocracy in the imperial capital. Only slightly before the outbreak of World War I, Polvinen's grandfather moved his shop to Mikkeli. The family still had connections to post-revolution Soviet Union, as Tuomo's aunt worked at the Embassy of Finland in Moscow. Finnish diplomat Johan Nykopp recalls in his memoirs that "Miss Polvinen" accompanied J. K. Paasikivi to the Winter War peace negotiations in Moscow in March 1940. While serving the embassy,

Miss Polvinen would often overhear sharp comments made by the temperamental Councillor of State, offering an unparalleled portrait of the time.

After passing his matriculation examination, Tuomo Polvinen pursued studies in history. The colourful history of his extended family probably influenced this decision, not to mention his interest in the language and culture of our large neighbour. In the early 1950s, young student of history Tuomo Polvinen started attending the lectures of lecturer Igor Vahros, later Professor of Russian Language at the University of Helsinki. Tuomo continued honing his practical Russian language skills with his aunt.

Before earning his BA degree, Polvinen had joined the licentiate seminar of Professor Arvi Korhonen. Korhonen directed his students to study either major historical problems in foreign countries or Finland as part of an international series of events. Since Korhonen was well aware of the young student's interest in Russia, he encouraged Polvinen to explore the significance of Finland's railways in Russian politics. In 1962, Polvinen, aged 30, defended his doctoral thesis entitled *Die finnischen Eisenbahnen in den militärischen und politischen Plänen Russlands vor dem Ersten*

Weltkrieg. Although the focus was on Finland only, the study also demonstrated how difficult it was to navigate the different interests, viewpoints and motives of the Russian Empire preparing for war and the Grand Duchy of Finland fighting for its autonomy.

Polvinen wrote his doctoral thesis while working at the same time. He was in a good position to do so as, immediately after earning his master's degree, he had been hired as an archive assistant by the State Archives of Finland. Historical research based on a thorough knowledge of archival sources became an essential part of Tuomo Polvinen's researcher profile.

The beginning of his career in the archives happened to coincide with a phase when international archives collaboration was booming and the State Archives were investing in new technology. State Archivist Yrjö Nurmi was an excellent role model for young Polvinen. Nurmio emphasized the role of the archives as the most important infrastructure in the humanities and social sciences. He was an active researcher as Docent of Political History at the University of Helsinki, the chair of some learned societies and a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters. Nurmio soon had the new trainee archivist working on his projects, which were being launched around the same time. One particularly useful talent was Polvinen's good skills in Russian and his knowledge of the history of Russia and Russian materials.

In 1955 the State Archives had proposed to the newly established Scientific and Technological Cooperation Committee between Finland and the Soviet Union that key documents concerning Finland should be microfilmed. The Soviet Union accepted the offer of cooperation and both parties

sent a delegation to find suitable material to exchange. Tuomo Polvinen was involved in this scientific cooperation from the start. He guided the Soviet archives experts arriving in Finland on how to use the Finnish archives, which were markedly different from the Soviet ones in terms of their openness, as access to the Soviet archives was much more restricted. As a result of the exchange programme, Finland managed to obtain altogether 170 000 microfilm images of archival material concerning Finland from the Soviet archives in the 1950s. This cooperation also opened doors to the archives in Estonia, and President of the Republic Urho Kekkonen's visit to Tartu in 1964 further promoted cooperation, which would continue over the next few years and decade under special funding from the Ministry of Education.

The relations forged through common archives projects furthered Polvinen's research activities. The project initiated by him and its achievements were described in detail in the 1983 publication *Suomen ja Neuvostoliiton väliset suhteet 1948-1983. Asiakirjoja ja aineistoja* ("Finland-Soviet Union relations 1948-1983. Records and materials", 1983). The editors of the work included not only researchers, but also anchors Jaakko Numminen, and his successor Markku Linna. Both had served at the Department for Higher Education and Science and later as Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education.

Polvinen had an internationally oriented career. He improved his knowledge of his discipline and archival systems and his language skills by working in various roles at foreign universities. He was Aspirant of History at the Lomonosov Moscow State University and worked as Assistant of Eastern European History at the University

of Marburg. His time at Marburg was significant, because he was asked to join the research team of the renowned Professor Peter Scheibert.

Polvinen became known to the reading Finnish audience with his breakthrough study *Suomi suurvaltojen politiikassa* (“Finland in the politics of the Great Powers”, 1964, Swedish edition 1969). The book was met with both admiration and confusion from the generation that had lived through the war years. It was praised for its strictly logical, cool and clear style that made it pleasant to read. In the study, Finland was positioned as an object in the great military and political game of World War II, in which “under conditions of prevailing international anarchy, the interests of one’s own state signified a principle above all others”.

Polvinen’s next major work was *Venäjäjän vallankumous ja Suomi* (“The Russian Revolution and Finland”, 1967, 1971). It is rare for a historian studying the modern period to choose such a sensitive topic of research that sparks major political controversy. The work demonstrated Polvinen’s thorough knowledge of the history of Russia and his skill to focus on the realities of his vast archival material. He did stress the problematic nature of the topic, where the sovereignty of the Finnish people was up against the Bolshevik world revolution. According to Polvinen, recognizing Finland’s independence was not an end in itself for Lenin, but above all a means to bring about a socialist revolution in Finland. This conclusion was a bold claim at the time, because it appeared to tarnish Lenin’s shiny image as a hero for recognizing Finland’s independence and rather showed that he had influenced the events of 1918 in Finland. Polvinen’s cool, objective eye also earned recognition and confidence among Soviet historians and sci-

ence administration: he served as chairman of the history working group of the Scientific and Technological Cooperation Committee between Finland and the Soviet Union and a member of the committee.

After his career in the archives, Polvinen continued doing research. Archives concerning World War II and partly the post-war period had been opened to researchers in England, Sweden, Finland and the United States. Material also started trickling out of the Soviet Union. Polvinen made good use of all this and produced the trilogy *Barbarossasta Teheraniin, Teheranista Jaltaan and Jaltasta Pariisiin rauhaan* (“From Barbarossa to Tehran, From Tehran to Yalta, From Yalta to the Paris Peace Treaty, 1979–1981”). Here, Polvinen revisited a topic he had explored earlier in the 1960s, this time more thoroughly. The series was critically acclaimed in every respect, and rightly so, as it is a fundamental work of Finnish history that deals with some of the most fateful and yet most crucial years in the history of our country. In 1987, the University of Minnesota Press published a summary of the series in English entitled *Between East and West. Finland in International Politics, 1944–1947*. This work is one of the most important works published in an international language that analyses Finland’s position after World War II.

Following the trilogy, Polvinen shifted his attention to another area – he became a Personal historian who would place his subjects in wider historical and social contexts. In his study *Valtakunta ja rajamaa. N.I. Bobrikov Suomen kenraalikuvernöörinä 1898–1904* (“Empire and borderland. N. I. Bobrikov as Governor-General of Finland 1898–1904”, 1984), he showed that Russia approached Finland from a politico-military

perspective and therefore sent a soldier to appease Finland. According to Polvinen, near the end of the 1890s, Nicholas II had had to think about how, with the help of God, he would “find a necessary, respectable and useful person” to become Governor-General of the borderland. Nikolai Bobrikov was appointed to the post – with or without God’s help. When Bobrikov was killed, Nicholas II did consider it an enormous and irrecoverable loss, according to his diary, but then proceeded to write about the weather of the day: in the eyes of the empire, this was nothing more than a borderland, whereas for Finland, the very existence of the country was at stake. Polvinen’s work was critically acclaimed, even internationally, due to its firm grasp of the big picture and its manner of expression.

After the death of J. K. Paasikivi, both Alli Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen had asked Arvi Korhonen – a good friend of Paasikivi’s – to write a biography of the late statesman. Korhonen refused and with good reason, because Paasikivi’s private archives remained inaccessible to researchers for 25 years, according to Paasikivi’s own wishes. But when this task became possible, Tuomo Polvinen was the obvious choice as the author of the work. He accepted, on the reasonable condition that he would not write a history portraying Paasikivi as former living legend, but a study that meets high quality criteria. The result was a massive five-volume series that deals with the history of Finland as a whole and its international relations, spanning from the late 19th century to the 1950s. In this study, Polvinen crystallized the vast knowledge he had obtained on Russia and when exploring various national archives. The biography of

J. K. Paasikivi also provides a chronological summary of the scope of Tuomo Polvinen’s scientific research.

Polvinen’s extensive, high-quality research work was based not only on his undeniable talent, but also on the availability of funding. In the 1960s he worked as an assistant both at the University of Helsinki and at Marburg. Polvinen was Senior Research Fellow at the State Committee for the Arts 1965–1968. Prior to his appointment as State Archivist, Polvinen served for a few years as Professor of General History at Tampere University. After managing the State Archives, Polvinen was appointed Professor of General History at the University of Helsinki, focusing especially on modern history, and held this post until he retired. His research work was made possible by various leaves of absence and opportunities, such as research professorships at the Academy of Finland 1979–1989 and 1992–1995 and other funding.

The high-quality research produced by Tuomo Polvinen always kept a finger on the pulse of the times and was – and still is – widely discussed. It was always an easy choice for his publisher WSOY to include his works on their publication agenda. Polvinen’s work did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries, and he received several recognitions. These included awards for merit from the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Alfred Korde-lin Fund for General Development and Education. Polvinen was invited as a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1971. He was also a member of the Russian Academy of the Arts. He was awarded the Commander Cross of the Order of the Lion of Finland. He was also a two-time recipient of the State Award for Public Information.

Hannu Heikkilä and Jussi Nuorteva

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