CHAPTER 7

From Hiding in Darkness to Entering the Spotlight: Finnish Military Deserters and Their Return to Post-War Society

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Military desertion is a common phenomenon, particularly when an army is collapsing during war or when military service is generally unpopular. In Finland during the Second World War, desertions peaked in 1941 and 1944, encompassing more than 30,000 Finnish soldiers committing some form of desertion. Given the actual size of the army in such a small European country, this constituted a significant number of soldiers with real impacts to its fighting ability.

Among the European countries that actively participated in the war, only the Soviet Union (Russia), Great Britain, and Finland avoided having their capitals occupied by enemy forces. The first two emerged on the winning side of the war, whereas Finland—despite declaring war on Nazi Germany in the autumn of 1944—ended up on the losing side. As a result, Finland's wartime experience was not defined by the traumas of prolonged occupation, yet Finns still had to confront the legacy of having been on the "wrong side of history".[1] For this reason, the post-war situation and the discussion of Finnish deserters and the war's aftermath are difficult to compare with those of other countries, although certain similarities do exist. In most countries, occupation and subsequent liberation were followed by prolonged debates over collaboration, the role of resistance movements, and how these groups should be treated in the eyes of the law. In France, for example, post-war legal proceedings initially granted amnesty to members of the resistance and, in the 1950s, this grace was extended to most collaborators.[2] The victors, too, had to deal with tens of thousands of men who had deserted and broken the law, yet punishing them for violations of military law had largely lost its meaning.[3]

In general, the relatively few scholarly studies investigating the nature of Second World War deserters focus on desertion during the war, typically ending their inquiry when deserters were apprehended or granted clemency. In the United States, research has primarily centred on the Civil War (1861–1865), while in Great Britain primary emphasis has been placed on the First World War. As a result, Second World War desertion is often treated only within broader studies, such as those by Heike Niebergall-Lackner and Robert Fantina.[4] Finnish desertions have been examined in detail by Jukka Kulomaa, while Charles Glass traced the experiences of selected individual deserters from British and American armies. The post-war period and the subsequent fates of deserters, however, have rarely been meaningfully addressed, with D.C. Peifer as a notable exception.[5]

This chapter examines the reintegration efforts of Finnish military deserters back into post-war society from multiple perspectives. It analyses this process at the legislative, political, and economic levels, which are irremediably intertwined rather than separate. The chapter offers new overall perspectives on deserters in the post-war context, a topic that has typically only been approached through individual or family histories. Given the limited existing research and the difficulty of comparing Finland's experience with that of other countries, the study draws primarily on Finnish archival records, contemporary newspaper sources, and parliamentary sources.

THE FINNISH DESERTER

In Finland, the term *Forest Guard* (*metsäkaarti*) refers to men who evaded military service through desertion during the Continuation War that was fought against the Soviet Union. They typically deserted by hiding in their local communities, retreating into the wilderness, moving into cities, or fleeing to neutral Sweden.

Desertion was not always directly linked to fleeing active combat, as many soldiers deserted already during the mobilisation of the Finnish army in the summer of 1941. In total, around 1,500 men failed to report when summoned. During the Continuation War, desertion became a major challenge for the Finnish army: more than 30,000 men—approximately five per cent of all service members—deserted in one form or another. By contrast, during the preceding Winter War, desertion was virtually non-existent in comparison; only a few hundred men deserted, and only a small number refused to fight out of sympathy for the attacking Soviet Union. The exact number of desertions remains difficult to determine precisely. Some deserters were pardoned by their superiors if they returned to their units, while others deserted multiple times, with each act generating a separate legal case.[6] The total number of deserters is estimated at around 30,000 men in 1941–44, of whom about 15,000 were "actual" deserters, who were either imprisoned or in hiding at the end of the war.[7]

The reasons for desertion varied wildly, but generally deserters formed a heterogeneous group. Trauma and fear of combat which were often reductively labelled as simple "cowardice" were commonplace but complex factors. These ranged from planned desertions at the front, often triggered by the prolonged stress that was faced there, it could be due to spontaneous flight when soldiers were in states of panic or it could be the response to mobilisation altogether. Many veteran soldiers carried trauma from the Winter War and were unwilling to face combat again. Others opposed the alliance with Nazi Germany, particularly in the summer of 1941, or objected to military service on religious or ideological grounds. Some were simply unwilling or unable to adapt to military life.[8]

In addition to their motivations, deserters can be classified according to the charges brought against them under Finnish military law (Sotarikoslaki, SRL), which distinguished between offences such as desertion, absence without leave, and failure to return to service. Sentences were typically custodial, although their severity varied over time; the death penalty was applied mainly in 1944, when the frontlines collapsed. During interrogations, most deserters cited fear or "cowardice" rather than sympathy for the Soviet Union, which could have resulted in harsher charges pertaining to espionage or collaboration. Only a small minority of a few hundred soldiers were politically motivated in their actions and engaged in active resistance, including espionage and sabotage against the Finnish state and military.[9] Captured deserters who participated in the resistance movement were typically sentenced to long terms of imprisonment or even death. Only a few managed to remain at large throughout the war. In total, just 173 documented cases involve men who avoided capture for the entire period from 1941–1944.[10]

THREE ROADS TO FREEDOM THROUGH PARDONS AND AMNESTIES

19 September 1944 Finland was forced to sign the Moscow Armistice treaty. Its most significant terms required Finland to cede territory, pay war reparations, expel German troops from its soil, and lease the Porkkala region in southern Finland to the Soviet Union as a military base. For the deserters, however, the most important provision was Article 20, which stated that: "Finland undertakes immediately to release all persons, irrespective of citizenship or nationality, held in prison on account of their activities in favour of the United Nations or because of their sympathies with its cause, or in view of their racial origin, and will also remove all discriminatory legislation and disabilities arising therefrom."[11]

This provision was primarily intended to secure the release of left-wing political prisoners who had been arrested and placed in preventive detention (turvasäilö) at the beginning of or during the war. However, if interpreted broadly, it could also be applied to Finnish soldiers who had deserted out of sympathy for the United Nations (not to be confused with the UN organisation), in practice meaning the Soviet Union. When the final peace treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union was signed in Paris in 1947, this provision was incorporated as Article 7 of the agreement.[12]

Some deserters returned home shortly after the armistice, but many were arrested, as it remained unclear whether the provision applied to them and they had still violated the tenants of Finnish military law. The consequences varied: some were merely interrogated and subsequently released, while others were detained and brought to court. On 20 October 1944, the Headquarters of the Home Forces (Kotijoukkojen esikunta) ordered that all "Forest Guard" members were to be arrested and prosecuted. As a result, many deserters remained in hiding until late 1944 or early 1945, when the provision was incorporated into the general body of Finnish legislation. The government's first step was to suspend prosecutions and sentences under a temporary military court law that lasted until the end of 1945, a measure that applied to offences reaching beyond simple desertion.[13]

Amnesty legislation was ratified on 1 December 1944, granting pardons or sentence reductions for sentences meted out by military courts before 19 September 1944. It covered most deserters, regardless of their motives. However, it excluded those who were convicted of serious offences, particularly sentences pertaining to war crimes such as the mistreatment of prisoners of war, in accordance with Article 13 of the armistice agreement. Military deserters were thus included among those pardoned for violations of military law, rather than being treated as a separate category. Beyond fulfilling the terms of the armistice, the amnesty was also driven by practical necessity, as the number of convicted soldiers was simply too large to handle effectively. During parliamentary debates in November 1944, the scope of the proposed legislation was gradually expanded.[14]

Although Finland was not occupied, the Allied Control Commission exercised significant influence over its domestic policy. In December 1944, the new Minister of Justice, Urho Kekkonen, met with the Commission in Helsinki, where Soviet representatives insisted that Article 20 should also apply to military deserters. On 7 December, the Ministry of Justice instructed the courts to grant amnesty to those who had deserted rather than fight the United Nations. The Soviets emphasised that the amnesty should be based on Article 20, not ratified Finnish legislation. Following this, 1,225 imprisoned deserters were re-interrogated; 544 claimed to have deserted out of sympathy for the United Nations and were released on Kekkonen's orders, while the rest were later freed under the amnesty act. The Commission expressed satisfaction with the outcome.[15]

This did not end the controversy, however. Shortly afterwards, three Soviet officers visited the central prison in Turku and asked inmates whether they had been imprisoned for sympathies with the Soviet Union. Several prisoners, who had previously cited other reasons for their desertion recanted and now claimed they had deserted because of sympathies for the Soviet Union. The officers demanded their release, and the prison warden freed eleven of them. The incident angered Kekkonen, who raised the matter with the Commission after Christmas of that year. It was subsequently agreed that Soviet officials could still inspect prisons and report grievances but not directly order the release of prisoners.[16]

This Soviet interpretation of Article 20 encouraged more deserters to claim that their actions were motivated by sympathy for the Allies, most often specifically the Soviet Union. In at least one case, a deserter born in the United States in 1911 stated that he had deserted in June 1941 because he was certain the United States would join the United Nations and he did not wish to fight against his country of origin.[17]

Whereas deserters captured during the war typically cited trauma from the Winter War or fear of combat—reasons seen as more acceptable and less punishable than sympathy for the enemy—the situation was now reversed. This shift makes it difficult to determine the true motives for desertion in many cases, as some adapted their explanations in order to directly affect their sentencing. Even during the war, interrogators questioned such claims when deserters with known ties to communist circles attributed their actions solely to fear or "cowardice". A revealing example of these shifting attitudes can be found in a letter written by a deserter to the head of his local military district on 31 January 1945. He explained that, when captured for a second time in the summer of 1944, he had cited cowardice to avoid being "executed as a two-time deserter and a political one at that." Now, however, he claimed that his actions had been motivated by "political conviction and sympathy for the United Nations" and expressed willingness to fight against the Germans in Norway. He also claimed that his comrades could attest to his convictions and argued that the Finnish president, Risto Ryti, had been more harmful to Finland because of the 1944 Ryti–Ribbentrop letter of agreement (Ryti–Ribbentrop-sopimus) with Nazi Germany. The deserter concluded by asserting that he would be more useful to the country as a free citizen rather than being behind prison bars.[18]

Amnesties granted under Article 20 were largely completed by January 1945. By then, 1,324 Finnish and 195 Soviet citizens had been released; 1,735 prisoners were fully pardoned, and 2,348 received reduced sentences. Finnish legislation also granted amnesty in around forty per cent of desertion cases from the summer of 1944. In addition, deserters could seek clemency directly from the president. Some pardons were already granted by Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim in September 1944, and by November, approximately 150–200 pardons were being issued each week.[19]

Similar policies were adopted in other countries, and amnesties have almost always been part of most peace treaties and post-war government decisions. As part of the celebrations marking the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, Stalin granted amnesty for a range of military offences committed by the troops. This was unsurprising as such measures also had precedent in Russian military history. The amnesty also extended to those who had evaded conscription or deserted and had been sentenced to serve time in labour camps.[20] Those who deserted by defecting or surrendering to the Germans were nevertheless treated harshly. Across Europe, even after the end of the Second World War, the Allied armies still faced tens of thousands of deserters who were at large for years after the conflict.[21] These deserters were located all across mainland Europe and in Great Britain. Although most Allied governments initially sought to arrest and convict them, the perceived need for punishment diminished over time. For example, in the autumn of 1946, the Canadian government granted amnesty to 14,000 deserters.[22] At the same time, nearly 19,000 British deserters from the army, navy, and RAF remained at large. By 1947, more than 15,000 were still unaccounted for and were widely associated with a rise in crime. According to Scotland Yard, they were responsible for over sixty per cent of offences in England. In early 1947, amnesty was offered to these individuals, but only 1,340 deserters surrendered before it expired at the end of March. Efforts to capture the rest proved largely ineffective, and by 1948 the British armed forces still estimated the existence of around 20,000 deserters, with only about 3,000 having turned themselves in during 1947.[23] It was not until 1953 that all deserters in Great Britain were granted a full pardon, as part of the coronation of Elizabeth II. One argument focused on their reintegration into society, as Sir Thomas Moore (1886–1971) explained: "[The pardon] would restore thousands of men to family and community life and perhaps give them an opportunity to justify this clemency."[24]

In Allied Armies, deserters were involved in the black market in many cases and resorted to other crimes in order to survive, and many saw no benefit in returning to society.[25] Thousands of deserters began living double lives. While amnesties and pardons typically covered minor offences associated with desertion, serious crimes excluded individuals from this kind of pardon, which was the case in Finland, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain. With this context in mind, it is easier to understand why rapid pardons were often regarded as less damaging to society than the prolonged and largely futile efforts to track deserters down—despite the fact that such pardons appeared unjust to those who had "done their part" and suffered during the war.

Desertion has been a far more common factor than governments have been willing to admit, and reconciling wartime propaganda with post-war realities proved difficult both legally and morally. In the eyes of the public desertion was typically seen and condemned as cowardice and a betrayal of fellow soldiers and countrymen. In post-war West Germany, for example, Wehrmacht deserters were widely viewed as having violated the ideal of Kameradschaft, the sacred bond of soldierly comradeship.[26] In Finland, by contrast, the status of deserters could be reframed in light of their perceived alignment with the eventual victors, the Soviet Union, even though the Finnish army remained largely intact until the end of the war. In retrospect, the rapid granting of legal pardons in 1944 helped Finnish society avoid a prolonged crisis which was more of an unintended consequence rather than a deliberate aim. Compared to other countries, Finland adopted clemency measures earlier than most and applied them more broadly.

THE QUESTION OF MONETARY COMPENSATION AND ECONOMIC RECOVERY

After the pardons, most deserters were legally able to reintegrate into society. The post-war years were, however, marked by severe economic and psychological strain and have been widely studied from various perspectives. The period from 1944–1948 is often described as the "years of danger" (vaaran vuodet) or as a "peace crisis".[27] Demobilisation, the resettlement of internally displaced persons, and the burden of war reparations posed major challenges for Finnish society. At the same time, fears of a potential Soviet occupation and the legalisation of the previously banned Finnish Communist Party added to the uncertainty felt in the country. In this context, former deserters were one group among many in a war-torn society, though the rise of the far left offered some opportunities for political mobilisation and claims for compensation. The Finnish Communist Party established a broad political coalition, Suomen Kansan Demokraattinen Liitto (SKDL), which achieved major success in the 1945 parliamentary elections. Political parties actively sought the support of former soldiers, and shortly before the end of the 1939–1945 "Long Parliament," a relatively generous Land Acquisition Act was passed to provide land and new homes, partly to prevent the radicalisation of ex-servicemen and displaced populations.

One of several leftist organisations founded after the war was the Entisten Sotilaiden Toverikuntien Liitto (EST, "Comrade Union of Former Soldiers"). It brought together former Red Guards from the Finnish Civil War, ex-front soldiers, and former members of the Forest Guard. Established in November 1944 by members of the resistance and reorganised as a nationwide association in April 1945, EST maintained strong communist sympathies and espoused anti-fascist rhetoric. Despite this, the Finnish Communist Party viewed the organisation with some suspicion, and the two occasionally disagreed on issues such as benefits for former soldiers. At its peak in 1946, the EST had over 200 local branches and around 30,000 members. The organisation declined rapidly towards the end of the 1940s, although some local groups remained active into the early 1950s.[28]

The EST argued that Forest Guard members were entitled to compensation for the economic hardship they suffered while deserting. It also demanded support for former red veterans of the Finnish Civil War in 1918 and their families, and sought to expand the Land Acquisition Act to include more ex-soldiers. The claim rested on the loss of military pay and benefits, which left deserters and their families in financial distress. After the war, many argued they had remained "soldiers" on the "right side" of the conflicts and thus deserved compensation. EST actively promoted these demands through meetings, petitions, and publications.[29]

Notably in Finland, desertion was already framed as a form of resistance in 1944–1945. In contrast to this attitude, in post-war West Germany, Wehrmacht deserters were widely condemned for abandoning their comrades, while recognition was reserved for active resistance figures such as Claus von Stauffenberg. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that desertion came to be more broadly regarded as a form of resistance in Germany.[30]

In early 1945, EST asked its Forest Guard members to submit accounts of their wartime activities in order to document their experiences and assess the legitimacy of their claims for compensation. One response, dated 18 January 1946 titled "a request for compensation," stated: "I supported the Allied cause... I deserted on 23 November 1941 and remained in hiding until the end of the war... I seek compensation for lost working hours and request my daily allowance and monthly family pay... for the period from 1 December 1941 to 12 December 1944."[31]

In January 1946, the Finnish Ministry of Finance appointed a committee in order to consider whether or not compensation should be given to Forest Guard members. This initiative was built on the work of an earlier committee, which in April 1945 had concluded that some released political prisoners were entitled to compensation, though this did not include imprisoned deserters.[32] The committee completed its work in 1948, estimating the total number of Forest Guard members at around 15,000 individuals which effectively functioned as a proxy for the general number of deserters, although compensation had initially only been intended only for deserters who were motivated by sympathy for the United Nations. Through questionnaires distributed by the EST, 4,152 responses were collected, of which 4,012 were classified as coming from Forest Guard members constituting more than a quarter of all deserters at the end of the war. Roughly one thousand of these claimed to have deserted for ideological reasons.[33]

In June 1948, a majority of the committee rejected compensation claims for Forest Guards, with two members dissenting. The main argument was the lack of a legal basis, as neither the armistice, the peace treaty, nor any other legislation legitimised such compensation. It was also noted in the press that not a single Forest Guard member had volunteered to fight against the Nazi Germans after the 1944 armistice, although this was not directly emphasised in the report. The committee further concluded that former deserters had generally reintegrated into society without major difficulties and already enjoyed the same social benefits as other former soldiers.[34]

Shortly after this rejection, on 4 August 1948, several members of Parliament would yet again propose that Forest Guard members were entitled to receive compensation comparable to that which was granted to political prisoners.[35] The proposal was rejected. Some newspapers later claimed that compensation had already been paid, but this was inaccurate; such false claims were largely propagated by anti-communist politicians and journalists. After the SKDL's defeat in the 1948 elections, the issue of compensation effectively disappeared as an issue in the political landscape. At the same time, opposition to the idea grew within Parliament, and the press—across right-wing, centrist, and Social Democratic outlets—became increasingly dismissive of the issue, often ridiculing the Forest Guard.[36]

The issue of compensation resurfaced decades later, in May 1971, when six SKDL members of Parliament proposed reparations for the "so-called Forest Guard members and other opponents of war and fascism" for losses suffered during the Second World War. It reappeared again in 1984 in connection with debates on military pensions though nothing ever came of it.[37]

The committee's third reason for rejecting compensation claims in 1948 highlights that most deserters were able to reintegrate and support themselves economically without assistance. This was supported by certain legislation, such as a February 1945 law stating that returning deserters should be treated as continuing employees, meaning that desertion could not affect their entitlement to annual leave.[38] In one letter to the EST, a deserter described his experiences in the following way:

"I went to my old workplace on 20.11.44, but I was told that my employment had been terminated because I was not in the war; however, they could arrange forest work for me. I told them I could not take the work, as I was not a forest worker by profession. On 4.12.44, I went to the workplace again, but the technical supervisor of the factory told me that they had no obligations towards me, because I had not fulfilled my obligations to the fatherland, and that my employment had ended. I went there again in February 1945 to ask for proof of employment. At the same time, I asked for my old work, and they took me back with all the benefits of a former employee, except for my annual (paid) leave. I requested the leave on the 19th day (June 1945), and they told me they could not pay it because I had not worked the previous year. I replied that I could not come to work, because I was not allowed to, even though I tried." [39]

All the other workers in the factory had received the payment they were owed, except for the writer and one other worker.

Evidence of workplace discrimination against deserters appeared mainly in communist newspapers, reporting that former Forest Guard members were sometimes treated with undue suspicion by employers. The EST therefore demanded that any and all documented record of desertion should be removed from military passports, as some employers scrutinised them during the hiring process when screening applicants.[40] It is difficult to assess how widespread such instances of discrimination were. The overall situation of deserters was likely quite similar to that of other ex-servicemen: those with a trade could more easily return to work, while young unskilled men faced greater challenges when looking for employment. For Forest Guard members, employment may actually have been easier in areas where established trade unions were led by communists. Furthermore, it was economically impractical to exclude thousands of able-bodied men from the workforce because of their actions during the war, especially when any kind of punishment no longer served a military purpose. Given that Finland, with a population of just 3,5 million individuals, had outright lost over 90,000 men of prime working age and was left with many more who were disabled; reconciliation was not only a question of dignity but of practical necessity. While individual employers may have harboured some resentment towards deserters, it is difficult to substantiate in concrete terms due to the lack of relevant sources.

FROM THE FOREST BACK TO CIVIL SOCIETY

In the end, all countries involved in the Second World War embraced large-scale emphasis on clemency for deserters. After the Continuation War, Finnish deserters had several avenues to seek amnesty or pardon for their violations of military law. A broad amnesty policy allowed most deserters to return quickly back into society without any legal consequences. While all the belligerent states participating in the war faced large numbers of deserters, Finland's position as a defeated power, shaped by the terms of the Moscow Armistice, created a particular legal framework that enabled the practice of extensive amnesties.

In the Soviet Union (1945) and Great Britain (1953), pardons were tied to major events such as victory celebrations and the coronation of a new monarch. Compared to the Western Allies, Finland avoided prolonged social problems by implementing swift and comprehensive amnesty measures, though this was not their primary intent. Unlike the Allied countries, Finland did not face large numbers of deserters remaining in hiding and turning to a life of crime after the war. The longer deserters remained outside of the law, the more difficult reintegration became, often forcing them into criminal activity simply to survive.

In Germany, post-war society faced a dilemma between recognising active resistance to Nazism and condemning “ordinary” deserters, who remained stigmatised until the 1980s. This distinction helped “redeem” the majority of German soldiers. In Finland, no such narrative was necessary. Although Finland preserved its independence in 1944, it lost the Continuation War fought with the Soviet Union. This unique position gave Finnish deserters greater room to negotiate their status and reputation, particularly because they were not excluded legally or politically from doing so. It is also notable that Finland granted pardons to soldiers who defected to the enemy, whereas the Soviet Union treated their defectors harshly.

The personal economic recovery of deserters appears to have been similar to that of other population groups in post-war Finland. This is according to a parliamentary committee that collected data from roughly twenty-five per cent of them and calculated the numbers. Although left-wing efforts to secure compensation for the Forest Guard failed, most deserters were able to return to civilian life achieving more or less equal outcomes. Further research is needed to assess how factors such as employment, training, education level, motives, and age shaped the reintegration process. Available evidence suggests that many deserters resumed their previous lines of work with little difficulty, supported by legislation and a general demand for labour, which likely led employers to overlook past discrepancies. This indicates that desertion was often tolerated, if not fully accepted. There is little reason to portray deserters as a distinct group whose rehabilitation was systematically planned.