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# Marshal Mannerheim: The Years of Preparation<sup>1</sup>

J. E. O. SCREEN

BARON CARL GUSTAF EMIL MANNERHEIM (1867—1951) is known to the world as Marshal of Finland: his place in history depends on the part he played in the establishment and preservation of the modern Finnish republic. Yet his life falls into two distinct parts of which only the second was spent in his native Finland, to which he returned after the revolution of 1917 had brought to an abrupt and premature end his service in the imperial Russian army. The thirty years he spent in Russia, which profoundly influenced his whole outlook and were of great importance in the development of his character and in shaping his policy as a Finnish statesman, are the part of his life about which least is known.

## I

Ever since Finland had come under Russian rule in 1809—and, indeed, even before that—small numbers of Finns had entered the Russian service, where they were favourably received, and a few had risen to high rank. During the 19th century, when the emperor was their sovereign as Grand Duke of Finland, it was not thought strange that they should go to Russia, to be challenged by a world entirely different from the provincial Finnish scene, in which the opportunities for an ambitious man were incomparably greater than in Finland, but where the struggle to succeed was correspondingly keener. Many who stayed at home even regarded it as desirable that there should be Finns well known in Russia whom the emperor could appoint to high posts in the Finnish administration.<sup>2</sup> There were certainly neither patriotic nor political objections to service in Russia.

Mannerheim was born in 1867, during the liberal reign of Alexander II when relations between the empire and Finland were cooperative and harmonious. As a young boy he was not attracted to Russia. His mother wrote, 'I know that he is averse to becoming a Russian soldier.... He is so decidedly pro-Swedish'.<sup>3</sup> But his child-

<sup>1</sup> This study has been aided by a grant from the Central Research Fund of the University of London. It was prepared before the publication of S. Jägerskiöld, *Den unge Mannerheim*, Helsingfors, 1964, which has added greatly to existing knowledge of the early part of Mannerheim's life.

<sup>2</sup> T. Borenus, *Field-Marshal Mannerheim*, London, 1940, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> '... jag vett att han har motvilja mot att bli rysk militär... Han är så avgjort svensksinnad'. Quoted in E. Mannerheim Sparre, *Barndomsminnen*, [Helsingfors, 1952], p. 73.

hood prejudice soon passed. He and his contemporaries felt none of the instinctive hostility towards Russia and Russians that became characteristic of the generation which grew up at the turn of the century after Russia had become the oppressor of Finnish liberties. His sympathetic attitude towards Russia after his return to Finland, as shown by his appeal in October 1919 to support the Russian Whites by attacking the bolsheviks in Petrograd, was regarded most suspiciously by the younger generation. His belief that a Russian White government would look benevolently on Finland was undoubtedly influenced by the political circumstances of his formative years as well as by his long residence in the empire.<sup>4</sup> In addition, he was able to understand Russian concern that the Finnish frontier came so close to Leningrad, and he argued in October 1939 that Finland should relinquish some of its border districts, as had been proposed by the Soviet government. Unlike the majority of Finns, he recognised that Russia retained a strategic interest in the country it had so recently controlled, an interest he knew Finland was not sufficiently powerful to be able to disregard.

After attempts by his family to enter him in the Imperial School of Pages had failed, Mannerheim thought again of serving in the Russian army, though only after the prospect of a military career in Finland had been closed by a precipitate action on his own part.<sup>5</sup> The self-discipline and sense of duty characteristic of his maturity contrast sharply with the wildness of his childhood and youth, when his future caused some anxiety to his family. It was hoped that he might make a soldier and in 1882 he entered the Corps of Cadets, a boarding-school at Hamina, to train for a commission in the small Finnish army.<sup>6</sup> He did not take kindly to the strict discipline there and was expelled for taking French leave one night in 1886. This expulsion made a deep impression on him. It taught him the importance of self-control and the need to accept discipline. He realised, too, how much he wanted to be a soldier. The military way of life offered attractive outlets for his capacity for leadership and eagerness to seek adventure and danger. With its emphasis on action, its glamour, its encouragement of riding and field sports, which he loved, and the companionship of like-minded men in an ordered society, the army was to appeal increasingly to his interests and temperament. He resolved to make a fresh start in Russia.

His ability, appearance and background, as well as a capacity for shrewd calculation, helped him first to enter the Russian world and

<sup>4</sup> The attitude towards Russia of successive Finnish generations is analysed in M. Rintala, *Three Generations: The Extreme Right Wing in Finnish Politics*, Bloomington, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> A. Inkinen, 'Vaihe Mannerheimin nuoruusvuosilta' (*Uusi Suomi*, Helsinki, 21 July 1962, p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> E. Mannerheim Sparre, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 77.

then to rise in it. As a boy he had shown little or no interest in learning, but after his expulsion from the Corps of Cadets he studied hard and succeeded in passing the matriculation examination. This was the qualification for admission to the Nicolas Cavalry School in St Petersburg at which he wanted to become a cadet, and his attempt to obtain a place there was successful. He began the two-year course in September 1887 and passed out of the school with a first-class grading, which was a tribute both to his ability and to his determination to obtain a commission in the guards, for which a high placing was necessary.

The main problem during his first years in Russia was undoubtedly the language. He worked patiently to overcome this difficulty and eventually spoke Russian fluently, though with a slight accent. Use of a foreign language may have contributed to his habitual slowness and deliberateness of speech. He was, nevertheless, an intelligent and penetrating conversationalist. Later he was to prove himself a polished speaker and writer, and his famous Finnish orders of the day were models of their kind. The records of the expedition across Central Asia which he undertook for the Russian General Staff between 1906 and 1908 reveal skill and precision as an observer in scientific fields entirely new to him. He enjoyed reading for a practical purpose. He was no intellectual, but his interests were wider in scope than the usual cultural and artistic tastes of the cosmopolitan aristocracy to which he belonged. The Russian military authorities were aware that he was not simply a conscientious officer with a devotion to horses and sport. Nor was there any doubt in his own mind of his ability to undertake the responsibilities of command or of high office.

Mannerheim's appearance gave him great advantages which he used to the full throughout life. He was tall—about 6 ft. 2 in—erect, well-proportioned and handsome. Admiral Sir Walter Cowan wrote, 'He was, I think, the handsomest foreigner I have ever met. Very tall, gracefully built, and beautifully-made clothes.'<sup>7</sup> His presence commanded immediate attention and respect; it was impossible not to notice him. As a young officer he acquired the appropriate nickname of 'the knight'. He was well cast for the parts he played in the ceremonial surrounding the Russian court, and it is unlikely that he would have entered the highly exclusive Chevalier Guards regiment if his appearance had not been favourable, any more than if his background had not been right.

Although a foreigner, he was a baron and his father a count. Members of his family had held important positions in the Finnish administration, and the name of Mannerheim would not be unknown

<sup>7</sup> L. Dawson, *Sound of the Guns: being an account of the wars and service of Admiral Sir Walter Cowan*, Oxford, 1949, p. 155.

in St Petersburg. In addition, he used every possible opportunity and every source of influence at his disposal to further his ambition to enter the Chevalier Guards. On one occasion, when their Colonel-in-Chief, the Empress Maria Fyodorovna, presented him with a prize for riding, he boldly expressed his desire to serve her.<sup>8</sup> He wrote to his godmother, Baroness Alfhild Scalon de Coligny, asking her to appeal to the war minister or the empress to arrange for him to be commissioned in the Chevalier Guards.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the final decision lay with the officers of the regiment, who had the power to reject applicants they considered unsuitable. Mannerheim's acceptance spoke well for the impression he made, and in 1891, when a vacancy occurred, he entered the Chevalier Guards after serving his first years as an officer with a dragoon regiment on the Polish frontier.

## II

Relatively few Russian officers, especially in the guards, regarded the army as a profession. To many of them service in the army simply offered the most acceptable solution to the problem of finding employment in an agrarian society. Such officers might resign their commissions and retire to the country on succeeding to their family estates, or leave the army for the civil or diplomatic service. They achieved a superficial familiarity with their duties but had no wish to do more. Mannerheim's enthusiasm for his profession was quite untypical and attracted immediate attention. Count A. A. Ignat'yev, who served under Mannerheim in the Chevalier Guards, wrote,

. . . This model mercenary looked on the service as a profession and not as an idle way of passing the time. He could do everything in exemplary fashion, and even drank in such a way that he stayed sober.

Deep down, certainly, Mannerheim despised our civilians in regiments, but he contrived to express his attitude in so jovial a fashion that the majority actually took it all as teasing on the part of the 'well-meaning but limited' Baron.<sup>10</sup>

The description is malicious, but perceptive. Mannerheim felt himself to be different from the majority of those around him. On 30 October 1914 he wrote to his sister Sophie that it was difficult to attain any kind of 'close relationship with [those Russian] fellow officers whom one did not choose oneself and whose way of looking at things is often very different from one's own'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> F. R. Martin, *Sett, hört och känt; skisser från Turkiet, Ryssland, Italien och andra land*, Stockholm, 1933, pp. 95-96.

<sup>9</sup> E. Heinrichs, *Mannerheim-gestalten*, Helsingfors, 1957-59, I, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> A. A. Ignat'yev, *A Subaltern in Old Russia*, London, 1944, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> 'intimitet med [dessa ryska] vapenbröder, vilka man ej själv valt, och vars [vilkas] sätt att se saker och ting ofta är mycket olikt ens eget'. Quoted in E. Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 40-41.

These differences in outlook extended beyond the army to political and social questions. Until the reform of parliament in 1906, the Finnish nobility constituted one of the four Estates in the Diet and was a politically active class, required to participate in legislation and thus involved in the government of the country. Mannerheim, who represented the baronial branch of his family in the last session of the Estates before reform took place, was accustomed to a politically conscious environment. There was no such political consciousness among the Russian officer corps, which formed an isolated group in society, indifferent to political and social affairs.<sup>12</sup> This indifference was the antithesis of his own outlook, which was rooted in a strong belief in the responsibility of the individual in matters of politics.<sup>13</sup> Such firmly-held principles reduced the possibility that he might become assimilated in Russia.

Mannerheim never relinquished his Finnish nationality and never allowed his connections with Finland to lapse, although in one important respect he identified himself with his new environment. In 1892 he married Anastasia Arapova, a daughter of General Nicolas Arapov, the chief of police in Moscow, and a former officer in the Chevalier Guards. In 1903 Baroness Mannerheim went to the south of France. She took their two daughters with her and never returned. In 1919 he obtained a divorce. The marriage, which might have helped to bind him to Russia, had proved short-lived. He continued to spend his long leaves in Finland. It was the home to which he returned when his life in Russia had been destroyed.

In 1899 the Russian government began a policy of oppression in Finland that continued with only a brief pause until 1917. The Finns countered with a campaign of passive resistance. One of the leaders of the resistance movement was Mannerheim's brother Carl, who was expelled from Finland in 1903 by the Russian governor-general. This situation made Mannerheim's own position as a Finnish officer in the Russian army extremely delicate. In his memoirs he affirmed his opposition to the russification of Finland.<sup>14</sup> He expressed his views on the subject in St Petersburg and aroused disapproval there. In spite of the risks involved, he met Finnish politicians to offer to raise the question of Finnish liberties at his audience with the emperor on his return from China in 1908, though there is no evidence that he actually did so.<sup>15</sup> During his service in Poland, a subject nation even more firmly held down than Finland, the Russian police became suspicious of his friendly contacts with the Polish aristocracy, but the

<sup>12</sup> O. A. Ray, 'The Imperial Russian Army Officer' (*Political Science Quarterly*, LXXVI, 4, New York, 1961, p. 592).

<sup>13</sup> T. Borenus, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>14</sup> C. G. E. Mannerheim, *Memoirs*, London, [1954], p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> E. Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, I, p. 100.

authorities attached no significance to the police reports. Whatever conflicts may have gone on in his mind, it was obvious that he remained unwaveringly loyal to the emperor. The fact that he volunteered to fight in the Russo-Japanese war has been interpreted as a deliberate demonstration of his loyalty, though his desire for experience of battle seems a more probable explanation.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Mannerheim's Finnish nationality was the principal cause of the occasional intrigues against him to which his biographer Rodzianko refers.<sup>17</sup> Intrigues were to be expected in circles close to the court, but they were not characteristic of his reception in Russia. He was in no sense a foreign outcast. The great houses of St Petersburg were all open to him, and he became well-known in the capital, particularly through his sporting interests. The years he spent in Poland, 1909-14, were especially happy and he became popular in Warsaw society: because he was not a Russian the Poles could receive him without any political stigma attaching to themselves. Although he found it impossible to make close friends of many Russians—or, in fact, of many Finns—the remoteness and separation from other people which stemmed from his complete independence and self-sufficiency, and are such striking features of his character, seem somewhat less pronounced during the years he spent in Russia. After he returned to Finland these characteristics were accentuated naturally by increasing age and the death of his friends, and artificially by their acceptance in the country as a part of his public image.

### III

Within the Russian army Mannerheim had the reputation of a very able soldier. General Brusilov thought sufficiently highly of him to attempt to dissuade him from volunteering to serve in Manchuria during the Russo-Japanese war in order to save himself for the European conflict which Brusilov believed to be imminent. Mannerheim, however, was not content to continue in the routine of peacetime duties in St Petersburg when there was a chance to see active service: he regarded training as preparation for battle. Much as he liked working with horses and the travelling about Europe that the job involved, he was glad to give up an appointment in the Imperial Stables Administration and return to the army. Soldiering was his vocation, and it was his ambition to have his own regiment which he could train to his own exacting standards.

The patience and attention to detail which contributed to his

<sup>16</sup> A. Nopanen, *Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim vuoteen 1919 saakka*, Lahti, 1963, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> P. Rodzianko, *Mannerheim: an Intimate Picture of a Great Soldier and Statesman*, London, 1940, p. 68.



success as a horseman also produced good results in training the Russian soldier, who responded well to his leadership, and whom he found docile and easy to handle. 'The young soldiers' review was brilliantly handled by Mannerheim, with the result that I, as well as he, received complimentary citation in regimental orders,' wrote Ignat'yev.<sup>18</sup> As a commanding officer Mannerheim was popular despite his strictness. He demanded the utmost effort from everyone, especially his officers, but spared himself least of all. His explosive temper showed itself principally when horses were ill-treated. In the Russo-Japanese war he was promoted for bravery, and during the World War, when in spite of his high rank he was never far from the fighting, he was decorated for valour on more than one occasion. He showed a different kind of courage in his determined recovery from several serious riding accidents and in his fight against the severe rheumatism he contracted in the rigorous conditions of Manchuria and which had become so bad by the summer of 1914 that he feared he might have to retire from the army. During the first weeks of the World War he was criticised in St Petersburg for squandering lives, but he never incurred unnecessary casualties and was not insensitive to losses.<sup>19</sup> He proved himself a sound tactician, capable of taking the initiative when the opportunity arose, and not lacking in the daring associated with a cavalry training.

Mannerheim was a first-class regimental officer who became a competent general. As Commander-in-Chief during the Finnish War of Liberation in 1918 his sound analysis of the situation, clear-cut plan, and the energy and resolution with which he put it into effect suggest more than mere competence. Yet he attained the rank of general without attending the Russian General Staff Academy. This was not unusual: guards regiments were commanded by major-generals and there was a reasonable chance that an able officer with a guards background would reach that rank. There remained, however, a gap in his formal military knowledge, although practical experience as a brigade, divisional and corps commander during the World War gave him an insight into staff work and compensated to some extent for his lack of theoretical training. But although he did not go to the Academy, he was not unknown to the General Staff. Possibly his skill as a horseman and experience in the Far East brought him to the attention of the Chief of the General Staff in 1906, when it was planned to send an officer to ride through the Central Asian provinces of China to collect military, topographical and political intelligence. The quality of the work he did during this expedition in 1906-8 did not pass unnoticed. On his return he was given an

<sup>18</sup> A. A. Ignat'yev, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> A. Knox, *With the Russian Army, 1914-1917*, London, 1921, I, p. 100.



audience by the emperor, a notable favour, and his appointment in 1912 as a major-general *à la suite* of the emperor, a mark of the sovereign's personal regard, was connected with the success of his expedition.<sup>20</sup>

Count Archibald Douglas wrote of Mannerheim, 'he was a man of honour without ambition'.<sup>21</sup> Honour mattered greatly to him, and he was quick to condemn dishonourable or unchivalrous conduct. But he was not without ambition, especially during his years in Russia, and he aimed high from the very first. Fame and success were important to him, partly because he felt the need to rise to the challenge of service in Russia by distinguishing himself, partly because he applied to his own achievement standards even more exacting than he ever applied to the performance of his subordinates. Promotion in the guards was by seniority within each regiment and tended to be slow. Mannerheim weighed the chances of promotion carefully and, much as he liked life in the Chevalier Guards, was ready to leave the regiment in order to get on. After transferring to the line, he became a colonel at the age of thirty-seven, which was creditable, though not exceptional. Concern to obtain a regiment prompted his initial hesitation whether to undertake the Asian expedition, and on his return to Europe he did not fail to mention to the emperor his fear of losing a command. He received the coveted regimental command in 1909; two years later he became commander of His Majesty's Life Guard Uhlans in Warsaw and was promoted major-general. Soon he felt sufficiently confident of the favourable attitude of the authorities towards him to refuse the offer of a brigade command in Krasnoye Selo and wait instead for a vacancy in the Guards Cavalry Brigade in Warsaw, a much-sought appointment which he obtained in 1914. In 1915 he became commander of the 12th Cavalry Division and during the period of the Provisional Government was promoted lieutenant-general and commander of the VIth Cavalry Corps. It was an achievement for a non-Russian to rise so high as Mannerheim, especially at a time when Russian nationalism was so powerful.

Mannerheim watched the progress of the revolution and the deterioration of discipline in the army with loathing, bitterness and shame. In September 1917 he wrote to his sister Sophie, 'Nor would I have believed that after thirty years' service I would find it repugnant to me to walk about in the uniform of the Guard Uhlans with the Order of St George on my chest; however the last six months have reached the point that one would rather forget one belongs to

<sup>20</sup> K. Donner, *Sotamarsalkka vapaaherra Mannerheim*, Porvoo, 1934, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> 'Han var ärekär utan att vara ärelysten.' A. Douglas, 'Mannerheim' (*Svensk tidskrift*, XXXVIII, 2, Uppsala, 1951, p. 76).

‘the Christ-loving victorious army,’—as it is called in the liturgy of the church.’<sup>22</sup>

After the bolshevik revolution he was relieved of his command for political reasons.<sup>23</sup> He tried to rouse his Russian friends to revolt against the bolsheviks but they were too apathetic to resist. On hearing of the Finnish Declaration of Independence in December 1917 he returned to Finland, his career ruined, a virtually unknown refugee in the country of his birth.

#### IV

My thirty years of service in the Imperial army were ended. It was with great expectations I had begun them in Russia, that vast and alien country, and when I looked back on the many years I had worn the uniform of the Tsar, I had to admit with gratitude that my expectations had been fulfilled. I had entered into wider fields which had given me a broader vision than I could have had had I remained in Finland in the years around the turn of the century. I had been fortunate in belonging to, and in commanding, crack troops with good officers and excellent morale. It had given me great satisfaction to command troops such as these, both in peace and war. Also I had seen so much of great interest in two continents. But now the mighty country lay helpless and, to all appearances, in the throes of dissolution.<sup>24</sup>

In his memoirs Mannerheim also wrote of ‘the experiences in foreign lands that had prepared me for my tasks in the service of the Fatherland.’<sup>25</sup> The preparation was as unconscious as the choice of Mannerheim as commander-in-chief in 1918 was fortuitous. And yet his long absence from home was not without advantages. Finland was a much changed country when he returned from his years of service in Russia: this made it easier for him to regard it from the viewpoint of an outsider. Standing apart from Finland’s internal divisions, and virtually free from national and linguistic prejudices, Mannerheim was able to see the wider consequences of Finnish policy. He feared the harm that German intervention in the Finnish War of Liberation in 1918 might do to the country’s delicate internal situation and to its relations with the Entente powers whose victory in the World War he believed to be imminent. He recognised the need to heal the division between White and Red after the war of 1918 to foster the unity necessary for the survival of a small nation. Above all, he never

<sup>22</sup> ‘Det hade jag ej heller trott att jag efter trettio års tjänst skulle finna det motbjudande att promenera i gardesulanernas uniform med Georgsorden på bröstet; senaste sex månader hava emellertid bragt det därhän, att man helst skulle glömma att man hör till ‘den Kristus älskande segerrika armén’,—såsom den benämnes i kyrkans ritual.’ Quoted in E. Heinrichs, *op. cit.*, I, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> K. Donner, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> C. G. E. Mannerheim, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>25</sup> C. G. E. Mannerheim, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

lost sight of the situation in Russia. He regarded the War of Liberation not only as a struggle to free Finland from revolution but also as an opportunity to create in Finland a base from which to launch an attack on Soviet-held Petrograd and establish a counter-revolutionary government there. This concept of the task of the Finnish White Army was his alone and he was unable to persuade the Finnish leaders to agree to a policy of intervention, particularly since he was unable to obtain recognition of Finnish independence from the Russian Whites. He saved Finland from bolshevism, but his fervent hopes of saving Russia were frustrated.

Mannerheim found it as impossible to dismiss and forget the past as to adjust himself to the new conditions of the present. Even his style of life remained outwardly similar although the revolution had destroyed the society to which he was accustomed. His high moral sense of duty and ideals of loyalty, service and chivalrous conduct appeared old-fashioned if not anachronistic in an increasingly materialist world. 'He was a cosmopolite in the age of nationalism; an aristocrat in the age of democracy; a conservative in the age of revolutions. These facts were at the same time his glory and his tragedy.'<sup>26</sup> The years he had spent in Russia had strengthened the natural tendency of an aristocrat to accept without question the privileges and obligations of rank, and although this attitude was firmly based on concepts of responsibility, justice and honour, it left no room for democracy. His implacable hostility towards bolshevism was not the only consequence of this outlook. It determined, too, his concern for a strong executive which could maintain ordered government and overcome what he regarded as the divisive and irresponsible influence of party politics. Not surprisingly, such opinions contributed significantly to his isolation from Finnish political life. Politicians, remembering his undemocratic views and his large personal following in the country, turned to him only in times of crisis. He was ready to serve when called on to do so, as in 1918 and 1944, but relinquished office when circumstances changed: although authoritarian, he was no dictator. Without his able leadership and statesmanship independent Finland would have been stillborn; without him it would not have survived, territorially attenuated, but fundamentally a free nation. That Mannerheim, such an untypical Finn and, moreover, a former Russian general, should come to typify Finland in its struggle for existence is the paradox of his position and the foundation of his greatness.

<sup>26</sup> M. Rintala, 'The Politics of Gustaf Mannerheim' (*Journal of Central European Affairs*, XXI, 1, Boulder, 1961, p. 71).