

## SUMMARY

### *Finland's state honours system from independence to the start of the Winter War (1918–1939)*

The Finnish state honours system had a very unassuming start: at Haapamäki railway station on 2 February 1918, the renowned Finnish artist Axel Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) sketched out on the lid of a cigarette box a design for a decoration he called “Suomen Ruusun Kunniakunta” (‘Honorific Order of the Rose of Finland’). Gallen-Kallela understood that the young nation, which had gained its independence just two months earlier, needed to find a way to reward deserving citizens in the same way as other sovereign nations. The need for this was heightened by the start, only a week before, of what was to be the Finnish War of Independence. Gallen-Kallela realized that decorations would also be needed for rewarding soldiers and officers in the service of the army of the government, as well as civilians demonstrating outstanding merit in other tasks.

Gallen-Kallela's first sketch remained in the possession of the stationmaster at Haapamäki, and the Order of the White Rose of Finland reclaimed it only in 1933. General Gustaf Mannerheim, who was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Military Forces, had also thought about setting up a system of honours. Mannerheim, who had served for many years as an officer in the Russian Imperial Army, understood the significance of recognising meritorious conduct. As Finland did not have its own honours system, this had to be created very quickly. Gallen-Kallela, who had recently joined the White army, was the right person for this task. He was commanded by Mannerheim to arrive at the army's headquarters in Seinäjoki on 13 February 1918. At the meeting arranged at the headquarters Mannerheim commissioned Gallen-Kallela to quickly set about designing decorations.

On account of the ongoing war, state honours were conferred mainly on soldiers at first. The Senate of Finland established the Cross of Liberty in five classes and the two-class Medal of Liberty on 4 March 1918. The Commander-in-Chief had the right to award crosses and medals to soldiers, but the highest honours – Grand Crosses and also decorations for officers above the rank equivalent to divisional general – would be determined by the Finnish Government. After P. E. Svinhufvud became Regent, Finland adopted the international practice whereby honours were conferred by the head of state. Decorations were awarded to foreigners and civilians, too.

General Mannerheim had a clear idea of the type of honours system that he wanted for the country. The models for this were from Russia, Sweden and other parts of Europe. The Commander-in-Chief had an excellent knowledge of the honours systems of France, Germany, Great Britain and other important European states. He had received his first decoration, Knight of the Order of Franz Joseph of Austria, in 1895. When serving in the Russian Imperial Chevalier Guard he became acquainted with the practice of reciprocal exchanges of decorations in accordance with international diplomatic courtesy.

Mannerheim was very active in commenting on Gallen-Kallela's designs for the insignia. In his youth Gallen-Kallela had displayed an interest in heraldry, and at the end of the nineteenth century he had embraced the Art Nouveau style. The symbolism of this style was also reflected in Gallen-Kallela's insignia designs. A white heraldic rose was already present in Gallen-Kallela's first draft and it received an important place in the early Finnish decorations. The Cross of Liberty was given a white rose in the centre, and the arms of the cross were superimposed with a straight swastika design. Gallen-Kallela had earlier used such swastikas in the wide frame for his Aino triptych (1891), depicting a scene from *Kalevala*, which he had painted in Paris. In March 1918, the newly founded Finnish air force adopted a straight swastika in blue as its emblem. It was regarded, above all, as an ancient symbol and, as yet, had no political symbolism attached to it.

The Crosses of Liberty were established as wartime honours. For this reason, Regent Mannerheim discontinued conferral of the Order on the first anniversary of the start of the four-month War of Independence, on 28 January 1919. As there remained a need for a system of state honours, Mannerheim founded a new order on the same date "to ensure that the state retains the ability to honour both Finnish and foreign men and women in future years". The name of the new order would be the Order of the White Rose of Finland. And so it was that Gallen-Kallela's original idea sketched in February 1918 came to be taken up a year later.

The designs for the Order's new decorations were again needed urgently. The King of Sweden, Gustaf V, had invited Regent Mannerheim for an official visit to Sweden in January 1919, and Mannerheim also wished to visit Copenhagen at the same time. The intention was to exchange decorations extensively during the visit, and this was to be the first such exchange for newly independent Finland. For state visits, three decorations of the highest class with collar were needed, and a great number of other decorations were also to be exchanged in accordance with the protocol for state visits. C. G. Westman, Sweden's envoy in Helsinki, conveyed instructions home that during the state visit Sweden should not skimp on the decorations and 'other finery' valued highly by the new nation.

The Order of the White Rose of Finland was established expeditiously in five classes. A special class was the Grand Cross with Collar, which was principally conferred on foreign heads of state. The ribbon for the Order was dark blue. The collar of the Grand Cross featured nine heraldic roses, attached to each other with Gallen-Kallela's preferred emblem, the straight swastika.

The first decorations of the Order of the White Rose of Finland were ready in February 1919 when Mannerheim set forth for his state visit to Sweden and Denmark. There were not sufficient of these, however, and many received their insignia afterwards. It was only after these visits that the Order of the White Rose of Finland became fully established.

Soon after the founding of the Order of the White Rose of Finland there was some debate over its status and purpose and the principles to be followed in the conferrals. The Social Democratic Party and the Left regarded the establishment of orders as a bourgeois practice that had already run its course. Many leading politicians of the National Progressive Party and the Agrarian League also harboured doubts. Indeed, a vote by the Constitutional Law Committee of Parliament produced a decision against noble ranks, honorary titles and orders. Discussion was also very lively in the newspapers. Despite the controversy, Regent Mannerheim signed the statutes of the Order of the White Rose of Finland on 16 May 1919. According to the statutes, the country's head of state shall be the Grand Master of the Order of the White Rose of Finland, and the Grand Master shall wear the Grand Cross with Collar as a mark of this status. The anniversary date celebrated by the Order was the date on which the Order's statutes were ratified. Parliament, in its third reading of the matter on 21 June 1919, decided to accept the respective article of the constitution, with the simple phrase: "No noble ranks or other hereditary titles may be conferred in the Republic". Honorary titles and decorations based on personal merit, and the newly established Order of the White Rose of Finland were thus accepted owing to this diplomatically worded clause. The significance of the Order of the White Rose in Finland in engagements with other countries was highlighted by the appointment of Otto Stenroth as the first Chancellor of the Order, as he had been Foreign Minister (at the foreign affairs bureau) in early summer 1918 and was chairman of the board at the Bank of Finland.

In the early years of Finland's independence, the number of conferrals of decorations of the Order of the White Rose of Finland was rather modest. The aim was that conferrals should be broad-based, honouring individuals across a wide spectrum of society. In addition to honouring the country's leaders, decorations were therefore also conferred upon farmers, public officials of lower rank, priests and soldiers, for example. During the restive years following Finland's independence, the Order's decorations were given

particularly for military merits. It was decided in 1920 that the silver Badge of Merit would be reserved solely for meritorious women. In 1921 the decision was made that the names of all decoration recipients would be inscribed in a register kept by the Order. During the Order's first year of conferral, in 1919, the number of decorations conferred was slightly more than 1,000, and subsequently the number of annual conferrals lay between about 200 and 800.

Decorations of the Order of the White Rose of Finland were conferred not only within the state honours system but also as part of diplomatic courtesy arrangements. Exchange practices especially with the Nordic countries and the Baltic nations were established very quickly. The special status of the Nordic monarchies was highlighted by the fact that, in addition to heads of state, the Grand Cross with Collar was also conferred upon crown princes. Several other European heads of state also received the Order's highest honour. In 1938, the exchange of decorations was extended for the first time to the other side of the Atlantic, when Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas was given the Grand Cross with Collar. The King of Egypt, Fuad I, also received the Grand Cross with Collar, the first African head of state to be given this decoration.

### *Finland's Orders and state honours arrangements during the Second World War*

The outbreak of the Second World War marked a significant change in the practices of the Finnish state honours system. War between Finland and the Soviet Union, the Winter War, broke out on the last day of November 1939. As soon as the Winter War had begun, Marshal Mannerheim, who had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Defence Forces, proposed that the Cross of Liberty and the Medal of Liberty would be reinstated. The President of the Republic of Finland, Kyösti Kallio, issued a decree on this as early as 8 December 1939. The decree followed, to a large extent, the practice which had been set in 1918. However, the President of the Republic gave the Commander-in-Chief the mandate to confer all Crosses of Liberty and Medals of Liberty.

During the Winter War and subsequently, decorations of the Order of the Cross of Liberty were conferred upon Finnish citizens serving in the armed forces or otherwise contributing to the war effort. The insignia were in most cases delivered to the recipients only after the Winter War had ended. This in fact continued long after the truce declaration on 13 March 1940. In 1940, Finnish women were for the first time among those conferred the decoration of Knight. Until then they had received Badges of Merit and medals. In 1940, the University of Helsinki was awarded a Cross of Liberty in honour of its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There was no time for any systematic consideration of honours for foreign citizens, and only a few decorations were conferred during the war. One of the recipients of the Commander of the Order of the White Rose of Finland was Dorsey Stevens, who had worked as coordinator for the Finnish Relief Fund established by former United States president Herbert Hoover. The economic and material support received via the fund had been vital during the difficult months of the Winter War, when there was a lack of munitions and many other things.

During the period known as the 'interim peace' in 1940–1941, the basis for conferring decoration was clarified by means of a set of regulations issued by the Order of the White Rose in Finland on 1 June 1940. These incorporated regulations on the wearing of decorations, including decorations of the Order of the Cross of Liberty. The Order of the Cross of Liberty was made a permanent Order in the decree issued on 16 December 1940. The Commander-in-Chief of the Finnish Defence Forces was named Grand Master of the Order, with the proviso that Mannerheim was to be Grand Master for life. The same decree established two classes of the Mannerheim Cross and the Medal of Merit of the Order of the Cross of Liberty. The decree also formalised the practice whereby the next of kin of a fallen soldier was awarded the Cross of Liberty Fourth Class with black ribbon. The first Knights of the Mannerheim Cross were appointed during the Continuation War in summer 1941. These honours, awarded for personal valour regardless of military rank, were extremely highly valued. In 1941–1945 the Mannerheim Cross was

conferred upon 191 individuals. The average age of these recipients was relatively low, at just 32, and almost half of them were from rural parts of Finland. A monetary reward was also given with the conferral of the Mannerheim Cross, the amount of which was equivalent to the annual pay of a lieutenant.

During the Continuation War, the opportunities for conferring decorations were considerably better than during the Winter War. The honours system was also extended when, on 11 September 1942, President of the Republic of Finland Risto Ryti confirmed a decree founding the Order of the Lion of Finland. The new five-class Order had a joint Chapter with the Order of the White Rose of Finland. The aim was to have a more diverse honours system with a greater variety of decorations. The Grand Cross of the Order of the Lion of Finland was not conferred with a collar, however.

The first Finnish women to receive the decoration of Commander of a Finnish Order were conferred this honour on Independence Day 1942. Hedvig Gebhard, holder of the honorary title Economic Counsellor, became Commander of the Order of the White Rose in Finland, while Karin Ramsay and Anni Walden, the spouse of a general, became Commanders of the Order of the Lion of Finland. Thus, cracks were starting to appear in the 'glass ceiling' of the honours system, although full equality with men was something that Finland's women would still have to wait for.

The wearing of orders changed considerably during wartime. In addition to state honours, commemorative medals of the Winter War and Continuation War were also issued, as were commemorative crosses and medals of various units and for different battles. The wearing of insignia on festive occasions became customary and remains so still. The war generation were able to see from someone's decorations what that person had experienced or achieved during the war, and this increased the sense of community and enhanced respect in society for the state honours system.

Honours diplomacy was of considerable significance during the Continuation War. Germany, Hungary, Romania and the other countries fighting side by side with the Axis Powers, each received their share of decorations. The first Grand Crosses of the Order of the White Rose of Finland with swords were conferred on the commanders of the German troops serving in Finland, General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst and General Hans Feige, in autumn 1941. The German leader, Adolf Hitler, was not conferred a Finnish decoration for the reason that he systematically refused to accept foreign honours. At the request of the Germans, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring and Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop received the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland, which was normally reserved for heads of state.

In July 1942, President Risto Ryti took the decision to confer the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland on Emperor Hirohito of Japan. This particularly angered the United States, which had earlier looked upon Finland in favourable terms, as the US navy had been the target of a surprise attack by Japan a number of months earlier, in December 1941. However, the United States did not break off diplomatic relations with Finland until June 1944. It stopped short of declaring war on Finland, unlike Great Britain, which had declared war on Finland's Independence Day, 6 December, in 1941. In the end, the decoration for Emperor Hirohito remained undelivered because of practical problems. Much later, in 1986, Finnish President Mauno Koivisto presented Emperor Hirohito with a collar of a new design during his state visit to Japan.

Finland's wartime honours diplomacy has generated considerable debate. During the war, the aim of this was to stimulate support for the Finnish war effort. Honours were conferred in conjunction with trade agreements, weapons deliveries, high-level visits or other special events. Finland was dependent on the support of Germany in particular, and the honours policy supported this line. Finland, however, did not comply with all the wishes of Germany.

Proposals to create a Pro Finlandia Medal for the Order of the Lion of Finland, to be conferred for cultural merits, were made in late October 1942 and the decoration was subsequently established by decree on 10 December 1943. The Pro Finlandia Medal corresponds to the Swedish Litteris et Artibus Medal. The first Pro Finlandia Medals were granted in 1944 to Swedish and Danish artists who, with their performances, had collected funds for Finnish war invalids and veterans.

Mia Backman, actor and theatre director, was the first Finn to receive the Pro Finlandia Medal, which was conferred upon her on 21 February 1945. The number of conferrals of the Pro Finlandia Medal since then reached a peak in 1958, at more than 30. Today, around ten medals are awarded annually. The age distribution of recipients has been very broad. The younger recipients have included Doris Laine, who received the Medal at the age of 26 in 1957 and Sofi Oksanen, who received the Medal at the age of 35 in 2012. In many cases, the Pro Finlandia Medal has been conferred in acknowledgement of an especially meritorious body of work over the recipient's career. The rosette of the Pro Finlandia Medal was introduced in 2015. It is similar to the designation worn with Knight First Class of the Order of the Lion of Finland, but includes additionally a miniature of the medal. The Pro Finlandia Medal is highly valued as recognition of notable cultural achievements.

### *Post-war reconstruction 1946–1956*

The post-war state honours system sought to support efforts to modernise society and promote internal unity and economic growth. Internationally, the main focus was on rebuilding diplomatic connections and reinforcing Finland's position. Finland shared the values of the other Nordic countries and wanted to be seen as part of Scandinavia, although the wartime fates of those countries had been very different. Good relations with the Soviet Union were regarded as essential – Finland sought to act as a bridge builder between East and West.

The Medal for Humane Benevolence (Pro Benignitate Humana Medal), awarded for wartime charitable work performed for the good of Finland, received a special place among the honours given to the other Nordic countries. President of the Republic Gustaf Mannerheim signed the decree for this honour soon after the end of the war, on 1 June 1945. The first conferrals of this single-class medal were made in autumn 1946. The Medal for Humane Benevolence was conferred mainly upon Swedish, Danish and also US citizens who had given a home to child evacuees from Finland during the war or supported Finland in other ways during the Winter War or Continuation War, or subsequently. By the end of 1948, 4,500 Pro Benignitate Humana Medals had been conferred, of which as many as 4,200 went to Swedish citizens. The number of Finnish recipients was about 800. The conferral of this honour upon Finns was discontinued in 1952, and in 1953 there were still a small number of conferrals made to foreign nationals. Though the decoration has never been officially abolished, further conferrals have been very few since then. President Mauno Koivisto made six conferrals in 1986 and a further one in 1988. More recently, medals were awarded to Veikko and Lahja Hursti for their extensive humanitarian volunteer work, and this was publicly very well received.

The contribution made by women to the war effort had already been acknowledged during the war. On Mother's Day in 1942, Marshal Mannerheim had awarded all Finnish mothers collectively the Cross of Liberty. As tangible recognition of this, the Commander-in-Chief's Order of the Day with the Cross of Liberty was placed in all churches. After the war, individual mothers who had brought up large families in an exemplary manner were honoured with decorations. At first, these were conferred in conjunction with the conferral of other decorations, but soon it became customary to present a Mother's Day decoration, the Medal First Class with Gold Cross of the Order of the White Rose of Finland, on Mother's Day at the beginning of May. In 1947, the Finnish Government declared Mother's Day, which had originated in the United States in 1914, as an official national flag day, and the medals were presented to mothers during the Mother's Day celebrations organised by the Family Federation of Finland. Mother's Day medals are

greatly valued. The appreciation of these medals is heightened by the ceremonial nature of the conferral occasion, when the medals are usually conferred personally by the President of the Republic. Today, the conferral criteria no longer include family size but instead focus on the upbringing task and on voluntary work in society.

The number of decorations conferred increased steadily in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The number amounted to over 1,000 on Independence Day 1948 and reached 1,500 in 1955. An important reason for the increase was that much more attention was being given to women generally in the state honours system. However, the practices followed were still far from consistent. For example, Finland's first female minister, Miina Sillanpää, a member of Parliament for 38 years and holder of the honorary title Economic Counsellor, was awarded only the Badge of Merit of the Order of the White Rose in Finland. By contrast, Ester Ståhlberg, spouse of the former President of the Republic of Finland, was awarded the Commander of the Order of the White Rose of Finland for her literary merits.

The Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952 raised the nation's spirits significantly amid the trying economic and political times of this post-war period. The final payment of the heavy war reparations was completed in the same year and international attention was now focused firmly on Finland for the Olympic Games, the second since the war. The Finnish Olympic Cross of Merit, First Class and Second Class, and a Medal of Merit, were established by decree in 1951. These were to be conferred upon Finnish citizens displaying outstanding merit in preparing and running the Olympic Games as well as upon foreign guests of honour. The task of designing and preparing these Olympic honours was given to the Orders. The Olympic Games Organising Committee could make recommendations to the Orders regarding prospective recipients of the honours. The Finnish Olympic Crosses of Merit and Medals of Merit became an important part of the diplomatic courtesy of the Games. The decree on these honours was not abolished until 2003.

Finland's international honours diplomacy began to follow a regular pattern by the early 1950s. The Nordic countries and the countries of Western Europe were the main partners and, increasingly, the countries of South America, too. The earlier exchanges with the Baltic nations had ended when they were incorporated into the Soviet Union. It was a little ironic that J. K. Paasikivi, who had been Finland's representative at the 1920 Tartu peace treaty negotiations with Lenin-led Soviet Russia, was awarded the Order of Lenin, the highest award of the Soviet Union. Correspondingly, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, was given the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland at an event organised at the Embassy of Finland in Moscow. There was irony in this too, because at that time the collar designed by Gallen-Kallela in 1919 still featured the original motif in which the heraldic roses were linked to each other by swastikas.

#### *Urho Kekkonen's long presidency 1956–1982*

The Vice Chancellor of the Orders, Urho Kekkonen, was elected President of the Republic of Finland after Paasikivi in 1956. Like many other members of the Agrarian League, he had earlier displayed a negative attitude towards the Orders, which he regarded as elitist. In the 1930s, he let it be known that he would not accept any decorations. However, having acquainted himself more closely with the conduct of state affairs, he had changed his views. At the request of Paasikivi, he had accepted membership of the Chapter of the Orders of the White Rose of Finland and Order of the Lion of Finland in 1948. Since 1953 he had served as Vice Chancellor.

After having assumed the office of President of the Republic and the Grand Mastership of the three Orders, Kekkonen wore, as a sign of his position, the Grand Cross stars of all three Orders, the peacetime sash (yellow with narrow red stripes) of the Grand Cross of the Cross of Liberty, and the collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland.

During his presidency Kekkonen showed special interest in the state honours system. He reformed the activities of the Chapter of the Orders and the conferral of the honours. He confirmed a proposal of the Chapter of the Orders regarding the order of precedence of the Finnish Orders and decorations on 10 October 1958. However, he removed from the Chapter's proposal the crosses and medals of merit of the Defence Corps and the Lotta Svärd organisation, which had been suspended on the basis of the 1944 truce agreement. An interesting detail was that the Pro Finlandia Medal, which is awarded for cultural merits, took precedence over the Knight First Class of the Order of the Lion of Finland.

In 1960 Kekkonen decided to suspend conferral of the decorations of the Order of the Cross of Liberty, justifying his decision by saying that peacetime conferral of these awards diminished the special value of the Order's wartime crosses and medals. However, the Order of the Cross of Liberty was not abolished, and its Chapter continued to function on a low key basis.

There were lively and critical discussions on the honours system in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, Kekkonen did not decrease the number of honours conferred but actually increased it. The intention was that state honours had to change with the times. The conferral of honours was consequently broadened so that every citizen had the chance to gain recognition for their work achievements or merits in society. This policy brought good results. The Left also supported the new way of thinking, and more and more members of the Social Democratic Party and the People's Democratic Union of Finland were ready to accept a state honour. Over 2,000 decorations were conferred in 1963. Of these, 1,400 were given to 'ordinary workers'. In 1966 the number exceeded 3,000, and in 1967, during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Finland's independence, the number of honours rose to 4,500.

Kekkonen's decision during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year to acknowledge Finland's Olympic winners aroused a lot of positive interest. At that time some of the Olympic winners from the Stockholm Olympics of 1912 were still alive. The Knight First Class of the Order of the Lion of Finland with clasp, in the shape of the golden Olympic rings, was granted to 61 gold medalists. It was decided that this decoration would be given as a special award, and those who had received a higher honour earlier were also allowed to wear it.

Honours diplomacy attracted special attention during Kekkonen's long presidency. He travelled a lot more than his predecessors and favoured the exchange of decorations during his state visits. During his presidency a total of 41 Grand Crosses with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland were conferred. The swastikas on the collar were replaced with fir crosses ('sprig crosses') in 1963, as there were concerns over the negative connotations associated with them abroad, where the history of the collar was not known. Kekkonen wore the collar with the new design for the first time at the Independence Day Reception on 6 December 1963.

Sweden conducted a major reform of its Orders in 1975 during the term of Prime Minister Olof Palme. It was decided that Swedish citizens would no longer be conferred decorations of the traditional four Orders. The Order of the Polar Star was preserved in order to honour foreign citizens, and the single-class honour of the Order of the Seraphim could still be conferred upon heads of state. Swedish citizens continued to receive Finnish honours, however. Indeed, greater interest was shown in Finland's honours system as a result of the discontinuation of conferrals of Swedish decorations on Swedish citizens.

Kekkonen, emphasizing Finland's neutrality, continued to exchange honours with the Soviet Union. Heads of state were awarded the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland. Among other recipients of honours were ambassadors, soldiers, representatives from the cultural sphere and the Orthodox Church. In 1968 Kekkonen made an impromptu decision to award ballet dancer Maya Plisetskaya and dancer Nikolai Fadeychev with the Pro Finlandia Medal. Ten years earlier Galina Ulanova, a dancer at the Bolshoi Theatre, had also been awarded the Pro Finlandia Medal. The Soviet Union awarded Kekkonen the Order of Lenin in 1964 and the Order of the Friendship of Peoples in 1973.

Despite his close connections with the Soviet Union, Kekkonen tried to preserve the ‘balance of honour’ between East and West in his policy on honours conferral. He believed that only in this way would he be able to exercise an active and independent foreign policy convincingly.

Urho Kekkonen resigned his position as President of the Republic of Finland for health reasons on 27 October 1981. As he was unable to act as Grand Master of the Orders, it was decided that the honours to be conferred on Independence Day 1981 would not be conferred until the new President had taken office.

### *Finland’s honours tradition in a changing society (1982–2017)*

Mauno Koivisto, who was elected as President of the Republic of Finland on 27 January 1982, received his insignia as the Grand Master from the Chancellor of the Order, K.-A. Fagerholm, who held the honorary title of Counsellor of State. Koivisto, like Kekkonen, had, in earlier times, been rather reticent about the conferral of decorations other than those bestowed in wartime. As Grand Master, however, he used the honours system very actively.

One of the first decisions of President Koivisto in 1982 was to confirm the recommendations for honours conferral that had been prepared for Independence Day in 1981 but had then been postponed due to Kekkonen’s ill health. The number of decorations was great, with some 4,500 recommendations in all. Later, Koivisto pursued a more moderate policy in bestowing honours. He reduced the number of high-ranking decorations conferred, cutting conferrals of the highest and third highest classes to a quarter of their previous levels, and the second highest class by half. Koivisto chose not to intervene in the number of medal-class conferrals. Thus, he continued the Kekkonen-era policy of broadening the honours system across society. The number of decorations conferred annually continued to increase during Koivisto’s presidency, reaching a peak of 6,000.

President Koivisto also made some bold decisions in his conferrals. On Independence Day in 1982, he bestowed an exceptional honour, the Grand Cross of the Order of the White Rose of Finland with swords, on Lieutenant General A. F. Airo, who had been prosecuted in the Weapons Cache Case after the Continuation War, but was acquitted. Koivisto also reintroduced the Medal for Humane Benevolence (the Pro Benignitate Humana Medal), conferring one on Independence Day 1983, five in 1986 and one more in 1988. No conferrals have taken place since.

At the beginning of Koivisto’s presidency, the Chapter of the Orders experienced a number of changes, as many long-serving members stepped aside due to age or ill health. There had previously been only a few changes, because the members of the Chapter had been appointed for life. The Secretary of State of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Commander of the Defence Forces also acted as members of the Chapter during their tenure, according to the established practice. The Secretary General of the Office of the President of the Republic of Finland acted as Treasurer of the Orders until the duty was transferred to a financial expert. Major General Ragnar Grönvall had for a long time served as the ‘Secretary General’ of the three state Orders: the Order of the Cross of Liberty since 1941 and the Orders of the White Rose of Finland and the Lion of Finland since 1963. His resignation led to changes in the practices at the Chancery of the Orders. The First Aide-de-Camp of the President of the Republic of Finland served as Second Secretary and was responsible, together with the Secretary of State of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, for international affairs and the exchange of decorations during state visits. The Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and other members of the Chapter were chosen by the Grand Master. At least one Chapter member represented the world of industry and commerce and another represented the cultural sphere. In this way, it was possible to ensure sufficient expertise within the system, the purpose of which was to honour meritorious conduct by citizens at various levels of society.

During the presidency of Koivisto, the use of the Orders as a means of diplomacy diminished. Regarding the Soviet Union, in particular, the policy was very restrained, which was also due to the vast changes taking place and eventually the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself. The rapid pace of change of that period can be seen in the fact that the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland was conferred upon General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was still Chairman of the Council of State of the Polish People's Republic in 1989. Lech Wałęsa, President of the new Republic of Poland, received the same decoration in 1993.

When Martti Ahtisaari took office as President of the Republic of Finland on 1 March 1994, he was well acquainted with the functions of the Orders, having been a member of the Chapter of the Orders while serving as Secretary of State at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Ahtisaari adhered to the same policy as his predecessor, Mauno Koivisto. The number of higher honours was kept low, and the emphasis was clearly on the medal class. It was not until President Ahtisaari's tenure that the Chapter received its first female member. She was Dr Päivi Setälä, who had been Director of the Finnish Institute in Rome. She was also appointed as the first female Vice Chancellor of the Orders in 1997.

Tarja Halonen, elected President of the Republic of Finland in 2000, was the first female President and the first female Grand Master of the Orders. Professor Aino Sallinen, Rector of the University of Jyväskylä, was appointed Chancellor of the Orders, succeeding Jaakko Itoniemi, in 2005. She served as Chancellor until the end of 2016. Fixed terms were introduced at the Chapter of the Orders, the general principle being that it was possible to serve at the Chapter for two terms, that is to say up to eight years. President Halonen especially emphasized that the honours system should be up-to-date and reflect the rapid changes in society. Particular emphasis was placed on equality issues, social justice and international cooperation. President Halonen already had considerable experience of the latter, having served as Foreign Minister.

Halonen's successor, President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö began his term as Grand Master of the Orders on 1 March 2012. He has chosen to underline the importance of extraordinary achievements as a prerequisite for conferrals. In addition to merits in working life, a further area viewed as being especially important is voluntary work for the benefit of others and society at large. The strict policy of President Niinistö's predecessors in regard to the highest honours has been maintained. He has also emphasized that it is important to honour those war veterans – men and women – who have not earlier received honours. Niinistö has therefore followed the practice started during Koivisto's presidency. The decision was made that during 2015–2018 the Medal First Class of the Order of the White Rose of Finland would be given to all war veterans who fulfil the criteria. The number of conferrals has been remarkably high: in 2015 over 1,800 medals were conferred and in 2016 over 3,600, of which 1,500 were to women. The numbers in 2017 are lower, but they include foreign war veterans who participated in Finland's wars during 1939 – 1945 and have not previously been honoured.

The significance of international relations has increased since the 1990s with the growing influence of digital technologies, the diversity of communications and globalisation. In serving as President of the Republic of Finland, Ahtisaari, Halonen and Niinistö have each possessed extensive international experience and have put into practice their aims by means of international diplomacy. The exchange of honours has been seen as part of diplomatic courtesy. This is evident in the large number of honours conferred on foreign heads of state. President Ahtisaari granted 19 Grand Crosses with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland to foreign nationals during his six-year term as President. During the twelve years of Tarja Halonen's presidency the highest state honour was conferred on 31 occasions. During Koivisto's two terms the number of such honours conferred was only 12.

In some cases, there has been critical discussion concerning the conferral of honours. One example is the Grand Cross with Collar of the Order of the White Rose of Finland conferred upon President of Syria

Bashar al-Assad by President Halonen in 2009. The aim at that time was to encourage – despite the recognized shortcomings – the emerging democratisation in Syria. The rapid deterioration of the situation in Syria just a few years later could not have been foreseen at the time. Barely any country, however, has been successful in achieving all its diplomatic goals.

As the third term of Professor Aino Sallinen as Chancellor of the Orders came to an end, Dr Jussi Nuorteva, Director General and State Archivist was appointed her successor, taking up his duties at the beginning of 2017. Nuorteva had been a member of the Chapter since 2013 and Vice Chancellor since 2014. The appointment of Rear Admiral Antero Karumaa as full-time First Secretary at the Chancery of the Orders marked an important change. Karumaa had served as Aide-de-Camp of the President of the Republic from 1992 until 2000. In addition, Susanne Eriksson, who had been working as Clerk of the Chancery for 37 years, retired at the beginning of August 2014. During Karumaa's tenure, digital procedures have been introduced in the proposal and decision processes and on the communications side of the Orders. The honours system has also been brought up to date, with the addition of miniature decorations. Recipients of full-size decorations in the class of Knight or above now receive a miniature and a designation as well. The aim of this is to encourage honours to be worn on other types of occasion too, in addition to those at which the full-size decorations are worn.

Finland's state honours system has confidently developed its own form and function during the course of the past hundred years since the country gained its independence. By international standards, the number of decorations conferred is high, but so too is the respect and appreciation accorded to the honours. Most important is that every citizen of Finland and everyone working for the good of Finland should have the chance to receive acknowledgement for the work they have done for the country, for Finnish society and for mankind as a whole.

Jussi Nuorteva

Translated by Merja Hykkönen, edited by the Prime Minister's Office