

Prison in Finland

A report from a military service refusenik

Antti Rautiainen

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At first, a million thanks to everybody who wrote letters... I got letters even as far as from Thailand! I also heard about a letter to which Swaziland had anarchists contributed, but it somehow did not make it to Finland yet.

To be honest, I was waiting for prison time in order to read some quality books and get myself fit (I haven't been doing any sports for 2 years, so it was about time to push some weight). Of course, I hoped people would send me some quality journals I could not afford otherwise (which happened). But although Finnish prison system is one of the softest in the world, it ended up being a bit harder than I would have expected.

I was expecting to get 18 days for a few draft refusals (formally "missing a call-up"), but I was slapped 35 more days for one failure to appear in court (20 days) and a few more draft refusals. My mistake, I had forgotten that these fines were converted to prison time as well. For a while I was considering taking a loan to pay added fines — 53 days total equal almost 900 euros in fines. I could have paid all of it to get out immediately, or a part for a less time in prison. But eventually I decided not to give up to bloodsuckers, and not to pay for my anarchist conscience.

Both of the prisons I spent time (one week in remand prison of Vantaa and 46 days in "fine prisoners section" of prison of Jokela) were luxury compared to rotting Katajanokka where I spent 54 days in 2001, where you had to piss in a bucket and which was built during reign of Tsar Alexander III and closed just half a year after I was there. Vantaa was built 4 years ago to replace Katajanokka, and barracks for "fine prisoners" in Jokela some 5 years ago, so everything was relatively fresh and clean.

In both prisons, I got vegan food from the day one without too much pressure from outside. Especially in Jokela it was even good, taken into account miserable budgets they have for feeding prisoners. Kitchen staff obviously does not consider punishing prisoners as part of their job — Both vegan food and food for rest of the prisoners was better than in any kindergarten, school or hospital I have ever seen in Finland — apparently concerns of prisoners are taken more seriously than concerns of nurses and teachers, so latter could draw some lessons from protest methods of the former.

Traditionally prison culture in Finland has reflected the consensual practice of "Scandinavian socialism", convicts have their official organisations, and their concerns are settled in a nego-

tiation table with the administration, much like the tripartite system in general. When strikes happened, they were orderly and not met with heavy repercussions.

This system is gradually disintegrating as the whole welfare state model, but the process is slow. Prisons are getting over-crowded, rights of prisoners are slowly eradicated under banner of “struggle against drug abuse” and bursts of violence happen more and more often. In late October, convicts rioted in Riihimäki prison, and in beginning of the December, there was another minor riot in Oulu.

But I did not feel these tensions much, since these issues touch “fine prisoners” less than remand and convicted prisoners. In remand prison of Vantaa, “fine prisoners” were mostly in two sections, and in Jokela we had two isolated barracks. From point of view of the administration, separation of prisoners to different categories and hierarchies always makes sense. Fine prisoners are in the bottom ladder of both hierarchies of the administration (you only have less rights in a hole) and among prisoners. According to criminal ethics, any true bandit should rob at least enough to pay for his fines, or he is a total loser.

I would not say I suffered from lack of contact with remand or convicted prisoners. Remand imprisonment is very stressing, and aggression may burst out anytime in various ways. In section I was in Katajanokka back in 2001 fine prisoners were a minority, and there were some cases of screw brutality, violence between inmates and general hassling people got involved with in order to escape dullness. Compared to that, Jokela was even boring. Not any violence, no even much of a hierarchy between prisoners, nobody shouting at me to fucking make space in the shower. Shortly, not any real prison at all.

Last time in Katajanokka, fine prisoners were almost exclusively homeless alcoholics, there are 3000 homeless in Helsinki, and so movies of Kaurismäki (Finnish film directors) are not outright fantasy. This time the composition was very different, people with longer sentences (maximal sentence for non-payment of fines diminished from 4 months to 3 months on New Year) were mostly sent to Jokela and up to half of them were young drug addicts and car thieves. Legal reform few years ago increased minimal unit of fine from 3 to 6 euros – in Finland amount of fine depends on your income, minimal unit is for those with smallest incomes (“failure to appear in a call-up” means a fine of 15–20 units, two units used to be converted to 2 days in prison, since new year 3 units will be converted to one day). Apparently due to this reform, many more people are unable to pay their fines and are imprisoned.

Although I was doing fine with many other prisoners (I could borrow some great gangster rap classics), I could not find a certain political connection. I am not much of an agitator, but it is also a problem that currently there is no any radical press in Finland that would have some general appeal to marginal proles. Perhaps there would have been some good stuff in latest issues of Kapinatyöläinen but much of the paper is nowadays very lengthy articles, and I did not had a single issue with me. I passed latest issue of Ninjaopisto to many, which is a sort of CrimethINC inspired fanzine... I only got positive feedback (which of course does not mean everybody liked it).

I had lots of great propaganda in English, but of course nobody could read in English. In Vantaa I had my own room, but after a transfer to Jokela I was some time even happy to have a roommate, since 22 hour lockdown in loneliness makes you sort of dull pretty soon. But of course you soon get annoyed with anybody in such conditions.

Being a non-smoker in prison is a kind of two-edged sword – you have a right to demand a non-smoking roommate, but since they are few, there are little chances to change one when you

have it. At one point I was even alone in Jokela for 12 days as only non-smoker of the section, but eventually I got a totally incompatible roommate for the last 10 days. This guy was quite disturbed after spending a month in Vantaa alone (including 8 days in a hole) upon transfer to Jokela, so he demanded some contact all the time. He was also over-social in Finnish standards, whereas I am perfectly happy doing my own shit in my corner. Eventually I just ignored half of the things he said. Although he had spent time in most of the Finnish prisons during last 30 years, for some reason he was very frustrated this time, and last couple of days he was just throwing things around in our cell and breaking things up.

I am certain that drugs played some role as well in his behavior, prison nurses write loosely receipts for up to 10 different relaxants and other pills, prisoners are phased out and administration is happy because of relatively calamity provided by “21st century medical science”. But I am certain that such a cocktail may easily result unpredictable consequences. So my last days were very long. I used to have lots of patience in the past, but for some reason I have lost it during last couple of years – perhaps my life has been too stressing. I would like to have it back somehow until I am jailed next time, otherwise I may end up to some serious trouble. This time I got freed just in time to avoid them.

Since according to some articles I’ve read almost 30% of the prisoners in Vantaa prison are of Soviet origin (Estonians, Russians and Russians of Estonia with Finnish passport or without), I expected to see some crossover of ex-Soviet and Finnish prison cultures. But I did not, since they are not among fine prisoners and in general there is a quite strict segregation among national and racial lines in Finnish prisons. I only met some Russians of Estonia at the yard during morning walk, but they were not much in a talking mood. Whereas Finland is probably most ethnically homogenous country in Europe, prisons are much more multi-cultural – If I remember it right Roma men end up in prisons 40 times more likely and Roma women 100 times more likely than their Finnish counterparts. It is interesting to see how Roma and Somali (biggest non-white immigrant group in Finland) get together well in prisons, apparently they feel related in a society which has failed to integrate them, although first group has been around 500 years longer than the latter. Not that I think integration within the system is universally desirable, and prison is hardly the right place for anyone.

Prison population is notoriously racist, but at least this racism does not always take very aggressive forms. One Somali guy was transferred from Vantaa to section for fine prisoners in Jokela soon after I was sent there, and he was the only black person there (unless you count Roma kids). I think he’d had a fair share of usual substance abuse and mental problems in his life and was not a tough guy by any means, but still he did not accept a role of an outcast, he went to gym and sauna with others, and thus was not fucked up with (except by system which slapped him with extra 15 days in morning of his release date!).

There were some Nazis in my section in Vantaa, but especially this one guy was such a sorry case that I even tried to be friendly with him. Sometimes you just see that someone is a looser to such extent that his race is definitely only thing he may be proud about (as if there was something to be proud of...). For me it is really hard to hate such a guy. Most of the Finnish Nazis go to this category, and traditionally the Finnish Nazi movement has been the weakest in Europe (perhaps because nationalism is so strong in the mainstream). Although Nazi movement has been in a rise lately, I do not think they will manage to organise prison or any other serious gangs anytime soon.

There are other prison gangs however; of course this reflects influence of American popular culture but also some real transformations in the Finnish society, where traditional institutions of mutual support such as trade unions are disintegrating. Thus far emerging gangs have drawn most inspiration from biker culture, although the most recently emerged gangs such as “Rogues Gallery” do not have bikes themselves. But still it’s a pretty small phenomenon, and not at all reflected in sections of fine prisoners, besides ban of wearing gang symbols.

As for the army, in when I had been two nights in prison, cops came to take me to a call-up in Thursday 17th of November. I announced I was not going to cooperate, but I felt protest should be targeted more against army officials than against coppers. We arrived to building in Kallio, where call-ups in Helsinki are traditionally organised – actually it belongs to Workers’ College. In some sense, that is where the saga began almost exactly 8 years before, when 23rd of November 1997 together with 3 other anarchist total objectors we disturbed a speech of a general heading military district of Uusimaa, blowing a fanfare with a horn and reading an anti-militarist manifesto. After an arrest, that was a first time I was ticketed for missing a call-up and given a new call-up date, 18 more times was to follow during the following 8 years. Of 3 other comrades, two did their 197 day sentences years ago, and one was exempted for health reasons after that action. I never got other sentence for this action, since they never managed to summon all of us to a court in the same time.

17th of November 2005, we arrived to call-up around 8:30 AM, and cops asked me to move to building maybe ten minutes later. Finnish anti-militarists (mainly from Union of Conscientious Objectors) have leafleted call-ups last 40 years in Finland, and in Helsinki this is organised for almost every call-up morning.

I hoped comrades would show up this time as well, so I proposed to cops to wait for them to have a chat. They did not like the idea, and began pulling me into building by force. I sat to ground, and went shouting “Do not go to army!” to some kids on their way to call-up (In Finland your first call up is during the year you turn 18). Cops did not liked this, so they pushed me back to the car, and drove me to backyard of the building, so that I could not spoil will of fresh new conscripts to sacrifice themselves for the fatherland. During rest of the procedure, they did not let me out from the police car.

Some officer showed up (I find those rank symbols hard to figure out); I announced I will not cooperate. After one hour of waiting, some doctor came to conduct “medical inspection” through window of the cop car. I refused to answer to all questions, except those concerning my anarchist ideas. I said I was fully capable of war, but not willing to give the State a moral authority to decide on its justification for me. I considered all questions concerning my physical and mental health to be beside the point.

Few years ago I was arrested in Vaalimaa border crossing and sent to Hamina military district for medical inspection, without which I may not be given a service category. I refused to answer all questions concerning state of my health back then as well, and eventually doctor gave up and announced to military officials that my service category may not be defined. I think this was only thing he could do from point of view of his professional ethics. But now doctor was not too concerned of such issues, after a couple of questions he proposed draft board to exempt me for health reasons with category C (F91).

F91 comes from international categorization of mental disorders, it means a conduct disorder but for some reason I was not specified, do I have F91.0 (Conduct disorder confined to the family context), F91.1 (Unsocialized conduct disorder), F91.2 (Socialized conduct disorder), F91.3

(Oppositional defiant disorder), F91.8 (Other conduct disorders) or F91.9 (Conduct disorder, unspecified). Especially “oppositional defiant disorder” sounds awesome; I propose we’ll use it anytime anarchism has to be diagnosed!

Obviously, draft board had ordered such a decision from doctor; he had even done the paperwork in prior since he was not really taking any notes when “inspecting” me. Eventually draft board (apparently two officers and one civilian person) stuffed themselves to luggage room between cage and drivers seats of the police car (it was a big police car of “Musta Maija”-type), and through a small window they stated that after recommendation of the doctor, I am exempted for health reasons with a category C (F91). This means I am liberated from peacetime duty, but I would be drafted in “2nd reserve category”, that means after 50–60 year old men but before 17–20 year old men in times of war.

I announced that I will refuse this decision, since I am all capable of waging war but not willing to do that for the system, and I do not need any such categories whatsoever. I complain only a month afterwards after some legal help. I wrote an appeal against this decision of the draft board, listing all the numerous legal violations, and also accusing them of using a Stalinist practice of misusing medical science for political purposes. I am quite confident that it will annoy them.

Of course there are some setbacks in theoretical case this complain would be fulfilled – I would either be given A or B service class and summoned to duty which would result a full 197 day sentence for desertion, or endless cycle of passing me new call up dates would continue for years to come, resulting more time in prison. I still have maybe 60 days to serve for 10 remaining tickets for “a failure to appear in a call-up” I have no plans to pay.

In prison there is a sort of pressure there all the time, you just have to concentrate to keep yourself together. You may be content with yourself for any time you manage to do something useful, even such small things as concentrating to a difficult book or writing to some other prisoner. Because of this increased focus to myself, I was actually much less depressed there than I have been lately in average.

Only afterwards I felt some heavy psychological exhaustion, which is not even over yet. So even when in prison you have no problem with the most elementary things, such as food, sleep or physical security, the isolation alone takes its toll. This is the philosophy of modern prison explained by Foucault, and in some sense taken to its logical extreme in the Finnish system, where amount of plain physical torture is minimal. I think if I was in such a place several years, I would get gradually encapsulated to myself, losing capacity of giving and receiving any emotions from people willing to communicate with me.

As I was sort of going for a holiday, I felt some uneasiness in ending up on some prisoner lists – for sure I would rather see people writing to comrades who face a risk of decades in prison in some much more brutal prison systems. I got just the ideal amount – few cards and one letter in average each working day, so I could answer to a good part.

This support was pretty much in an individual level (with an exception of the petition by WRI and a picket in Warsaw); total objecting has become routine in Finland so there is no interest in media or society in general. And perhaps I rather don’t see people freezing in some miserable picket while I am comfortably inside, reading all those books I wanted to read for years. But still one keeps wondering, if that all makes much of sense.

My first time in prison 3.5 years ago was interesting and useful; I got some totally new perspective to society. This time I was eager to see new Vantaa prison from inside but in general learned nothing new, did not gained any important new experiences and did not grow as a human being.

I did not even get to a good state of fitness; I still fail to push 60 kg from the bench. It was just the fucking State stealing almost two months from my life, and getting out from it without any trouble. We have to seriously think how to put some new edge to anti-militarist struggle in Finland.

After hunger strikes of 1990 and 1992, total objectors are routinely sent to open prisons (my case was different since formally I was in for non-payment of fines), where life is easy. But it happens more and more often that there is no space in open prisons, and you get sent to a closed one. Besides open prison is not necessarily that much better unless you have a job or studying place outside. I guess fine prisoners have also some minimal chance to get transferred to an open prison, but I did not even apply because I do not have a job or studying place in Finland – I'd rather read books than do some shit-work for the prison system.

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