



PASI IHALAINEN

The Springs of Democracy

*National and Transnational Debates on Constitutional Reform
in the British, German, Swedish and Finnish Parliaments, 1917–1919*

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Table of contents

Acknowledgements 10

List of abbreviations 12

1. Introduction 13

- 1.1 The reform debates of the revolutionary era 1917–19 in inter- and transnational comparisons 13
- 1.2 Towards a comparative and transnational history of political discourse 23
- 1.3 Discourse-oriented political history based on parliamentary sources 37
- 1.4 The structure of the analysis 41

2. National backgrounds of constitutional disputes from spring 1917 to summer 1919 44

- 2.1 The standstill in the British constitutional reform before and during the war 44
- 2.2 Universal male suffrage in Germany. Prussian executive power and scepticism about parliamentarism 50
- 2.3 Prolonged disputes on suffrage and parliamentary government in Sweden 57
- 2.4 Finland – a grand duchy of the Russian Empire with exceptionally broad suffrage but no parliamentary government 62

3. The spring of democracy in 1917: The new constitutional scene created by the prolonged war, the Russian Revolution and the American intervention 72

- 3.1 Britain: The wartime situation used to force through a postponed reform 72
 - 3.1.1 A continuing constitutional crisis 72
 - 3.1.2 Creating ‘a new Britain’ consensually in a time of war and revolution 75
 - 3.1.3 Cautious Labour and Liberal democrats versus patently democratic Conservatives 85

- 3.1.4 Creating a 'Parliament of the people' while avoiding a 'constitutional revolution' 92
- 3.1.5 A new Parliament – 'a mirror of the nation' engaging the citizens and placing its trust in the masses 97
- 3.1.6 The committee stage during a campaign for amendments 104
- 3.2 Wartime demands for the democratisation and parliamentarisation of Imperial Germany 108
 - 3.2.1 The German polity in a profoundly transformed world 108
 - 3.2.2 Implications of the war, the Russian Revolution and the British reform for the German constitution 113
 - 3.2.3 The Western democracies and a new democratic order in Germany 124
 - 3.2.4 The role of a 'free' German people and the masses in a new era 131
 - 3.2.5 What would the co-sovereignty of parliaments mean? 134
- 3.3 Sweden: Renewed reform demands under the threat of revolution 139
 - 3.3.1 The situation created by a repeatedly postponed suffrage reform 139
 - 3.3.2 Building 'dams of ice' or welcoming the spring in the midst of transnational change 143
 - 3.3.3 A global breaking-up of the ice for the forces of democracy? 154
 - 3.3.4 The role of the Swedish people in the reformed polity 162
 - 3.3.5 Should parliamentarism be seen as the established system, an instrument for creating a better society through debate, or a system to be taken over by the people? 166
- 3.4 Finland: The legitimacy of the parliament deteriorates at the moment of democratisation and parliamentarisation 173
 - 3.4.1 Sovereignty in the former grand duchy: in the parliament, the government or a Russian-style 'democracy'? 173
 - 3.4.2 The international, imperial and national political order changed by the war and revolution 185
 - 3.4.3 International democracy or the vernacular 'rule by the people'? 197
 - 3.4.4 Defining the position of the people within the Finnish polity 205
 - 3.4.5 Prospects for a parliamentary Finland: opposing Social Democratic and bourgeois views 207

4. The autumn of 1917: A completed, a suspended and a partial reform – and a failed reform leading to a civil war 214

- 4.1 Britain: The rising politisation of democracy 214
 - 4.1.1 A final confrontation on extended suffrage between the two chambers 214
 - 4.1.2 'This Bill is a revolution': The reform in relation to British constitutional history and foreign examples 219

- 4.1.3 The increasingly contested definition of 'democracy' 225
- 4.1.4 'Women in Parliament, in Governments': The widening involvement of the people in politics 232
- 4.1.5 The future of a democratic parliamentary polity after the war 236
- 4.2 Germany: Democratisation and parliamentarisation come to a halt 240
- 4.3 Sweden: The introduction of parliamentary government as a safeguard against domestic upheaval 251
- 4.4 Finland: Discursive struggles over democracy and parliamentarism turn into an attempted revolution 256
 - 4.4.1 The Bolshevik Revolution and the questioned legitimacy of Finland's disputatious new parliament 256
 - 4.4.2 Reforms to be implemented by a national parliament or by an international revolution? 259
 - 4.4.3 The Finnish 'rule by the people' in the shadow of Bolshevism 273
 - 4.4.4 A people divided by class and parliamentary discourse 281
 - 4.4.5 Diminishing trust in parliamentary government escalates the crisis 282

5. The Spring of 1918: Western and Prussian versions of 'parliamentarism' clash in the Swedish and Finnish parliaments 292

- 5.1 Britain after of the Representation of the People Act 292
- 5.2 Germany: All quiet on the reform front 297
- 5.3 Sweden: A parliamentarised ministry introduces its first reform proposal 298
 - 5.3.1 Anti-reformism bolstered by a civil war next door 298
 - 5.3.2 Surrounding wars and revolutions as transnational agents of political change 302
 - 5.3.3 An attempted democratic breakthrough 306
 - 5.3.4 Bypassing the political rights of the Swedish people 310
 - 5.3.5 All parties on the side of parliamentarism – but different kinds of parliamentarism 312
- 5.4 Finland reconstructed to resemble a little Prussia 315
 - 5.4.1 The attempt to restrict reform by restoring the monarchy 315
 - 5.4.2 A counter-revolution built on an assumed German victory 321
 - 5.4.3 Redescribed rightist or principled centrist democracy – or no democracy at all? 326
 - 5.4.4 Disappointment with the Finnish people or continuing confidence in it 331
 - 5.4.5 Limited debates on parliamentarism in the Rump Parliament 337

6. The autumn of 1918: German, Swedish and Finnish constitutional debates in the face of a democratic turn 340

- 6.1 Democratic suffrage applied in Britain for the first time 340
- 6.2 Germany loses the war, introduces parliamentary government and experiences a revolution 349
 - 6.2.1 The course of the German Revolution up to the fall of the Kaiser 349
 - 6.2.2 Comparing the German Revolution with the Bismarckian system and the Finnish counterrevolution 351
 - 6.2.3 Divergent understandings of German democracy 355
 - 6.2.4 The German people as a political agent 357
 - 6.2.5 Crypto-parliamentarism comes into the open 359
 - 6.2.6 The radical phase of the revolution in November and December 1918 363
- 6.3 Sweden introduces an electoral reform: No revolution like those in Russia, Finland or Germany 367
 - 6.3.1 A reluctant rightist opposition gives in after the fall of the German monarchy 367
 - 6.3.2 The war and revolution as agents of domestic reform 373
 - 6.3.3 Optimistic and pessimistic visions of a democratic Sweden 381
 - 6.3.4 The relationship between the will of 'the people' and the interests of 'the realm' is problematised 392
 - 6.3.5 Parliamentarism under democratised suffrage 399
- 6.4 The monarchist majority of the Finnish Rump Parliament in search of a stable polity 401
 - 6.4.1 The strange logic of Finnish constitutional politics in late summer and autumn 1918 401
 - 6.4.2 A controversy over the excessive transnational influence of Germany 403
 - 6.4.3 Monarchical vs. republican democracy 407
 - 6.4.4 'The will of the people' interpreted for and against a republic 411
 - 6.4.5 Parliamentarism redefined or endangered by the monarchists? 417

7. The spring of 1919: The beginning of an era of democracy and parliamentarism? 422

- 7.1 Britain: Parliamentary democracy established or a bureaucratic state reinforced? 422
- 7.2 The construction of a democratic and parliamentary Germany in the Weimar National Assembly 428
 - 7.2.1 Expert planning for a new constitution 428
 - 7.2.2 A revolution against dictatorship 432
 - 7.2.3 Defining 'the most democratic democracy in the world' 435
 - 7.2.4 'Power in the state belongs to the people' 445
 - 7.2.5 Extolling, limiting and ignoring parliamentarism 450

- 7.3 Sweden: Adjusting the principles of a future democracy 455
 - 7.3.1 Swedish parties after the suffrage reform 455
 - 7.3.2 Internationalism after war and revolution 457
 - 7.3.3 Further prospects for democracy and parliamentarism 458
 - 7.3.4 Politics of the people in a democratic Sweden 461
 - 7.3.5 A glance across the Gulf of Bothnia 463
- 7.4 Finland: Moving towards a compromise on a presidential parliamentary republic 465
 - 7.4.1 Re-orienting the polity after the war 465
 - 7.4.2 Rethought international comparisons and transnational connections after the war and the revolutions 475
 - 7.4.3 Searching for a compromise between Socialist, centrist and rightist democracy 481
 - 7.4.4 Popular sovereignty recognised by all but one parliamentary party 488
 - 7.4.5 The remaining limits on parliamentarism 495

8. The entangled parliamentary revolutions of 1917–19: Comparison, discussion and conclusion 504

Appendix: Selected key events in national politics 534

Bibliography 536

Primary sources 536

Newspapers 537

Literature 537

Abstract 555

Subject and Place Index 556

Index of Names 577

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Jyväskylä, 15 March 2017,
the centennial anniversary of the abdication of Nicholas II

Pasi Ihalainen

List of abbreviations

AK: Documents of the Lower Chamber of the Riksdag (Sweden)
DDP: German Democratic Party
DVP: German People's Party
FK: Documents of the Upper Chamber of the Riksdag (Sweden)
Hansard: Official Reports of the Houses of Parliament
SDP: Social Democratic Party (Finland)
SPD: Social Democratic Party of Germany
USPD: Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany
Verhandlungen: Documents of the Lower Chamber of the Reichstag
(Germany)
VP: Documents of the Eduskunta (Finland)
WSF: Worker's Suffrage Federation

1. Introduction

1.1 The reform debates of the revolutionary era 1917–19 in inter- and transnational comparisons

The First World War was a transnational tragedy the effects of which crossed boundaries and led to the questioning of established truths. This unprecedented tragedy, which made peoples suffer without the prevailing political systems responding to their views, also provided an unexpected impetus for reforms that extended democratic suffrage and increased the parliamentary responsibility of governments. The total war, consequent revolutions in Russia and Germany, suffrage reforms, declarations of independence and modifications of constitutions affected and were affected by changing understandings of ‘democracy’, the political role of ‘the people’ and ‘parliamentarism’. These terms and related concepts became objects of constant debate, redefinition and contestation within, and at times between, European political cultures as part of constitutional and political struggles. The dynamics of the discursive processes related to the transformation catalysed by the war is the subject of this book.

Unlike in previous revolutionary eras, ‘democracy’ (or ‘the power or rule by the people’ in various vernacular translations) was widely used of in parliaments and newspapers in the years 1917–19 as nearly all political groups wished to identify themselves with democracy and view themselves as democrats. Especially among socialists and liberals, the experiences of the war, turns in political discourse and constitutional shifts after spring 1917 gave rise to redefinitions of the political order that were of historic importance. The understandings of democracy were inherently diverse, however, and tended to get more so in the ideological heat of reform demands and constitutional debates that often led to the expression of radicalised stances before ending up with compromises with which few would be completely happy. Attitudes towards parliamentarism were also becoming more positive in that parliaments came to be regarded as providing a proper medium for the representation of the will of the people in the political process, though parliamentarism remained an object of even greater dispute than democracy. Many European political cultures were, as a result of the devastating war, entering a new stage of nationally multi-sited

and transnationally connected debates on democracy, the political role of the people and parliamentarism.

This transformative period will be explored comparatively and transnationally on the basis of parliamentary and media sources in what follows. Such an exploration relativises any simplifying narratives of popular sovereignty and representative democracy as having emerged already among the English revolutionaries or Dutch authors in the seventeenth century or as a result of the French Enlightenment thought, innovative political practices in mid-eighteenth-century Sweden or the American or French Revolutions in the eighteenth century.¹ It also relativises narratives on democracy being straightforwardly related to the rise of capitalism² or having made linear progress under liberal constitutionalism in the course of the nineteenth century.

Recent research suggests, after all, that Europe that went to war in 1914 was far from democratic in either a French revolutionary or any post-First World War sense. As Bo Stråth has pointed out, the century that followed the French Revolution had been characterised by competing and contradictory definitions of the nation and the people and their relations to sovereignty – and hence increasingly also of democracy.³ Volker Sellin has argued that Europe had experienced since 1814 a century of restorations, all of them aimed at countering the revolutionary principle of popular sovereignty and solving crises of legitimacy of monarchies by introducing reactionary constitutions, Russia of 1906 being an extreme case.⁴ Researchers in the project ‘Europe 1815–1914: Between Restoration and Revolution’ have likewise demonstrated that no linear development from absolute monarchies to representative democracy existed but that authoritarian regimes had rather introduced constitutions and parliaments for anti-revolutionary purposes.⁵ By the early 1910s, the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Empire – and to a great extent also states such as Britain, Germany, Sweden and Finland – were experiencing a domestic political crisis in which there was a parliament but also widespread disappointment with what it had to offer in terms of popular representation. While conservatives reacted by supporting extra-parliamentary politics, leftists looked for ways to replace parliaments

1 A summary of the conventional narrative can be found in Eley 2002, 18. Contemporary parliamentary and public as well as later historiographical debates on democracy in the late eighteenth century have been discussed by Ihalainen 2010, 1–28. Teleological narratives of nineteenth-century progress from absolutism to parliamentary democracy on the basis of the values of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution has been questioned by Stråth 2016, 1–2, 5, 17. Inspired by Reinhart Koselleck’s emphasis on discursive struggles in politics he emphasises contingency, human agency and imagination in and the connected fragility of democratic projects instead.

2 This is questioned also by Geoff Eley who rather links the rise of democracy to the socialist analysis of capitalism and calls for societal reorganization. Eley 2002, 4, 18, 109.

3 Stråth 2016, 7.

4 Sellin 2014, 7–11, 135.

5 Grotke & Prutsch (eds) 2014, 4, 13.

as 'bourgeois' institutions with more democratic political bodies. Both ways of thinking increased potential for the radicalisation of political debate and expectations of major political changes once a major war was encountered.⁶

The transforming effects of the First World War on political systems have been aptly summarised in recent research inspired by its centennial, though without particular attention to parliamentary debates. Jan-Werner Müller, Jay Winter, Richard Bessel and Jörn Leonhard have characterised the Great War as a test of the credibility and legitimacy of the principles, hierarchies and institutions of the states involved in it. The war and the connected revolutions challenged all previous conceptions of the state and society, intensifying and reorienting postponed processes of reform. The old categories of those entitled to participate in the political process tended to lose relevance as everyone was required to participate in the defence of the state. The experiences of the war and the revolutions separated the old world from the new, opening new visions for the future. Prevailing political structures and connected political concepts were transformed by new, often more optimistic conceptions of the proper relationship between the people and the state, formulated in new constitutions and reinterpretations of old ones. The demands placed on the people during the war often also led to the strengthening of parliamentarism. At the same time, the pervasive war potentially vindicated violence not only in international relations but also in domestic politics.⁷ Violence could be used to replace dialogical means of political action, including parliamentary deliberation, as a way to resolve conflicts of interest. In addition to their democratising and parliamentarising effects, the war and the revolutions also inspired attempts to use extra-parliamentary methods to force through societal change that voting and the parliamentary framework seemed unable to produce.

State interventions in various areas of societal life increased drastically during the war. Richard Bessel has pointed out the risks that such interventions entailed: the rulers might lose their credibility and the legitimacy of their power if they failed to fulfil the rising expectations of the people. Especially in countries whose political systems did not care much about popular opinion, wartime sacrifices and shortages tended to give rise to popular discontent. There followed calls for political reforms that would strengthen the participation of the people at large in politics in a way that corresponded to their participation in fighting the war or their contribution to the wartime economy. However, the combination of poor economic conditions and postponed reforms could have similar effects in countries that were not directly involved in the war as well. Without the military disasters of the war, there would hardly have been revolutions in Russia and Germany, Bessel argues.⁸ And without these revolutions and the German defeat, there would

6 Lieven 2015. I am grateful for Alexander Semyonov for pointing at this pan-European pattern.

7 Leonhard 2008; Müller 2011, 16–19; Winter 2014, 1; Becker 2014, 32; Bessel 2014, 126–7, 144. On the totality of the war and political changes, see also Müller 2002, 289, and Leonhard 2014, 11, 14.

8 Bessel 2014, 128–30, 136, 139–44.

not have been such clear political transformations in Sweden and Finland, for instance, I argue in this book. Pan-European experiences of massive violence led to brutality finding its way into domestic political conflicts also in countries that were not directly involved in the war,⁹ most famously in Finland. International wartime debates on national and popular sovereignty and revolution, furthermore, had global effects, awakening expectations for autonomy and independence in various national contexts.¹⁰

The war internationalised (in the sense of producing references to relations and comparisons between nation states) and transnationalised (in the sense of creating political discourses that crossed frontiers through networks and individual contacts) debates on political reform. While the reform processes took place, and have been studied, primarily at the level of nation states, I argue that they were also more transnationally linked than has been customarily recognised. Wartime propaganda increasingly presented the battle as concerning the basic character of the states involved. However, the political elites and the press had been transnationally connected before the war and remained so during it. Furthermore, as Richard Bessel has pointed out, national and transnational interaction between people of various social backgrounds caused by the war led to the dissemination of revolutionary ideas and contributed to the rise of a shared understanding of the necessity of an immediate political transformation. Individuals acted as micro-level agents, transferring a revolutionary mood from one national context to another;¹¹ conversely, individuals might also reinforce reactionary views held in one country in other national contexts, as this book will show. The reform debates became entangled both on the macro and micro levels, and their transnational connections deserve more analytical attention. I have hence paid particular attention to revolution as a transnational phenomenon. As Robert Gerwarth has put it, the Russian Revolution redefined international politics and provoked anti-revolutionary action to counter real and imagined Bolshevik threats. It led to brutal civil wars inspired by the Bolshevik conception of foreseeable resistance from the old elites and a class war as thus unavoidable – Finland being a case in point. This new type of revolution also extended the practitioners of revolutionary agitation from intellectuals and activists to self-educated revolutionaries who were ready to use both radical rhetoric and radical action.¹² By focusing on these phenomena I wish especially to provide a complementary interpretation on the background of the Finnish Civil War. I am not interested in questions of ‘guilt’ but aim at understanding national

9 Gerwarth 2014, 640–1.

10 Leonhard 2014, 655, 706, 937, 940–2.

11 Bessel 2014, 141–3.

12 Gerwarth 2014, 642, 644–9. Robert Gerwarth concludes on the basis of the numbers of Russian volunteers and the assumption that the moderate Social Democrats controlled the revolutionary movement that there was no real Bolshevik threat in Finland. However, he does not consider the revolutionary discourse of the left and its implications on both sides of the conflict; Leonhard 2014, 940.

During the First World War, conflicts between the people's sacrifices and their political participation led to crises of parliamentary legitimacy. This volume compares British, German, Swedish and Finnish debates on revolution, rule by the people, democracy and parliamentarism and their transnational links. The British reform, although more about winning the war than advancing democracy, restored parliamentary legitimacy, unlike in Germany, where Allied demands for democratisation made reform appear treasonous and fostered native German solutions. Sweden only adopted Western political models after major confrontations, but reforms saw it embark on its path to Social Democracy. In Finland, competing Russian revolutionary discourses and German- and Swedish-inspired appeals to legality brought about the deterioration of parliamentary legitimacy and a civil war. Only a republican compromise imposed by the Entente, following a royalist initiative in 1918, led to the construction of a viable polity.



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