

# Osmo Jussila

\* 14.3.1938 † 15.3.2019



**OSMO TAPIO JUSSILA**, professor emeritus of political history at the University of Helsinki, died in Espoo on 15th March 2019. He was born into the family of an elementary school teacher in Haukipudas in Northern Finland on 14th March 1938, but scarcely had any recollection of his father, who was killed in the Winter War of 1939–1940. His mother, who belonged to the Laestadian religious sect, brought her four children up alone, each to pursue an academic career.

The principal object of Osmo Jussila's research was the Grand Duchy of Finland and its constitutional status within the Russian Empire, although he later went on to consider the Soviet period in Russian history and became well-known as an indomitable expert in the field of Finnish-Russian relations. He was invited to membership of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1988.

After matriculating from a school in Oulu in 1957, Jussila enrolled at the University of Helsinki to read history. His first forms of employment after gaining a master's degree were as a relief teacher and a writer of local histories. He was determined to progress further with his academic career, however, and an opportuni-

ty to do this arose in 1967, when he was appointed as a research assistant in Russian history at the university's newly created Department of Historical Research and Documentation, where the department's founder, Professor Pentti Renvall became his closest mentor. This liberal-minded, youthful and outward-looking department was to become his home for more than a decade.

Jussila achieved his breakthrough in 1969, when, towards the end of the year, he defended his doctoral thesis *Suomen perustuslait venäläisten ja suomalaisten tulkintojen mukaan 1808-1863* ("Russian and Finnish interpretations of the Finnish constitutions over the period 1808-1863"). Long before this field of study became fashionable he established a profile for himself as a "conceptual historian" by emphasizing in his *lectio praecursoria* that this was a question of "clarifying words and putting history right". His programme was to open up the historical accounts of the legal battle entered into by the Finns during the tsarist era in order to view matters from a broader European perspective. This meant attempting a more nuanced analysis of the concepts and intentions that prevailed in St. Petersburg at that

time. There were others, of course, who advocated re-evaluations of a similar kind, but Jussila was the most radical and controversial and met with the strongest opposition from the older generation, spearheaded by his supervisor and formal opponent in the doctoral disputation, Professor Eino Jutikkala.

Even before the discussion of his doctoral thesis, Jussila had given many talks on this subject and had appeared in the media, largely radio and television, and when this young researcher even dared to make frivolous comments about Marshal Mannerheim, the conservative press was up in arms. He also began to lose his prominent position in his own field of research after the clash at the doctoral disputation, as both Renvall as editor-in-chief and Jussila as editorial secretary had to resign from the board of Finland's most prominent historical journal.

One of Jussila's achievements in 1969 was the commencement of regular Finnish-Soviet symposia for historians. These proved to be a significant forum for both sides, and an especially important connection was formed with the head of the Scandinavian section of the Department of History in the Russian Academy of Science, Professor A. S. Kan, who later moved to Sweden. Jussila's language skills in Russian and his precise knowledge of the starting points and limitations of Soviet historiography had the effect of protecting him from misunderstandings, while another force that acted in the same direction was his desire to emulate the standards of the best western research into the history of Russia. It was this that attracted him to undertake a visit to the United States to meet one of the foremost authorities on the subject, Richard Pipes.

Although the stimuli for Jussila's political radicalization came from the western *new left*, it was in the same year, 1969, that he made overtures to the more traditional Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL), which was something new and quite exceptional in the field of history. He never became a communist, however. If his knowledge of the Soviet Union protected him from communism, then his experiences of living in the United States kept him on the left far longer than would otherwise have been the case, as the time he spent there coincided with the fiercest protests against the Vietnam War.

Although he was influenced by Marxism, Jussila never went so far as to limit his historical thinking in that way. He did attempt a draft of a Marxist history of Finland and parts of it were read at small gatherings, but the eventual *samizdat* publication never saw the light of day.

Many people regard Jussila's book *Nationalismi ja vallan kumous venäläis-suomalaisissa suhteissa 1899-1914* ("Nationalism and revolution in Russian-Finnish relations in 1899-1914", 1979) as his finest work. In it he describes overlapping national aspirations and relations, acute political manoeuvres and grand ideologies, and analyses perceptively the way written histories had influenced people's opinions by looking back "through the December 6th peephole", i.e. starting out from the inevitability of Finnish independence. The irony that is so characteristic of Jussila's style of writing is visible here and can be enjoyed, but it does not stand out badly. This large volume is a fine example of his handwork as a historian; it would not have been in his nature to tie up all the ends, for there was always a sense of impatience about what he did. His profile as

a researcher was often dominated by major issues and arguments based on broad ideas rather than by the polishing of precise details, but in this work he managed to achieve a balance between all aspects, although there is still some of the room for interpretation that was so typical of its author. The fact that it was so convincing was probably also responsible for its failure to inspire any outstanding political passions. On the other hand, times and political climates had changed by then.

Jussila was appointed associate professor of political history at the University of Helsinki in 1980, to be followed in 1983 by a personal chair in that subject, which he held until his retirement in 2001. In this new capacity he published a series of works that, although based on his research, were intended for a more general public. The first of these was his *Venäläinen Suomi* ("Russian Finland", 1983), followed by *Terijoen hallitus* ("The Terijoki Government", 1985), in which he examined the puppet administration set up for Finland at the beginning of the Winter War in 1939 in the light of the parallel measures adopted by the Soviet Union during the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the invasion of Afghanistan. The openness with which he was prepared to discuss these topics was regarded as a display of boldness. He then continued along the same lines during his period as a sharp-witted columnist for the daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat in 1986–90. This meant that the researcher who had been termed a "revolutionary" in his youth now merited an "anti-Soviet" label.

His series of books aimed at a more general readership continued with his *Maakunnasta valtioksi: Suomen valtion*

*synty* ("From a Province to a Nation: The Rise of Finland as a Sovereign State", 1987) and *Suomen tie 1944-1948: Miksi siittä ei tullut kansandemokratiaa?* ("Finland's Path in 1944-1948: Why it never became a People's Democracy", 1990). It is interesting, however, that for one reason or another, Jussila did not react to the collapse of the Soviet Union by rushing off to Moscow to consult the archives that had suddenly been made available to scholars, even though he was perhaps the best equipped of all the researchers in Finland to make a balanced and professional evaluation of them and put them to use. Perhaps he was put off by the Klondyke Gold Rush atmosphere in which this took place and the unrestrained profanity that surrounded the concept of "truth" which was so dear to him.

It has been said of Osmo Jussila that he needed, and always chose for himself, the most powerful opponent possible: God, Eino Jutikkala and the Soviet Union. At least the last two gave in in the end, which may have left him with a feeling of emptiness. Although he faced strong opposition, he never took the conflicts too seriously, but was even prepared on occasions to arrange a ball game between the "Neo-Tsarists" and "Constitutionalists", for instance, and he was not afraid to include sarcastic jokes even in his reports of symposia held with his Soviet counterparts.

Having once more overcome his health problems, Jussila returned to the passion of his youth and put together a broad synthesis of his ideas in the volume *Suomen suuriruhtinaskunta 1809-1917* ("The Grand Duchy of Finland 1809–1917", 2004). This extensive work resulted in the author, in spite of his former anti-Soviet

reputation, being awarded a medal by the Russians. His series of books on major issues then continued with *Suomen historian suuret myytit* ("Great Myths in Finnish

History", 2007) and *Neuvostoliiton tragedia: utopiasta vankileirien saaristoksi* ("The Soviet Tragedy: From a Utopia to the Gulag Archipelago", 2012).

*Obituary by Kimmo Rentola*

*Photo: Helsinki University Museum*