

(Un)intended Consequences and the Force of Events: Anarchy in Helsinki During the Revolutionary Summer of 1917

The February/March Revolution of 1917 had a significant impact in Helsinki, the capital of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. Despite the best attempts of socialist leadership, once the floodgates were open, a strong anarchic spirit manifested in the streets of Helsinki. We will follow the development of the anarchy via three factors. First, a distinguished author Arvid Järnefelt, "a Tolstoy of Finland", who by civil disobedience held speeches in the churches demanding the bourgeoisie to give up their privileges and churches to be given from clergy to the people. Second, an old friend of Järnefelt, an eccentric revolutionary and a declassé lawyer, Jean Boldt. In the stairs of the Cathedral of Helsinki, he held vigorous speeches for stateless communism and against private property, audience mostly consisting of unorganised lumpenproletariat. They put into practice what Järnefelt had preached, occupied the cathedral for the people in revolution, just to be evicted the next day and Boldt discreetly and rapidly sent to a mental hospital out of the city. Third factor, the acephalous mobs of rank-and-file workers and lumpenproletariat, resorted to what Boldt had preached: direct action, expropriation of bread and butter, taking initiative to themselves and pushing for the popular reforms. The summer of anarchy came to end in mid-August, when the commander of Helsinki militia, a bolshevik Kustaa Rovio, in a desperate attempt to get socialist leadership back on top, armed several hundred bourgeoisie youth to beat unruly proletarian crowds off the streets. In my paper I will argue that the actions of Järnefelt and Boldt were not just isolated events as previous research tend to suggest, but very much connected to the development of events toward the end of the summer, which had a significant effect to the deterioration of the social situation into the outbreak of civil war few months later. Without going to too far-fetched generalisations about one historical chain of events, I will argue how rather small anarchic intervention can have rather big consequences, intended and not, given the suitable conditions. I will also reflect the events on the basis of some major themes in the classical anarchism, especially on the roles of the revolutionary, lumpenproletariat and the political organs claiming to represent the proletariat. The reflection will inevitably also touch the multifaceted discussion of spontaneity vs. organisation in anarchism, something where anarchists are always struggling to find a feasible balance.