

## THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

The general strike that took place in Russia in October 1905 was also reflected in Rovaniemi, where the Young Finns and the labour movement organised a procession in support of it and carried the red flags of the newly established Rovaniemi Labour Association. This was followed by strikes of forestry workers in January 1906, in connection with which the first trade union, the League of Northern Lumbermen, was founded. Hugo Rikhard Sandberg, forest manager of the Kemi Company, was prepared for the worst and bought firearms for the company.

### A change in the party spectrum

Rovaniemi was not yet to witness the beginning of a new political era, however, for when the first parliamentary elections were held on 15.–16.3.1907, the polling rate of 37 % was only a half of the national average and as much as one third lower than that for the electoral district of Oulu. The Social Democrats and the Agrarian Party already had candidates in the elections, though both of them had to be content with only 8 % of the votes, as opposed to 49 % for the Finnish Party and 30 % for the Young Finns. The elections nevertheless marked the beginning of a period of major change, as indicated by the fact that in the elections of 1916 the Social Democrats gained 32 % of the votes and the Rural Party 27 %, while the Young Finns and the Finnish Party polled only 24 % and 17 %, respectively.

The Labour Association,

*The labour movement and the Young Finns held a joint march in support of the general strike of 1905, carrying the red flags of the newly founded Rovaniemi Labour Association.*



which was already engaged in a wide variety of activities, soon fell into financial difficulties and decided to wind up in 1912. Rovaniemi was considered at the national level to occupy such an important position in the countryside of northern Finland, however, that support was apparently given to the party from that quarter which helped it to resolve its financial problems. At the same time it became more radical in its outlook.

### Workers as Jaegers

There were 21 men from Rovaniemi among those who set out for Germany between October 1915 and March 1916 for military training. Most of them were poor, 13 being general labourers and six artisans or skilled workers, and they also had among them the chairman of the Rovaniemi Labour Association. Many of these men later joined the Murmansk Legion or served in the ranks of the Reds elsewhere.

### The 75 days of the workers' revolution

The revolution of March 1917 in Russia again evoked a response from the socialists in Rovaniemi and reactivated the

trade union movement there. The serious food shortage provided an opportunity to present quite radical demands, which were backed up by stationing Russian troops there, which had not happened on a permanent basis before. Work began in the late summer on organising Red civil defence forces, although in a clandestine capacity at that stage. At the same time the firearms acquired by the Kemi Company were handed over to trusted right-wing supporters in August 1917. The Reds organised their ranks in public at the end of October under the name of the "Workers' Disciplinary Guard", and this was followed by the founding of a local Civil Guard by the Whites on 10th November.

A meeting of approximately 500 persons was held in Rovaniemi on 15th November to set up a Revolutionary Labour Council, and the following day the Disciplinary Guard together with a few of the Russian soldiers who had been



*The social upheavals of the beginning of the century aroused the people's religious feelings, too. The Laestadians formed their own association in 1905, and this group was responsible for organizing the sect's national convention in 1912. The picture shows the people attending the convention outside Rovaniemi church.*

brought there from Kemi occupied the police station. Although the local administrative bodies continued to operate, it was the Workers' Council that

*The May Day procession of 1912, with flags flying, passing the railway station, built four years before. The Labour Association had become more radical by that time and was already calling for an eight-hour working day.*

exercised actual power in Rovaniemi for the next 75 days. The actions of this body were exceptionally severe compared with those taken in other places in Northern Finland, which points to a conscious attempt at achieving revolution.

The Russian soldiers summoned by the Workers' Council left Rovaniemi on 26.1.1918, taking with them 36 rifles belonging to the Red Guards, for example. On the night of 28th January, following the Declaration of Revolution in the country as a whole, the Civil Guards made an attempt to capture the Labour Hall. There was a brief exchange of fire which did not cause any casualties, and when members of the Civil Guard from Kemi came to the aid of those of Rovaniemi the Red

Guards were forced to retreat to Kemi by rail. When the Reds of Rovaniemi and Kemi massed their forces to reconquer Rovaniemi on 2nd February, the local Civil Guards led by the Jaegers who had arrived in Rovaniemi in the meantime arranged an ambush in Tervola, killing some twenty Reds and themselves escaping without losses. Some twenty men from Rovaniemi lost their lives on other fronts in the ranks of the Whites.

Although hostilities in Rovaniemi were soon over, the recriminations meted out on the Reds were cruel. Kaarlo Kurki, director of the local Workers' Theatre and the commander of the Red Guards in Rovaniemi, was shot in public in the market place in Kemi on 8.2.1918. The





Jaeger appointed as commander of the Whites in Northern Finland, K. M. Wallenius, had two leading Red Guards shot in Rovaniemi on 12th February, and the officers of the Civil Guard, acting as a military court, had had another 30 Reds executed by August. There was also a prisoner-of-war camp in Rovaniemi until June. In the end, the executions and prison camp experiences remained in the minds of the local people more vividly than did the actual fighting.

### **The communists and the Lapua spirit**

Rovaniemi was an important centre for under-cover communist activity in Northern Finland in the late 1920's, and the political right also grew in strength at the same time. In fact Rovaniemi could be said to have been the stronghold of the Lapua spirit in Northern Finland.

A shopkeeper, Alex Hyv nen, known to support the labour movement, was transported

*Rovaniemi was firmly in the hands of the Whites from February 1918 onwards. The Civil Guard held exercises in the area between Veitinkanharju and the church.*

over the eastern border in summer 1930, and there was a case of arson at the beginning of July for which a number of left-wingers were sentenced to

prison, although a persistent notion remained in Rovaniemi for a long time that it may in fact have been the work of the opposing party. Despite the fact that the doors of the Labour Hall were nailed shut in the middle of July, as many as four underground communist papers were published in Rovaniemi in 1931–1933, although only written by hand. The signs of political friction eventually faded away in the late 1930's.



*During the 1920's and 1930's Rovaniemi was the main stronghold for underground Communism in Northern Finland, but at the same time the Lapua Movement had reached its peak. A fire at the Rovaniemi Electric Mills in July 1930 led to the conviction of a number of young people known for their left-wing sympathies on charges of arson. Considerable doubts nevertheless hung over the whole trial because of the political interests involved.*