A Lack of Resources, Information and Will: Political Aspects of the Finnish Crisis of 1867–68

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In 1867 Finland was faced with a serious crop failure. An insufficient amount of food was imported and when the winter came, there was not enough grain to feed the hungry. Traditionally this event in Finnish history has been explained as a crisis of outdated agriculture and an inescapable natural and economic catastrophe. When examining the political aspects of the crisis, it is noticeable that the failure to import a sufficient amount of food was based not only on a lack of resources, but also on inefficient transfer and use of information and, indeed, a lack of will to help the hungry.

In the 1860s the Grand Duchy of Finland was a part of the Russian Empire. Finland formed a separate financial state from the Russian Empire that had to take care of its own financial operations. The department for financial affairs of the Senate of Finland, and its head, Johan Vilhelm Snellman, were responsible for finances and poor relief in Finland. The harvest reports, letters and telegrams of governors as well as the reports of the rapidly-developing local press provided Snellman with the possibility of staying informed on the food stocks and crop forecasts. Snellman’s political views are visible in his public writings and letters to the governors. All of the above are used as central source material in this article.

The Finnish Famine of 1867–8 has been cited as the last peacetime famine in Europe.\(^1\) Certainly, the crisis – that took the lives of over 100,000 Finns – is exceptional in both Finnish and European history. In Finland a peacetime demographic catastrophe of this scale had not taken place since the seventeenth century, although crop failures had occurred quite regularly.\(^2\) In Europe the previous corresponding demographic catastrophe in terms of percentage mortality occurred in Ireland in the 1840s. In

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1 Häkkinen, Ikonen, Pitkänen & Soikkanen, 1989, 9. The Finnish famine of the 1860s was the last peacetime famine in Europe, if not taking into account the Soviet bloc. See Weiss, 2000, 175; Devereux, 2000, 3.
1867 the crop failures extended over large areas of Sweden and the Russian Empire including the Baltic Provinces, but a large-scale mortality crisis was encountered only in the territory of Finland. Earlier research has shown conclusively that due to a lack of stocks in granaries and the poor harvest of 1867 there was a serious lack of food in Finland in the autumn of 1867. The only viable option to meet this deficit would have been grain imports from abroad. In 1862 and 1865 poor harvests had been balanced with increased imports of grain, but in 1867 the amount of food imports was smaller than in the previous years. Why was a sufficient amount of grain not imported to Finland in the autumn of 1867?

Research on the 1860s crisis has emphasized the poor economic situation of Finland and inadequate information on crop forecasts during the summer of 1867 as an explanation for the insufficient grain imports.

Economic life in 1860s Finland was in a crisis and the economic possibilities of the merchants to carry out grain imports without loans from the state were slim. David Arnold has noted that the state’s response to a famine is affected not only by economic resources and administrative capabilities, but also by the pre-existing conventions and ideology. The historical understanding of famines requires alertness to its structural causes and its social and cultural parameters.

Holger Weiss has emphasized that aid is dependent on the will and interests of the rulers. Aid is a political act and politics defines who receives aid and who does not. Since the ecological and economical reasons behind the food shortage of 1867 are well explained in earlier research, this paper focuses on the role of politics behind the inadequate food imports in 1867. It also examines the crop forecast data that the decision makers had at hand during the summer of 1867.

In terms of theoretical background, the paper utilizes the famine research of late 20th and early 21st century. Development economist Stephen Devereux notes that failures of public action should be incorporated into the causal analysis of all famines. Although most pre-twentieth century famines were triggered by natural catastrophes, the natural triggers operated in contexts where local economies were weak and the political will or logistical capacity of the state to intervene was lacking. Devereux’s idea that the failure to prevent famines can be explained by inadequate information, bureaucratic inertia, lack of capacity to act efficiently as well as lack of political will offers an interesting framework for the Finnish case.

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3 Turpeinen, 1986, 237. See also the contributions of Ludvigsson and Lust in this volume.
5 Soininen, 1974, 404.
7 Voutilainen, 2015, 124–44.
8 Arnold, 1988, 8.
9 Weiss, 2000, 121, 169.
10 Devereux, 2000, 13, 27.
Economist Amartya Sen has claimed that famines are easy to prevent, if only the government tries to prevent them. According to Sen famines do not occur in democracies because elections and free media offer strong incentives to undertake famine prevention. A free press can adduce information from distant areas and even bring out information that might be embarrassing to the government. Free press and active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system for famines. Finland in the 1860s was far from a democracy, and the press was subject to censorship, but the seeds of political and cultural liberalism were sprouting at this time and interesting comparative perspectives with more modern famines can be seen in the Finnish case. When keeping in mind the historical context, theories and examples from more recent famine research offer fruitful views into the politics behind the Finnish food crisis.

Economic and Political Decision Making in Finland in the 1860s

During the 1860s Finland was an autonomous Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire. The Russian Tsar (ie. the Grand Duke of Finland), had the decisive power, but Finland was autonomous in the sense that it had to finance and execute its own financial operations. Finnish central government during the period of autonomy was dualistic, and incorporated the Senate in Finland as well as Minister Secretary of State and a Committee for Finnish Affairs in St. Petersburg. In addition to the Senate and governance in Russia, a separate power was the Governor-General who represented the Russian Tsar in Finland. As Häkkinen and Forsberg have observed, the Finnish Senate, under the control of the Governor General, “managed Finland’s economic and legal matters, and if Finland did not make any financial claims on the Russian imperial Treasury, it was not in the Tsar’s interests to limit this autonomy”. By the 1860s the Senate had taken de facto control of Finland’s internal affairs, including foreign trade and economic policy.

In 1809 when Finland, had shifted from Swedish rule and become a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire, Tsar Alexander I of the Russian Empire, had convened the four Estates of Finland to the Diet of Porvoo. In principle the Diet had power over legislation under the ultimate authority of the Tsar. In practice the Diet was not convened between 1809 and 1863, because the Russian government had not wanted any meetings of the Estates in the Empire. This further emphasized the shift of practical power to the civil servants, working under the Senate’s control.

13 Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 100.
The Senate could technically manage the economy and rule the citizens without the Diet, but the postponement of new legislation and tax reforms stalled the society.\textsuperscript{14} In the 1860s Finland consisted of eight provinces, each with its own provincial administration. The Finnish provincial governments were subordinate both to the Senate and to the Governor-General. The governors of the provinces had to balance the expectations of both the Senate and the Governor-General, which often proved challenging.\textsuperscript{15} The standing of the governors was dualistic also in the sense that they were representatives of the central government in the provinces, but also representatives of the people to the central government. In the early nineteenth century in particular, the governors had an important role in passing information from the provinces to the central administration. In the 1860s, due to new channels of information, this aspect of the governors’ role diminished in importance. Their role in adjusting the expectations of the government in Helsinki with the needs of the provinces became stronger.\textsuperscript{16}

In the event of a crop failure the Senate’s head of financial affairs was ultimately responsible for taking care of the consequences.\textsuperscript{17} The Finnish philosopher, journalist and Fennoman Johan Vilhelm Snellman became a senator as well as the Senate’s head of financial affairs in July 1863 and maintained his position until the spring of 1868.\textsuperscript{18} In addition to Snellman, the Governor-General Nikolai Adlerberg and the provincial governors of the provinces also bore responsibility for relief actions in the summer and autumn of 1867.\textsuperscript{19} Snellman’s importance was emphasized by the fact that Adlerberg was on a leave of absence for three months in the autumn of 1867 and came back to office in mid-October.\textsuperscript{20} After his return Adlerberg took more responsibility over the famine prevention and Snellman stepped aside.\textsuperscript{21} Snellman’s career as a senator and head of financial affairs of the senate ended in the spring of 1868 at the request of Adlerberg.\textsuperscript{22} Although the official reason for Snellman’s resignation were differences of opinion related to the building of a railway between Helsinki and St. Petersburg, earlier research has

\textsuperscript{14} Tiihonen & Tiihonen, 1983, 270; Kuusterä & Tarkka, 2011, 180; Tiihonen, 2012, 51; Newby & Myllyntaus, 2015, 146.
\textsuperscript{15} Westerlund, 1996, 351.
\textsuperscript{17} Turpeinen 1986, 148; Savolainen 1989, 21, 61–2; Savolainen, 2005b, 16.
\textsuperscript{18} Heikkinen & Tiihonen, 2009, 370–1; Snellman’s public writings [\textit{Samlade Arbeten}] and his correspondence with governors and other officials during the famine years have been edited and published as a series of books, which have been used as source material for this article [hereafter \textit{Snelman SA}].
\textsuperscript{19} Häkkinen, 1991a, 130–1.
\textsuperscript{20} Oulun Wiikko-Sanomia, 27 Jul. 1867; Hufvudstadsbladet, 21 Oct.1867. Adlerberg’s leave was health related. See Tapio, 27 Jul. 1867.
\textsuperscript{21} Turpeinen, 1991, 55.
\textsuperscript{22} Savolainen, 1989, 63.
suggested that disagreements in relation to handling the food crises were the real reason behind his departure.23

The breakthrough of economic and political liberalism in Finland during the 1850s and 1860s also set the context for political decision-making at the time. Trade freedom, convening of the Diet and freedom of press were advocated. The two main political movements of the time – the Fennomans and the Liberals – were on opposite sides in the debates around language politics and relations with Russia and Sweden, but in matters concerning political and economic freedom they both advocated a reform. New newspapers were established and they became an arena for economic policy discussions. These events in Finland were connected to general European developments, marked by the emergence of economic and political liberalism.24 Democratization of the society has usually been seen as a factor that prevents famines, yet the Finnish crisis arose at a time when such changes were just beginning.25

**Snellman’s Economic and Aid Policy**

Snellman’s standing as the head of financial affairs of the Senate gave him an opportunity to realise aid politics that he had been proposing in his writings since the 1840s.26 His primary objective as the head of financial affairs was to balance the economy of Finland.27 Again to quote Häkkinen and Forsberg: “Snellman believed that economic independence was [essential for] political state independence, and accordingly his policies during the famine can be seen as prioritizing the longer-term development of the nation before individuals or regions”.28 For years Snellman had been criticizing the old model of aid politics, where the crown would take a loan and then lend money to merchants for grain imports, which they would then sell to the common people with credit. For example in 1862 a loan that was originally meant for a monetary reform in Finland was used for this purpose. There was even need for an additional loan from Bank of Finland and from bankers in St. Petersburg to finance grain imports in 1862.29

Snellman claimed that the involvement of the state in the grain trade had caused the traders to import large amounts of grain that was then passed out to the people with no worries of payback. Snellman had decided to abandon this structure, the

26 Savolainen, 1989, 21.
27 Kuusterä, 1989, 97.
state could take no more loans and the damaging system had to end.\textsuperscript{30} Until the end of the summer 1867 the Senate refrained from taking foreign debt and from lending money to merchants for grain imports.\textsuperscript{31} When efforts for a state loan to finance grain imports began in September, a failure of crops had already been experienced not only in Finland but also large areas of the Russian Empire as well as Sweden. The import of grain was made difficult by high prices as well as lack of supply.\textsuperscript{32}

Central to Snellman's policy was also the idea of refraining from gratuitous aid. Self-sufficiency and frugality were encouraged, as outlined by Snellman in two unpublished writings in 1866. In these writings, Snellman criticized the way in which people in large swathes of the country still believed that the crown would help them when in need. This mindset, Snellman believed, was destructive and had made the common people unable to help themselves through hard work and saving. Snellman even criticized meetings that were held in the municipalities to find out how much help was needed. The common people needed to understand that the crown had no more money and that they therefore needed to work harder, save more and take better care of their personal economy – and keep in mind that God would help by blessing honest endeavours to help oneself and others. Aid that was given too early made the people slow to help themselves. Snellman also accused the common people of having lavish spending habits, specifically that they bought large amounts of foreign fabrics, coffee, cigarettes and sugar and also drank most of the spirits.\textsuperscript{33} Referring to the inability of the people to save, Snellman wrote: “It is harsh to say this, but those many bad years are largely the people's own fault”.\textsuperscript{34}

Snellman was certainly not alone in holding these opinions. The conception that the personal features of the poor people were to blame for their poverty was rather prominent in Finnish public discussion in the mid-nineteenth century. Helping a person would just sustain the bad features that had created poverty.\textsuperscript{35} The idea that generous help would destroy the morality of the people and postpone the destruction into the future was also common in Great Britain during the Irish Famine of the 1840s.\textsuperscript{36} Assistant Secretary to the Treasury of the United Kingdom Charles Edward Trevelyan did not see problems with the economic policy he led, but pointed to Irish customs as part of the explanation for the famine.\textsuperscript{37}

Since gratuitous aid was not an option, relief needed to be obtained through work. According to Snellman the experience of all countries had shown that

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{30} Savolainen, 2005a, 22.
\bibitem{33} SA XI.2, 1194–8, 1201–5.
\bibitem{34} SA XI.2, 1197. Author's own translation.
\bibitem{35} Pulma, 1994, 58.
\bibitem{36} Ó Gráda 1999, 6.
\end{thebibliography}
aid without compensation was a wasted effort.\(^{38}\) The employment policy would support the economy of Finland, build the people’s morality and prevent begging.\(^{39}\) This emphasis on hard work was visible in Snellman’s enthusiasm for supporting small-scale home industries, such as weaving simple fabrics. In his letter to the governors in July 1867 Snellman noted that since agriculture did not offer work for the people for the entire year, forms of home industries would provide employment and income for the people during the winter. Snellman was hoping that the Finnish merchants would take responsibility over the export of these products, in addition to the material and production costs, so that the producers would get monetary reward towards the finished products.\(^{40}\) If sincere, Snellman’s expectations were certainly unrealistic, and too much responsibility was given to merchants who were generally, understandably, unwilling to take big financial risks in the prevailing situation. Although it became clear during the summer and autumn of 1867 that there would be no market for these products, this activity was continued until the end of 1867.\(^{41}\)

Another form of aid that gained a lot of publicity was spreading information on emergency or surrogate foods. Emergency food – such as bark bread– was not unknown to the Finnish people even before the crisis of the 1860s. In northern Finland in particular, people had to resort to bark bread quite regularly.\(^{42}\) In July 1867, Snellman advised the governors to spread information on emergency food such as mushroom and moss.\(^{43}\) The governors seem to have reacted to this form of aid rather positively and provided Snellman with information on developments with the emergency food education in their provinces during summer 1867.\(^{44}\) Even the press seems to have taken a positive attitude towards this form of aid. The press published information on emergency food actively and presented it as an alternative for grain: “Nobody will need to die of hunger under the threat of failure of crops this year – as far as we know – as long as we make a quarrel against our entrenched idleness and inefficiency and begin to collect all the food that the nature abundantly offers.”\(^{45}\)

Snellman’s writings during the famine years have been seen as an attempt to prevent passivity in the Finnish population. Rumours of a loan for grain imports could have made the people passive, so the rules had to be set straight. In this

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38 SA VIII, 75.
40 SA XI.2, 1260–2; SA XI.1, 310–2.
41 Häkkinen, Ikonen, Pitkänen & Soikkanen, 1989, 44.
43 National Archives of Finland [KA], Ministry of Finance Archive [VVA], DA117: Communication to the Governors of Vaasa, Oulu, Hämeenlinna, Mikkeli, and the acting governor of Kuopio, relating to the use of mushrooms and other substitute foodstuffs. 31 Jul. 1867.
44 SA XI.2, 1263–7, 1287–9; 1295–7.
45 Oulun Wiikko-Sanomia, 17 Aug. 1867. Author’s own translation.
sense the publicity has been seen as advancing common goals in fighting famine.\(^{46}\) This kind of interpretation seems to be based on the ruler’s conception that the people and their laziness were at the core of the problem. Snellman’s writings could also be seen as use of power and an attempt to calm the people in the face of a threatening crisis. Especially when considering that efforts for a foreign loan only began in September 1867, and not much was done during the summer.

It is interesting to note that although similarities can be found in Snellman’s writings and the ideas behind the British politics during the Irish famine, the historiography of these two famines is very different. Finnish historians have until very recently been rather understanding towards the decision makers of the time whereas British officials have been condemned more harshly in the historiography of the Irish famine. The status of Finland as a part of Russia creates an interesting question in this aspect. In the earlier half on the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century Finns had received aid from the Tsar, at least when it was in the empire’s strategic interests.\(^{47}\) In the 1860s Finland already had its own economic policy and Finnish officials were responsible for the aid policy. Bureaucratic inertia between the different echelons of power as well as the willingness to please superiors and foster the economic power and independence of Finland could explain some of the actions. The Russian officials were generally pleased if Finland did not cause economic strain.\(^{48}\)

Because the Finnish decision makers were responsible for the aid politics it is quite understandable that the crisis has a very different meaning in the Finnish historical narrative than the Irish history writing of the 1840s.\(^{49}\) It is interesting to ponder in what measure the apolitical historiography of the Finnish famine is actually a consequence of deliberate national identity construction of the Fennoman politicians and historians of the late nineteenth century. Henrik Forsberg has rather aptly pointed how the process to naturalize the famine began in Finnish public discussion soon after the crisis. Both the Finnish and Swedish speaking elites of Finland shared the idea that the famine had been an unfortunate outcome of poor weather. The naturalization and depoliticization of the 1860s Finnish Famine (i.e. emphasising the frost as a main reason) suited the Finnish elite very well. Frost was politically neutral and did not challenge the political elite or the power relations in the society. It was also equally feared by all members of rural communities and thus bridged rural class differences. Concentrating on the frost also suited nationalist ideas by creating a link between contemporary events and the nation’s mythical forefathers’ struggles in the hard climate. In the national historiographies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the question of culpability was often left unaddressed. If anyone was to be blamed, it was those who had become too accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle and who had not learned to adjust their

\(^{46}\) Turpeinen, 1986, 161; Savolainen, 1989, 34.

\(^{47}\) Turpeinen, 1991, 30, 57.

\(^{48}\) Kuusterä, 1992, 71.

\(^{49}\) Newby & Myllytans, 2015, 148–9.
spending accordingly. As unfortunate as the famine was, it was also a reminder that one should not rely on handouts from the Tsar.\(^50\)

### Information on Crop Forecasts

In the 1860s Finnish people got most of their nutrition from grain. The two most important grains in Finland were barley and rye.\(^51\) According to estimates made in the 1860s the annual requirement of grain per person was about two barrels.\(^52\) The population of Finland in the 1860s was about 1.8 million, so according to this rather rough estimation about 3.6 million barrels of grain would have been sufficient to feed the population of Finland.

Figures 1. and 2. show the rye and barley crops in barrels in Finland’s eight provinces in a three year period from 1865 to 1867. The combined yearly crop of rye and barley in Finland was roughly 2.5 million barrels in 1865, 3 million barrels in 1866 and only 1.7 million barrels in 1867.\(^53\) It is noticeable that the rye crop of 1867 was considerably smaller than the previous year in most provinces. According to the rough estimate presented above, the crop of 1867 would have been enough to feed only half of Finland’s population. The situation was worsened by the fact that the crops of previous years were insufficient as well.\(^54\)

**Figure 1. Rye crop in Finland 1865–1867, 1 000 of barrels**

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50 Forsberg, 2017.

51 Ikonen, 1991, 81

52 SVT II:1, 4; SVT II:2, 8. N.B. 1 barrel = 1,6489 hectolitres (SVT II:1, 24).

53 SVT II:1, Litt. B. & SVT II:2, Litt. B.

54 Voutilainen, 2015, 124–44.
Since grain had such an important place in the nutrition of Finns, the information on crop expectations during the summer months was crucial. Because of Finland's poor infrastructure, imports for the winter needed to be agreed early so that they could be carried out before the ports iced over at the end of the year. Earlier research has noted that the information on crop forecasts during the summer and autumn of 1867 was insufficient.\footnote{Turpeinen, 1986, 150, 153; Turpeinen 1991, 51; Pitkänen, 1991, 63–4; Savolainen, 2006, 782–4.}

It has been said that the Senate did not waver in its efforts to begin grain imports, once it was clear that night frosts in early September had ruined the crop in large parts of the country.\footnote{Pitkänen, 1991, 63–4.} This claim can be questioned by the fact that early September is a perfectly normal time for night frosts to occur in large parts of Finland. The cold spring and summer of 1867 meant that sowing was done later than usual which meant later harvest – and higher risk of night frost during the period of growth.\footnote{Hirvonen, 2013, 70; Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 106–7; Newby & Myllyntaus, 2015, 151.}

During the 1860s the governors were still a very important source of information for the Senate. Governors provided Snellman with information on crop expectations through their private letters as well as official reports and telegrams. In the 1860s governors sent three official reports on crop expectations to the Senate's finance department during the growth season.\footnote{Johanson, 1924, 58.} The second report, sent in August, was particularly important, since it gave a somewhat reliable forecast of the yearly crop expectations, yet left some time for organizing grain imports before the winter, if needed. I have collected the data on barley and rye crop expectations from the second reports of the governors from all of Finland’s eight provinces from a
three-year period 1865–1867. From this data I have calculated the median for
crop expectations for each province (Figures 3. and 4.). The information from the
province of Viipuri is unfortunately missing from 1865 and 1866.59

Figure 3. Rye crop expectations, second reports of the governors, 1865–1867 median,
(1=failure of crops, 2=under average, 3=average crop, 4=above average, 5=good crop)

In August 1867 the governors’ reports estimated either an average or below
average rye crop. Although some individual districts were expecting a failure of
crops, the median of each province is either below average or average. Compared
to the previous year, 1866, the expectations were slightly lower in all other provinces
except Turku-Pori. The estimates were reasonably accurate, although the actual
crop of 1867 was below 1866 in all of the provinces. In comparison with 1865, most
provinces were expecting a similar or a smaller crop. Two provinces, Kuopio and
Mikkeli, were expecting a slightly better rye crop in 1867 than in 1865. In Mikkeli
the crop of 1867, although quite poor, was actually slightly better than in 1865, but
in Kuopio the rye crop of 1867 was below 1865. As a summary of the rye crop
expectations in 1867 it can be said that although the expectations were slightly too
positive in some provinces, they did not give hope for a good crop.60

59 For more detailed information see Hirvonen, 2013, attachment 4.
60 See figures 1 & 3.
In a quick glance the governors’ official reports on barley crop expectations would seem to give reason to expect an average crop corresponding to previous years. When looking into the actual crop harvested, it is clear that the crop of 1867 was much below previous years. The barley crop was especially poor in the three northernmost provinces – Oulu, Vaasa and Kuopio – where it also had significant importance as a crop. When evaluating the information of the governors’ reports, it is important to note that several governors reminded Snellman in their reports of the threat that a possible frost caused to the barley crop. If frost would not ruin the crop, only then was an average yield expected. The threat of frost was also mentioned in the governors’ private letters to Snellman, as well as in the newspapers, and can very well be seen as general knowledge at the time.

Unfortunately the governors’ fears were realised as a night frost in early September 1867 ruined the barley crop in large parts of Finland. Night frosts at this time of year were rather typical in many parts of Finland, but because of the unusually cold spring of 1867 the crop did not have enough time to mature during the summer of 1867 making it more vulnerable to a night frost in September. It has also been noted that unlike in Ireland where the *phytophthora infestans* had been previously unknown – the main reason for the crop failure in Finland, the frost, was

61 See figure 4.
62 See figures 2. and 4.
63 Suomalainen Wirallinen Lehti, 30 Jul, 2 Aug. 1867. KA, VVA: Valtiovaraintoimituskunnan kirjediaari KD51/183 (1867); Senaatin talousosaston kirjediaari KD45/158 (1867); Valtiovaraintoimituskunnan kirjediaari KD32/134 (1867).
64 SA XI.2, 1248; Meurman, 1892, 32–3; Helsingfors Dagblad, 24 Aug. 1867.
a common phenomenon. Although Snellman may have acted rapidly once he heard about the damage caused by the frost, it is impossible to claim that the frost – and the crop failure that followed – should have been a surprise to anyone.

The importance of official reports is somewhat diminished by the fact that Snellman as well as others had questioned the reliability of these reports. The route of official reports from the local officers in the different districts of each province to the governors and finally to the senate could take weeks. Thus it is clear that the official reports did not always contain the most up-to-date information. In the 1860s the telegraph network that had been developed since the 1850s offered possibilities for quicker exchange of information between the senate and provincial offices as well as grain merchants. In early August 1862, during a previous crop failure, Senator Axel Ludvig Born used the telegraph system to inquire about the grain expectations from the governors. In mid August, after receiving information from the provinces, Born started organizing grain imports by asking the governors to contact local merchants. A few days later some merchants were informed that the Senate had decided to offer them a loan for nine months without interest. Even J.V. Snellman commented on the government’s efficient use of this new technology in an article published in 1862: “One must acknowledge that the quick actions of the government have been possible because of the telegram.” In 1867 similar telegrams between Snellman and the governors can be found only after the night frosts of early September. The possibilities for receiving more up-to-date information through the telegraph were available also in 1867, but it seems that this technology was not used to its fullest.

Snellman also claimed that the governors’ reports were unreliable, since the local officers had a tendency to underestimate the crop expectations. In his letter to Snellman, the governor of Turku-Pori, C.M. Creuz, tried to defend the estimations of local officers of his province to Snellman. It was not easy to forecast likely crop yields and the governor was assured that most of the local officers were doing their best to fulfil their reporting duties. From the governors’ letters it is obvious that Snellman did not spare criticism if he felt that the governors were too lenient with the aid policy. Governors had to explain to Snellman that they had not in any way encouraged requests for aid. In August 1867, Creutz described his worries to Snellman:

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65 Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 106–7; Newby & Myllyntaus, 2015, 151.
66 Kuujo, 1948, 19–20; SA XI.1, 9; Uusi Suometar, 17 Aug. 1877.
68 KA, VVA: Hl 1 (List of the measures undertaken by the Royal Senate from the start of July 1862).
69 SA XI.1, 7. Author’s own translation.
70 SA XI.2, 1203, 1268.
71 SA XI.2, 1268–9.
72 SA XI.2, 952–3, 1267–8, 1304–5.
-- I have never been one of them, who accepts the patronage under which the government has kept the Finnish people for decades and which has created the reluctance and inability in the people to take care of their own affairs. Instead I have criticized it, and nobody could be happier than me that the system has been changed. Still, it should be noted that all sudden changes from a system to its opposite are dangerous and this change is taking place at a time when there has been many difficult years in a row, and I can only hope, that the change would be gradual and that the support from the state would not stop completely at once.\(^7\)

There were also some personal differences between the governors in their communications with Snellman, which gives reason to question their ability to present the best interest of the people of the provinces. In the autumn of 1867 the governors of the provinces of Kuopio and of Turku and Pori seemed genuinely worried in their letters to Snellman whereas Theodor Sebastian Thilén, the governor of the province of Mikkeli demonstrated an exceptional lack of empathy towards the people in his letter to Snellman: “I hope that the harsh starvation will teach many things. And if it will not, it does not matter if a few dozen slackers die of hunger.”\(^7\)

In addition to the governors, the local press provided information on the crop expectations and threatening food crisis. In the 1860s the press was still rather constricted. Although the distribution of newspapers was growing, the group of people that read newspapers was still socially very restricted.\(^7\) During the autonomy the Finnish press was also restricted by Russian censorship laws.\(^7\) The Diet of 1865 implemented the act on freedom of the press in Finland, but since the Russian officials believed that the freedom of the press in Finland could not differ from the rest of the Empire, censorship was introduced again in May 1867.\(^7\) Despite these restrictions the newspapers had already for several years reported on the unfortunate situation of Finland. In the summer of 1867 several newspapers referred directly to the threat of famine.\(^7\) Although the press did report on the poor food supply in the country, it did not directly hold the government responsible or express requests for aid from the government.\(^7\)

Snellman was very critical towards the reports of the press on the famine. He constantly criticized the press for its complaints and inadequate information.\(^8\) In his published writings from 1866 and 1867 Snellman even tried to calm the people rather than allowing the press to stoke fears of famine. Snellman praised the local

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\(^7\) SA XI.2, 1268. Author’s own translation.
\(^7\) SA XI.2, 1301. Author’s own translation.
\(^7\) Häkkinen, 1991b, 105.
\(^7\) Tommila, 1982, 7; Nieminen, 2006, 100.
\(^7\) Heikkinen & Tiihonen, 2009, 356.
\(^7\) Helsingfors Dagblad, 15 Jun., 17 Aug., 27 Aug. 1867; Ilmarinen, 2 Aug. 1867; Oulun Wiikko-Sanomia, 10 Aug. 1867.
\(^7\) Hirvonen, 2013, 105–10.
\(^8\) SA XI.1, 316–8, 892–3; SA XI.2, 932.
papers of northern Finland for the fact that they had not exaggerated the situation and for this reason the correspondents of Oulu and Kuopio provinces had offered their stories for the newspapers of Southern Finland.81

Although Snellman was worried that the local officers and press had a tendency to underestimate the crop expectations and exaggerate the misery following crop failure, research of other famines has shown examples of the opposite. Amartya Sen has described the Great Leap Famine of the mid-twentieth century in China as a situation where the lack of free press led the government to become a victim of its own propaganda. The local civil servants gave overly positive reports of the local situation in hopes of gaining popularity in Beijing.82 There is not enough proof to make a corresponding claim of the Finnish case, but when examining the communication between Snellman and the governors as well as Snellman’s attitude towards the reports of the press, it does not seem impossible that such problems could have occurred at some level in Finland. When looking into the technical developments in communications in the 1860s the claim that there was not enough information does not seem tenable. Based on Snellman’s writings it seems rather clear that Snellman was not interested in receiving more information on the needs of the provinces. The administration did not use all channels of information to their fullest extent.

Conclusions

According to Stephen Devereux the failure to prevent famines is explained by insufficient information, bureaucratic inertia, lack of capacity to act efficiently as well as lack of political will.83 In the case of Finland in the autumn of 1867 all of these explanatory factors can be found. The food crisis is explained by a lack of resources, a lack of political will to help the hungry as well as inadequate use of information.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of poor financial resources as a significant factor in explaining the hunger crisis of 1867–1868. It is indisputable that financial resources to prevent the food crisis were poor. However, the famine research of the new millennium has proved that economic distress does not always lead to a famine. Concentrating merely on economic factors offers a simplified explanation and creates a depolarised picture of the famine.

Refraining from gratuitous aid was the guideline of J.V. Snellman’s relief policies during the summer of 1867. The people were encouraged to help themselves and be frugal. In the summer of 1867 the relief actions concentrated on collection of emergency food and the development of handicraft activities. Since the problems

81 SA XI.1, 316–8; SA, XI.2, 1201–5.
83 Devereux, 2000, 27.
behind these forms of aid were well visible already in the summer, the activities can be seen as a means to calm the people in a threatening situation, more than true attempts to help. In the internal correspondence of Snellman and the governors the fear of an impending catastrophe is much more visible than in Snellman's published writings.

However, Snellman was not alone with his ideas of the destructive consequences of generous and gratuitous aid. The idea, that the poor were themselves responsible for their inferior standing was common in the mid-nineteenth-century public discussion in Finland. In the 1860s the society also accepted inequality and the state was not actively held responsible.64 Although Snellman was accountable for the chosen politics, his strict politics did receive support. Social historian Christopher Lloyd has emphasized that the actions of a person are caused not only individually, but also socially. Attempts to explain actions should also include analysis of the society and its structures.65 The failure to help the hungry was based not solely on the individual decisions that were made, but also on wider structural factors. The unequal society and undemocratic governance of the 1860s allowed a situation where the rulers could execute politics that did not serve the best interest of the masses.

A key factor in the context of this crisis was the lack of a political counter force to the government. The press reported diligently on the threatening food crisis, but did not actively hold the government responsible. Censorship laws that came in to effect in the end of May 1867 restricted the freedom of the press. It is still rather probable that the press was mainly restricted by social and economic factors. The proportion of the population of Finland reading the newspapers was very small in the 1860’s. The press did not represent the poor.

The poor did not have a means for resistance in the 1860s, but it does not mean that the political features of this crisis could not be evaluated. The apolitical historical picture of the crisis represents the view that the decision makers of the time had. The actions of the central decision makers were based on strong political views. Even political consequences can be seen, since Snellman did have to resign from his position in the spring of 1868. It is notable that only rather recently have Snellman’s actions related to the famine been brought up as an explanatory factor behind the resignation in mainstream historiography. The historiography of the 1860s has until very recently had very little room for questioning the solidarity of the elite towards their less fortunate countrymen and women. It seems that the lack of counterforce to the government’s politics was not only visible in the politics and press of the time, but also in the Finnish public discussion decades after the event.

The information that the decision makers had at hand was also rather inadequate. The reports sent by the governors did not give hope for a good crop, but the somewhat positive reports in August may have misled the Senate. It is also

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possible that the willingness to please the superiors could have led the governors to some modesty in their requests. It is clear that Snellman did not appreciate repetitive requests of aid from the provinces. Snellman would also have had possibilities to supplement the information from the reports of the newspapers. Also the telegram offered possibilities for a more timely exchange of information, but this means was not used efficiently. It seems that it was just as much a case of inadequate information as well as inadequate use of the information that was available. Most famines take a long time to develop and this also seems to have been the case in Finland in the 1860s. The Finnish case represents a phenomenon which persists even today. Although the information of an impending food crisis is in the air for months or even years, this does not guarantee a reaction.

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86 Devereux, 2000, 27
87 Weiss, 2000, 122.


