

Are Finns ashamed of their independence?

A 21st century look upon Uno Kailas' patriotic poetry

Abstract

Born in 1901, dead in 1933, Uno Kailas witnessed the process of Finnish independence 100 years ago. As a volunteer of the Aunus expedition, he had a personal experience of the natural continuity between the Finnish and Karelian peoples. Though remembered nowadays as an expressionist poet, he was mostly celebrated during his lifetime for his patriotic verse. In the Finnish literary landscape, he is therefore a major personality regarding the times of independence.

While recently editing a booklet about Kailas' poetry, I encountered unexpected reactions from my Finnish publisher. For instance, whereas I was considering that “the patriotic poems of Kailas inspired by the Civil War were published again in 1941 in a different context”, I was replied that things could not be put that way because “the context was exactly the same”. Of course there may have been language issues, but I suspect even a language issue can reveal a meaningful lot. Moreover, some of the poems themselves proved to be considered shocking by the younger generation.

This experience suggested me a couple of thoughts. Obviously, the tone of Finnish patriotic poetry from the time of independence is not politically correct nowadays. Does it mean that the notion of independence itself is something to be ashamed of? Or that it is time to rewrite history? In a “different context”? Or “exactly the same”? This paper will answer these questions in the light of the life and works of Uno Kailas.

15 min.

Introduction

Born in 1901, dead in 1933, Uno Kailas witnessed the whole process leading to the independence of Finland a hundred years ago.

As a volunteer of the Aunus expedition, he had a personal experience of the **natural continuity between the Finnish and Karelian peoples**.

While recently editing a booklet about his poetry and its **Occitan translations**, I encountered unexpected reactions. For instance, whereas I was considering that “the patriotic poems of Kailas inspired by the Civil War were published again in 1941 in a different context”, I was replied passionately that things could not be put that way because “the context was exactly the same”. There must have been some misunderstanding, of course, due to the use of different languages or cultural references. But nevertheless, this passionate reaction revealed a conflictual issue. As a consequence, I thought this question was worth developing in the present paper.

So my purpose here is to focus on some Finnish patriotic poetry from the time of independence, which is obviously **not politically correct nowadays**. The area is the Finno-Ugric world between the Baltic and the White Seas, and the study deals with the relation between history and literature after the Russian revolution and a hundred years of Finnish independence.

1. Heinola and the Russian revolutions

Kailas was born and raised in the countryside of the Grand-Duchy of Finland, in the town of Heinola, at the time of Grand-Duke and Emperor Nicholas II.

He was a child when the revolution of 1905 led to the abolition of absolute monarchy in Russia, and 16 when the Emperor abdicated.

In November 1917, the Bolsheviks declared a general right of self-determination for the peoples of Russia. The Finnish Parliament immediately voted the independence on December 6th.

2. Aunus expedition

The consequent civil war (January-May 1918) settled the new country into Western Europe, under the influence of Germany, and raised once again the question of the Eastern border of Finland. Already in February 1918, General Mannerheim declared: “I swear [...] I shall not set my sword to the scabbard until [...] the last soldier and hooligan of Lenin is deported from Finland as well as from White Sea Karelia”¹.

Under the regency of Mannerheim in 1919, an army of a thousand Finnish volunteers try launching an expedition into Russian Karelia with the intention to take from the Bolsheviks the area of Eastern Karelia – that is the region of Aunus (in Russian: *Olónets*), on the other side of lake Ládoga. Uuno Kailas, just 18, enrolls into these troops.

It is one of the several so-called *heimosodat* (“kinship wars”), with an idea of solidarity from the Finns towards their Karelian cousins.

In the autobiographical short story “Bruno on kuollut” [“Bruno is dead”] (*Novelleja*, p. 162-163), Kailas recalls how the young soldiers in April 1919 gloriously believed they were coming to the rescue of oppressed people, but then the officers told them this was

“a crusade for culture; we want to move the cultural border of Western countries until lake Onéga and river Svir”.

¹ CGE Mannerheim’s “*Miekkavala*” [“Sword Oath”], February 23rd, 1918: “*minä vannon sen suomalaisen talonpoikaisarmeijan nimessä, jonka ylipäällikkönä minulla on kunnia olla, etten pane miekkaani tuppeen, ennenkuin laillinen järjestys vallitsee maassa, ennenkuin kaikki linnoitukset ovat meidän käsissämme, ennenkuin viimeinen Leninin soturi ja huligaani on karkotettu niin hyvin Suomesta kuin Vienan Karjalastakin*”.

The **border as a level of conscience** shall be a permanent subject in all the symbolist poetry of Uno Kailas. Whether it be a door, a window or an eye, for instance, there is always a fragile lid between two worlds, which is at the same time a separation and a frightening passageway. In the patriotic verse, this image obviously gets a very political meaning.

3. Helsinki, capital of the Republic of Finland

After volunteering in the Aunus expedition in 1919 and serving in the army of the Republic of Finland from 1923 to 1925, Kailas will keep mentioning in his poems this position of the homeland as a border between two incompatible worlds. The idea of a strong Finland being the “guardian” of “Western” order at the gates of the “Eastern world” reappears in the poem “Rajalla” [“At the border”] (*Uni ja kuolema*):

Rajalla	At the border
<p>Raja railona aukeaa. Edessä Aasia, Itä. Takana Länttä ja Eurooppaa; varjelen, vartija, sitä.</p>	<p>The border cracks open. In the front: Asia, East. In the back: West and Europe; I am the guardian who guards it.</p>
<p>Takana kaunis isänmaa kaupungein ja kylin. Sinua poikas puolustaa, maani, aarteista ylin.</p>	<p>Behind me, the beautiful fatherland with its towns and hamlets. Your son defends you, my land, supreme treasure.</p>
<p>...</p>	<p>...</p>
<p>Synkeä, kylmä on talviyö, hyisenä henkii Itä. Siell' ovat orjuus ja pakkotyö; tähdet katsovat sitä.</p>	<p>Dark, cold is the winter night, frozen blows the East. Over there live slaves and serfs, under the look of the stars.</p>
<p>Kaukaa, aroilta kohoa Iivana Julman haamu. Turman henki, se ennustaa: verta on näkevä aamu.</p>	<p>From the far-away steppes comes up the spectre of Ivan the Terrible. Spirit of destruction, it predicts: blood shall be seen by the morning.</p>
<p>Mut isät harmaat haudoistaan aaveratsuilla ajaa; karhunkeihäitä kourissaan syöksyvät kohti rajaa.</p>	<p>But the grey fathers from their tombs ride on ghost-horses; bear-hunting spears in their fists, they rush towards the border.</p>
<p>...</p>	<p>...</p>
<p>Ei ole polkeva häpäisten sankarileponne majaa rauta-antura vihollisen, — suojelen maani rajaa!</p>	<p>It shall not dishonouringly tread your heroic resting place, the iron-foot of the enemy, — I'll protect the border of my land!</p>
<p>Ei ota vieraat milloinkaan kallista perintöänne. Tulkoot hurttina aroiltaan! Mahtuvat multaan tänne.</p>	<p>The strangers shall never take our precious heritage. Let them come like jackals from their steppes! They shall bury themselves here.</p>
<p>...</p>	<p>...</p>

Kailas now lives in Helsinki, capital and cultural centre of the young Republic of Finland, where he publishes four collections of poems between 1922 and 1928.

Although he briefly collaborates with the modernist writers, his individualistic character quickly sets some distance between them: rather than their enthusiasm towards modernity, he prefers the introspection of symbolist and expressionist artists.

4. Winter 1932-1933 among the Finnish colony in Nice

1931 is the year of publication of his last collection, *Uni ja kuolema* [*Sleep and Death*] but also of the discovery of his fatal lung illness. His doctors advise him to spend some time in Nice.

The collection *Uni ja kuolema* contains a series of three patriotic poems composed for the anniversary of independence in 1930: “Isien tie”, “Ceterum censeo” and “Suomalainen rukous” [“A Finnish Prayer”].

Ceterum censeo (<i>Uni ja kuolema</i> , p. 128) Kaksi on tarpeen: seisoa valvoin, ynnä: vahva olla. ... Siks, kunis olemme jäähtyneitä, silloin, veljet, taistelemme! Kaunis on verellä sydäntemme synnyinmaata juottaa.	Ceterum censeo Two things are necessary: to stand on guard, and: to be strong. ... So until we be cooled, then, brothers, shall we fight! Beautiful it is with the blood of our hearts to water the native land.
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In Nice, the poet meets the small Finnish community of the Riviera, especially the family of composer Armas Launis, who has just left Finland in 1930 with a State grant and settled with wife and daughter by the Mediterranean Sea.

On this picture, we can see some members of this Finnish colony in Nice a bit later, in 1939 (RANTA 1945, p. 433).

This is a photo that Armas took of Kailas with his own wife and daughter. Unbelievably enough, the poet is just 31 years old.

Uuno Kailas dies in March 1933.

Death certificate.

5. Posthumous honours and exploitation

The 1930s

The poet's ashes are repatriated to Finland in great pomp, and buried in Helsinki, at Hietaniemi Cemetery.

His unpublished poems appear in a posthumous collection already in 1933: *Punajuova* [*The Red Line*], which will be followed by a collection of his short stories in 1936 (*Novelleja*).

The poems of Kailas have inspired many composers, already during his lifetime². His *Finnish Prayer* remains one the most popular "hits"³, especially in the version composed by Taneli Kuusisto in 1939.

Suomalainen rukous (<i>Uni ja kuolema</i> , p. 130)	A Finnish Prayer
Siunaa ja varjele meitä, Korkein, kädellä! ... ettei kansamme nääntyis, silmäsi meihin luo! Alati synnyinmaalle siipies suoja suo!	Bless and protect us, o thou supreme, under your arm! ... so that our folk shall not perish, lay your eyes upon us! Forever to our native land give the protection of your wings!

Winter War, 1939-1940

During the Second World War, as you all know, Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union (and a third one against Germany). The "Winter War" breaks up in November 1939 with the invasion of Finland, **just a few days after the performance of Kuusisto's *Finnish Prayer*** in Helsinki. This little patriotic piece will thus gain an extraordinary popularity in Finland, with a sort of prophetic destiny. Nowadays, it has become canticle n° 584 within the canon of the Lutheran Church of Finland.

By Kailas' tombstone in Hietaniemi Cemetery, a statue is erected at that time, which represents the Poet and his lyre⁴.

The Winter War concludes with the loss of Finnish Karelia.

So the Karelian question is raised again.

Continuation War, 1941-1944

The "Continuation War" is fought with considerable support from Nazi Germany and leads to a swift invasion of the neighbouring areas of the Soviet Union.

² **Yrjö Kilpinen** (1892-1959), *Five melodies on poems by Uno Kailas*, op.73 (1929), for voice and piano.

³ **Martti Turunen** (1902-1979), for choir (men's, women's, children's or mixed) a cappella; **Ossi Elokas** (1904-1991), for male choir a cappella; **Taneli Kuusisto** (1905-1988), for mixed choir a cappella; also for mixed choir and orchestra op. 27 n° 2, for voice and orchestra op. 27b n° 2, for soloist and orchestra...

⁴ By sculptor **Yrjö Liipola** (1881-1971), inaugurated in 1940 (LINDGREN 2009, p. 234).

And this is the point where I am saying that “the patriotic poems of Kailas inspired by the Civil War are published again in 1941 in a different context”: the anthology *Isien tie* [*Way of the Fathers*], a selection of patriotic verse by this famous poet of the first fifteen years of independence, is printed **□(during? just before?)** the Continuation War.

Another poem is set to music and performed during this war: “*Termopylain laulu*” [“The Song of Thermopylae”]. **Heikki Klemetti** (1876-1953) had already composed a version for mixed choir a cappella (1934); now **Aarre Merikanto** (1893-1958) writes another one for male choir a cappella in 1943, during the Continuation War. Of course the text refers to the Greco-Persians Wars – yet another conflict between two civilisations following an invasion of the “West” by the “East” and leading to a victory of the invader despite a passionate defence by the invaded. Since ancient times, the artists have often used the Battle of Thermopylae to illustrate the power of a patriotic army defending its homeland; and of course the comparison with the Winter War is obvious:

Sotahuutomme soi tuhat kertaa: – Ei, eivät he milloinkaan ota maatumme tuuman vertaa – joka tuumasta taistellaan...	Our war cry sounds a thousand times: – No, they shall never take an inch of our land – for every inch we’ll fight...
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Eventually, Finland loses its only ice-free winter harbour in Petsamo and has to proceed to the so-called “Lapland War” of 1944-1945 in order to have the Germans withdraw from the country.

After the wars

Here are a painting⁵ and a statue⁶ created in Kailas’ hometown Heinola in the 1940s.

6. And after 100 years?

What about the “Karelian question” today?

Civil War and Continuation War: a question of context?

I have mentioned the context “issue” between the Civil War and 1941. Kailas dead, ten years passed, yet another war with a different name... isn’t that a whole different “context”?

~~Although there was probably a misunderstanding about the very notion of “context”, this misunderstanding raises an interesting issue.~~ As a matter of fact, as we have just seen on the previous slides, we are dealing here with the *Continuation War*, which has remained a painful chapter in the history of the Republic.

⁵ **Arvid Broms** (1910-1968), *The poet and his Muse*, 1947, Art Museum of Heinola.

⁶ By **Essi Renvall** (1911-1979), inaugurated in Heinola in 1949.

Apart from the wish to recover the losses of the Winter War, the Continuation War was motivated in a certain measure by **irredentist and nationalist ideologies** (cf. AUER & JUTIKKALA 1941; JAAKKOLA 1941), which has made it eventually a controversial campaign in the public opinion in Finland.

Finland contracts a military alliance with Nazi Germany, Mannerheim strikes again into Soviet Russia as he did in 1919⁷, then takes the territories of East Karelia and occupies them in 1941-1944⁸, patriotic propaganda is in full swing in the country, and late Uuno Kailas is exploited to this end.

So yes, now I realize how much the events of 1919 and 1941 have a very similar nature – with the support of Germany and the explicit declaration of Mannerheim who refers to his own “Sword Oath” from the Civil War: “I promised I would not set my sword to the scabbard until Finland and Karelia would be free”⁹. On the other hand, the historical background is different regarding the life of Kailas and the diplomatic relations in Europe.

“Liberation of Karelians”... or invasion of Russia?

We remember how Kailas talked – already sceptically – about the liberation or the rescue of Karelians.

As a matter of fact, this Aunus expedition was of course an invasion, a pure and simple violation of Soviet Russia’s territory, under the impulse of Regent Mannerheim and Germany¹⁰.

Conclusion

Indeed the life and works of Uuno Kailas, as reported in this paper, evoke two events that have stained the history of independent Finland: the Finnish invasions of Soviet Russia after the civil war and the coalition with Nazi Germany in the Continuation War.

Both are related to the hero Mannerheim, which has turned recently into a controversial character. Nowadays, as I could perceive while editing the aforementioned booklet, it appears that **the very notion of Finnish independence** is closely associated to these events which are **considered shameful, especially by the younger generation**.

⁷ The Continuation War started with a Soviet air offensive to Finland on June 25th 1941, three days after Germany started invading the Soviet Union.

⁸ PIMIÄ 2012, p. 396-398.

⁹ CGE Mannerheim’s “*Miekantuppipäiväkäskey*” [“Scabbard Order”], July 11th, 1941: “*Vapaussodassa vuonna 1918 lausuin Suomen ja Vienen karjalaisille, etten tulisi panemaan miekkaani tuppeen ennen kuin Suomi ja Itä-Karjala olisivat vapaat. Vannoin tämän suomalaisen talonpoikaisarmeijan nimessä luottaen sen urhoollisiin miehiin ja Suomen uhrautuvaisiin naisiin...*”

¹⁰ At the time of the “Sword Oath” and as an issue of the Civil War, White Finland was a German protectorate.

Yet Kailas' poetry definitely remains an intimate illustration of the transition from the Russian Grand-Duchy to the independent Republic, with all its spontaneous – though occasionally naïve or aggressive – patriotism.

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