

MANNERHEIM AND HIS PERSONALITY CULT IN FINLAND

Anssi Halmesvirta

Introduction

Personality cult has commonly been understood as a phenomenon of totalitarian or otherwise more or less anti-democratic political cultures. However, there are stable democratic regimes in which great men, statesmen, soldiers, sages, writers and artists have been greatly admired to the point when the admiration has been transformed into a cult (cf. e.g. Shakespeare from England, J.L. Runeberg from Finland). In what follows, I examine the emergence, historical vicissitudes and (pre)conditions of the revival of the personality cult of C.G.E. Mannerheim (1867–1952), the Marshall of Finland who led the Finnish army during the Winter (1939–1940) and Continuation (1941–1944) War. Also the ideational content and the political messages of the cult – its use and abuse in political education of the youth – are disentangled in order to contribute to the contemporary history of ideas.

When analyzing the personality cult, one needs a simple definition: it is an excessive admiration of a person. In comparison to respect which is a quite legitimate moral feeling for a person who has done ‘great deeds’ for his/her people, admiration, when growing out of proportion, becomes a sentiment which often makes imagination construct fantastic ‘higher mental reality’, a cult-personality in place of a historically ‘real’ person.¹ Imagine a Hungarian General had beaten the Austrian/Russian army in 1849 – this General would have become a great war-hero never to be forgotten. This is what has happened to Mannerheim under whose leadership the Finnish army did stop the Russians twice, thus making him a popular war-hero for many Finn today (see PICTURE

¹ Cf. Anssi Halmesvirta (Ed.): *Cultic Revelations. Studies in Modern Historical Cult Personalities and Phenomena*. Spectrum Hungarologicum, vol. 4. Jyväskylä – Pécs, 2010.

1).² In their case tributes and homage paid to Mannerheim and his memory are based on real achievement, and they are everyday expressions of the so called public history in Finland, for instance, on his birthday, the day of the flag of Finland, June the 4th. Furthermore, Mannerheim has become internationally famous as his doctrines of winter war strategy are still taught in many military academies in the world. Nevertheless, the story of his personality cult is much more complicated, calling for an analysis and explanation in view of its persistence, multiplication of cult venues and invention of new forms of eulogy and admiration for him.

One can differentiate at least six modes in which Mannerheim's personality cult manifests itself:

1. **Cult sites:** in Finland there are two Mannerheim museums (in Helsinki and the Headquarters' Museum in Mikkeli), there is a grave monument in Helsinki, numerous statues and, for instance, in Geneva, there stands an obelisk for him in the Mannerheim Park. In every church in Finland, the Command of Mannerheim is hanging on the wall near the pulpit – a spot to say thanks not only to God but also to the Savior Mannerheim. A special case is *pantheonization*: Mannerheim is elevated among the holy few worth of almost godlike admiration and remembrance. The Finnish pantheon does not exist physically anywhere but it is in the minds of cult-mongers and practitioners (there is no Square of Heroes in Finland).
2. **Cult practices:** there are numerous yearly ceremonies and commemorations. There are diverse pictorial representations (a stamp, a coin), novels, memoirs, amateurish public history publications challenging the official biographies. The latest developments are two movies planned, one to be directed by Renny Harlin as a Hollywood-adventure film, the other, more serious attempt declaring to be 'truthful' to his life.³
3. **Falsification of history by magnification:** in popular history and biographical publications Mannerheim's personality is made bigger and more perfect than his real deeds and achievements imply. These magnified images are also being used politically in a neo-

² The newest popular biography of Mannerheim „for every Finnish home” has been sponsored by The Reader's Digest and written by some leading Finnish historians and writers. See Mannerheim. Tuttu ja tuntematon. Valitut Palat, Helsinki, rev. ed. 2011. (1997) The illustrated advertisement of the book contains altogether nineteen pictures of Mannerheim in various situations in his career.

³ The first one has faced serious financial problems and the film experts do not expect much from it. See Peter von Bagh ei odota suuria Mannerhiem elokuvaa. Helsingin Sanomat, 6 May 2008. It was not yet produced in spring 2012.

traditionalistic fashion as a model for character-building of young in education (see details below: *Mannerheimiana*).

4. **The nationalist function of cult:** Mannerheim-cult buttresses national pride and is one of the cornerstones onto which build and maintain Finnish national identity. This has populist and banal features: if one does not have (great) achievements of one's own, one can take pride in Mannerheim's great deeds.⁴
5. **Mystification:** many Mannerheim-myths have been invented and manufactured making him appear in various controversial or even scandalous guises. The utmost, defamatory example was to show him in an animated cartoon titled *Uralin perhonen* (Butterfly from the Urals) as a weird homosexual wearing a corset⁵. This has aroused a debate concerning what were his 'real' sexual inclinations.
6. **Anti-cult:** as we shall see in the next section, there were and still are people in Finland, on the political left in particular, who do not like, even detest Mannerheim, his memory and his cult. They slander his popular, right-wing 'beautified' image and admire Lenin instead.⁶

This leaves the historian a difficult task: he should work as a myth-buster, not only excavating the layers of cult in order to find or preserve the 'real' Mannerheim but he also should be able to expose the intentions, motives and goals why fantasies and dubious representations are being manufactured. Certainly, they are not always very serious but rather innocent, like in the cartoon showing Mannerheim jealous of Hitler during his 75th birthday party in 1942 in which the captures read: Mannerheim asks "Wasn't it *my* birthday party?" and President R. Ryti dragging Hitler away to his quarters answers: "Am I not the President of Finland?" (PICTURE 2). This, more, so to say, human side of Mannerheim seems to be appearing also in recent historical reappraisals which depict him as an obstinate and irritable commander for his Generals.⁷

A brief history of the Mannerheim cult

The juxtaposition of the 'good' and 'bad' Mannerheim can be dated back to the aftermath of the Finnish Civil War in 1918. As a commander of the

⁴ Cf. Michael Billig: *Banal Nationalism*. Sage, London, 1995.

⁵ TV channel 1, March 2008 (452,000 spectators).

⁶ Anssi Halmesvirta: A Foreign Benefactor and a Domestic Liberator: the Cults of Lenin and Mannerheim in Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 34. no. 4. (2009) 420–421.

⁷ See e.g. Lasse Laaksonen: Riitelevät kenraalit ja hankala marsalkka. *Kanava* 2/2012. 24–28. Cf. J.E.O. Screen: *Mannerheim*. Otava, Helsinki, 2001.

victorious White army, he machinated the White terror, summary executions of Red prisoners and prison camps where hunger and disease killed thousands. For this he earned the nickname ‘slaughterer’ by the surviving Reds (workers, crofters) and their children whereas the winning side (landowners, bourgeoisie, church) idolized him as the Savior of Finland from communism. As the Ostrobothnian – the base from where Mannerheim recruited his White soldiers – folklore had it: “Here nobody can slander God, Mannerheim or me!”.⁸ This cleavage has remained ever since in the Finnish political culture, and the schism has flared up every now and then. Although Mannerheim fell out of favour in the radically leftist, ‘progressive’ 1960s and 1970s⁹, the highly positive image of him among the Conservative, political right never truly eroded. It was a shock to them in 1962 when the modernist writer, Paavo Rintala in his *Mummoni ja Mannerheim* (My Grandmother and Mannerheim) showed Mannerheim as an anti-hero, drinking straight from the bottle, swearing and kicking his male servant when drunk. The Conservatives had their turn in 1967, on the 100th birthday anniversary of Mannerheim, when his Savior-role in Finnish history, in the midst of the so called ‘People’s Front’-type political culture, rehabilitated. It was found that he was for the Finns, who, we were told, usually had no inclination to “personality cult” (*henkilöpalvonta*), a truly exceptional figure, *the only one* whom they would idolize.¹⁰ Realizing the political value of the resurrected Mannerheim to the Right, the Left was infuriated and castigated this cult-building as “shameful political demonstrations against democracy and the Soviet Union”.¹¹ In times of ‘finlandization’, the ‘noble’ Mannerheim might have insulted the Soviet leaders, who did not want to see his picture on the walls of residence of the President of Finland. And even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there seems to be no end to this erasing of Mannerheim by the Left. A popular leftist writer, Hannu Salama from Tampere, the hotbed of Finnish ‘Reddism’, reminded Finns in a TV interview that they should remember him as a murderer of 10.000 Reds prisoners in 1918. This was a direct onslaught to the poll by which Mannerheim was voted in 2005 to be the “Greatest Finn ever”. To aggravate the issue, one historian found out that in 1918,

⁸ Personal information from Heikki Rantatupa (historian from Alajärvi teaching at the University of Jyväskylä).

⁹ Also the Hungarians learned that Mannerheim was a „slaughterer” from István Dolmányos’s *Finnország története* (1972). See Anssi Halmesvirta: Suomen historian sankarit ja roistot unkarilaisille tarjoiltuina: István Dolmányosin ’Suomen historia’ (1972) – ideologisen historian kirjoituksen malliesimerkki. In: Kalevi Ahonen, Petri Karonen, Ilkka Nummela, Jari Ojala, Kustaa H.J. Vilkkuna (Eds.): *Toivon historia*. Gummerus, Jyväskylä, 2003. 209-221.

¹⁰ Myytti elää. Suomen kuvalehti 21/1967, 13.

¹¹ *Kansan Uutiset*, 3 June 1967. Cf. Henrik Meinander, *Tasavallan tiellä*. Suom. Paula Autio. Schilds, Helsinki, 1999. 589.

Mannerheim enrolled in commando forces, young boys who were devoid of sympathy and could not foresee the consequences of their deeds, to cleanse Finland from the remaining Reds.¹² Without further probing these diverse and contradictory elements of the Mannerheim-cult, one can say that it has worked with such repetitions and counterpoints (anti-cult) that make it an omnipresent, socially and politically dividing feature in Finnish political culture.

The Mannerheimiana

As an example of the recent revival of practices of Mannerheim-cult, I have chosen a text that nicely represents the rhetoric of the nationalist, neo-conservative side of the Finnish political culture. It is the first volume of the series celebrating Mannerheim's memory entitled *Mannerheimiana* (2004). Although its readership has not been wide as its edition is limited and it is distributed only by the Mannerheim Museum, it is advertised by its editors to be a harbinger of texts that "provide background material and historical depth to security political discussion" which has great significance for all Finns. Consequently, the personality of Mannerheim is entangled with up-to-date defense-political debates, and lifted in a problematic way onto a high platform from where it can teach useful lessons in solving post-Cold War problems – e.g. whether Finland should join the NATO or not – as well as be a model for national leadership in critical times (cf. the Winter War). Thus, Mannerheim is again made incarnate such indispensable moral qualities that could "heal the soul of the sick nation" and give its youth an anchor of moral stamina resembling that of the Cadet Corps.¹³

One should notice that the organizations behind the *Mannerheimiana* -venture are not directly party-political but present themselves as 'expert', rearguard influence on wider national issues. The publisher, Champion of Liberty Association, was established in 2000 to cultivate Mannerheim's memory and to promote the knowledge of his career "in gaining freedom to Finland [1918] and in preserving a democratic social order in the country".¹⁴ In this sense, it is deeply conservative, if not die-hard, working closely with kindred-minded institutions devoted to Mannerheim's heritage, namely Mannerheim Museum (est. 1951), Mannerheim Foundation, Mannerheim's Heritage Foundation (est. 1973) and Marshal Mannerheim's Hunting Cabin Society (est. 1958). Retired, highly-ranking officers of the Finnish army feature prominently in the leadership of the Champion of Liberty Association, foremost of them be-

¹² Helsingin Sanomat 17 April 2006. A6.

¹³ Editors' "Foreword". *Mannerheimiana* 1/2004. Otava, Helsinki, 2004. 3.

¹⁴ Editors' "Notes". *Mannerheimiana*, 93.

ing Lieutenant-General Ermei Kanninen, the former Chief-of-Staff. Fittingly, in some of the articles of the *Mannerheimiana* a self-assured but at times naively and unconditionally ‘truth-telling’, patriotic and paternalist tone can be heard. It gives the book its peculiar flavor of unchallengeable authority of noble public moralism. The authors naturally presuppose that the political system of Finland – the term ‘democracy’ is mentioned only once – cannot survive without great leaders like Mannerheim was. It sounds as if the military contributors, many of whom have experienced both the Winter and Continuation War, were as right as Mannerheim himself had been in his distanced aristocratic attitude and successful military strategy. It is these contributions from high moral ground that create a new, magnified Mannerheim, not the ones in the first half of the book written by professional historians or other scholars who were not intent on pursuing any cult-making but deal with some forgotten or less well-known aspects of Mannerheim’s life.¹⁵

Super-Mannerheim

One basic assumption behind the arguments of the cult-making articles in the *Mannerheimiana* is that there exists an unbroken bond between the nation and its great leaders through historical time (cf. Thomas Carlyle’s classic hero-worship). It is regarded as corroborated by accumulated national-historical experience that nations cannot survive without great men’s exceptional “competence” and that the education of such persons is of paramount importance to any country. In times of war it is the military heroes who strengthen the “national spirit of defense” but they are also needed in peacetime since the memory of their deeds and military virtues invigorate the morale of a nation, somewhat slackened without warfare and military exercise. The mega-subject, ‘nation’, is in need of great brains in modern democracies like the body politic needed a king to head the state in the era of Absolutism. Furthermore, in times of crisis the leadership and power are usually concentrated in the hands of a single person, the great leader. Accordingly, we are being told, Mannerheim stands in line with Churchill and Roosevelt – Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini are, as “Great but bad leaders”, denied the access to the pantheon-gallery.¹⁶

But which dispositions and propensities make Mannerheim the greatest Finn of international stature to the propagandists of the *Mannerheimiana*? It is biology, more precisely Mannerheim’s “blood heritage” but selectively at that. One author, Colonel Lappalainen, tells of Mannerheim’s Finnish, peasants

¹⁵ See e.g. J.E.O. Screen’s „The Development of Mannerheim’s Image in Europe” in *Mannerheimiana*.

¹⁶ Colonel Matti Lappalainen: *Mannerheim kansansa johtajana. Mannerheimiana*, 60.

origins in his mother's family line but forgets to mention that his father was Swedish-Finnish aristocrat. Referring to an obscure 'natural law' that "every person has his/her own dose of strength of soul in his/her blood", Lappalainen lays it down that Mannerheim had inherited the most of it.¹⁷ This natural superiority is complemented by Mannerheim's own preparation and self-development which manifest the latent qualities and talent of a leader in him. Relying on the derelict language of national typology and character, Lappalainen accumulates the national use-value for Mannerheim-cult: in his fiction Mannerheim is predestined to embody such traits as "strength of will, strength of soul, courage, Finnish perseverance (in Finnish: *sisu*), self-confidence, determination, sense of responsibility, mental flexibility, ability of adapt, nervous power and reasonable ambition", all that made him a Lieutenant-General already in the Russian cavalry in the Great War. To crown it, Mannerheim is made by Lappalainen the wisest statesman in Finland before the Winter War because he – without being a politician – was the person who advocated Nordic co-operation, a policy by which the Winter War could "evidently have been avoided".¹⁸ In the end, Mannerheim is made to carry the potential of nothing less than a seer and a prophet, usually found only in superhuman beings, and so much so that when out of favour he knew his services would be needed in the future. Needless to add, no one other than Mannerheim could have helped Finland in hard times: he was the indispensable as Finland would have been conquered in 1939–1945. Without any reservations he is elevated to the same level of military and state leaders as St. Stephen of Hungary, Gustavus II Adolf of Sweden, Peter the Great and Napoleon.¹⁹

The lesson the Finns should take to heart is: the use of "potential of survival" – yet another gift of nature – was totally dependent on the capability of leaders of Mannerheim's caliber. The predicament, however, was that in present day Finland there were no such persons available. Military statistics told their gloomy message: Finnish youth was physically and mentally weakly and even "degenerate". When realizing this fatality, the Finns should remember the basic "truth" that "unfit", small nations may die out or be run over by the powerful, big ones. With this imperative, sounding very similar to the Social-Darwinist jargon of the late 19th century, future generations were subjected to the duty to cultivate the physical and mental heritage of the super-Mannerheim so that the

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ Ibid., 66. In a history of Finnish military leadership we are told that Mannerheim himself regarded the "power of soul" as the most important propensity of a leader but it was added that only difficult times reveal whether a person has it or not. See Kimmo Ikonen – Ali Pykkänen: *Haasteena sodan ja rauhan johtajuus. Suomen reserviupseeriliitto 1931–2006*. Karisto, Hämeenlinna, 2006. 335.

¹⁹ Lappalainen: *Mannerheim kansansa johtajana*. 66., 70–71.

Finns would survive forthcoming crises in the same way as they survived the wars. This was made all the more urgent as the number of war veterans, those who largely carried the heritage forward, was decreasing fast.²⁰ Notwithstanding, in view of popularity of military and paramilitary organizations in Finland, it seems that the Champion of Liberty Association does not have as much to worry about as their alarmist message implies.

In a nutshell, for military authors of the *Mannerheimiana* Mannerheim was *primus inter pares* among the Finnish great men because he simply was “incomparable” (in Finnish: *ylivertainen*).²¹ In view of this, it was a great pity that school and university curricula did not teach any “Mannerheim-doctrine”. In future crises new Mannerheims were desperately needed, and in the meanwhile, Finland could prosper only if the principles of Mannerheim-morality were applied in all sectors of life. The so called “Mannerheim-knowledge” – buried in his *Memoirs*²² – as the treasure of exemplary career-history should have been made compulsory reading for every young male Finn who wanted to succeed in life. It remains ambiguous what the authors meant by telling the reader that by time “Mannerheim’s importance was further clarified and emphasized” but the prediction appears to indicate that it may be easier for future generations to realize how far-sighted and statesmanlike Mannerheim actually was, for example, in his “attempts at healing the wounds of 1918” and at quelling the language strife between the Finnish- and Swedish-speakers in Finland.²³ He is made a tool the politics of national reconciliation and social harmony, of the politics of memory that aims at making people forget past conflicts dividing the nation and at rallying them behind the goal of ‘survival’. A utopian Finland is envisaged where there is no class hatred nor minority disputes. Politics of this kind is typical of the neo-conservative public moralism purported to revive some supposedly lost virtues in the nation so brilliantly evinced by the personality of Mannerheim. It is hoped that in times of materialism and secularization, Mannerheim can serve as a surrogate-Saviour whose sacredness should not be doubted. The sacredness – the core of the cult – is highlighted by gestures towards his philanthropic nature: we are told that during the Winter War Mannerheim treated his soldiers gently, as his ‘children’, when comforting the wounded during visits to military hospitals, in particular. Then he was also the Chairman of the Finnish Red Cross, the founder of the Mannerheim’s League for Children’s Protection and a vehement supporter of veteran organizations and the Finnish scout movement. All in all, Mannerheim’s appearance in Finnish history

²⁰ Ibid., 61.,76.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² E.g. C.G. Mannerheim: *Erinnerungen*. Atlantis Verlag, Zürich, 1952.

²³ Lappalainen: *Mannerheim kansansa johtajana*. 63–64.

as the greatest leader ever is seen as the “miracle” which saved Finland from destruction many times.²⁴ Actually he is displayed so great that a normal person could only humbly try to imitate him but never reach the same dignity and valour. And it is only natural that by regarding themselves as virtuous and hard-working pupils of the Mannerheim doctrine, the military writers of the *Mannerheimiana* created a Mannerheim also in their own image reflected in the mirror of Mannerheim’s heroic life. They are the priestly guardians of his cult.

Mannerheim rides on

It is redundant to enumerate all the great attributes dedicated to Mannerheim by the military writers of *Mannerheimiana* and other cult-mongers. More to the point would be to narrate of one fairly recent Mannerheim dispute as it reveals the vigorousness and deep-rootedness of the cult itself. It also shows how sensitive the Mannerheim-issue still is in Finland as it touches the raw nerve of aesthetic sense of the some artistic Finns.

All of us who have visited Helsinki could not but look at the statue of riding Mannerheim in front of the museum of modern art, Kiasma (see PICTURE 3). For many a Finn this statue is one of the best symbols of the nation and nothing should tarnish it. But alas, Kiasma produced an art exhibition in summer 2006 called *Ars* in which artists were commissioned to paint the walls of the museum in five colours, leaving the riding Mannerheim in front of “black contraption of barbed wire, a pistol with bullets and gallons of gasoline”. According to the dumbfounded critic, this could not but arouse “negative impressions” in the minds of beholders and really was a blasphemy to Mannerheim’s glorious memory. More seriously, the silhouette of Mannerheim seen against this terrible background could be politically harmful: a foreigner would realize that Finland, hosting the summits of the European Union (2006), “yarned for a revolution and idolized terrorism”, politics diametrically opposite to consensual democratic practice. In the crooked imagination of the critics, the *Ars* was a national shame, and they exhorted the beholders turn away from it and try to remember what the ‘real’ Mannerheim looked like.²⁵ The same angry attitude is recommended against the expressions of artistic symbolism which depict Mannerheim as a

²⁴ Ermei Kanninen: Mannerheim sotilasjohtajana. 83.; Lappalainen: Mannerheim kansansa johtajana. 73. *Mannerheimiana*. In the same spirit Kanninen criticizes the TV-version of the play *Tunteimatonta sotilasta* (Unknown soldier, 2009, dir. Kristian Smeds). In his view, it distorts the reality of war offending the sensibilities of the veterans with its images of undisciplined, reckless and incessantly swearing soldiers. Letter to the Editor, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 10 February 2009.

²⁵ Urpo Ryönänkoski in *Helsingin Sanomat*, 4 June 2006.

homosexual or otherwise deviant man.²⁶ The image of him should serve as a symbol of purity for all Finns as well as ‘a clean show-case’ for the foreigners to look at them, and no satire should slander it.

The question arises: what other functions does the Mannerheim-cult fulfill than being a shield against dangers of social unrest and loss of national identity, interpreted in a neo-traditionalist way? Does it in its elevated posture guard the nation against, for example, increasing economic uncertainty and the expansion of refusal identity among the disenchanted people? Does it really appeal to the sentiments of the Finnish youth today? The message of cult, not geared, for example, to social reform policies but aimed at reviving the feelings of national solidarity and cohesion, attracts the newly patriotic and largely populist right-wing strata of the society. The Mannerheim-cult’s ancient ideological rival, the cult of Lenin, does no longer count as a viable alternative, irrespective of the fact the Lenin museum in Tampere attracts more foreign tourists than the Mannerheim museum. One reason why Mannerheim-cult can live on is that in such stable societies as Finland, history of great men lends support to continuities and allows room for such historical personalities on whom to anchor the value of national existence and essence. Occasional polarities in Finnish political culture perpetuate debates between icon-makers and icon-busters but it seems that Lenin has receded to the past and his positive memory lingers on in the minds of extreme Leftists (communists) but Mannerheim rides on among wider public. While professional historians attempt to disseminate a rather realistic image of him in the public²⁷, in the market of visual arts and literature he has, become a fictional product catering to feminine and peace-making qualities of softness and tolerance on one hand, and to the masculine qualities associated with Rambo-types on the other.²⁸ Obviously, the realistic, ‘dull’ Mannerheim does not satisfy the popular needs of people who live the world of ever-increasing fantasies, the latest of them being that a black man plays Mannerheim in a 2nd-rate romantic movie.

²⁶ Helsingin Sanomat 4 July 2008.

²⁷ E.g. Professor Henrik Meinander on Mannerheim in the Finnish Radio YLE1, 4 June 2008.

²⁸ Osmo Pekonen: Mannerheim runon peilissä. *Kanava* 4-5/2008.; Aapo Korkeaaja: Tabut murtuvat, taide ei. Helsingin Sanomat, 17 December 2008.; Helsingin Sanomat, *Nyt-liite* no. 12, 2009, kansikuva (cover).

MANNERHEIM



TUTTU JA TUNTEMATON

ValitutPalat

