

The trauma of war was passed on in Finnish families

September 9 2021, by Nina Venhe

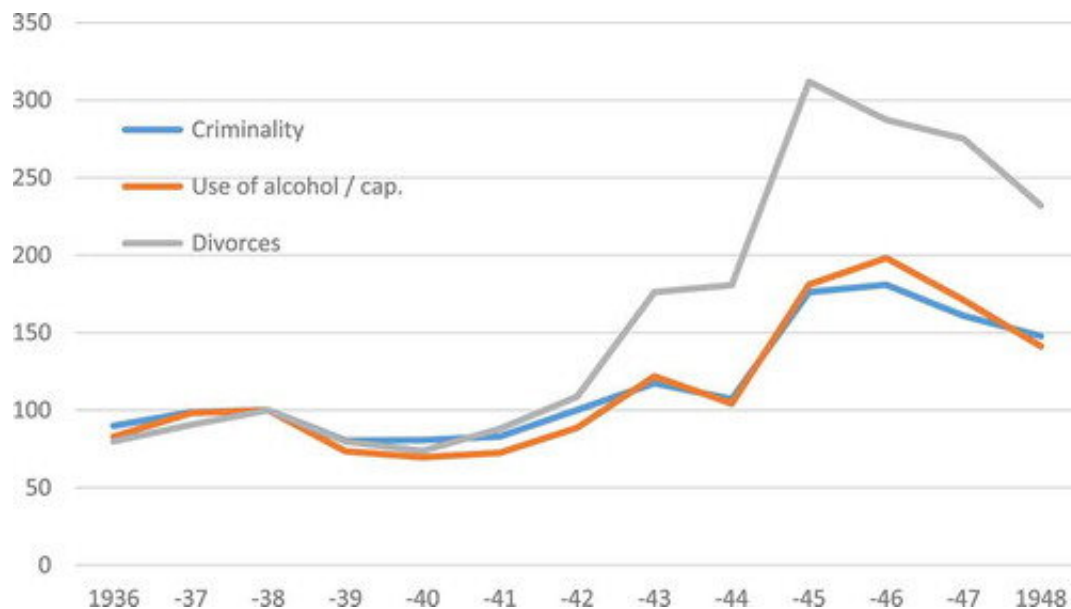


Figure 1. Finland in 1936–1948, in the light of social indicators (1938 = 100): by criminality known to police, consumption of spirits per capita, and divorce. Source: Statistical Yearbook of Finland 1936–1948. Credit: DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2021.1892314

The time of war left its mark on Finnish families. Many fathers and young men returning from the front were traumatized, had nightmares, drunk heavily and were violent against their family members. Often, their ability to work and provide was not the same as before. Many mothers who took sole care of the home and farm work, on the other hand, were exhausted.

There was no room or opportunity to talk about the mental burden of war, and those with a shattered mental health were seen to be weak. Mental instability and mental illness were also considered shameful, which is why they were kept quiet outside the home.

"After the war, Finland was strongly focused reconstruction, and all eyes were set on the future. Life was materially scarce, and many families only had enough energy to survive everyday life. Mental well-being wasn't really considered an issue of its own, and there was little social support for [mental health](#) at the [time](#)," cultural researcher Adjunct Professor Kirsi Laurén says.

Together with historian, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Ph.D. Antti Malinen, she has authored an article on children's post-war experiences in Finnish families. The article examines the role of a culture of shame and silence in relation to difficult memories of insecurity and domestic violence. As material, the study used narratives gathered during the "Did the war continue in the home?" campaign, which was organized by the University of Jyväskylä and the Archive of the Finnish Literature Society.

Staying silent no more

"Clearly, the time is now ripe for addressing difficult memories. The narratives gathered for the study showed that there still is a need to deal with traumatic experiences and memories. The underlying hope is to find closure and to stop the culture of silence from being passed on to generations to come."

For many, the certain anonymity of writing may have made it easier to address difficult and even shameful issues, rather than to talk about them face to face.

"Here in Finland, public remembrance and history writing relating to the war and its consequences was, for a very long time, focused on the politics of war, and on the events of, and heroic stories from, the front. Over the past decades, however, research and [public debate](#), as well as the narratives in our research material, have given a voice to children and women, i.e., today's adult women and men."

Laurén says that there has been an affective turn in studies addressing the war, i.e., researchers are now increasingly interested in experiences and emotions instead of, or alongside with, the history of military offenses and action.

This is also reflected on popular culture: movies, theater and literature are increasingly focused on what happened and what was experienced on the home front.

The microhistorical viewpoint of everyday life shapes, for its part, our society in a more tolerant direction, and it is safer to talk about emotions than before.

"A similar phenomenon in dealing with wartime experiences and trauma can also be seen in international research and cultural ways of publicly dealing with difficult memories."

A phenomenon that didn't exist before

For people today, it is difficult to comprehend why no mental support or therapy was offered to the men returning from war.

"The need for support wasn't understood at the time, and there wasn't enough information on how to deal with post-traumatic experiences."

According to Laurén, the narratives deal with a phenomenon that didn't

officially exist at the time.

"According to the authors, it is a relief to finally be able to talk about these experiences, and to end the secrecy and silence around the topics. It is also helpful to discuss these issues in public, allowing people to see that others have been through similar things. This makes it possible for the process of healing to start."

Belittling and dismissal

Although some of the narratives were positive and about good and loving families, most of them were touching stories about how little dignity was given to children at the time. Physical and mental punishment of children was commonplace in many families.

"I especially remember a narrative written under the pseudonym "Pertti," who describes how he spent most of his childhood trying to please his parents. As an only child, he had always been obedient and kind, and hoped to get attention especially from his unpredictable father. However, the father followed a common upbringing method of that time, often resorting to corporal punishment. Pertti's father didn't think Pertti was manly enough, so he was never complimented or encouraged."

Once, however, Pertti remembers having received praise from his father for heating up the sauna.

"And he still remembers how good that one time felt."

The narratives also show how impulsive both fathers and mothers could be, and how sudden and unconditional decisions on children's upbringing were. According to Laurén, this speaks about constant fatigue and anxiety.

Older siblings would protect younger ones, especially from their violent and drunk fathers.

"Besides physical punishment, I was particularly moved by the constant dismissal and belittling of children. One narrative described how the family's father repeatedly pointed to his son that 'he cannot understand anything because he has not been in the war.'"

Later on, experiences of shame may have caused depression and difficulties in establishing permanent relationships.

Some people have managed to talk about their trauma in therapy, but aftercare was often delayed.

"For some, it has taken a long time to understand that these things get passed on from one generation to the next, and that the trauma of war also affects the lives of many generations to come."

Important research

Laurén says that when society faces a major crisis, it is important that the crisis and its many effects are publicly and transparently acknowledged.

"It is of course clear that acknowledging and addressing shameful and difficult issues, such as war crimes or human rights violations, will take a certain amount of time before they can be spoken about out loud."

War is one of the greatest crises faced by mankind, and Finns don't seem to get tired of reading about theirs. With the narratives of different minorities and women and children now coming to light, there is a new perspective to the events and consequences of war.

"Small narratives and personal experiences are interesting. They are also important for research, as they carry with them the cultural and social climate and values that have prevailed in different times."

In other words, the perspectives related to microhistory reflect more broadly the attitudes and values of the period in question.

"I also think it is a sign of a healthy society that even difficult things from the past are discussed honestly, even if they are not always so honorable."

More information: Kirsi Laurén et al, Shame and silences: children's emotional experiences of insecurity and violence in postwar Finnish families, *Social History* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2021.1892314](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2021.1892314)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

Citation: The trauma of war was passed on in Finnish families (2021, September 9) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-trauma-war-finnish-families.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.