INTRODUCTION

The 1880s marked a fundamental change in Finnish academic philosophy as well as in Finnish intellectual life as a whole, for German Idealism, which had dominated the scholarly community, had to give way to a critical-empirical approach. The younger generation took the natural sciences as a model for the humanities, insisting on quantitative methods, repeated experiments and statistically proven laws. At the same time, they took part in a more general ideological discussion, raised by Darwinism, about the possibility of explaining everything in nature and in the human being scientifically. As the Finnish botanist Fredrik Elfving (1854–1942) stated in his polemical article in 1884, he and his contemporaries were witnessing an intellectual upheaval, comparable to the breakthrough of the Copernican system. This would finally put an end to all fallacies originating in the naïve childhood of humankind.²

In this program aimed at the elimination of all superfluous and metaphysical assumptions, the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach (1838–1916) was used as an authority.³ In Finland, Mach’s ideas were favorably received in 1889 at the latest by Hjalmar Neiglick (1860–1889), the Finnish pioneer of experimental psychology and psychophysical research, who had made his doctoral dissertation in 1887 in Leipzig at Wilhelm Wundt’s first psychological laboratory in the world. In Finnish academic philosophy, Neiglick was the leading advocate of “eine Psychologie ohne Seele.”⁴ In this profoundly anti-metaphysical approach, he used Mach’s Beiträge zur Analyse der Empfindungen (1886) to defend his thesis that all abstract concepts as well as concrete ideas and recollections had to have a certain sensual correlate (in most cases, an audio feature, spoken words, or an optical picture, writing) to occur and to be reproduced.⁵ His early death from typhoid in 1889,

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4 See e.g. Hjalmar Neiglick, “Om exakta metoder i psykologin”, in: Finsk Tidskrift II, 1887, pp. 269-281, 339-349.
however, tragically broke off his promising career, and his reference to Mach was left without further explication.

In Finland, extensive treatment of the topic began only at the beginning of the 20th century. These receptions of Mach were also among the earliest receptions in the Nordic countries as a whole. Firstly, in this article, I explore the socialist Otto Ville Kuusinen’s Machian ideas, presented in 1905 and 1916. Secondly, I analyze the ways in which the moral philosopher Rolf Lagerborg utilized Mach’s phenomenalism in his theory of knowledge, especially in his main study on the subject in 1920. Thirdly, I deal briefly with the earliest sceptical reception of Mach, presented in the 1910s by Eino Kaila, a future leading figure in Finnish academic philosophy. Finally, my discussion raises for analysis various ways in which these interpretations were intertwined with the more general political and religious views of those in question, for in this early stage, the positive reception of Mach was clearly connected with leftist sympathies and anti-clericalism, already cherished by many of “the 1880s generation.” In this respect, the Finnish scholars differed from their Nordic colleagues, such as the Swedish philosopher Vitalis Norström (1856–1916), who, despite his occasional positive references to Mach, developed his “philosophy of practical reason” predominantly in connection with Kant and Fichte, without taking Mach as the basis for his discussion.6

**OTTO VILLE KUUSINEN’S “FAREWELL TO THE ANGELS OF METAPHYSICS”**

Arguably the earliest extensive reception of Mach in the North was presented in 1905 by the young student of aesthetics and philosophy Otto Ville Kuusinen (1881–1964) in his Master’s thesis *Ernst Haeckelin monismi ja puhtaan koke-muksen kanta* [“Ernst Haeckel’s monism and the position of pure experience”].8 This final project at the Imperial Alexander University of Finland (the present University of Helsinki) is of special interest because the author soon became the ideological leader of the Finnish Social Democratic Party and, after the Finnish Civil War and his flight into Soviet-Russia in 1918, a prominent leader of the Comintern (Communist International) as well as a member of the Soviet Union’s Politburo (the Central Committee of the Communist Party), the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Soviet Academy of Sciences. In 1961, he was even nominated the Hero of Socialist Labor. It has been claimed that at the summit of his power, this son of a humble village tailor was the most influential Finn ever in world politics.

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7 Kuusinen’s own expression, see Otto Ville Kuusinen, “Ernst Mach III–IV”, in: *Työ-mies* no. 73, 15.3.1916.
8 In his Master’s thesis, Kuusinen referred extensively to Mach’s *Die Analyse der Empfindungen* (1886) and *Populär-wissenschaftliche Vorlesungen* (1896).