
COMICS AND CARTOONS IN FINLAND DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by Ralf Kauranen





Hänninen, Ville & Karjalainen, Jussi. *Sarjatulta! Sota-ajan suomalaiset pilapiirroksset ja sarjakuvat*. Kustannus Jalava, Helsinki, 2014. ISBN 978-951-887-504-1. 206 pages.

The title of the most recent book by journalists, non-fiction writers and jacks of all trades in the Finnish comics field, Ville Hänninen and Jussi Karjalainen, *Sarjatulta! Sota-ajan suomalaiset pilapiirroksset ja sarjakuvat*, translates into English roughly as “Rapid fire! Wartime Finnish cartoons and comics”. The title is wittier in Finnish as the word “sarjatulta,” and its first half, “sarja,” which means series and sequence, alludes to the Finnish word for comics: “sarjakuva.” The book provides a broad exposé of a theme that has been neglected in Finnish historiography, despite the availability of a plethora of earlier books about Finland in the Second World War. Before this publication, the knowledge of Finnish war-time comics and cartoons has been limited and fragmented, spread out as little tidbits here and there. *Sarjatulta* offers ample new insights into the field.

Finnish involvement in World War II is commonly broken up in three separate wars: the Winter War in 1939–1940, wherein Finland defended itself against Soviet invasion; the Continuation War in 1941–1944, wherein the acts of war between Finland and the USSR continued; and the Lapland War in 1944–1945, wherein Finland, after having signed an armistice with the USSR, fought to push out the troops of the former ally, Germany, out of Finland. Hänninen and Karjalainen’s book follows this chronology and is thus divided into three parts. Each part begins with a more general description of the period and its comics and cartoon art, and ends with thematic sections, focusing on, for example, individual artists, on specific comics, or on a topic of humorous depictions, such as war-time Christmas celebrations.

The book is heavily illustrated, the consequence of which can best be described as two-sided. On the one hand, the reader really gets to see the rich material that



the authors have discovered and studied, and gets a chance to truly appreciate both the beauty and crudeness in style, the similarities and differences in perspective on issues treated in the art, and, through this, come to fully understand that, indeed, both comics and single-panel cartoons were flourishing during the war era. The material reflects development in the art form during the war period and highlights issues which were found topical at different points in time. On the other hand, the picture-heavy book has relatively little space for verbal written narrative. But this is a relative judgment and a matter of taste. There is certainly enough text in *Sarjatulta* to give the reader a general understanding of the position and use of comics and cartoons during the war, and more detailed and anecdotal information adds color to the insight. But, still, the more academically inclined reader could hope for more in-depth and theoretically informed readings of the historical, social and cultural processes at work in the wartime production, distribution, and consumption of comics and cartoons.

Sarjatulta marches in front of the reader a large number of artists, whose names range from the internationally renowned to those forgotten even by Finnish comics history writing: Asmo Alho, Ola Fogelberg, Thor Fredric (Tor Fredriksson), Ami Hauhio, Tove Jansson, Erkki Koponen, Alexander Lindeberg, Hjalmar Löfving, Helena Malisto, Aarne Nopsanen, Joel Räsänen, Erkki Salonen, Kari Suomalainen, Erkki Tanttu, Tapio Tapiovaara, Arvo "Tiikeri" Tigerstedt, Henrik Tikkanen, Arnold Tilgmann and Poika Vesanto. Internationally, Tove Jansson, whose Moomin entered the world of comics after the war in 1947, is of course the best-known of all. Among the others, Kari Suomalainen had his moment of fame outside Finland when his work was acknowledged by the US National Cartoonists Society in 1959. Further, Touko Laaksonen's wartime experiences are related in the book, although this is a bit disconnected from the book's stated purposes: his involvement in the war was not as an artist (he served



in the anti-aircraft defense), and only later would he embark on his career as Tom of Finland, the famed creator of homoerotic fetish art.

Sarjatulta helps deepen the picture of already-known artists' work. For instance, Hänninen and Karjalainen praise Tove Jansson not only as political satirist, but also as an apt observer of everyday life during wartime. The book also contains previously unpublished art by, among others, Kari Suomalainen, postwar Finland's most famous political cartoonist, working for its largest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. New names (and anonymous artists) are also excavated from the archives. The publication channels available for artists in these years were many and drawn material was widely used and in demand. In addition to traditional newspapers and magazines, and the occasional album collection, the war also generated new media: the Finnish military's Information Companies, for example, reported from the front, army papers addressed soldiers as well as unofficial papers were produced on the front line, and home front propaganda was produced by administrative bodies such as the Ministry of Supply.

One aspect of the wartime production and publication of cartoons and comics was censorship. In this context, Hänninen and Karjalainen highlight the importation and translation of American comics. These were not banned, but they were domesticated in an at times elaborate process. The warring factions, for example, needed to be altered when *Helsingin Sanomat* published Felix the Cat: in 1944, swastikas were added to a plane flown by Felix, with the aim of repositioning the hero as fighting on the same side as the Finns. After a peace treaty with the Soviet Union was signed in September 1944, the political context for cartooning changed again. A Soviet cultural delegation visiting Finland in early 1945 included the *Pravda*-connected cartoonist group Kukryniksy; an exhibition now displayed to the Finnish audience Soviet cartooning that critically depicted the Finns' former ally, the Germans.

Throughout most of the war, the enemy in Finnish cartoon art was the Soviet-Russian leadership and military. Stalin was a recurring figure, but Churchill and



Roosevelt also appeared now and again. Russian soldiers were depicted stereotypically, often given an accent and dressed in torn clothing. The enemy was presented in all sorts of negative ways, as both weak and mean. Hänninen and Karjalainen also showcase a few examples of stereotypical racist depictions of Jews. However, the Finnish soldier and general Finnish public were not simply idealized or heroized, but also presented in different shapes, as vain, greedy, accident-prone, or as laughable in a sympathetic way. One person, however, was beyond the pale of humorous depiction: the Finnish commander-in-chief, C.G.E. Mannerheim.

While most of the art presented is humorous, there is considerable variance in the drawing and generic styles of the comics. There were a few traditional adventure comic strips published in dailies, some of which also depicted the war. Ami Hauhio's "Ismo Lento" (Ismo Flight), published in 1942–1945, is the prime example of the adventurous Finnish war hero. Alex Raymond seems to have been a significant source of inspiration for the adventure comics, although the Finnish artists' artwork seldom reaches Raymond's standard.

The Information Companies, which were tasked with producing information/propaganda from the frontlines, shunned humorous or caricaturing styles. In these companies, comics artists worked alongside authors, journalists, photographers, and filmmakers to produce material meant to raise the morale of the Finnish people. The drawn art was supposed to be "serious and realistic" (p. 34). When Henrik Tikkanen, perhaps best known as an author of anti-war literature and for (semi-)autobiographical works after the war, applied for a position as artist for the Information Companies, he received a reply that clearly defines the suitability of different styles in different contexts: "Your nature as draughtsman points to the area of caricature. The Information Detachment has no use of you as an Information Company artist. Instead, it is suggested that you should make humorous comics, which topics are to be taken from the lives of soldiers and the frontline, maybe combat etc., to be published in the frontline



papers. It will be important for you to create a folksy, sympathetic soldier type, whose circumstances would interest the soldiers” (p. 36). Thus were the connections between drawing style, content, and the aims of communication consolidated.

Much more probably remains to be said about comics and cartoons in wartime Finland. I hope the future will bring about thicker descriptions and deeper studies of, among other topics, the different production practices of administrative bodies and journals, the work of individual artists, stylistic and thematic choices and trends, the importation of comics from other parts of the world, censorship, racism and national stereotyping, as well as the reception and readership of comics. Still, Hänninen and Karjalainen have done a thorough job of digging into the collections of libraries and archives. The authorial voice is informative and entertaining; I also appreciate the humane tone they strike, free from any nationalist or militarist sentiments and judgementalism.

All in all, *Sarjatulta* stands as another example of good non-academic research into Finnish comics history, the picture of which would still be very limited, had it been reliant only on the interests of academic scholars. As such, the book is positioned in a line of local comics history writing, which has as its starting point Heikki Kaukoranta and Jukka Kemppinen’s book on comics, *Sarjakuvat*, first published in 1972 and expanded in a second edition in 1982. Since then, non-scholarly works like *Sarjakuvat* have performed important groundwork and offered a basis upon which future academic studies can build. With *Sarjatulta*, another such title is now available.