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The History *of*
FINLAND
in a Nutshell



Tekstin- ja tiedonlouhinta kielletty.

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Introduction

This book started with a dinner and a laugh. The dinner was a gathering of Finland's and Sweden's business elite in Helsinki's Old Bank Hall – a grand space built in 1862.

The laugh came after dessert. A CEO friend pulled me aside, chuckling:

“Risto, why didn't you tell me who I was sitting next to? I thought it was your job to tell me everything I need to know about Finland.”

He wasn't upset – just amused. But his comment stuck. Was it my job to explain Finland?

Officially, no. My role as a global affairs commentator for TV news was to explain the world to Finns. Yet, in practice, I've spent much of my life doing the opposite: explaining Finland to the world.

It began in Elyria, Ohio, as an exchange student answering the inevitable: “What's it like living next to Russia?” At Yale, at Oxford, and later at international research

institutes, the same mission continued. Even at McKinsey, hoping to do something different, I ended up explaining Finland to consultants and clients.

Over the years, I've worn many hats – politician, business advocate, CEO, and government advisor. In other words, I have had the pleasure of meeting lots of interesting people. Which brings us back to that dinner. Why did my friend feel I'd let him down? Because he'd asked his dinner companion, "So, what do you do?"

"I work for the bank hosting this meeting," the man replied. "But I used to be involved in politics."

"Oh? What did you do in politics?"

"I was the Prime Minister of Finland."

Yes, I could have warned him. But in Finland, former Prime Ministers don't make a fuss. So why should I?

This book won't help you recognise former Prime Ministers at dinner parties. But it will help you have a good conversation with one – if you happen to be seated next to them.



CHAPTER 1

Three Magical Numbers

Do you remember something from every book you've ever read? Probably not. That's why I want to make sure you remember something from this one: three magical numbers – 600, 100, and 100+.

Six hundred represents the number of years Finland was part of Sweden. One hundred marks the years under the Russian Empire. And the final hundred with a plus? That's the century (and counting) of Finnish independence.

Of course, these numbers aren't exact, but they're a good shorthand for thinking about Finland's major historical periods. Finland was part of Sweden for more than 600 years. The usual starting point is the First Crusade to Finland, often dated to 1157 – though there's no definitive

documentation. If we do the math, Swedish rule lasted about 652 years. But 600 is close enough to remember.

The historical record of Russian rule is more precise. Russia took Finland from Sweden in 1809. We declared independence in 1917, after 108 years of Russian rule. Let's round it to 100.

And what about the plus in the final number? It's a living number. Every December 6th – Finland's Independence Day – we add another year to our century of sovereignty.

Why call them magical? Because each marks a turning point – moments that reshaped Finland's culture, politics, and identity.

When Finland was integrated into Sweden nine hundred years ago, we were a scattered population of hunter-gatherers. By the time the Russians took over Finland in 1809, we were firmly part of Western civilisation. Quite a journey. And the story was far from over.

Under Russian rule, the idea of Finland as a distinct entity began to take shape. By independence, Finland had its own laws, civil service, Lutheran faith, and a strong national identity. In the century since, we've gone from one of Europe's poorest agrarian societies to one of its most developed nations.

So, remember: 600, 100, and 100+. That's Finnish history in a nutshell.

You already know more than the average tourist.

Three Lucky Strikes

Former Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen once said that Finland's history is shaped by three lucky strikes:

1. Becoming part of Sweden
2. Becoming part of the Russian Empire
3. Becoming independent when Russia and Germany were both weak.

At first glance, this sounds odd. How can being dominated – twice – by an outside power be considered lucky?

Let's start with colonialism. Finland is rarely mentioned in books about colonial history. We weren't a colony in the usual sense. Under Sweden, Finland was an integral part of the kingdom. People in Finland had the same rights as other Swedish subjects. They sent representatives to Sweden's parliament in Stockholm and even helped elect the king.

Under Russia, the arrangement was even more unusual. As citizens of the Grand Duchy of Finland, Finns had more rights than most Russians. Two examples stand out:

- Military service: Finnish men were generally exempt from conscription into the Russian army. Only a few elite Finnish units served in the Tsar's wars.
- Voting rights: Finnish women gained full suffrage in 1906 – eleven years before women in Russia could vote.

How about national identity? Don't great powers normally try to suppress separate identities in the territories they control? It's more complicated than that. Why? Because identity itself changed over time.

During the Swedish era, national identity wasn't yet a concept. People identified with their village, region, or a landmark – a lake or a hill. Many Finnish surnames still reflect this: Virtanen means a small *virta*, a stream, while Lahtinen denotes a small bay. In other words, people identified with their immediate surroundings while recognising they were part of a kingdom.

Under Russian rule, things changed. Nationalism was rising across Europe. Yet Russia did not try to suppress it in Finland. Why? Because it believed a distinct Finnish identity would prevent any desire to reunite with Sweden. Ironically, when Russia finally tried to erase Finnish identity at the turn of the century, the effort backfired. Instead of caving in, Finns resisted every attempt at “Russification”.

Before the West

Finland's story is often told as a kind of national *Bildungsroman* – a coming-of-age tale. As a young protagonist, Finland grew under Swedish rule, absorbing Western religion and governance. Then came adolescence under Russian rule, where it developed culturally and politically.

Finally, adulthood: independence, EU membership, and NATO. It's a neat story – but not the whole story.

For one, Finland didn't begin with Sweden. People lived here long before the first crusaders arrived. And history hasn't been a straight line of progress. There were setbacks under Sweden, under Russia, and during independence. EU and NATO membership didn't mark the end of history – just the start of new chapters. And these chapters have often begun abruptly. Once Finns have realised that the world has changed fundamentally, it has taken only a few months for the country to find a new direction.

So, let's begin at the beginning – before kings and constitutions, when saunas and spirits shaped the Finnish worldview.

Saunas, Shamans, and Sacred Animals

How old is the Finnish sauna? Some say 6,000 years, others 10,000. Either way, it's ancient. Early Finns dug pits into hillsides or built huts to create sweat baths. Heated stones, water, steam – the same basic idea still warms Finnish evenings today.

However, the sauna was more than a place to get clean. It was sacred. Babies were born there. The sick were healed there. It was a space for spiritual renewal, believed to purify body and soul, ensure fertility, and ward off evil.

Pre-Christian Finns were polytheists. They worshipped nature spirits and deities:

- Ukko, the Sky God, thundered from above.
- Akka, the Earth Mother, nurtured life.
- Ahti, God of the Sea, ruled the waters.

Shamans served as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. Animals were sacred – especially bears and elks.

We know this from two sources. First, archaeology. For example, near our summer cottage in southern Finland, Bronze Age rock paintings show stick figures dancing with elks, fish, and serpents. It's easy to imagine a sauna nearby even then.

Second, folklore. The *Kalevala*, Finland's national epic, was compiled in the 19th century by Elias Lönnrot, who collected oral poetry from Karelia. The stories feature shamans, heroes, and the mythical Sampo – a magical mill that produces endless prosperity. A swan – featured on the cover of this book – was seen as a bridge between the worlds of the living and the dead. Like other ancient epics, the *Kalevala* blends myth, morality, and identity.

Its publication was a turning point. It told Finns: we are not a young nation, but an ancient culture with deep roots and distinct traditions.

Tolkien and the *Kalevala*

J.R.R. Tolkien, best known as the author of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, was captivated by the *Kalevala* and the Finnish language. In a 1955 letter to W.H. Auden, he described Finnish as “like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before”.

Tolkien studied Finnish grammar and phonetics, which influenced the languages of Middle-earth – especially Quenya. He also drew inspiration from *Kalevala* characters like Väinämöinen and Kullervo, whose traits echo in Gandalf, Túrin, and others.

But *Kalevala* isn't just a relic of the past – it still lives in Finnish culture today. Every Finn knows that Väinämöinen was the wisest of all the wizards, while the Sampo brought happiness and wealth. Every now and then, a new film or a book uses *Kalevala's* characters in a contemporary context. So, which one is my favourite *Kalevala* character?

I do not really have one. Väinämöinen is an old sage and a master of magic and song. But he is also arrogant and resistant to change. I like Lemminkäinen, the bold adventurer and warrior. But he is reckless. For example, he tries to kill the Swan of Tuonela, the arbitrator of life and death. How about Ilmarinen, the eternal smith, creator of the magical Sampo? If I were an engineer, I would probably choose him. But he is too melancholic for me. So, I enjoy them all. Including Pohjan Akka, the powerful

matriarch who rules the northern realm of Pohjola and opposes Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkäinen in their quests.

Between East and West

The culture of pre-Christian Finland sounds magical – with stories of shamans, sacred animals, and the Sampo. So why was it “lucky” to fall under the influence of Swedish clergy and kings? Because of the alternatives.

By the late 10th century, the Christian world was expanding. The Eastern Orthodox Church, centred in Novgorod, and the Western Catholic Church, backed by Sweden, both sought influence in the North. Finland became a bone of contention between these two rising powers – and it wasn’t pretty. There were skirmishes with both Russians and Swedes. One folk tale tells of Lalli, a Finnish peasant who killed Bishop Henry of Uppsala in 1156 after the bishop allegedly took food from his home without paying. Lalli chased him across a frozen lake and struck him down with an axe. It’s a vivid story – though Lalli’s existence is unconfirmed.

Still, the tale captures the tension of the time: a land caught between East and West, between paganism and Christianity, between two power centres – Sweden in the West and the early Russian state in the East. In other words, Finland lay on a fault line between what Professor

Samuel Huntington later called the Western and the Slavic-Orthodox civilisations – a divide that would shape its destiny for centuries.