

A Case in Relations between Great Powers and Small States—France’s Recognition of Finnish Independence, 1917–1918¹

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Abstract: What are the most important variables explaining the 4 January 1918 decision by the French Government to recognise Finland’s independence? This short contribution to the Special Issue aims at giving a broad overview of developments explaining this decision. It will first of all introduce general notions concerning France’s relation with “nationalities” during the First World War. It will more specifically describe the geopolitical environment of the winter 1917–1918, when France looked for ways to react to the crumbling of its Russian ally against Germany. It will also emphasise the way domestic developments and the long-term action of Finnish national networks helped in shaping up this decision. Finally, based on this example, it will consider various ways for small states to try and influence their international environment.

Keywords: *1917–1918, Finland, France, nationalities, networks, recognition, small states*

¹ This article is not a piece of original research, but the reorganisation of material gathered for the author’s doctoral thesis (Clerc, 2011). If the empirical basis has already been presented elsewhere, the text itself is original, and new concluding reflections have been added for the purpose of this Special Issue.

1. Reluctant France?

In his recent book dealing with France’s First World War policy, Georges-Henri Soutou brought forward the ambiguities of France’s wartime relations to European “nationalities”. French war goals reserved little room to the national groups that were “residing” in the three European empires (Russia, the Austria-Hungarian double monarchy, and the Ottoman Empire), and their eventual “liberation” and transformation into independent states hardly figured amongst France’s priorities in the conflict (Soutou, 2016). For most of the war, the French side saw the perspective of new small states in Eastern Europe as an unwelcome development. When Georges Clemenceau arrived in power in November 1917, the new Prime Minister had arguably a range of compelling reasons to think that way. The Bolshevik Revolution had dismantled France’s Russian ally, and Germany was negotiating peace with Lenin. Evidently, the Russian Empire was fraying around its edges: several nationalities had expressed their will to withdraw from a Russia now dominated by the Bolsheviks, and the French had good reasons to see Germany behind several of these national movements.

The French government and society had been for long cautious regarding national groups and their claims. If France had, after her defeat to Prussia in 1871, contemplated retribution for a while, times had changed. In the early 1910s, the French leadership had acquired a taste for stability that made it defiant of any changes in the European *status quo*, susceptible to come to the advantage of Germany and the disadvantage of France’s allies (Soutou, 2014). This reluctance was best expressed by the journalist and thinker Jacques Bainville, who denounced a “ticking bomb of nationalities”, ready to dismantle Eastern Europe’s old imperial structures; while some of these nationalities were seen as carrying strong claims to historical legitimacy, most were described as accidents of history (Dagan, 2010; Decherf, 2000). In fact, Bainville epitomised a rich European tradition of contempt towards “small states”, born out in various contexts, from H. G. Wells to Peter Hitchens, of concerns for European stability, contempt for small nations, or a rejection of nationalism. If some groups in France defended the rights of nations to determine their fate, most would see national claims in Europe as in stark contrast with the stability of France’s allies.

During the war, these visions had evolved but strong reluctance remained. On the other hand, in times of momentous changes, official France did also recognise and support a few of these “troublesome” nationalities.

This movement included national groups the French had hardly heard of, situated in regions France did not consider as especially important: Paris recognised Finland in January 1918, Latvia and Estonia in January 1921, and Lithuania in December 1921. How can one explain the decision by the French government to recognise Finland's independence as early as in January 1918, a bit less than a month after its declaration on 6 December 1917? To answer this question, one needs to delve deep into French foreign and domestic policy, while not forgetting the role of bilateral relations with the Finnish national movement.

2. Ambiguity and crisis

In the context of a war seen in France as involving the very existence of the nation, French support for nationalities in 1914–1918 was naturally built on visions of French interest, not necessary on any moral stand or respect for ethnic or cultural phenomena. The French leadership thus came to define along certain criteria those nationalities it was ready to support. During debates on the question in the autumn of 1917, the two main civil servants of the French MFA, Pierre de Margerie and Philippe Berthelot, advocated support for “national pillars” in Eastern Europe susceptible to act as allies in the back of Germany after Russia's eventual crumbling. These national groups were based mostly on the perception of what could be reasonably sized, “worthy” states able to stand on their own. Poland, for example, was conceived in this plan as a country including parts of Lithuania. A Czechoslovakia was created out of thin air, as was a Yugoslavia gathering all southern Slavic nationalities, and a Romania considerably greater than the Romania who had joined the war. The main reason to support these states was strategic concerns developed in Paris (Soutou, 2016, p. 270). When it comes to Russia, national movements were mostly seen as future autonomous parts of a Russian Empire susceptible to survive or to be reconstructed.

In the winter of 1917–1918, when the threat of a Russian withdrawal from the war realised itself, the French started to approach certain Russian nationalities as potential centres, from which to resist Germany in the East and possibly reconquer Bolshevik Russia. This flew in the face of past politics: this policy of support for wayward nationalities was half-hearted and was met with active resistance amongst French diplomats. It developed

in a rapidly changing international context, when the French leadership tried to grasp at straws in order to compensate for Russia’s withdrawal. But even for the most convinced this was limited to nationalities they considered as worthy of consideration, “historical nationalities” they saw as sufficiently developed, well established, and presumably Francophile (Bibó, 1993, p. 140). In such a context, Finland, which the French consular agents in Helsinki had described consistently throughout 1917 as a staunch pro-German nation in the Eastern Baltic, hardly qualified. The Baltic States as well, peripheral, comparatively “young”, and suspected of pro-German leanings, only barely made the cut.

In the context of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, France’s decision-making thus tended to move between caution and support under the quickly changing circumstances. Taken in the feverish atmosphere following Lenin’s coup, the decision to recognise Finland’s independence in January 1918 seemed to rekindle the French leadership with the idea of nationalities as potential poles of stability, this time against chaos in Russia. Taken at the top of the French state in discussions between Clémenceau and his foreign minister Stephen Pichon, this decision came at the same time as a decision to recognise Ukraine, and was met with strong defiance amongst French diplomats. Answering his critics in January 1918, Pichon made it clear that France had no choice but to gambit with the future: Finland, for example, was supported as a second best to Russia, in the hope that it would stabilise at least some parts of the Russian Empire (Clerc, 2002). The quick change and crisis had to be met with unsavoury decisions.

3. Domestic policy and bilateral networks as providers of alternative visions

To be understood, these geopolitical reflections have to be complemented with a context of domestic policy and bilateral relations with the Finnish national movement. Despite the reluctance emphasised above, there were debates in the winter of 1917–1918 on the subject of nationalities. For some French publicists and politicians, the liberation of “oppressed nationalities” was a question of principle: personalities from the moderate, republican left, interested in international affairs and foreign cultures (the legislators Henry Franklin-Bouillon, Albert Thomas, or Léon Bourgeois), defended European nationalities in the name of justice but also out of a conception of France’s

historical mission: victorious France, daughter of the 1789 revolution, naturally had to act as the shield of the oppressed.

The Baltic States and Finland were certainly not well known in France: arriving in Paris in 1919, the head of the Estonian delegation to the Paris Conference Kaarel Robert Pusta wrote that his delegation felt like “unknown men, from an unknown country” (as quoted in Gueslin, 2003; Made, 2008, p. 7). Arriving in Paris in the early months of 1918, the Finnish representative Lorenzo Kihlmann met with a mixed reception in the French MFA, where he was asked to answer for the German leanings of his nation and the news of burgeoning political violence that had arrived from Helsinki (Clerc, 2002). But Soutou also underlines the activity of personal networks between the Baltic and Finnish national movements in Paris and French diplomats. Stephen Pichon had meetings during the winter with various Baltic representatives, such as the Lithuanian exile Juozas Gabrys, founder of the Lithuanian Information Bureau and in 1912 of the *Union des Nationalités*, and organiser, in 1916, of the Congress of Nationalities in Switzerland.

The Finns were extremely active in this respect as well. Finnish networks had been active in France since the late 1800s, and they had managed to impose the image of a developed culture, an economically prosperous province inside the Russian Empire, and a peaceful society oppressed by Russia. These lobbying networks followed the patterns of “interest groups”, studied for example by Jan Beyers, Rainer Eising and William Maloney (2008): informal organisations revolving around certain political interests. Around a core of professional militants, cultural, academic or political figures of Finnish nationalism installed in France were a layer of Frenchmen drawing symbolic and sometimes concrete resources from their capacity to incarnate in Paris a certain culture and the political cause attached to it. A good example of that is the jurist Albert de Lapradelle, who was used as expert by the French government on Finnish issues (Clerc, 2018).

Some of these networks had a direct influence on foreign policy in the framework of momentous changes in the winter 1917–1918. They had the capacity through their meetings with especially Pichon and Clémenceau to nudge French policy more decisively towards acknowledging nationalities. In the case of Finland, a host of important personalities met with Clémenceau in December 1917 to explain to him the Finnish case. Amongst them, one can find, for instance, Professor Paul Boyer, a specialist of Russia, who met with Clémenceau to try and convince him to recognise Finland’s independence

(Clerc, 2011). The French consul in Helsinki, Louis Raynaud, also exerted intense lobbying on his superiors in favour of recognition.

Such networks were highly volatile and dependent on the atmosphere and politics of the times in France. But albeit heavily constrained in their actions, these networks were old and could influence French politics at key moments. When decisions had to be taken in regions the French leadership had little knowledge of, this undergrowth of friendship societies, cultural associations, and personalities could suddenly become an important relay in official decision-making. They could also make use of the work done by Finnish representatives in France in the long term. The Finns had managed to anchor their nation on the French map of Europe as a real nationality, oppressed by Russia but nonetheless developed and active. History and culture had been mobilised to weight on the side of Finland as an autonomous part of the Russian Empire. In the context of the winter of 1917–1918, the narrative of Finland as an “old nation” was allowed to overcome the narrative of Finland as an “ephemeral phenomenon” or as a German pawn. Memories of past relations resurfaced and were emphasised, for example, by the French press.

Jacques Bainville's rhetorical evolutions, once again, provide us with a good barometer of these uncertainties: while, in 1917, the writer condemned the perspective of independence for the Baltic States and Finland, seeing them as dangers for the Russian Empire and thralls of Germany, the rise of Bolshevism in Russia after November 1917 pushed him to look at these little nations with different eyes. Reminiscing his own thoughts some 20 years after, Bainville (1937, pp. 39, 72–75, 249–251) insists that things had changed and a new context had appeared, in which a nation such as Finland could find its use for France; unpalatable and unstable as they were, small national forces on the borders of Russia were at least present on the ground and potentially ready to fight a new threat: the Bolsheviks.

The French were thus quick to make a virtue of necessity, but they still continued to see Finland in global geopolitical terms. 1918 and 1919 saw Finland closely associated to the intervention in Russia, and only in January 1920 did the French diplomat Jules Laroche take stock of the situation and propose the group recognition of all *de facto* states created on the western borders of the former Russian Empire (Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1920). The dilemma between French hopes for a Russian renaissance and support for the Baltic States and Finland was solved only by the stabilisation of the Bolsheviks in Russia, which crushed all hopes of imperial renaissance in Russia.

4. Doing what they must?

While perceptions of the geopolitical situation framed French reactions to Finnish independence, other levels contributed to shaping these reactions. In times of crises, different levels (contacts born of bilateral relations, networks, values, *et cetera*) could be allowed a certain influence on French decisions. Esa Sundbäck (2001) brings up the same pattern in his description of Britain's reactions to Baltic and Finnish developments after 1917. If the case of Finland's recognition by France is interesting in itself as an episode of French as well as Finnish history, it is equally important as a tool to understand more widely the relations between great powers and small nations. What exactly are the main variables, the main levels to observe when considering such cases? What can small states do in order to defend their interests regarding great powers?

At the surface is, of course, the geopolitical logic of international and regional relations. In our case, it has been made abundantly clear that France's decisions were before everything determined by wider issues and the context of the war: relations with Germany, relations with Russia, relations with Great Britain, visions of the Baltic Sea as a distant place having little to offer in terms of strategic interests to France. This means that representatives of a small state such as Finland should build up the tools and the competence in order to be able to observe, understand what happens abroad and be able to react quickly. An example of this capacity to react can be found a bit further from the period studied here in Franco-Finnish relations. In the early winter of 1918–1919, the Finnish regent Pehr Evind Svinhufvud decided to withdraw from his post in favour of a general, C. G. E. Mannerheim. Mannerheim was immensely popular in the country, as the military leader victorious in the Finnish Civil War that had taken place in spring of the same year. But more interestingly, Mannerheim was one of the rare Finnish figures well-known and appreciated amongst the victorious nations, which had just forced Germany to sign an armistice in November 1918. Svinhufvud's decision to withdraw from the regency in December and Mannerheim's arrival can be seen as a sign of adaptation to external events. It suggests that contacts abroad as well-functioning, legitimate institutions able to react quickly to external events are precious for small states.

Small states, however, have ways to escape the iron circle of this geopolitical logic. Great powers are complex systems, where many levels have an influence on decision-making. Their visions of the world are often disputed, ambivalent,

their horizons are often limited to the most pressing issues. Leaders can be fickle and assemblies divided. Lobbying groups and personal networks can be decisive at key moments. In observing great powers' reactions to small states, one should thus pay attention to domestic developments and the effects of prejudices and personal contacts, the pressures of public opinion and values, the influence of groups and personalities, and the accumulated memory of past relations. Especially in times of crisis, these elements can become very important: as the crisis comes, great powers' leaderships reach out for whatever expertise and conceptions are at hand related to the small state in question. This can allow at times short-term changes in the long-term vision of small and (from a French point of view) peripheral Eastern European states such as Finland. Moments of sudden change can liberate the agency of small states on the basis on heterodox contacts, personal relations, but also a capacity for influence built in the long term through networks and public diplomacy aimed at foreign societies.

One can say that a vision of small states as passive objects, entirely at the mercy of international changes and the whims of great powers does not always give the best and most complete vision of developments. There are several levels at which a small state can influence the world. There are also many ways in which it can build and refine its own institutions in order to be able to react to external changes—domestic policy, societal cohesion and smooth compromise-building mechanisms, as well as functioning institutions matter immensely in the way small states manage also their foreign policy. Finally, the creation of networks abroad, able to work in the long term towards the spreading of certain notions related to small states, or able to act as bridges in contacts, is essential. Small states have to know foreign societies and especially great powers' societies in their regional environment, if they want to be able to react to their environment and find ways to influence these great powers. This can also happen through engagement in common international organisations, an aspect of things the case studied in this short text has not given us the opportunity to illustrate.

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