VICTIMS AND SURVIVORS OF KARELIA

Guest Editors

Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo

Special Double Issue of Journal of Finnish Studies

Volume 15  Numbers 1 & 2  November 2011
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

JOURNAL OF FINNISH STUDIES EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICE
Journal of Finnish Studies, Department of English, 1901 University Avenue, Evans 458 (P.O. Box 2146), Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas 77341-2146, USA
Tel. 1.936.294.1404; Fax 1.936.294.1408

SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADVERTISING, AND INQUIRIES
Contact Business Office (see above & below).

EDITORIAL STAFF
Helena Halmari, Editor-in-Chief, Sam Houston State University; halmaris@shsu.edu
Hanna Snellman, Co-Editor, University of Helsinki & University of Jyväskylä;
Hanna.Snellman@helsinki.fi or hanna.k.snellman@jyu.fi
Scott Kaukonen, Associate Editor, Sam Houston State University;
kaukonen@shsu.edu
Hilary Joy Virtanen, Assistant Editor, University of Wisconsin; virtanen@wisc.edu
Sheila Embleton, Book Review Editor, York University; embleton@yorku.ca

EDITORIAL BOARD
Varpu Lindström, University Professor, York University, Toronto, Chair
Börje Vähämäki, Founding Editor, JoFS, Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto
Raimo Anttila, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Los Angeles
Michael Branch, Professor Emeritus, University of London
Thomas DuBois, Professor, University of Wisconsin
Sheila Embleton, Distinguished Research Professor, York University, Toronto
Aili Flint, Emerita Senior Lecturer, Associate Research Scholar, Columbia University, New York
Anselm Hollo, Professor, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado
Richard Impola, Professor Emeritus, New Paltz, New York
Daniel Karvonen, Senior Lecturer, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
Andrew Nestingen, Associate Professor, University of Washington, Seattle
Jyrki Nummi, Professor, Department of Finnish Literature, University of Helsinki
Juha Pentikäinen, Professor, Department of Comparative Religion, University of Helsinki
Oiva Saarinen, Professor Emeritus, Laurentian University, Sudbury
George Schoolfield, Professor Emeritus, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
Beth L. Virtanen, Professor, South University Online
Keijo Virtanen, Professor and Rector, University of Turku
Marianne Wargelin, Independent Scholar, Minneapolis
SUBSCRIPTION RATES 2011-12 (2 ISSUES PER YEAR)
Individuals: US $40  Institutions: US $50
Europe €40  Europe €50

ADVERTISEMENTS (BLACK & WHITE ONLY)
Half page $50/€50       Full page $100/€100
Inside back cover $200/€200  Outside back cover $250/€250

MORE INFORMATION
Contact Business Office, or http://www.shsu.edu/~eng_www/finnishstudies/

©2011 Journal of Finnish Studies

# Table of Contents

*Helena Halmari*: Editorial 1

*Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo*: Foreword 3

*Markku Kangaspuro and Samira Saramo*: Introduction 5

Map of the Soviet Union 16

Map of Soviet Karelia 17

Map of Petrozavodsk (Petroskoi) and Surroundings 18

*Samira Saramo*: Road to Utopia: Finnish Communities in Canada and the United States up to ‘Karelian Fever’ 19

*Markku Kangaspuro*: Finnish Project: Karelian Workers’ Commune 40

*Mikko Ylikangas*: The Sower Commune: An American-Finnish Agricultural Utopia in the Soviet Union 52

*Sari Autio-Sarasmo*: The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia During the Process of Soviet Industrialization 86

*Evgeny Efremkin*: Recruitment in North America: an Analysis of Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1931–1934 103


*Irina Takala*: The Great Purge 147

*Dmitri Frolov*: Canadian and American Finns in the GULAG 162

*Markku Kangaspuro*: Finns in the Whirl of the Soviet Union’s Foreign Policy 170

Contributors 181
EDITORIAL

It is my pleasure to present this special guest-edited double issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* to our readers. Markku Kangaspuro, professor and director of research in the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, and Samira Saramo, a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at York University, have compiled a captivating collection of articles. Their topic is one that continues to intrigue and trouble many people: the fate of North American Finns who followed the call of Stalin in search of a better, more fulfilling life, a life that would fit their socialist beliefs and rescue them from the woes of the Great Depression. I am proud to offer this special issue as a tribute to the victims and survivors of Soviet Karelia, those workers who gave their best for a dream of paradise—a paradise that turned out more closely to resemble an inferno. I want to thank the guest editors and the authors of the articles for the smooth collaboration during the editorial process.

This double issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* is the first one to be mailed to you from our third editorial home, the Department of English at Sam Houston State University. The *Journal of Finnish Studies* has migrated from its initial location at the University of Toronto, first to Finlandia University in Hancock, Michigan, and now to Huntsville, Texas. I am honored by the invitation to follow in the footsteps of Professor Emeritus Börje Vähämäki, founding editor of the *Journal of Finnish Studies*, and Professor Beth L. Virtanen, who steered the journal during the past two years.

The editorial board remains the same, with the addition of former editors as new members. Except for the change of the editor-in-chief and the addition of an associate editor, Dr. Scott Kaukonen (the director of the Sam Houston State University Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing), the other members of the editorial staff continue: Professor Hanna Snellman (University of Helsinki and University of Jyväskylä) as co-editor; Hilary Joy Virtanen (University of Wisconsin and Finlandia University) as assistant editor; and Distinguished Research Professor Sheila Embleton (York University) as book review editor.

Because this issue is a large one, with ten lengthy articles, we have decided not to publish book reviews here. Reviews will re-commence with the next issue. A quick glance at 16.1 promises articles of great interest: an analysis of nineteenth-century popular composition in Finland, an account of a suffragette’s travels in the Grand Duchy of Finland, studies of Finnish supernatural narratives and of contemporary Finnish dreams, and a discussion of Finnish girlhood in the twentieth century.
During FinnFest 2011 in San Diego, Scott Kaukonen and I met a large number of our readers and subscribers. It was a pleasure to meet you and hear your enthusiasm about the scholarship published in the *Journal of Finnish Studies*. We were also honored to finally meet, in person, Doctors Börje Vähämäki and Varpu Lindström—scholars whom we respect enormously, to whom we owe our current exciting positions as members of the editorial staff, and without whom we would not have this great journal.

Helena Halmari
The Missing in Karelia Research Project synthesizes the various layers of the history of Finnish Canadians and Finnish Americans in Soviet Karelia. By combining the expertise of leading researchers from Canada, Finland, and Russia, working across a wide range of economic, political, social, and cultural perspectives, and with materials culled from the unique archives of each of the partner countries, the project contributes to a better understanding of the approximately six thousand to seven thousand Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian migrants who left North America to build the workers’ paradise. The project confronts a new set of research questions and takes a multidimensional look at the topic, including the study of the history of American Finns not only from the perspective of North America, but also from the Soviet Union, as well as from the points of view of other agents with varying motives in both countries. The project utilizes a wide range of archival holdings in Russia, Canada, and Finland that have never before been used at the same time in one research project. This offers a splendid opportunity for the project to analyze the topic in a balanced and innovative way. The project also provides an inspiring environment for its researchers to contribute to a wider discourse in presenting new research results in both academic and public forums.

In addition to supporting the research and writing of scholarly works, the Missing in Karelia Research Project has also worked to help the descendants of the Karelian immigrants. The project’s website <http://missinginkarelia.ca/> contains a database of four thousand individuals known to have moved to Karelia from Canada and the United States. All biographical materials and information provided by families and found in archival searches have been posted in the database, and timelines for individuals have been created. For many families, the website and the Missing in Karelia Research Project have brought closure to decades of uncertainty about the fate of long-lost relatives. Likewise, the generosity of many families in sharing letters, photographs, and other documents has made further research advances possible for the team.

Much debt is owed to Professor Varpu Lindström in spearheading the research project. Varpu Lindström’s research on the lives and fates of Finnish Canadians in
Karelia began with the stories told by Finnish women and men in Canada whom she interviewed. These stories led her to the available early studies on the topic. In 1989, Lindström visited Karelia, and the trip solidified her commitment to uncovering the stories of the countless North American Finns who disappeared while building a “paradise.” In 2005, Lindström secured a significant grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as support from York University. This kicked off the Missing in Karelia Research Project with the researchers from the University of Helsinki and Petrozavodsk State University. Most of the primary and secondary sources about North American Finns in Karelia collected by Varpu Lindström and the Research Project have now been donated to the York University Archives, and are contained in the Varpu Lindström fonds. The Missing in Karelia Internet database will also be accessible for wider public use in the future, thanks to the contribution of the National Archives of Finland.
The history of and the reasons for the mass-scale immigration of American Finns to Soviet Karelia in the 1930s has been a topic of on-going and often politicized dispute in Canada, the United States, and Finland. Probably the only non-politicized aspect has been the statistics regarding the number of immigrants. We have a relatively broad consensus that between 1931 and 1934 about 6,000 to 6,500 Finns from Canada and the United States immigrated to the Soviet Union. Why and how that happened, the motives, and questions of the migrants’ fate in Soviet Karelia have been discussed and disputed, although the tragic fate of the Finnish North Americans, caught up in Stalin’s purges, has been commonly known for some time.

We can see several reasons for controversial attitudes and perceptions about “Karelian Fever.” The first is that both the Soviet Union and Finnish immigrants in the United States were perceived within a heavily politicized framework. Finns were one of the most politically active groups in Canada and the United States, organizing and running working-class leftist organizations, as Samira Saramo and Evgeny Efremkin demonstrate in this collection. Finnish members of the Socialist Party of Canada already constituted two-thirds of the total party membership by 1906, and almost half of the members of the Communist Party of Canada in 1923 were Finns. The Finnish Civil War in 1918, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Winter War poured oil on the fire between left-oriented Finns and “patriotic” Finns. They regularly took different sides politically and in regard to labor movements. The cultural and political differences between the Red Finns and the White Finns and the various political factions within the United States and Canada aggravated the attitudes of each party. These often led to unbalanced interpretations of the history of Finnish communities, the interpretations subject to political bias.

Especially in Finnish communities, but certainly also across Canadian society, the perception of the Soviet Union ranged across a spectrum of views. For Red Finns, the Soviet Union represented hope for a better and more equal world, but also an asylum to which they had fled the revenge of White Finland and the hunger of concentration camps in 1918. For the majority of Canadian society, the Soviet Union and communism represented something totally unacceptable; they were phenomena
that had to be actively resisted. In these circumstances, strikes or trade-union activism as collective expressions of group interests were easily over politicized both from the employers’ and employees’ side.

The personal tragedy of many families also made the rememberance of Karelian Fever a delicate and painful thing. For individuals, the rememberance of the immigration to the Soviet Union continued, on the one hand, in silence, an active forgetting of those who had left, and with silence on the part of those who had returned. On the other hand, other returnees spoke out publicly about the miserable conditions in which people had lived as well as about the Stalinist purges, and they participated in political discussions about the Soviet Union, as well as other communist and socialist movements. This intimate experiential level has made memories of Karelian Fever an emotionally charged topic. From this individual perspective emerged questions of guilt, responsibility, deception, idealism versus pragmatism, and so forth.

The articles of this special issue of the *Journal of Finnish Studies* reveal that the motives of the migrants for moving to Soviet Karelia and the organizations through which they operated were much more diverse than has been previously understood. We can outline several social and political reasons for the phenomena in Canada and the United States as well as in the Soviet Union and in Soviet Karelia. Taking into account all state actors and agents working within the state apparatuses of the respective governments, we will see multidimensional and complex configurations. At the governmental level, Canada and its state organs, including its police forces, pushed Finns to move, in particular during the Great Depression with its wide-scale unemployment. At the same time, in 1931, the Soviet government made decisions that opened the way for the Soviet Karelian Finnish leadership to start the recruitment of North American Finns. However, although the Soviet government accepted the recruitment, its security organizations (namely the NKVD, Narodnyj komissariat vnutrennikh del, or the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) resisted it and interrupted immigration a couple of times. The motives for recruitment differed from party to party. For the Soviet government, economic modernization was the main motive; however, for Karelia’s Finnish leadership the question was not only economic but also very much about the nationalities policy and Karelia’s autonomy, which was grounded in the Karelian-Finnish ethnic composition of Karelia’s population.

The second level of the recruitment and migration apparatus involved non-governmental actors. In Canada, as well as Finland to some extent, employers’ harsh policies during the Depression, including the blacklisting of employees who were politically leftist and/or members of trade unions, constituted one factor pushing people to move from Canada and dovetailed with the efforts of Finnish organizations to recruit people to migrate to the Soviet Union. The active efforts of the Karelian Technical Aid (KTA), authorized by the Communist International and unwillingly accepted by the Communist Party of Canada, had the authority with and the perfect
network among Finnish organizations in Canada. Besides this, the organizers were capable and well respected among Finnish leftist organizations.

The third level is the individual one. The recruits came from different backgrounds and had a variety of motives although we can identify some common features. Most of them were lumberjacks and carpenters who were needed and wanted in Karelia. The focus of the recruiters can also be seen from the gender composition of the emigrants. There were quite clearly few single women, whereas single young men were well represented. The social composition of those recruited is demonstrated as well by the required payments to the Machinery Fund and the requirement that migrants pay their own travel costs.

It is indisputable that most of the recruits were more or less connected to Finnish leftist circles, although recruiters had been instructed that, of the total number recruited, no more than 20 percent should be from the ranks of party members. In the midst of a world recession, the Soviet Union’s rapid economic development and its increased demand for a growing workforce tempted the workers who had not known any experience outside capitalist society and its labor market, where the demand for and the supply of the workforce determined the living standard and welfare of workers. However, we cannot diminish the prevailing and propagated perception of Soviet Karelia as a culturally and linguistically Finnish area. Many of the emigrants had moved not so long before from Finland to Canada and the United States and maintained a fresh memory of emigration, which probably made the decision to move again easier.

**Russia and Karelia**

Karelian Fever also had its origins in Canada and in the Soviet Union. Samira Saramo’s article focuses on the long history of Finnish emigrant communities in Canada and the United States, where different socialist ideas and organizations played a prominent role in the emigrants’ decision to move. Mikko Ylikangas sheds light on the history of the first American Finns’ immigration to southern Russia in the beginning of the 1920s. They traveled to the new revolutionary Soviet Russia to establish the agricultural commune Kylväjä (Sower, Seiatel' in Russian) based on the principles of the Finnish cooperative movement and socialist ideals. It is not a surprise that the new socialist Soviet Russia inspired Finnish emigrants who had deep roots in Finnish and North American cooperative, trade union, and socialist movements. As Ylikangas writes, the establishment and development of Kylväjä was not easy, as were few aspects of American Finns’ life in Soviet Karelia.

North American Finns in Soviet Karelia typically experienced culture shock in every way. Living conditions, from housing and food supply to working conditions and work culture were usually miserable, as becomes clear from Alexey Golubev’s and Irina Takala’s article. Although Red Finns held leading positions in the state
apparatus of Karelia and the same held true in almost half of the administrative districts of Karelia, it did not mean that Karelia was a Finnish area in terms of culture, language, or other features. Russian was the administrative language, and it dominated culture, education, and society in a wider sense. Furthermore, the Soviet Union and Karelia were not very developed societies as compared to North America or Finland, and the situation for new immigrants in Karelia was further complicated by the hardening political struggle over the political orientation and power of the area. This development had already started a few years prior to the first immigrants’ arrival in Soviet Karelia in 1931. American Finns arrived in the midst of escalating political and social tensions. They had little understanding of what was happening or why.

On the one hand, we see that American Finns immigrated to Karelia in good faith and with good intentions, but also with a wide range of motivations, and without a proper understanding of the living conditions and the political situation that prevailed there. On the other hand, emigrants knew, on a general level, that their professional skills were needed to solve the problems of the Soviet Union and to build a new society. However, no one knew beforehand that the political and economic crisis of the First Five-Year Plan would escalate finally into violence against the USSR’s own population and immigrants.

When the North American Finns arrived, what did they find? First of all, they arrived amid an enormous and feverish attempt to build the Soviet economy and its culture. In 1897, nearly 13 million people populated Russia’s cities, and by 1914 this number had almost doubled to 24 million. Still, in 1926, a clear majority of the population, about four out of five, lived in the countryside. In general, city dwellers were Russians, and in some cases Jews or members of other more urban Western minority communities. In the beginning of the 1930s, forced collectivization and industrialization changed the picture in this respect. Collectivization and the rapidly increased demand for an industrial workforce did not lead only to increased urbanization, but in particular to significant cultural, social, and structural upheaval among the national minorities (Simon 1991, 391; Liber 1992, 54).

The situation in Karelia in many ways resembled general developments across Russia. The urban population of Karelia increased nearly three-fold between 1897 and 1926, reaching 60,785 inhabitants. However, even in 1926, the share of the urban population was no more than 22.5 percent. Karelia, like the whole of the Soviet Union, was a peasant society, and 87 percent of Karelia’s city dwellers were Russians. Only 4.7 percent of Karelia’s Karelians (4,753) lived in cities. The number of Russians among the city dwellers was 54,017, while the number who were Finns was just 2,544 (Vsesojuznaja perepis’ naselenija 1926 g. 1928, 114–15). That means that almost all Finns in Karelia lived in cities, and we can expect that the information American Finns received about life in Karelia was not about Karelia as a whole, but
rather about Petrozavodsk and some other cities. The North American Finns’ prevailing perception of the Finnish-led Republic of Karelia conflicted with the reality of Russian-dominated cities and society. The truth must have come more or less as a surprise to the emigrants.

In the eyes of Soviet officials, Karelians and other minority nationalities were members of the peasant social group, which was seen as an illiterate and backward part of society that hindered development and had to be modernized. The gap between the cities and the countryside in Russia was so big that sometimes it is said that there existed two separate nations. Although the population of Karelia doubled again between 1926 and 1939, the share of the urban population still remained below 32 percent in 1939. Immigration created 70 percent of the population increase, and, therefore, the question was not only of the workforce but also of the development of social and economic structures of the republic. Immigration also influenced the balance of the region’s ethnic composition as well as relations between ethnic groups, and so, consequently, national autonomy (*Vsesojuznaja perepis naselenija 1926g.* 1928, 114–16; *Karelskaja ASSR 60 let*, 1980, 8). Industrialization and mass internal migration of the workforce from the countryside to the cities and new industrial areas changed the ethnic composition of national republics and autonomies in all areas of the Soviet Union. As a consequence, the nationalities question and peasant question were two different sides of the same coin. In Karelia the ethnic balance between the Karelian-Finnish population and the Russian population was a very sensitive question, if we take into account that Russians formed a slight majority in this national republic led by the smallest minority, Finns, who had moved to Karelia in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at first as immigrants and later as refugees following Finland’s Civil War in 1918.

**Literacy Creates a New People**

According to the Census of 1897, only 29.6 percent of the population of the Russian Federation were literate. In Ukraine and White Russia the level was slightly lower. In Karelia literacy was higher (31.3 percent) than the average literacy in Russia and three times more common than the average level in other Soviet minority republics, where only approximately 10 percent could read and write. However, statistics give a biased picture of Karelia’s situation as a whole. Karelia’s Russian population was more literate than the average level in Russia, but only 10.4 percent of ethnic Karelians were literate. Moreover, the majority of them were literate not in Finnish or Karelian, which was not a literary language, but in Russian (Simon 1991, 49; Afanasjeva 1989, 42–43). Beside the ethnic composition of the population and the immigration affecting it, the literary language and culture of Karelians established the second particularly politicized factor in the development of Karelia’s autonomy. Karelian autonomy was based on the foreign policy of the Soviet Union (the Dorpat/
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920) and the area’s Finnish-Karelian identity and national composition. In this respect American Finns, with their Finnish cultural and political activities, played a more significant role in Karelia’s development than might have been expected. They formed one stronghold of Finnish culture in Karelia in a situation in which culture and ethnicity were politicized as a result of the change in Moscow’s nationalities policy from one that supported minority nations’ development to one that emphasized the role of Russianness as a core element of Soviet patriotism and unity. Finnish language and culture were the last bastions in the struggle for Karelian national autonomy. Therefore culture and ethnicity were questions of escalating power politics between Karelia’s Finnish-Karelian leadership and its Russian-Karelian opposition. Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand how important the migration of six thousand to seven thousand literate and professional North American Finns was for Karelia’s Finnish leadership. Markku Kangaspuro discusses in more detail later in this volume the establishment of Karelia’s autonomy and the following political conflicts.

Literacy campaigns in the Soviet Union were a huge success after the revolution. By 1926, literacy had doubled in the Russian Federation and reached 56.6 percent. Karelia’s situation was typical: Russians were literate, but, among the Karelian population, literacy was only half of what it was for the region as a whole. Because of determined campaigns and the development of a Finnish school network, the situation started to change, and literacy among Karelians increased quickly. In 1930 it was already about 69 percent. In 1939 the general literacy in Karelia had reached 92.4 percent (Simon 1991, 49; Afanasjeva 1989, 42–43, 80). As a result of the nationalities policy supporting the minority nations, Karelians learned to read the Finnish language. This orientation to Finnish, paired with the growing Finnish population resulting from the arrival of North American Finns and illegal immigration from Finland, strengthened Karelia’s Finnish identity and strengthened the basis for national autonomy accordingly.

However, the result of literacy campaigns did not mean that people learned to read and write beyond the most rudimentary level. For this reason, Finns from Finland, Canada, and the United States, who had a long history in literary culture, held significant advantages in acquiring leading positions in the Karelian government and in Karelian society. Moreover, the official nationalities policy of the Soviet Union promoted the rights and position of titular nations of the Soviet Republics, which gave particular advantage to the Finnish population as compared to Karelians, who did not have their own literary language. The role of Finnish language and culture as a core of Karelian autonomy is one more reason why North American Finns had such an important role in Karelia’s culture, politics, and economy. They significantly increased the size of the small Finnish population in the area. The logical consequence of this was the politicization of immigration, and, in particular, the position of the
American Finns invited to Karelia as privileged specialists. In the Soviet regions, the question was always about the proportion of the republic’s titular nation to Russians, which affected the power relations between the titular population (in this case the Finnish-Karelian “bloc”) and Russians.

**Motivation to Move**

We can identify several reasons to explain the emigration to Soviet Karelia. Recruitment of North American Finns began well before the Karelian Technical Aid (KTA) offices opened in New York and Toronto in 1931. Already in the 1920s, Matti Tenhunen was active in the Soviet-Karelian Aid Committee in the United States. The second key figure was Oscar Corgan, who was also a prominent political activist in the Finnish-American leftist movement. Tenhunen led the New York office and was later replaced by Kalle Aronen and Corgan. In Canada, John Latva was in charge of recruitment.

However, when speaking of Karelian Fever, we cannot stress enough the Great Depression, which began in 1929; the Communist media’s active campaign to propagate the success of the Soviet Union; and the problems of capitalism in the West. By 1932, Canada’s unemployment rate had reached a devastating 32 percent. Many Finns had arrived in Canada on the eve of the Depression and were thereby among the most vulnerable in the labor market. Although recruiters did not want to recruit the unemployed or people who could not pay their travel expenses or contribute to the machinery funds, more than 30 percent of the recruited fit into such categories.

Beyond the socioeconomic motives, the political landscape also affected the migrants’ willingness to move. In the early 1930s, countries like Canada and Finland, among others, outlawed radical organizations, including communist ones. About 800 Finns were expelled from Canada during the first half of the 1930s. That made Karelia an attractive alternative for many Canadian Red Finns. Emigration was not just the result of the manipulative propaganda of communist media or peoples’ mass psychosis. It seems to be clear that from the outset of Karelian Fever, immigrants were sending back letters with negative depictions of Karelia. The first disappointed returnees had already arrived back within the first year. Without a strong push effect in Canada, it is not plausible to believe that the kind of mass movement would ever have occurred, taking into account all that people knew about the poor living standards in Karelia. It is characteristic of the social climate that, despite the reports of difficulties in Karelia that reached Canada, thousands still awaited their turn to travel to Soviet Karelia, even as late as 1935 when recruitment had already stopped.

**Disappointment and Contradictions**

The Soviet Union and Soviet Karelia had strong motivations to recruit specialists and to buy technology from the West. The First Five-Year Plan was designed by the
Soviet government to develop modern mechanized agriculture and to increase industrial capacity with overly ambitious speed. Economic trends favored the Soviet Union’s ambitious plans. The Great Depression did not only hit Western capitalism, but it also made the economic situation worse for the Soviet economy because of falling prices for raw material in the world markets. The foreign currency needed for imported machinery was expected to be acquired through the intensified export of raw materials, including Karelian timber. Old work methods and an archaic work culture, outdated tools, unprofessional workers, and a general lack of a sufficient workforce were the basic challenges to achieving the targets set by central planning officials. These problems formed the background that led to the Soviet government’s decision to start recruitment of foreign specialists and, in Karelia’s case, a professional workforce for the forest industry from Canada and the USA.

The Soviet method of industrialization imitated Western production models and borrowed Western technology, as Sari Autio-Sarasmo details in her article. This model of modernization fit perfectly with the needs and policy of the Soviet Karelian Finnish leadership. They understood perfectly that without new technology, a new work culture, and a new workforce they would have no chance to meet the production targets of the First Five-Year Plan. Furthermore, Karelia’s Finns understood that the flow of a new workforce to Karelia would be a decisive factor in keeping or changing the area’s ethnic balance. Recruitment of North American Finns seemed to provide an all-encompassing solution to these demands: they were professional forest workers, they brought a new technology with them at their own expense (machinery funds), and they strengthened Karelia’s Finnish ethnic composition and culture.

As many times in history, unintended consequences outweighed the intended results. The immigration of North American Finns boosted the modernization of Karelia’s forest economy and had good results in terms of input and output, but at the same time, the immigrants’ negative experiences with work and social conditions sent an unwanted message back to Canada and the United States. Furthermore, North American Finns were targeted by the Russian-Karelian opposition and, by the mid-1930s, after the turn in the whole Soviet nationalities policy, by security officials. Additionally, conflicts between North American Finns and the local population, both Karelians and Russians, were manifested from the beginning. Animosity followed the tightening of work norms, the privileged position of North American Finns as compared to the local population, and the exigency of bosses to take up the use of new “foreign methods and tools” without better financial compensation and with worsening food supplies. Dissatisfaction turned against the newcomers, who, for their part, were also dissatisfied with poor conditions at work, the poor condition of the food supply, and their living situation in general.
Stalinism and Purges

Stalinist purges were dramatic and traumatic for the whole of Soviet society. In particular the purges hit the national minorities on the border regions especially hard. It is estimated that under the Stalinist coercive policy from the late 1920s to the end of his regime in 1953 the death rate in the Soviet Union increased by about 10 million as compared to the natural demographic level. In Karelia the main target of Stalinist purges was foreigners (North American and Finnish Finns) and, more generally, the population living in the border regions.

We can identify several distinct stages in developments towards the Great Purge of 1937–38. The first warnings had already come in the beginning of the 1930s, when, in 1931 and in 1933, the NKVD attacked the Karelian Jaeger Brigade and the population living along the Finnish border. In the Soviet Communist Party, the beginning of the 1930s was a time of Bolshevization that resulted in suspicious attitudes toward all foreigners or former members of other parties like the Social Democratic Party of Finland. Almost all Red Finns who had come to Karelia after the Civil War in 1918 had been members of the old Social Democratic Party of Finland. Some had also been members of other socialist parties established as the legal political forum for the illegal Communist Party of Finland and other leftist forces.

The second stage was the power struggle between the Finnish-Karelian leadership and the Russian-Karelian opposition between 1929–30 and 1934. Neither of the parties could gain the upper hand. The political situation remained tense, partisan political disputes were common, and power struggles flared from time to time, but the situation was still quite stable. This was when North American Finns began to arrive in Karelia.

The third stage was 1934–35, when Karelia’s entire Finnish leadership and part of the Karelian leadership were dismissed and the first political charges of local nationalism were made by the new party leadership and the security organizations. Karelia’s leader, Edvard Gylling, and its party leader, first secretary Kustaa Rovio, were “invited” to other duties away from Karelia. Karelia’s Jaeger Brigade was closed down, and some Finnish officers were sentenced to jail, some dismissed from the army, and others moved to different units. Some North American Finns were also arrested in 1934 and 1935. In 1934, the last immigrants from Canada and the United States arrived in Karelia, while thousands remained behind, waiting for their turn to start the big journey. It is history’s irony that they did not know, when immigration was halted despite North American protest, what a great favor the Soviet security officials had done for them. The cunning moves of history had given them an invaluable gift.

The fourth stage was the beginning of the Stalinist purges and the mass-scale arrests and executions in 1937–38, the “iso viha” (Great Hatred) as Finns named it. According to Irina Takala, among the 739 North American Finns who were
repressed during 1937 and 1938, 323 people had arrived from Canada and 416 from the United States. Among all Finns repressed in Karelia during 1937–38, the share of North American immigrants was 15 percent. Over 90 percent of the repressed were men. Stalin’s purges of 1937–38 had different stages and followed a different logic, depending on the viewpoint of the observer. We can separate general social developments and different individual experiences, which are discussed in detail in several articles of this collection. We can see that the picture even during these nightmare years is not one-dimensional. Although there were millions of victims who for a good reason dominate the picture, there were also survivors and people who continued their “normal” life, as depicted by Samira Saramo in the life history of Aate Pitkänen. Nonetheless, it is clear that at least 10 million people were victims of Stalinism, and the violence seriously damaged the whole of society. Dmitri Frolov provides an overview of the GULAG (Main Labor Camps Administration) system and its role in the Stalinist state.

The Purges ended in August 1938, and the Winter War again changed the atmosphere in and development of Karelia. In the beginning of 1939, the first Finns received the right to move back from exile, and after the Winter War started on November 30, 1939, the Finnish language was again used in schools. Kangaspuro’s article sheds more light on the background of the Winter War in terms of Karelia as well as the consequences of the Second World War on the region. A new Finnish-led government—the Terijoki government—was installed at the behest of the Kremlin. After the war, the republic gained a new status as a Soviet republic, and accordingly it was named the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic in March 1940. After the Second World War, by 1950, about six hundred North American Finns remained in Karelia. In 1956, the republic’s status shifted back to an autonomous republic.

The intention of this collection of articles is to diversify the picture of Karelian Fever by drawing upon new sources and answering new questions. The articles approach Karelian Fever from top-down and bottom-up perspectives, and discuss the circumstances that created this phenomenon in Canada and the United States as well as in the USSR. The articles focus on individual and collective motives for recruitment and migration and do so with a wide range of research materials and with open minds. The stated intention of this issue is to show North American Finns both as individual and collective agents. As well, the collection demonstrates the various motives of the state-level actors, and how their intentions could be contradictory and the results unintended. It is also important to realize that although there were many unique features to Karelian Fever, this migration also shares characteristics with emigration everywhere. The fate of the Soviet Karelian immigrants and the organizations that recruited them reveals that powers greater than those immigrants or organizations took control of them and dictated their place in history as part of one of the greatest human tragedies of the twentieth century.
**Works Cited**


Map 1. The Soviet Union. Courtesy Petteri Linnakangas, Aleksanteri Institute, Helsinki.

Victims and Survivors of Karelia
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

Map 3. Petrozavodsk (Petroskoi) and Surroundings.
Courtesy Irina Takala and Elena Lällä, Petrozavodsk State University.
Road to Utopia: Finnish Communities in Canada and the United States up to ‘Karelian Fever’

Samira Saramo
York University and Lakehead University

Abstract

Saramo’s article “Road to Utopia” provides an overview of the main characteristics and developments of Finnish communities in Canada and the United States until the time of the Karelian Fever—the migration of North American Finnish immigrants to Soviet Karelia. With the use of the available secondary source material on the Finnish North American population, the article bridges Finnish experiences from Finland to North America, and for some, ultimately, to Stalin’s Russia. By tracing the rise of socialism (and communism) among many North American Finns, and by examining factions within the Finnish diaspora, Saramo points to the key factors in individual decisions to emigrate to Karelia and contextualizes the Finnish community development that occurred there.

In the 1931 Canadian census, 43,885 people of Finnish origin were reported to be living in Canada, including 30,354 who had been born in Finland (Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, CODOC, 1931; see also Lindström 1985; Aaltio 1969, 68). By that same year in the United States, Finnish-born residents numbered over one hundred thousand (Aaltio 1969, 65). In the four decades preceding the migration of Finnish North Americans to Karelia, Finnish communities in North America had grown rapidly, carving their own place in the wider society.

This article provides a synopsis of Finnish life in Canada and the United States in the decades leading up to the mass migration to Karelia. If we are to better understand the motives of those who picked up their lives to start anew, we need to first look briefly at the reasons for emigration from Finland and at the settlement and occupational choices of those immigrants and the central elements of the community life that they created: the church, the temperance movement, and the halls, as well as the Finnish role in the North American Socialist and cooperative movements. When placed in the context of the social climate at the beginning of the 1930s, the road to
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

Reasons for Emigration from Finland

Finns were drawn to the westward journey across the Atlantic for a number of reasons. While a small group of early Finnish emigrants headed to Delaware in 1637 as part of a Swedish colonization effort (Engle 1975, 15), and others came to seek riches in Alaska and California before the 1860s (Lindström 1985, 6; Kero 1974, 16), the major movement of Finns to North America occurred primarily between 1880 and the beginning of World War II. The Finnish population, especially in the Ostrobothnia and Satakunta regions, the source of the heaviest migration, had experienced tremendous population growth, and in a region already with limited agricultural space, people were left landless. Many turned to the cities for employment, but found that a better life did not await them there. Finnish cities simply could not meet the employment and living needs of the rural exodus (Kero 1969, 57). The outcry over the Russian implementation of mandatory three-year military service in 1878 became even louder with the 1901 military conscription law, and many looked for an opportunity to escape the increasingly heavy-handed rule of the Russians (Kero 1969, 58). From the 1870s onward, Canadian and American agents recruited Finns to work in agriculture, railroad construction, and mining (Kero 1969, 59; Kivisto 1984, 69). While Finns certainly had many factors pushing them to migrate, and while land and employment agents painted a rosy picture of North America as a destination, personal letters sent by fellow Finns who had already made the move also proved to be very persuasive to further emigrants. Letters continued to hold sway, as evidenced by the Karelian letters of the 1930s. Conditions in Finland set the stage for emigration, while recruiters and letter writers appealed to the potential émigré’s hopes for a better life.

Migration and New Beginnings

The transatlantic trip from the port of Hanko to eastern Canada and the United States was an experience shared by tens of thousands of Finns. Finns first appeared in the Canadian census in 1901, with 2,502 individuals of Finnish origin counted (Lindström 1985, 6). Between 1901 and 1931, more than sixty thousand Finns came to Canada, with thousands preceding them. The American numbers prove even more impressive: by 1930, close to five hundred thousand Finns had landed in the United States. For many, however, their stay was short, as neither Canada nor the United States proved to be the land of gold, as promised by recruiters and immigrant writers of letters home. Those willing to stay helped to lay the groundwork for the vibrant Finnish communities that began to emerge by the 1890s.
Peter Kivisto contextualizes the place of Finns by stating that although Finns “represent a relatively small immigrant group in the United States, their settlement patterns were such that, as an ethnic group, they had a rather profound impact on certain locales” (1984, 71). While a common argument claims that Finns settled in areas that replicated the familiar landscape and geography of Finland, it seems that economic necessity and some level of coincidence, rather than intentionality, explain the phenomenon. Ontario, especially in the northwest, the Prairie Provinces, and British Columbia were the destinations of the majority of Finns in Canada. While the government of Canada officially welcomed Finns to work in agriculture, many instead found employment in mining, railroad construction, fishing, and the timber industry. Finns in the United States pursued similar occupations. Wage work, rather than farming, proved to be more typical among Finns in North America (Lindström 1985, 9).

In the United States, the Great Lakes region attracted the majority of immigrants, but Finnish immigrant communities could be found from Brooklyn, New York, to California. In both Canada and the United States, Finns typically settled in smaller towns and cities rather than in large urban centers. Finnish women arriving at the turn of the century, however, were an exception to this rule, as they primarily found employment as domestics in large cities (Lindström 2010, 35–38).

Documentary evidence, such as the over ten thousand letters written by Finns in North America and now contained in the Satakunta Letter Collection, reveals Finnish immigrants actively assessing and evaluating their earning potential, whether that meant frequently or seasonally changing jobs, or moving to where the wages were best. Adaptation allowed Finnish immigrants to shape their North American experiences to their advantage. This willingness to pursue different occupations, job sites, and locales resulted in a wide array of skills and knowledge that allowed Finnish Canadians and Americans to successfully transfer their know-how to any situation. These broad skills made Finnish North Americans especially appealing for recruitment into the Karelian project.

While securing wages and a roof over one’s head were the primary focuses of individual immigrants’ lives, settlement in Canada and the United States also meant establishing collective spaces for Finns that would feed the body, mind, and soul. The Finnish church, therefore, played an interesting part in ethnic community formation.

**Church**

In Finland, resentment of the Finnish State Lutheran Church’s power grew in the years coinciding with the rise in migration. Although largely to thank for the unusually high rates of literacy among the whole of the Finnish population, the church’s hand in various aspects of people’s lives had become burdensome. For those eager to leave Finland, a character reference from the home parish had to accompany their
passport application. The church, however, actively discouraged migration, blaming it for the spread of immorality (Hoglund 1977, 27–29).

Not heeding the warnings of the church, the tens of thousands of emigrants were charged with the task of setting up a church once in North America. Compared to the highly institutionalized operations of the Finnish state church, North American Finnish religious communities had difficulty in forming coherently. A lack of funds, a lack of strong leadership, and a lack of formally educated Finnish clergy resulted in intense competition between a number of congregations in the early phases of settlement. By 1890, the largest of these were the Laestadians and the Suomi Synod. While the Suomi Synod’s belief that it was the authentic Finnish immigrant church was strengthened by the support it received from the Finnish state church, many charged the Synod with simply reproducing in North America the worst of the old state church (Hoglund 1977, 30–34). Immigrants continued to carry their old suspicions and bad feelings about the church, and anticlericalism was widespread among Finns in North America. In the United States it is estimated that no more than 25 percent of Finns had joined church by 1900 (Kivisto 1984, 79). Even more strikingly, the 1931 Canadian census revealed that only 3 percent of Finnish immigrants had joined the church (Lindström 2003, 115). For many, traditional church simply seemed “irrelevant” to the daily realities of their immigrant lives (Hoglund 1977, 23).

**The Temperance Movement**

Though generally wary of secular immigrant activities, the Suomi Synod and other congregations did become involved with the temperance movement. The mission of temperance societies spoke to many early Finnish immigrants. When no formal Finnish church had been established, the moral guidance of the temperance pledge was reassuring for those needing religion. In fact, cooperation with friendly temperance societies proved beneficial for fledgling churches. While temperance societies, like the Finnish National Temperance Brotherhood, formed in Michigan in 1888, managed to secure buildings, many congregations were still homeless and held services and meetings in these temperance halls (Hoglund 1977, 32). Carl Ross estimates that in the United States, some two hundred temperance societies had been formed by 1900 (1982, 26).

Even for those not necessarily driven by the spiritual life, the temperance movement aimed to combat the alcoholism prevalent among new immigrants, and gave direction to those feeling lost and lonely (Aaltio 1969, 67; Metsaranta 1989, 57). The temperance societies proved to have a far-reaching impact on Finnish immigrant life and, in the words of Carl Ross, “outstripped the church, became the incubator for Finnish immigrant culture, and the umbrella under which its institutions arose” (1982, 23). Indeed, it did not take long for the religious undercurrents of the
temperance movement to be challenged. The church’s idea of a proper Christian temperance movement included a ban on dancing and other forms of lively social interactions, and vice was viewed as the result of individual immorality (Kivisto 1984, 80–81). For the majority of Finnish immigrant participants, the church’s ideas did not mesh with their understanding of the role of social factors, or with their cultural needs. Both the church’s role and the scope of the temperance movement became too limited to address the issues of work and life so dear to immigrants.

**Hall Life**

Along with the forming of Finnish temperance societies came the establishment of the Finnish haali, or cultural hall. For example, the Finns of Copper Cliff, Ontario, built their hall in 1906, the Port Arthur Finns in 1910, and, in Minneapolis, a hall was built in 1913. Edward Laine argues that Finnish halls fostered a highly developed sense of collectivization by simultaneously creating the appearance of alienation from the greater Canadian society and yet building strong community ties (1981, 96).

In the safety of the Finnish hall, immigrants could come together to speak their language, celebrate their traditions and customs, and partake in the busy social calendar. Hall members frequently staged iltamat, or evenings of entertainment, that featured a variety of activities ranging from dances, musical acts, and guest speakers, to dramatic performances. Finnish women were instrumental in the organization of these popular community events. Additionally, halls were home to a wide array of clubs, groups, and organizations. From childhood to old age, Finnish immigrants could partake in athletics, sewing circles, theater troupes, or politics, to name just a few options. The vital place of the haali in Finnish-Canadian and Finnish-American lives was to be replicated in Karelia, remaining the hub of cultural life.

The forging of close ethnic communities through the halls did much to encourage Finns in Canada to develop their class-consciousness. In the words of Edward Laine, halls “provided a refuge or sanctuary for the immigrant community where its members could immerse themselves in the comfort of their commonly held Finnish cultural heritage and, increasingly, to dream of the coming era of social democracy” (96). An undeniable characteristic of Finnish organization in Canada and the United States was the prevalence of socialism.

**Why Socialism**

In the words of Varpu Lindström, radicalism for Finns “was not a philosophy abstracted from the experience of the ordinary people, but was an integral part of the day-to-day life” (1981, 119). In fact, in a 1910 survey of Finns in Toronto, 57 percent self-identified as “Socialist,” outnumbering those who identified themselves as Christian by four to one (Sangster 1981, 51; Kealey 1998, 131). The era of mass migration from Finland to North America coincided with the quickly growing
popularity of social democracy in Finland. Peter Kivisto concludes that Finns “who arrived from 1890 onward, no matter where their point of origin in Finland, had been exposed, in varying degrees, to socialism; socialist ideas, quite simply, were in the air” (1984, 70). Likewise, according to J. Peter Campbell, “Finnish history, culture, and class structure were the foundation stones, not the direct cause, of the influence of the Industrial Workers of the World” (2008, 94). The statement rings true for Finnish North American immigrants in the whole range of socialist organizations. Although Finns were certainly aware of the growing labor and social democratic movements in Finland, conditions in their adopted homeland often proved a more enticing push to the Left.

Many Finns were sorely disappointed when the new lives they sought in Canada proved ripe with injustice and oppression. Auvo Kostiainen suggests that large numbers of Finnish immigrants in North America were drawn to socialist organizations because socialism and communism offered Finns an opportunity to fight for improved living and working conditions within the political realm (1978, 191). It can also be argued that the international focus of revolutionary organizations proved very appealing for many Finnish immigrants in Canada. Fighting for change in their adopted homeland was only one aspect of socialism; through the movement, Finnish immigrants could toil to change conditions for workers everywhere, including family and friends remaining in Finland. In addition, affiliation with socialist organizations allowed Finns to come together to share cultural traditions and practices. In Finland, socialists emphasized the importance of community and stressed the need for the involvement of all workers (Lindström 1989, 199). This cry resonated with Finnish immigrants, as evidenced by the popularity of socialist cultural halls.

With a keen eye on movements in Russia, Finns in both North America and Finland were profoundly affected by the Russian Revolution. Reflecting on the early days of the North American communist movement, Elis Sulkanen, a well-known Finnish-American organizer, remarked: “With ludicrous devotion did we sit in meetings of the underground branches, where the mentioning of the name of Lenin made the heart throb. . . . In mystic silence almost in religious ecstasy, did we admire everything that came from Russia” (quoted in Kivisto 1983, 69). For those who had not yet been compelled to draw political lines, Finland’s independence and the bitter civil war that followed left no Finn politically neutral (Lindström 1989, 199). Finland was torn apart by war, and after its official end, the victorious Whites (conservatives) systematically terrorized those who had been sympathetic to the Reds (socialists or social democrats) (Upton 1980, 312). Many escaped to North America in search of freedom, bringing their heightened class-consciousness with them. The effects were clearly felt in Finnish-Canadian and Finnish-American communities.

• • •
**Road to Utopia**

**Work in the Left**

Whether politicized by traditions and events of the homeland or by immigrant life in Canada or the United States, a significant portion of Finns in North America pledged their allegiance to the workers’ movement. From the turn of the twentieth century until the move to Karelia, Finnish Leftists worked their way through a number of political movements and parties, leaving a lasting mark on the broader North American political and social spheres. When we consider the Finns’ establishment of the utopian community Sointula and their involvement in the cooperative movement, Imatra Association, the Socialist parties of Canada and the United States, the Social Democratic Party of Canada, their own cultural political organizations, unionism, and, finally, communism, it becomes evident that Finnish immigrants clearly desired a place of their own in the North American Leftist movement but struggled to find the perfect fit because of both internal and external factors. Ultimately, the opportunity to move to Karelia to establish their own utopia seemed to be the answer for thousands disheartened by the North American socialist movement’s failure to meet Finnish immigrant needs.

**Sointula**

One of the first attempts by Finns to make a political mark on North America can be seen in the example of the Finnish utopian community of Sointula on Malcolm Island, British Columbia, from 1901 to 1905. The brainchild of Finnish utopian socialists Matti Kurikka and A. B. Mäkelä, Sointula received a land grant from the Government of British Columbia in 1901. Kurikka’s and, by extension, Sointula’s brand of socialism was not motivated by the works of Marx; instead, they looked to Christian principles of love, equality, and harmony (Wilson 1973–1974, 52). Building a new life based on cooperation appealed to many Finns frustrated by the realities of immigrant life in industrial Canada and the United States.

By the summer of 1902, Sointula had 127 inhabitants, and settlers continued to arrive over the next two years (Kolehmainen 1941, 115, 118). The Finnish residents were charged with clearing forest, setting up housing, establishing industry—primarily timber and fishing—and anything else required for a fully functioning “utopia.” Organized as the Kalevan Kansa Limited, the people of Sointula aimed to produce commodities that could be traded both internally and externally in order to move away from the capitalist cash system.

Perhaps ironically, though, rapidly growing debt plagued the community from its inception and was a significant cause of the commune’s demise (Kolehmainen 1941, 115–116). Additionally, a clash of personalities and philosophies, mixed with the difficult demands of building a self-sustaining community out of rugged bush, proved to be too much. The dream of Sointula, or the Place of Harmony, ended on May 27, 1905, when the Kalevan Kansa dissolved. Sointula shares fascinating
similarities with the experiences of Finnish North Americans in Karelia decades later. Indeed, Sointula reveals the roots of Finnish North American interest in building their own movements and communities.

**THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT**

One such movement that came to bear a strong Finnish mark in Canada and especially the United States was the cooperative movement. In fact, Finnish immigrants had established between sixty and seventy cooperative stores in the United States by 1919 (Jokinen 1975, 11). The appeal of the cooperative movement was its ability to allow workers to take the meeting of material needs into their own hands, and Finnish immigrants had already become familiar with its concept in the homeland. Perhaps even more important than their role in providing material goods, co-ops organized social, cultural, and athletic activities for Finnish immigrants (Jokinen 1975). In the words of Gary Kaunonen, writing about the Finns in Michigan: “To the many families who came to depend on the co-op, it became a way of life. Families and individuals shopped, worked, ate, and were entertained at the local co-op . . .” (2009, 81).

The cooperative movement became closely associated with the Left, especially after the formation of the Communist International in 1919 (Kaunonen 2009, 17). By the late 1920s, the cooperative movement was embroiled in controversy as active members struggled to determine whether the Communist hard-line or political neutrality would govern the co-ops. The fight was especially pronounced in the United States. Ultimately, in the spring of 1930, the Communists were ousted, and links to the Party were extinguished, despite efforts by the Communists to restore their place in the following years (18–19). Once the political tensions were diffused, the co-ops grew quickly and began to lose their uniquely Finnish character. Decades of the cooperative movement meeting the material, physical, social, and cultural needs of Finnish immigrants drew to a close. Cooperation had not been the ultimate answer to the Finns’ quest for a place to call their own.

**IMATRA**

Coinciding with the beginnings of the Finnish immigrant cooperative movement were the origins of their earliest North American mass workers’ organization. Finnish workers in the United States had come together to form the Työväenliitto Imatra, or Imatra Workers’ League, in 1890. This organization operated as an inclusive mutual aid organization that advocated a broad type of socialism to better the lives of workers (Ollila 1975, 26). Imatra grew to claim thirty-two locals in the United States and Canada. The Port Arthur branch of Imatra, for example, formed in 1903 (Metsaranta 1989, 70). Many of these branches traced their roots to temperance societies that had adopted a socialist point of view. Imatra successfully brought Finnish workers
together to begin combating the difficulties they collectively shared as immigrants in Canada and the United States. However, it did not take long for rifts to appear.

Imatra’s non-doctrinaire approach was criticized by Marxists, who advocated a more militant anti-clerical, anti-bourgeoisie revolutionary direction. By 1904, these staunch socialists succeeded in affiliating some Imatra locals with the American Socialist Party (Ollila 1975, 29). Canadian branches quickly followed suit, and the era of Imatra had run its course.

**The Socialist Parties of Canada and America**

The Socialist Party of America (SPA) formed in 1901 and the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) in 1903, and it did not take long for Finnish immigrants to join. In the words of Varpu Lindström: “The SPC did not ‘organize’ Finns; rather, it was Finns who ‘organized’ a significant section of the Socialist Party of Canada” (1981, 113). The statement also rings true for the Finns in the SPA. In June 1906, the first Finnish-language group of the Socialist Party formed in Canada, joining Local #1 in Toronto (115). Other Finnish-language SPC branches began to emerge across the country, from Toronto to the West Coast, and the Finnish membership constituted approximately two-thirds of the total party membership (Kealey 1998, 115; Lindström 1981, 113). However, the Finns’ relationship with the Socialist Party at large was strained. Interestingly, Finns in the American party faced different challenges than those in the Canadian party. Socialist Finns in the SPA were not warmly greeted. Carl Ross outlines the anti-immigrant position of the Socialist Party leadership and their unwillingness to embrace the Finns en masse, despite the party’s official stance of inclusiveness (1982, 68). On the other hand, the Canadian Party leadership’s sole focus on the long-range goal of Marxist world revolution did not mesh with Finnish interest in addressing the immediate needs and demands of workers (Newton 1995, 142). In both the United States and Canada, Finns failed to find a suitable political platform in the Socialist parties, but did not leave without a fight. For example, in 1908, Finnish Canadian members staged an attempted overthrow, armed with a new platform focused on reforms crucial to improving workers’ lives (Lindström 1981, 117). The Finnish bloc was narrowly defeated, resulting in a barrage of expulsions, and ultimately the severing of Finnish ties to the Socialist Party of Canada.

**Industrial Workers of the World**

As some North American Finns worked to find a fit within the Socialist parties, others turned to unionism to advance their objectives. The ideals of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”), in particular, resonated with many Finns in Canada and the United States. The focus on direct action to meet immediate needs, with a long-term goal of revolution, appealed to many Finns who had felt crippled by the vagueness of the Socialist parties (Radforth 1998, 301). Founded in
Chicago in 1905, the IWW caught the attention of many socialist Finns right away but gained most of its Finnish immigrant support years later.

By 1912, Finnish workers in the Midwest had become disenchanted by the Western Federation of Miners and other smaller unions for their failure to meet the membership’s needs and by the unions’ move toward conservatism (Ollila 1975, 50–51). Finns across the United States were equally frustrated with the American Federation of Labor. The failure of the traditional unions and Socialist parties to reach out to rank-and-file opened the doors for widespread IWW support. However, Ollila argues that “actual membership commitment to the IWW itself was most often quite minimal because the fires of pure devotion to revolutionary ideals most often burned low, and because membership had its penalties in the form of social ostracism, especially after the purges of 1917 which tempered the radical spirit of the Finns” (Ollila 1977, 33). That being said, the arrival in Canada—and northwestern Ontario in particular—of displaced leaders of the Wobbly movement in the United States had a profound impact on Finnish political activism in the immediate post-WWI period (Campbell 2008, 121). Finnish bush and dock workers and grain handlers were especially keen to embrace Wobbly philosophies and actions.

Peter Campbell, in his excellent examination of Finnish Wobblies in northern Ontario, “The Cult of Spontaneity,” provides a useful discussion of the IWW’s official platform and whether “spontaneity” truly did rule their approach (2008). Using the words of Salvatore Salerno, Campbell argues that the IWW “formed an associational context rather than a single ideology, a sensibility based on the emotion of working-class solidarity rather than doctrine, and a concern with agency rather than fixed organizational formation” (ibid.). This characterization of the Industrial Workers of the World helps to contextualize why the organization struggled to maintain loyalty when faced with the strengthening of communism. While many Finns continued to support the Wobbly cause into the 1930s and beyond, the rise of the communist movement led to a significant decline.

THE FINNISH AMERICAN SOCIALIST FEDERATION
As they struggled to claim their space in the North American socialist movement, both American and Canadian Finns began to form their own national organizational bodies. American Finns had already begun to organize collectively in 1903, when Eero Erkko led a movement to unite all Finnish immigrants in the United States, whether affiliated with the church, the temperance movement, or socialism, under the Finnish National League (Ollila 1975, 26). However, Erkko’s organization failed to take off because the socialist elements had begun to hold significant sway and saw only socialist organization as fruitful.

Finnish socialists formally founded the Finnish American Socialist Federation (FASF) at a convention in Hibbing, Minnesota, in the summer of 1906, after a lengthy
struggle to come together. The federation proved to be a popular outlet for Finnish immigrant political action and cultural pursuits. The membership quickly grew. In 1912, for example, the FASF boasted 10,925 members (Ollila 1975, 41).

A fascinating aspect of the federation’s legacy is its role in the establishment of the Work People’s College in 1908. Although originally founded as the “People’s College,” a seminary of the National Church in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1904, the institution is best remembered as a unique school for educating socialist leadership. The school was focused on economics, sociology, and English-language instruction; all courses were committed to being “useful in the revolutionary movement” (Kivisto 1984, 109). Many eager students of socialism and key Finnish socialist leaders, like Sanna Kannasto, spent time at the school. In fact, as an indication of its reach, the Work People’s College had 123 students in 1911 (Ollila 1975, 41). By the time Finnish North Americans began to move to Karelia, the college was struggling to maintain its IWW identity in the face of a growing number of Finnish communists.

Although at its founding the federation officially affiliated with the Socialist Party of America and remained a language branch of the party until 1920, the relationship was far from unanimously accepted. Even at the founding convention, many members advocated a commitment to radical industrial unionism and the Industrial Workers of the World (Ollila 1975, 30; Ross 1982, 69). By the end of the 1910s and with the dawn of international communism, the federation was strained by internal divides between the socialists, communists, and the industrial unionists, with the communists eventually winning control.

**FINNISH SOCIALIST ORGANIZATION OF CANADA**

While American Finns continued their relationship with the Socialist Party through the formation of their own organization, the FASF, Canadian Finns simultaneously looked for direction from a new political party and worked on forming their own association. By 1910, Finns had come to find working within the Socialist Party of Canada nearly impossible (Pilli 1981, 21). In 1911, the new Social Democratic Party of Canada (SDPC) was formed at a convention held in Port Arthur, Ontario, and the newly formed Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (FSOC) affiliated.

Edward Laine rightly argues that because the establishment of a national Finnish organization coincided with the emergence of the SDPC, the FSOC “was able to maintain and build upon its own autonomous existence right from the beginning” (1981, 97). It seems the Finns had learned a valuable lesson from their failed relationship with the SPC; by organizing independently, as the FSOC, the Finns assured themselves a place and a voice within the Social Democratic Party. However, the relationship was short-lived. Like in the United States, Finnish-Canadian socialists struggled to find a party to represent them. Over time, FSOC connected Finns to the ever-changing Canadian socialist organizations of the day, first affiliating with the
SDPC, then the Industrial Workers of the World and the One Big Union, and finally the Communist Party of Canada.

While perhaps not satiating the political needs of the Finnish membership, the FSOC undoubtedly made an impact on the Canadian Left. In a 1936 publication commemorating twenty-five years of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, J. W. Alqvist, founding member and long-time national executive chair, estimated that the FSOC, in its first ten years, contributed at least $30,000 to the Canadian socialist movement, with an additional $10,000 sent to Finnish Reds following the Civil War (Alqvist 1936, 39, 42).

**The War**

The onset of World War I challenged the young FSOC. First, its press was stopped, and then the organization as a whole was banned through provisions of the War Measures Act, both for being a group for “enemy aliens” and for its alignment with the Left. Membership dropped by as much as half because of the upheaval caused by the organization’s ban and the fear of individual persecution (Laine 1981, 99). The national executive played its cards well, quickly complying with new requirements that it conduct its business in English, and transformed itself on paper from a political organization to a cultural organization. The Finnish Organization dropped the word “Socialist” from its title until the War Measures Act was revoked in 1919.

The Finnish Organization of Canada, however, was not the only victim of wartime anti-immigrant and anti-socialist backlash. In the words of Douglas Ollila: “Anything foreign was automatically suspect, and immense pressure was brought to bear on all immigrants to purchase Liberty Bonds, speak only English, display the flag, and otherwise give unswerving support to Wilson’s Great Crusade” (1976, 397). Finland’s ties to Germany from the Civil War looked very suspicious to North Americans, and the growing perception that all Finns were Reds helped little. Finnish socialist activity in both Canada and the United States quieted for the duration of the war and its immediate aftermath, but rumblings of a new political order were underway.

**Communism**

If the old Socialist parties had neglected the needs of Finnish North American workers and if the IWW lacked ideological firmness, the Communist or Workers’ parties in Canada and the United States came to more than make up in the political hard-line. With the 1919 establishment of the Communist International in the aftermath of the Russian revolutions, Finns still searching for their place within the political spectrum turned to Moscow.

While the Finnish American Socialist Federation debated the merits of aligning with the new Communist International, it did not take long for communist parties
to emerge in the United States. In February of 1919, the new Communist-oriented Left-wing of the Socialist Party of New York issued its “Left-Wing Manifesto,” which quickly circulated throughout the American Socialist Party and across the border to Canada. According to Auvo Kostiainen, not many Finns were yet willing to turn from principles of social democracy in order to commit the radicalism proposed by the new faction (1978, 70). However, the appeal of the manifesto and the call for the overthrow of capitalism quickly began to find favor, and the Socialist Party became irreconcilably fractured. At the August 1919 party convention, two rival communist parties formed: the Communist Labor Party (CLP) and the Communist Party (CP) (Kostiainen 1978, 78). Finns, for the most part, found their place in the CP, with Santeri Nuorteva as a crucial organizer and go-between for the parties, as the Communist Labor Party was primarily made up of English speakers. In May 1920, the United Communist Party was established, though far from having unanimous consent, and the Communist International openly supported the move (Kostiainen 1978, 96). With growing persecution of Reds, especially the immigrant elements, the United Party went into underground operation, where it remained over much of the next two decades, using the Workers’ Party as its front.

In Canada, the emergence of a Communist Party proved less dramatic. Before the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) was established in its underground and open forms as the Workers’ Party of Canada (WPC), many Canadian Bolshevik sympathizers had joined informal Canadian branches of the U.S. communist parties, despite the continued ban on revolutionary organizations under the War Measures Act (Buck 1952, 21). Interestingly, according to Ian Angus, an underground organization by the name of the Communist Party of Canada had been in existence since 1919 (1981, 36–42). However, in May of 1921, a secret convention held in Guelph, Ontario, established a program for a new party that would serve as the Canadian branch of the Communist International. The Guelph Conference established the framework for the illegal or underground Communist Party of Canada. In addition, plans were made for an open mass party, the Workers’ Party of Canada, that would carry out the direction of the CPC, as ordered by the Comintern. The Workers’ Party of Canada was officially founded in February of 1922. Within the first months of its creation, Canadian communism in the form of the Workers’ Party of Canada had managed to draw in the country’s leading socialist activists, their supporters also eager to join the new revolutionary organization (Avery 1979, 119).

The emergence of workers’ parties in Canada and the United States coincided with the adoption of a new united front policy by the Third World Congress of the Communist International. The call could not have come at a better time for Canadian and American communists. For the infant Communist parties, an opportunity to call to action anyone who had marveled at the creation of a workers’ state in Russia proved very beneficial. With an emphasis on unity, divisions and
contentions in existing Socialist parties and organizations could be used to gently coax new members toward communism. The united front of the Workers’ parties represented the interests of all shades of socialists, social democrats, labor unionists, and even anarchists, along with a diverse range of cultural and social ideologies. With the Communist International’s united front, the Workers’ parties successfully replicated, in political terms, the diverse nature of the North American experience.

While many Finns had individually been moving towards communism, the Finnish American Socialist Federation affiliated with the Workers’ Party of the United States in late 1921, and Finnish (Socialist) Organization of Canada joined the Workers’ Party of Canada at its conference on February 16, 1922 (Rodney 1968, 51; Avery 1981, 70). This meant that all FSOC and FASF members also became members of their respective communist parties. The automatic membership proved very significant, considering that by 1930, the FSOC boasted over six thousand members (Avery 1981). Half of the members of the Communist Party of Canada in the 1920s came from the membership of the FSOC (Avery 1981). When other segments of the CPC witnessed stagnation or even a drop in party membership, the Finnish membership continued to grow (Rodney 1968, 76). In the United States, Finns, through the FASF, accounted for some 40 percent of the American Communist Party membership (Ross 1982, 182).

In the Workers’ parties, in addition to a national body, federations based on language accommodated the majority of their supporters, who affiliated firstly with their cultural socialist organizations (Penner 1988, 272). Because of the strength in numbers and the experience contributed by radical immigrants, like Finns, Jews, and Ukrainians, language groups were viewed as key pillars to the organization’s structure, right from the foundation of the parties (Rodney 1968, 41; Avery 1981, 71; Penner 1988, 272). These ethnic branches were to have their own constitutions and by-laws, and hold their own conferences, with an emphasis on maintaining the official party line at all times (Rodney 1968, 41–42). This model suited Finns who had learned to work with other political parties in the past.

The Finns became the financial backbone of the Communist parties. For example, in Canada, with 2,028 members out of the reported 4,808 in 1923, the Finnish elements contributed approximately two-thirds of the party’s total revenue, through fundraising and dues payments (Rodney 1968, 55, 68). At times Finns supplemented the parties even further. In 1922, Finnish-Canadian communists donated $2,000 to help launch the English-language Party organ, The Worker (Avery 1979, 120). American Finns provided $25,000 for the establishment of The Daily Worker (Ross 1982, 182).

However, the Finn’s relationship with the Communist parties quickly turned sour, just as the Workers’ Party fronts were being dismantled. In 1924, the Communist International adopted a “Bolshevization” policy, which, in part, meant the abolition
of all language federations. In the words of Auvo Kostiainen, Bolshevization was intended to “destroy the last remnants of socialist and social democratic thought among the world’s communists” (1975, 172). The Comintern viewed the North American communist movement as splintered and failing to follow the official international party line. An emphasis on a “working-class language” was the solution supported by the Communist International (Avery 1981, 78; Kivisto 1983, 70). Unfortunately for the 80-plus percent of non-English-speaking members, this unifying language was to be English. While Communist parties in other countries were largely structured unilingually, both the Canadian and American parties were created by the amalgamation of numerous linguistically and culturally differing organizations, and thus, breaking the original branches into smaller cells proved almost impossible (Rodney 1968, 85). In the North American context, Bolshevization essentially meant an assimilation or “Americanization” of immigrant Communists (Kostiainen 1975, 173). In an attempt to counter the very real fear expressed by the non-English branches, the Comintern and, in turn, the North American leadership argued that an inability to effectively communicate in English could be manipulated by the bourgeoisie (174).

The Bolshevization crisis not only alienated Finns and other language groups from the wider communist movement but also resulted in extreme divisions within the Finnish branches. Hostile in-fighting, neglect of the rank-and-file, and, ultimately, a rash of expulsions saw the end of moderation in the Communist parties of Canada and the United States. By 1930, after years of struggling to maintain their original position within the North American communist movement, less than 10 percent of the Finns who had aligned with communism at the beginning of the decade remained members (Kostiainen 1978, 192).

By the 1931 establishment of the Karelian Technical Aid to recruit Finnish Canadians and Americans to Soviet Karelia, the Finns’ relationship with the Communist parties of North America was complicated, to say the least. Although the Karelian project was officially sanctioned by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Communist International, the Canadian and American parties were very reluctant to grant permission to participate in the migration to the remaining Finnish members. Therefore, the vast majority of the Karelian migrants, as we will see, were not card-carrying Communists, but rather those who had experienced the betrayal of the North American Communist parties, either first- or second-hand.

**Divide Between Leftists**

The Finns’ bitter experience with communism in the 1920s was not an isolated event of dissatisfaction and dissention, neither between Finnish immigrants and the Leftist political movement in North America, nor among Finnish socialists themselves. As evidenced by the continual shifts in allegiances, the Finnish socialist movement could not find a political party or philosophy to unite them as Leftist Finnish immigrants.
While compromises were struck, hostilities between socialists of varying shades of red were an ongoing feature of the history of Finnish North Americans up to the Karelian exodus and beyond.

One area of contention surrounded the question of anarchism. This example serves as a useful illustration of the typical schism within the Finnish North American Left. While conservative Finns and other unfriendly forces consistently referred to all Finnish socialists (and all other socialists, for that matter) as “anarchists,” the label troubled those with social democratic leanings. In the first decade of the 1900s, the Leftist Finnish-language press was filled with heated debates between the “impossibilist” industrial unionists and the “opportunist” socialists, as the two sides referred to each other (Ollila 1975, 36). The “impossibilists,” geographically primarily Midwesterners, believed that freedom would be gained only through a complete overthrow of the capitalist electoral system, beginning with meeting workers’ immediate needs through widespread general strikes. On the other hand, the “opportunists,” typically from the Eastern United States, wanted to use the existing structure to implement political changes to the advantage of the workers.

These two sides were complemented, or, perhaps more fittingly, aggravated by a whole range of additional opinions and strategies. Continuous in-fighting and ideological power struggles are a consistent and fascinating feature of the history of Finnish socialism in Canada and the United States. Despite all their differences in philosophy and rhetoric, Finnish Canadian and American Leftists of all shades of red were united in their struggle against conservatism and, especially, White Finns.

**Divide Between Whites and Reds**
Clauses rooted in the homeland as well as differences and competition grounded in North America meant that a clear line separated socialist, or Red, Finns from conservative or religious, or White, Finns. Tensions between socialist sympathizers and conservative and religious Finnish immigrants came to a vicious head when the homeland was torn apart in a bloody civil war that pitted Whites against Reds. The following wave of immigration brought with it a bitterness that succeeded in dividing Finnish immigrants so thoroughly that the line still remains after almost one hundred years.

In North America, economics and questions of loyalty to Canada and the United States drove a wedge between the two sides. The involvement of so many Finns in the frequent labor disputes and disruptions of the early 1900s led employers to be wary of hiring Finns, believing them all to be radicalized. This meant that even those “church” Finns, vehemently opposed to the activities of the socialists, were often blacklisted from work sites. Conservative Finns rallied together in Canada and the United States to publically distance themselves from Finnish leftists (Ollila 1975, 30). In the United States, non-socialist Finns organized the Lincoln Loyalty League.
in 1918. Canadian Finns attempted to come together under the Kansallis-Liitto (Finnish National Federation) in 1917 and other similar groups over the years, but had lasting success with the Central Organization of Loyal Finns in Canada in 1931. With these organizations, Finnish conservatives promoted their own well-being, while identifying to prospective employers those with known, or even suspected, ties to socialism or unionism (Garth and Brooks 2010, 23–24). Proving their North American-ness was especially important in the self-promotion efforts of the conservative Finns. The tensions caused by the severe economic downturn in the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that loyalty to Canada and the United States could prove very beneficial to securing employment in a scarce market.

The persecution of socialist sympathizers in North America, often referred to as the “Red Scare,” affected many Finns. Not only were Finnish-immigrant socialists attacked by the Canadian and American governments and nativist groups, but the onset of the Depression led to a no-holds-barred attack by organized conservative Finns. Varpu Lindström’s “The Finnish Canadian Communities during the Decade of Depression” successfully points to the rise of conservatism and right-wing movements among North American Finns as a contributing factor to the hardships experienced by Finnish socialists and communists (2004, 23).

**Conclusion**

As news of the creation of a workers’ republic was reaching North America, the effects of the Great Depression and the Red Scare were beginning to take their toll. Karelia was presented by Finnish-language newspapers and recruiters as a land of opportunity where employment was available for all willing to work. Varpu Lindström and Börje Vähämäki argue that North American Finns were drawn to Karelia because the Soviet Union promised a “more cooperative and freer intellectual climate” than what was available in inter-war North America (1992, 14). Likewise, Peter Kivisto believes Karelia offered Canadian and American Finns a chance to escape the alienation they had come to experience (1984, 173). For many unemployed and underemployed North American Finns, increasingly under attack by conservative elements in the broader Finnish immigrant community and in North American society in general, the prospect of eking a better living in a place where workers ruled was very alluring.

By looking at Finnish immigrants’ establishment of Sointula and their involvement with the cooperative movement, socialism, social democracy, their own political-cultural organizations, the IWW, and communism, the degree to which these immigrants were willing to work and fight to improve their lives and make a mark on their adopted country, be it Canada or the United States, becomes undeniably apparent. It is understandable in this context, then, why some seven thousand Finnish Canadians and Americans were so eager to move to the unharnessed wilderness of
Soviet Karelia to build their own community. These willing builders of socialism brought with them skills and experiences they had collectively gained through immigrant life in North America. From the establishment of the Finnish church, temperance societies, halls, and countless groups and organizations, the Finnish North American immigrant experience armed those who went to Karelia with the tools to build a community from the ground up. This time, the road to utopia was to be harmonious.
Works Cited


Victims and Survivors of Karelia


Statistics Canada. 1931 Census of Canada. CODOC Collection.


FINNISH PROJECT: KARELIAN WORKERS’ COMMUNE

Markku Kangaspuro
Helsinki University

Abstract
The establishment of Soviet Karelia in 1920 resulted from a captivating mix of factors: the Russian Civil War, the normalization of Finnish-Russian state relations, the institutionalization of the Soviet Union’s state structure, and the emancipation of the minority nations of the former Russian empire. After the independence of Finland, Soviet Russia met Finnish demands to expand its borders to eastern Karelia. The establishment of Karelian national autonomy was a compromise that both parties could accept in order to clear a path to the Tartu peace negotiations of 1920. Karelia’s Finnish leadership needed American Finns to meet the demand for a qualified workforce in its timber industry and to ensure that the Finnish-Karelian proportion of the republic’s population would not drop below 40 to 50 percent. It was the misfortune of American Finns that they arrived in Karelia at a moment when the Soviet Union turned toward Stalinism, resulting in purges and the removal of Finns from the leadership of Karelia.

In twentieth-century Karelia, ethnic divisions played a central role in determining its balance of power, its culture, and its economy, and, accordingly, American Finnish emigrants became, in the first half of the 1930s, a part of that complex setting. The relative proportions of key ethnic populations have changed significantly since the establishment of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia in 1920 when, at the time, Russians comprised 40 percent of the population and Karelians and Finns comprised 60 percent. By the early 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians accounted for about 80 percent of the population in the region, whereas Karelians and Finns totaled just 14 percent in 1989. Finns have always been a relatively small minority in Karelia, comprising from 2 to 5 percent of the population. But their remarkable political and cultural weight has not corresponded with their minority position. In fact the Finns’ position as a leading stratum of the Karelian Autonomous Republic has been in many ways exceptional, and in order to be understood requires a broad examination of its historical and social context.

One explanatory factor has been the vagueness of the national identity of Karelians, which has tempted both Russians and Finns to use it politically with the
purpose of influencing, by ethnopolitical means, the orientation of Karelians. This has made ethnic and national issues in Karelia, including immigration and recruitment of workers, politically charged. Between the world wars, the struggle for the minds of the Karelians and the definition of the identity of the republic was a real issue. It was not only a local issue but a matter of foreign policy and governance for the Soviet Union’s central government.

In the history of Karelia, there have been a couple of factors that have had a crucial influence on the development of attitudes, values, norms, and the identity of inhabitants of the region. Religion is one of these. In the early twentieth century, Karelians identified themselves religiously as Russian Orthodox (although pre-Christian beliefs and superstitious practices were also quite common), and this separated them from Lutheran Finns in many ways, culturally and politically, up to the early 1930s. Suspicious attitudes towards Finns (or Swedes as they were then identified) were common in the Olonets government (Southern Karelia) in particular (Churchill 1970, 35–36, 99–102, 107). Further, prior to the foundation of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia, Karelians, mostly illiterate peasants, hunters, and fishermen, were divided into two Russian-majority administrative areas. If Karelians had any state identity to speak of, it was Russian.

Before the October Revolution in 1917, almost all administration and education as well as church affairs were in the hands of Russians. In a sense, they represented enlightenment and modern urban culture in the midst of the illiterate and semi-pagan forest tribes. The Russian Orthodox Church, and the Solovetsk monastery in particular, played a prominent role in terms of the policy of integration and legitimation of the Russian regime. The national awakening of Finns in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland and the new phase of state-building and modernization in both Finland and Russia led to conflict during the latter part of the nineteenth century (Hosking 1998, 397). For Russians, the Finnish national awakening and the endeavors of Finnish nationalists to use their autonomous status to its fullest and to spread their influence to Karelia provided irrefutable evidence of expansionist and separatist attitudes. From the Russians’ point of view, the Finns had penetrated historically Russian soil in Karelia.

Although the Karelian language, especially in North Karelia, is closely related to Finnish, the religion of all Karelians—as well as that of Russians—is Orthodox. In the common understanding of the history of Karelia, there prevails a similar dichotomy. East and West have fought over Karelia since the beginning of the twelfth century. Sweden and Novgorod made the initial division of Karelia in the Pähkinäsaari (in Russian, Orekhovets) Peace Treaty of 1323. Those Karelians who remained on the western side of the line adopted the religion of Sweden. The majority of Karelians remained on the eastern side under the power of Novgorod and adopted the Orthodox faith. Later on, particularly after the Stolbova Peace Treaty of 1617,
Swedish attempts to convert the Orthodox Karelians to the Lutheran faith by force strengthened this East-West dichotomy. Karelia was the object of the hegemonic interests of both Russia and Sweden (Kirkinen 1983). From the beginning of the nineteenth century, Finns, as Lutherans and former subjects of Sweden, represented from the Russian point of view the Other and, in this respect, an alternative object of identification for Karelians. Thanks to the language, though, Finns had a remarkable advantage in the competition for the souls of the Karelians.

In terms of the center-periphery dichotomy, two centers, St. Petersburg and Finland, created the economic, political, and cultural conditions for Karelia’s development. The administrative and economic center of Karelia was the Russian-speaking and also ethnically Russian Petrozavodsk, founded by Peter the Great in 1703. The establishment of Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg in the same year had been a move to strengthen Russian influence and stabilize the possession of the annexed areas in the northwest region and in the Baltic Sea.

Trade routes divided Karelia as well. Southern Karelia—Petrozavodsk and the Olonets government, with the largest share of Karelian population—was connected to St. Petersburg, and Northern Karelia (in Finnish, Vienan Karjala) to Finland. The administrative and commercial center of Karelia was Petrozavodsk in the Olonets government, whereas the backwater Northern Karelia was a part of the Arkhangelsk government. The administrative center of Arhhangelsk and its harbor were founded on the White Sea as a trading base with England. Russia and Sweden had practiced a policy of colonization in order to extend political influence over Northern Karelia. This race to colonize continued until Russia annexed Finland in 1809. As a result of the natural cross-border trading routes, as well as economic and language connections, the Northern Karelians, living on the western side of the Murmansk railway, established closer relations to Finland than to Russian Petrozavodsk. Further, the dialect spoken in Northern Karelia was closer to Finnish than that of the Southern Karelians. The railway represented a mental border between two separate cultural spheres. The eastern side of the railway was almost completely ethnically Russian.

**The Ethnic Factor**

Finland gained its independence in December 1917 during the First World War and the Russian revolutions, but the state borders remained indistinct. The issue was whether Karelia should be incorporated into Finland or remain part of Russia. The question was largely one of economic and social values, although security policy was also a factor. For the Red Army, the Murmansk railway was of strategic importance (Shaposhnikov 1920; Generalnogo Shtaba 1920). Karelia also had huge timber reserves and other natural resources that Finnish forest companies wanted. Karelia was also understood as an ancient homeland of the Finnish culture and nation, and in the beginning of the nineteenth century Elias Lönnrot had collected the Finnish
Kalevala poems mostly from Northern Karelia. Therefore Finland did not hesitate to use armed force to move the old borderline and annex East Karelia (the Russian part of Karelia) in the period between 1918 and 1922.

The First World War, the British-led intervention of the Entente into Murmansk, and Finnish expansionist policies in the period of 1918–1922 greatly influenced the development of the identity of Russians in Karelia. Owing to the war, the formerly peripheral region of Karelia took center stage. One had to choose one’s party (Red or White) and ethnic identity (Finnish Karelian or Russian Karelian). At that moment, ethnicity became politicized and began to play an important role in Russian foreign policy. Russian nationalism and the central government became increasingly synonymous. By contrast, Finnishness gained a regionalist, and, in a way, oppositional, status with respect to the central power. In Karelia, political realism forced the central government to carry out a policy that was recognized as deceitful by local Russians. Karelian Russians saw themselves as threatened by Finland and the hegemony of Finns. With the Entente deciding to withdraw its forces from Murmansk and to suspend its support of Russian White troops, and with Soviet Russia needing to pacify its western borders, Finnish Red refugees, led by Edvard Gylling, the former minister of the Finnish Red government in 1918 and later leader of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia, took the initiative. In June 1920, as part of Soviet Russia’s foreign policy strategy, the Karelian Labor Commune was established. Georgy Chicherin, commissar for foreign affairs of Soviet Russia (Narodnyj komissariat po inostrannym delam, Narkomindel), argued that the decision for Karelian autonomy did not contradict the policy already carried out in other areas of Soviet Russia. He referred to other national republics and areas established in order to pacify local nationalist restlessness and bids for independence.¹ The Karelian Workers’ Commune was not as such an exceptional case, but what was certainly unique was the interplay of foreign policy, ethnicity, and the internal policy of the Soviet government.

As a result of this complex tangle of politics, Gylling and other Red Finns were named to leading positions within the government of the Autonomous Republic. The new ruling body was forced into a fierce competition with the former Russian rulers, who had run the administration with little attention to the Karelian population. Finns, with Gylling at the forefront, were able to challenge the political hegemony and the status of the former rulers, as well as the Russian middle class, its civil servants and its teachers, not to mention its priests, merchants, and police force. The Russian population faced the immediate consequences of the weakness in Karelia of Soviet Russia’s central government. In Karelia, the nationalities policy (korenizatsija) provided advantages for the Karelians and Finns (the republic’s titular population), granting them privileged status in nominations for administrative positions in

¹ For the establishment of Karelia’s Workers’ Commune and the Tartu peace negotiations, see Kangaspuro 2000, 76–86.
government and business. The new nationalities policy also strengthened their position in the struggle with Russians for the leading positions in local Soviets and party organizations and, thus, for real power over Karelia. The weakness of Soviet central power in all areas with national minorities forced the central government to make concessions to those national minorities at the expense of Russians.

On the whole, there were a variety of factors that politicized and cemented the Russian and the Finnish identities as counterparts: geography, language, religion, history, and institutions. This historical background prepared the ground for conflict not only between the new Soviet Russia and Finland, but also later between the Finnish and Russian populations in Karelia. That was the political and cultural environment in which the American Finnish immigrants, without understanding local circumstances and history, began to pursue their hopes and dreams of a wealthier future. For the Soviet government, the Karelia question was always more or less a question of military and foreign policy. These were closely connected, and it is not easy to say how much the formation of the Karelian Labor Commune was a result of the Soviet nationalities policy of the 1920s, its foreign policy, or its military policy. If we compare Karelia to other Soviet republics and autonomies, we can see that realpolitik was a decisive factor in carrying out the Soviet nationalities policy. However, I do not want to suggest that the Bolsheviks’ faith in the ideas of enlightenment, education, equality, and solidarity played no part. Indeed it did, but it was still only one side of the story, and the reality of a backward society was strongly present.

The nationalities question still plagued Soviet Russia, although the assumption was that the new political system would solve it. It was not only the problem of the minority nationalities but very much that of Russians as well. Their relationship to the titular nations of the national republics could be tense, and Russians were usually defined as former oppressors whose duty was to compensate for the injustices of the past. That was also the case in Karelia, where the national-minded policy and privileged position of the Finnish and Karelian populations were justified by the Finnish leadership. In 1929, at Karelia’s party conference, the Finnish First Party Secretary Kustaa Rovio referred to the official policy of the Bolshevik Party that demanded the “former Tsarist Russian oppressors” to pay for their “former injustices” (Rovio 1929, 21–23). The primary purpose of this policy was to promote Karelians’ social and political status. In the first half of the 1920s, one of the first issues was whether Finnish and Karelian teachers and public servants should replace Russians. The result of the new line of nationalities policy was a struggle over the limited resources (posts) and for cultural and political dominance of the society, a struggle that favored the Finns between 1923 and 1933 (Kangaspuro 2000, 218–19). In this respect, in the 1920s the Russians in Karelia lost the battle, but in the 1930s they would win the war.

Although the formation of the Karelian Autonomous Republic was part of an early phase of Soviet nationalities concession policy, it could not have been realized
without the Finnish dimension. The Soviet nationalities policy set forth that each republic was to be based on its titular nation’s culture and mother tongue. In this way Karelia was an exception because its autonomy was based on Finnish, rather than Karelian, language and culture. It created a somewhat misleading image of the republic’s status within the Soviet Union and as an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation, and the Karelian Finns, in their conception of the autonomous status of Karelia during the late 1920s, may have overestimated the degree of autonomy the republic in fact had. Kustaa Rovio’s resolution, mentioned above, described the status of Karelian Autonomy as equal to all other Soviet Republics based on the principle of the Soviet nationalities policy and the voluntarily formed federation of the Soviet republics. Rovio even described the Karelian population in terms that would become absolutely impossible just a few years later. He defined Karelians as a part of Western Finnish nations, whose culture and language were distinct from the Slavic people and tied directly to Finland. For Red Finns, Karelians were Finns who had been Russified by Tsarist oppressors. Red Finns believed that it was their task to bring Karelians back to their authentic Finnish cultural home. In addition to economic reasons, this cultural ethnopolitical consideration motivated the Karelian Finnish leadership to recruit American Finns in the beginning of the 1930s. Under increasing pressure to build a new workforce, which was needed to meet the production targets of the First Five-Year Plan of 1929, such recruitment efforts were an attempt to keep Karelia ethnically and culturally as a Finnish-Karelian republic.

**Foreign Policy**

For the sake of its foreign policy, Moscow sent Finnish Red refugees to Karelia as the representatives of Soviet power in 1919 and 1920. This was Moscow’s response to Finnish demands over East Karelia. Moscow was eager to pacify its western borders in order to stabilize the political situation. In the spring of 1920, Georgy Chicherin, the commissar for foreign affairs (Narkomindel), assumed that the peace treaty with Finland would be a key factor in stabilizing the political situation with regard to the Baltic Sea countries. Narkomindel knew that if Soviet Russia did not make concessions on the Karelia issue, they would not find anyone from Finland who would be willing and politically able to make the peace treaty (Chicherin Zinovjevu 1920; Tukholman Komitea 1920). A conciliatory policy in the face of Finnish nationalism was the price Moscow had to pay for the Tartu Peace Treaty.

The Karelian Labor Commune was established as a national autonomous region, and the extent of its autonomous rights was in fact outlined during the Tartu peace negotiations in an invisible, unofficial, and partly unintended interplay between official delegates and Edvard Gylling and other leaders of the Communist Party of Finland. The contribution of Gylling, the future chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Karelia (Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov, SNK), was decisive. He
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

outlined the proposal for Karelian national autonomy during his exile in Stockholm at the turn of 1919–20. On March 27, 1920, the proposal was translated and sent to Narkomindel and to Lev Trotsky, commissar of the Red Army, and probably to other leaders as well. As a result, Gylling was invited to Moscow, where he and the chairman of the Communist Party of Finland, Yrjö Sirola, met the Soviet leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin in May 1920. The local population, both Russians and Karelians, and Soviet organizations in Karelia had no role in these discussions. It was a question of foreign policy for Soviet Russia, not of regional politics. In principle, the decision on Karelian autonomy had already been made during April and the beginning of May, 1920, before Soviet Russia announced to Finland that it was ready to continue peace negotiations (Karel'skaja Kommuna 1920; Kangaspuro 2000, 74–76).

The Karelian Workers’ Commune was officially established on June 8, 1920, and the Tartu peace negotiations began four days later. One of the crucial questions was whether Karelian autonomy should be mentioned in the peace treaty or not. The position of the Russian delegation was that the status of Karelia was an internal matter, and consequently not subject to negotiation. The demand of the Finnish delegation was that Karelian autonomy should be precisely defined in the peace treaty. The way out of the deadlock was found when the Soviet delegation gave “a declaration on the Autonomy of East Karelia” although this declaration had no legal consequences. However, the declaration was still included in the peace treaty as an appendix (Polvinen, Heikkilä, and Immonen 1992, 26–59). The formation of the Karelian Commune was a successful diplomatic maneuver by the Soviet government to create the needed conditions for peace negotiations with Finland. The second purpose was to turn Karelia into a new model of society for the Finnish and Scandinavian people. However, this was much more the goal of Red Finns than of the Soviet government.

The later history of Karelia also provides strong evidence of Finnish and broader international influence. As long as the Tartu Peace Treaty was under dispute and the League of Nations was processing it (up until 1924), Narkomindel made sure that Finland had no reason to protest the way Karelia’s national autonomy was carried out. This was a significant advantage for Gylling’s government, which had strong Russian-Karelian opposition. In fact, the opposition had a majority in the party and in most Karelian Soviet organizations. The opposition also received a certain amount of support from the powerful Leningrad Party and Soviet organizations, which held a higher position in the hierarchy than the organizations of Karelia. The opposition’s resistance was based on the fact that, especially at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the essence of the nationalities policy was rather one of Finnicization than Karelianization (see Kangaspuro 1998a, 1998b). The main problem was that Russian was the written language of the majority of Karelians, and they typically did not fully understand Finnish, particularly in its written form (see Afanasjeva 1989, 43; Austin 1992, 16–35). As a result, American Finnish emigrants did not, in fact, even know
the political and cultural circumstances in which they arrived. On the one hand, they came in principle in many ways into “Finnish land,” but, on the other hand, they fell into the middle of a fierce internal, offstage struggle over the status of Finns, the line of nationalities policy, and the extent of Karelia’s autonomy. Although contemporaries did not know it, we can see that American Finns immigrated to Karelia during a watershed in Karelia’s autonomy. Black clouds had already started to gather in the sky, but much evidence from the past projected a good future. Few could see any reason to be genuinely worried about the coming years.

**Dark Clouds**

The resistance to a Finnish nationalities policy was not only a reflection of Stalinist paranoia; it had deep roots in the history and the ethnic and geographical divisions of Karelia. The proportion of Russian population increased steadily, from 40 percent in 1920 to 60 percent in the 1930s. However, in the beginning of the 1930s, the status of Russians was lower than ever, and that was underscored by the privileged status of American Finns, although these newcomers also had reasons to complain about their new living and working conditions. National quotas in universities, secondary schools, and even in workplaces, in addition to a higher salary for the employees who spoke Finnish (a supplement of over 25 percent), all served to embitter Russians (NA RK, f. 690, o. 6, d. 4/14, ls. 184–85). Although the political situation in Karelia was tense for all of these reasons, it was in no way unique in the Soviet Union. The nationalities policy in many other Soviet Republics and autonomies was even more radical and led to much more serious problems than ever occurred in Karelia. In Karelia the question was not only about Russians but also about the discontent of Southern Karelians. They comprised two-thirds of Karelians, did not understand the Finnish language, and were more pro-Russian than Northern Karelians. This formed a broad social and psychological base for the Russian, as well as Karelian, nationalism leveled against Finns and, in particular, against American Finns, who enjoyed many privileges based on their status as special workers who were in many ways culturally alien to the society. It seems that during the switch from a policy of Finnicization to a policy of Russification in 1933–35, the majority of Karelians responded passively or simply did not mind the change. Certainly in the beginning some of them even benefited from a political climate that favored Russians; they were now appointed to better positions at work and in administration, replacing Finns.

However, if we concentrate only on issues internal to the Soviet Union, we miss many factors in the story. In the 1930s, during the rise of fascism in Europe, the political atmosphere inside the Soviet Union and, ultimately, its external policies changed. Although there are various reasons why this happened, the outward European influence seems to be one of the crucial ones. With the rising external threat, the suspicions of Soviet security organizations were directed particularly...
towards the population living in the border areas. At first the main targets in Karelia were Finnish illegal immigrants, Karelians at the border, and everyone who had fought against the Soviet regime and had received amnesty in the years 1924–26. From the beginning of the 1930s, in principle, all those who had contacts across the border were viewed distrustfully by the security organizations (Kangaspuro 2000, 304–5).

As everywhere in Europe, the Soviet regime adopted the nationalism of its largest ethnicity (in its case, Russians) in order to strengthen central power. In Karelia, the result was a revolt against Finnish domination. The ground for this revolt had been ready for anti-Finnish sentiments for a long time, in fact, from the beginning of the foundation of Karelian autonomy. As Moscow stopped backing the Finnish leadership of the republic, the Russian-Karelian opposition launched its operation. It was led by the Leningrad party organizations, and between 1933 and 1935, almost all Finns were forced aside (Kirov, 1933). The Finnicization policy was condemned as local nationalism, and anti-Finnish purges started within the Communist Party and Soviet organizations and within the Karelian Jaeger Battalion. Cleansings of the Karelian and Finnish population along the border region also took place. The coming purges slowly made themselves clear to the American Finnish immigrants. In the fall of 1933, they started to feel a new, increasingly tense atmosphere, and soon thousands of them and other Finns fled back to Canada, the United States, and Finland. Some, including those who had no other possibilities or who, for one reason or another, did not want to flee abroad, moved to other parts of the Soviet Union.

The American Finns’ perception of Soviet Karelia at the beginning of the 1930s was paradoxically both right and wrong. They knew that in the years between 1929 and 1931, when recruitment offices were set up in New York and Toronto, Red Finns held a strong position in the leadership of Karelia, and the Karelian Finnish leadership aimed to develop a Finnish socialist society based on Finnish culture and the heritage of the Finnish leftist political and co-operative movement. Many of the Finnish leaders of Karelia and the Communist Party of Finland were well known in North America. For example, Santeri Nuorteva was a prominent leader of Finnish leftist organizations in the United States between 1911 and 1920 and the “president” of Soviet Karelia from 1924 to 1927. Yrjö Sirola was a teacher at the Finnish Socialist Federation’s Work People’s College in Smithville, Minnesota, from 1910 to 1914, and after 1918, he served in various leading positions in the Communist Party of Finland in exile in the Soviet Union, and in 1929 he acted as people’s commissar of public education for Soviet Karelia.

In the midst of the Great Depression and with the rapid progress of the Soviet Union, Finnish Americans had a good reason to believe that things couldn’t be worse in the Soviet Union. At that time, the Soviet Union held the promise of a better future not only for American Finns but also for a wide range of people from all over the
world. Stalinism as we know it had not yet shown its ugly face. In the Soviet Union, 
the use of the police and the army against peasants and the political opposition was 
not exceptional, considering the experiences of Finnish immigrants with the Finnish 
Civil War as well as strikes and political activities in the United States and Canada. In 
the early years of the twentieth century, all over Europe and the American continent, 
a certain level of violence against opponents and critics was more the norm than the 
exception. The assumption was that the difference between the Soviet Union and the 
rest of the world was in who would have the power to use violence and who would 
be ruled by force.

What immigrants did not know was that in 1937 “normal” violence would 
turn into the Stalinist purges of all national minorities, including American Finns 
who had responded to the call of the leaders of the Soviet Union, Soviet Karelia, and 
the Comintern to build a better free society. American Finns did not have any way 
to know about the complex set of political tensions that dominated the present and 
future of Soviet Karelia. They did not even know that Karelia’s future was tied to the 
development of relations between Finland and the Soviet Union or to world politics 
(Hitler’s rise to power) or to the domestic policies of the Soviet Union (the Five-Year 
plans) or to intraparty struggle (Stalin’s extermination of the opposition). It was 
the immigrants’ severe misfortune that all of these conditions that would so signifi-
cantly impact Karelia’s future had started to change by the beginning of the 1930s. 
American Finns emigrated to Karelia in the midst of a political power struggle pit-
ting the Soviet Union and Soviet Karelia’s Finnish leadership against its Russian-
Karelian opposition. In a sense, authorization for the recruitment of American Finns 
to Soviet Karelia was the last battle that the republic’s Finnish leadership won before 
it lost the whole war in 1934–35.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

WORKS CITED


Chicherin Zinovjevu. 1920. (Chicherin to Zinovjev, letter) f. 135, o. 4, folder 6, d. 6, l. 7. Moscow: Arkhiv vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federatsii (AVP RF) [Archive of Foreign Policy of Russian Federation].


Kirov, S. M. 1933. Reshenie sekreteriata Leningradskogo OKVKP(b) ot 8.5.1933 o doklade t. Rovio [Resolution of secretariat of Leningrad’s district committee of VKP(b), 8.5.1933 about report of Rovio] (resolution). Communist Party documents, f. 3, o. 3, d. 1, l. 3. Petrozavodsk: Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv obshchestvenno-politicheskikh dvizhenij i formirovanij Respubliki Karelija.
(GAOPDF RK, former Karelian Party Archive).
National Archive of Karelia (NARK), Petrozavodsk.

*Punainen Karjala* [Red Karelia], January 9, 1926.

Shaposhnikov, Nachal’nika Polevogo Shtaba Revoljutsionnogo Voennogo Soveta Respubliki, Moskva 30.3.1920 [Shaposhnikov, Commander of Field Command Centre of Revolutionary Military Council of Republic, Moscow March 30, 1920] (memorandum), f. 013, o. 3, folder 103, d. 2, l. 1. Moscow: Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiijskoj Federatsii (AVP RF) [Archive of Foreign Policy of Russian Federation].

Tukholman komitea [Stockholm's committee] (letter). 1920. f. 516, o. 2, d. 15, l. 20. Moscow: Rossiijskij gosuderstrennyj arkhiv sotsial'no-politisheskoj istorii (RGASPI) [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History].
THE SOWER COMMUNE:
AN AMERICAN-FINNISH AGRICULTURAL UTOPIA
IN THE SOVIET UNION

Mikko Ylikangas
The Academy of Finland, Helsinki

ABSTRACT
In 1922 a group of idealistic American Finns decided to go to Soviet Russia to build an agro-industrial commune. After a harsh start, the Sower agricultural commune with its tractors and other modern machinery became a model farm that received a lot of attention as well as visitors from other parts of the Soviet Union and even from abroad. It succeeded in something that had not been thought possible. In less than a decade, the communards turned the dry steppe into a granary and a green orchard. But living and working on the isolated steppe proved to be dull, especially for those who had come from the United States or Canada and from very different economic and cultural conditions. Then, when more and more non-Finnish people joined the commune, the original communards started to feel themselves marginalized. Therefore, in 1930 a majority of the Finns left the Sower commune and moved to Soviet Karelia to start a new collective farm—the Hiilisuo. That experiment ended tragically with the Great Purge of 1937.

One sunny afternoon in August 1922, a motley group of enthusiastic idealists embarked upon the S.S. Rotterdam in New York Harbor. This company of eighty-two people consisted of farmers and workers who were bound for Soviet Russia to build a communist industrial agricultural commune and to help the new Soviet state, the workers’ paradise, survive the hard times that had followed the October Revolution and Civil War. Who were these people? Why did they enter into this utopian venture? What was their legacy for Soviet agriculture? What was their fate?

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SEATTLE COMMUNE
In 1921 the young Soviet state was in bad shape. Although the Bolsheviks had just won the bloody Civil War, they were still walking on thin ice, facing enormous tasks that they still had to complete in order to firmly establish Soviet power. The October Revolution and the following Civil War had devastated Russia’s economy and society.
Russia had lost almost 20 million people; heavy industrial production had fallen to one-seventh of its 1913 level. Production in the textile industry had retreated to the levels of the mid-nineteenth century, and the production of iron to the level of the late eighteenth century (Yarov 1998, 97). Most factories were not working, the mines were flooded with water, and the transportation systems did not function. Between 1919 and 1921, the country was plagued by a severe famine that killed millions of people, especially in the Volga River regions. On August 2, 1921, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of Soviet Russia, turned to the international working-class movement with an appeal to help the country: “We need help. The Soviet Republic of workers and peasants expects this help from the working people, the industrial workers and the small farmers” (published August 6). Shortly before that, on June 22, the Council of Labor and Defense (STO) had published a decree about American industrial emigration, the first point of which stated: “The development of individual industrial enterprises or groups of enterprises by means of turning them over to groups of American workers and to industrially developed peasants on a contractual basis, which guarantees them a certain degree of autonomy, is recognized as desirable” (Lenin 1972, 370; see also Shtyrbul n.d.). The resolution was actually an appeal to the skilled workers who had once immigrated from Tsarist Russia to the United States. More than three million people had emigrated from Russia to America between 1880 and 1920 (Trumbauer 2004, 36). The young Soviet state now invited people to return home to build socialism. Soviet Russia needed the expertise from abroad because its own technical cadres were not strong enough to rebuild its industry and the economy. It could also not rely entirely on the old “bourgeois specialists.”

1 “Bourgeois specialists” were non-socialist engineers and other expert workers whom the government had to recruit for various positions and jobs.
every field of technology. Initially, Lenin’s appeals sparked a movement in the United States to relieve the terrible hunger. Socialist organizations collected funds and sent basic necessities to Russia. The Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia, founded in 1919 by Russian émigrés in New York, took part in organizing this relief aid. The aim of the society was to promote the rehabilitation of the Soviet economy by sending skilled workers and technicians. Similar societies were set up elsewhere in the United States and Canada (Lenin 1976, 236–37; see also footnote 2).

In 1921 the Soviet government abandoned the so-called “war communism” and introduced the “New Economic Policy” (NEP) in order to boost the economy in the post-Civil War environment. As a part of the NEP, Soviet Russia offered licenses to foreign enterprises and firms. The Comintern encouraged workers outside of Soviet Russia to form cooperatives and to apply for these licenses in order to work in Russia. The aim of the Soviet government was thus to control the emigration of a skilled labor force into Russia. The appeals of Lenin found a sympathetic and enthusiastic response from within the left-wing working-class movement in America. However, the question of the possible immigration of thousands of working-class activists to Soviet Russia was not an easy one for the Communist Party of the USA. It could have been a devastating blow to the American working-class movement. Nevertheless, after lengthy discussions in December 1921, the Communist Party of the USA decided to allow its members to immigrate to Soviet Russia (Hovi 1971, 282).

American-Finnish communists held a strong position in the Communist Party of the USA. The Finnish activists passionately agitated in public meetings and in newspaper articles for immigrating to Soviet Russia (Hovi 1971). The agitators depicted Soviet Russia in a very positive light. In their tales, it was an ideal workers’ paradise where working people decided matters for themselves. In newspaper articles, left-wing activists argued that workers in capitalist countries were obliged to go to Soviet Russia. After all, comrades in Russia had won the revolution, and they had defended it fighting the long civil war. Now it was Westerners’ turn to go and help raise Soviet Russia from the ashes (Hovi 1971, 283). Russia’s cause was every worker’s cause because Russia was the cradle of the world socialist revolution. Activists’ agitation fell in fertile soil among the American-Finnish left-wingers. The bitter defeat of the socialist revolution in Finland in the spring of 1918 still haunted everyone.

On the other hand, the socialist October Revolution in Russia had inspired them greatly with hope for a better future. The victorious Red Army had thrown the White generals and foreign intervention forces out of the country, and now it was time to rebuild a socialist world without the burdens and exploitation of the capitalist system. Many Finns deliberated a move to Russia, especially to Soviet Karelia. Perhaps many thought the flame of socialist revolution would now spread to the whole of Europe and that they would soon be able to return to a socialist Finland.
There were other reasons, too, that affected their decision-making. The most important “push factor” was the fact that the left-wing working-class movement—and especially the Communist Party—was facing greater pressure than ever from the government and police. The left-wing movement in the United States was also suffering from internal strife and controversy (Hovi 1971, 284).

The recruitment of a skilled labor force to Soviet Russia was well organized. It was coordinated by the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia. The society raised funds and bought industrial and agricultural machinery to be sent to Soviet Russia. It also recruited skilled workers from within Russian left-wing emigrant circles. In 1921 the need for a specialized work force was so desperate that the organization started to recruit people regardless of their national background.

The rules regulated that workers willing to go to Soviet Russia had to organize cooperatives that consisted of at least five members. It was the task of the Society for Technical Aid to combine these small cooperatives into larger units before sending them to Russia. The Soviet government was willing to invite these cooperatives on the condition that they would bring with them the means of production they needed (machinery, tools, etc.), food supplies, clothing, and all other necessities of life for at least two years. For its part, the Soviet government would support the cooperatives in Russia by renting them land and housing, and in other ways as well (Hovi 1971; Cherny 2009).

During the autumn of 1921 and the spring of 1922, American Finns in different parts of the United States founded eleven cooperatives. One of these cooperatives was organized in Kirkland (Juanita), Washington, on November 6, 1921, by a group of six idealist American-Finnish farmers and workers who wanted to move to Russia to start an industrial agricultural commune. The driving force behind the idea was cooperative ideology and socialism. They also thought that in this way they could help to relieve the famine in Russia and, by example, help to develop conditions that would allow Russians to build and develop the needed expertise (Haapalainen 1935, 10).

The group decided to register in the Seattle filial of the Society for Technical Aid to Soviet Russia. They also published a manifesto to Finnish workers and farmers in America that encouraged more people to join the cooperative. The first official meeting of the cooperative was held in Kirkland (Juanita) on January 1, 1922, with twelve people registered (Haapalainen 1935, 12). Soon the cooperative had around thirty members, twenty of whom enrolled themselves as “professional farmers,” although many of them were skilled workers in some other field, too. In addition, there were three agronomists, four experts in agricultural machinery, one

---

2 Between 1922 and 1924 numerous emigrant groups applied for a permit to enter the USSR in order to found agricultural or industrial communes. Of those, forty were from Germany, eighteen from the United States, thirteen from Czechoslovakia, one from Canada, three from Turkey, and eight from other countries (Olshevska 2007, 54).
electrician, one blacksmith, two carpenters, and one poultry specialist (Hovi 1971, 286).

In February the cooperative sent three agents, Alarick Reinikka, Clas Collan, and H. Enholm to Russia to find a suitable place for the commune. The task proved to be more difficult than had been anticipated. One might say that the expedition was not very well planned either, because none of the agents knew the Russian language and none had previously been to Russia. When Enholm decided to go to Karelia instead of the agricultural core in South Russia and Reinikka became ill in Petrograd and could not do anything, it consequently became the task of the twenty-two-year-old Clas Collan to find a suitable place and to negotiate the contract with Soviet officials (Haapalainen 1935, 13).

Because the cooperative back in the United States did not hear any news from the agents, the governing board presumed that everything had gone wrong. To make matters worse, on May 31 the cooperative received a telegram from Reinikka from Helsinki, informing them that he was sick, moneyless, and coming back to Seattle.
In a meeting on June 4, the board decided to dissolve the cooperative and return the money to its members. But then suddenly, the same evening, a letter was received from Collan with the good news that he had found a couple of suitable places in southern Russia and that the Soviets would offer one of them to the cooperative. The news sparked joy and enthusiasm, and the decision to dissolve the cooperative was overruled (Haapalainen 1935, 14).

When news of the Finns’ success spread across the state of Washington, other groups, too, became interested. A group of American Russians, who were also planning to return to Russia to farm, approached the Finnish cooperative with a request to join. Negotiations led to an agreement to unite the two groups. On July 16, the general assembly of the two groups gathered in Seattle and decided to found a commune named Seattle. It was decided that the name would be Seiatel’ (sower) in Russian and Kylväjä (sower) in Finnish (Haapalainen 1935, 15; “Collective Farm XXII Party Conference” n.d; T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72). The English and Russian names of the commune are actually a play on words as the word seiatel’ is pronounced quite like Seattle.3 The meeting established the rules of the commune. The group also accepted the place that Collan had chosen, elected a governing body (a superintendent), and sent a commission to New York to buy modern agricultural machinery. The financial funds of the commune were around 2.3 million US dollars (in current value). The commission faced significant difficulties in New York because none of its members was familiar with financial issues, much less with modern large-scale agricultural machinery (Haapalainen 1935, 15).

Most of the American-Finnish cooperatives were planning to move to Finnish-speaking Soviet Karelia, but the Sower commune was heading to the Tselina area in the Rostov region in southern Russia. It is obvious that the communards knew very little, if anything, of the place before they arrived there (Hovi 1971, 286). Had they known, they might have chosen differently. Among other things, they seem to have been ignorant of the fact that the cultivation of cereals was not traditionally practiced in the area or that the Tselina area had suffered a total failure of crops in 1920. The ensuing famine left many villages desolated. Entire families died of hunger, and those remaining left the villages to look for bread and work in the cities or other parts of Russia. Neither were the communards told that, in addition to the famine, the area had been terrorized by groups of bandits that had formed during the Civil War and that the Red Army and Cheka units had not yet been able to eliminate.

The commune was organized in order to build an agricultural farm in Russia. Therefore it is quite natural that many members were farmers. On the other hand, the Soviet government waged a fierce war against the peasant mentality, its lifestyle, and so-called kulaks, or prosperous peasants. It was clear that in Russia the Sower commune would not be allowed to be governed by people with peasant origins, but

3 From now on I shall use the name Sower for the commune.
only by workers belonging to the Communist Party. It was also clear that the commune would not build any pastoral idyll in Russia. Its aim was to practice effective modern, industrial, large-scale agriculture. The commune had profound ideological and political aims as well—it would bring industrialism, machines, electricity, and a working-class mentality into the countryside of southern Russia where agriculture was practiced in old-fashioned ways and where religiosity and superstition reigned. The commune would lead and teach the surrounding peasants in the construction of socialism. It would bring the city into the countryside. After all, in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels had named the liquidation of the divide between the city and countryside as one of the main objectives of communism (Marx, Kautsky, Engels, and Jokinen 1919, 65).

But the ideological background of the communards was diverse; not all could be labeled as communists. Later, that would cause problems. Most of the communards shared socialist ideas, but many had, no doubt, received their inspiration not only from Marx, but also from so-called socialist utopians like Charles Fourier, Jean-Baptiste Andre Godin, Etienne Cabet, and Robert Owen, and even from anarchists.4

In the early spring of 1922, the Sower commune accepted for membership almost anyone who was eager to emigrate to Soviet Russia. Soon it became evident that the new members included people with undesirable political views, presumably people with anarcho-syndicalist or revisionist socialist ideas. For that reason, later in 1922, the governing body of the commune decided that the commune would accept new members only upon the recommendation of two longstanding members of the commune or two members of any working-class organization or two well-known left-wingers. This restriction to the membership criteria was crucial for the future cohesion of the commune. It was assumed that if the members of the commune were more unified in their political and ideological views, the commune would be stronger.

Every member had to pay $500 to the cooperative fund ($6,742 US in 2011). This capital was used to buy machinery. Five hundred dollars was a large sum of money for any worker. The rules stated that the money would not be returned to the member if he or she later chose to leave the commune. That rule tightly bound every member economically to the commune. Beside the first donation to the fund, the members were expected to loan the commune as much money as they could. It was agreed that the loan would be paid back to the members as soon as the economic situation of the commune would allow it or when the general assembly decided to do so. In addition to the five hundred dollars, everyone had to contribute one hundred dollars to a fund to cover the basic necessities of life during the first year.

4 Fourier, Godin, Cabet, and Owen had all created utopian industrial or industro-agrarian communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
Additionally, members were obliged to pay for their own expenses to travel to Russia (Hovi 1971, 286; Finnish Central Detective Police 1925).  

By August of 1922, the Sower commune was ready to start the long journey to Russia. The first group of seventy-six people from Washington and Oregon bid farewell to relatives and friends and started the long and adventurous journey to Sower on August 13. In New York, the group was joined by the fifteen people of the Life commune from the town of Steubenville, Ohio, who had requested and been allowed to join the Sower commune. On August 26 the communards embarked upon the S.S. Rotterdam. A crowd of people was on the pier to escort those leaving. A brass band played and the people sang “The Internationale,” overwhelmed with mixed emotions. When the ship left the Lower Bay of New York Harbor, many of the communards onboard saw the shores of America for the last time in their lives (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72).

![Figure 3: Harvesting on the Seiatel' (the Sower) commune, 1925. Courtesy Arvid Nelson Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota. Note the dromedary camels pulling the wagons.](image)

**In Soviet Russia**

After a two-week journey, the communards arrived in Petrograd, the old capital of the Russian Empire, on September 11. There they received a festive welcome after which they were taken to the railway station and put into eleven wagons. The journey, which usually took two-and-a-half days, lasted twelve days because of the chaos of a famine- and war-torn country. The communards arrived in Tselina village at the end of September and saw their future homestead: a vast, endless gray steppe that somewhere in the horizon imperceptibly dissolved into the blue sky (Haapalainen 1935, 18; Fond Severo-Kavkazskogo [n.d.]).

5 This is also related in Oskar Hendrickson’s letter to Matti Salmi in Artjärvi, Finland, December 6, 1925.
The territory that the Soviet government rented to the Sower commune consisted of two lots between the Salsk and Trubetskaja railroad stations. The rented area ran along the Yegorlyik River and resembled a quadrangle with the short sides four kilometers long and the longer sides fifteen kilometers. One of the lots had formerly belonged to an estate owner named Pishvanov and the other one to a known horse breeder, Sultan Gireyev. The estates had been nationalized in the socialist revolution (Haapalainen 1935, 61, 67).

According to the agreement signed in May by Clas Collan and the Don Region Land Administration, the commune rented two “nonfunctioning” Soviet farmsteads including all buildings and a total area of some seven thousand hectares (around ninety square miles). The newcomers were surprised to find that the few miserable houses that the Don Region Land Administration had granted to them were still occupied. According to some sources, these tenants had been offered “better fields and accommodation elsewhere by the government” (Työväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72). The truth may be that the situation was as much a surprise to the tenants as it was to the communards. In any case, the inhabitants refused to move out and, therefore, after a month’s tiresome journey, the newcomers had to seek shelter from the September rains and cold in tents. The eight women and all children were at least allowed to sleep in the small railway station of Salsk. The board of the commune requested that the commune be allowed to choose another farmstead near Salsk instead of the inhabited one. The Don Region Land Administration refused this request, and the communards were powerless. Therefore, on October 13, they had no other option but to move to the given place, to put up tents and dig dugouts, and to hope that the rebelling tenants would someday leave. Food was cooked outside, and people ate their meager rations in the open air. Eventually the tenants were ejected from their homes by force, which, of course, created tension with the neighboring peasants and hatred towards the “well dressed” rich newcomers. The tension resulted in a “boycott” where the surrounding peasants refused to sell food supplies to the commune. According to some sources, the boycott was broken after two weeks when the farmers began to sell the commune food supplies even though their own resources were scant (Haapalainen 1935, 22; Lapaus 1927; Voloshinova 2002, 5). However, some other sources show that it took some two years before the relations between the local people and the new settlers could be described as normal. Until then, the peasants were not willing to sell even a chicken to the commune (Cherny 2009).

Even after the tenants had been forced out, the housing situation was difficult. Therefore, the communards began to construct new buildings right away. Following the tradition of all Finnish settlers, they first built the most important building—a sauna. The living quarters were situated at one of the long ends of the fifteen-kilometer-long quadrangle. To overcome the long daily commute to the fields, the
The Sower Commune

Communards decided in 1924 to find another place to build a new village center. Finally they found a suitable place closer to the center of the lots, some 1.5 kilometers from the railroad. They were able to dig a well there, and, to their great pleasure, discovered that the quality of water was better than anywhere in the region. In this virgin place, they built houses and other farm buildings. After a while, the commune consisted of two centers—the old “lower place” and the new “upper place” (Haapalainen 1935, 61, 67, 72).

American Technology in Rostov

Sower was not the only commune in the Rostov region that was founded by Americans. The Soviet experiment to modernize and reorganize agriculture had aroused much attention in the United States among agriculturalists searching for a new and better way to organize agriculture in America. American agricultural leaders and manufacturers of agricultural machinery were fascinated with the Soviet project and followed it in both the farm and popular press. The most interesting thing about Soviet agriculture was that the Soviets seemed to be doing what the Americans were only talking about—industrializing agriculture. As Dr. Deborah Fitzgerald has stated, the idea of modeling American agriculture on industry, referred to as “corporate” or “large-scale” or “industrial farming,” was expressed in the growing number of large farms in America at a time when the average farm was still a mere 160 acres. Farm machinery firms were also interested in the Soviet Russian market. Ironically, while implement manufacturers made gigantic farm machinery for Argentina, Canada, and the Soviet Union, they made few machines scaled to suit the average American farm, which in the 1920s still relied largely on horses and hired men (Fitzgerald 1996, 459–62).

The Soviets also ran advertisements in the farm press to hire American farmers and farm experts who would be willing to live in the Soviet Union for a year or so to help the Soviets modernize agricultural production. For many farmers who had lost everything in the post-war depression, the Soviet offer was too good to pass up (Fitzgerald 1996, 461). Besides Sower, there were three other communes in the Salsk region that were founded in the United States. In 1923 American and Canadian Estonians founded the Koit (Dawn) commune, which was situated some 150 kilometers away from Sower. There was also the Kalifornia commune, members of which were predominantly from Los Angeles, and the San Francisco commune that was actually a venture of Molokans, a small Orthodox sect that originated in seventeenth-century Russia. Altogether, thirty-five agricultural communes were founded from 1922 until 1926 by immigrant groups in the territories of the USSR (Olshevska 2007, 66).

6 There were some ten thousand Molokans living in thirty-nine obshchinas (communities) in the Salsk region. Molokans supported Bolshevism and Soviet power, and the People’s Commissariat of Land gave them land to establish collective farms.
Most of the other communes experienced the same difficulties as Sower. The communards of Kalifornia actually went to search for a better place in the Kuban region. They found a perfect place there—a large, good lot with good buildings, a liquor factory, a mill, and a bakery. Unfortunately, it was too large for Kalifornia. When the Sower commune heard about this option, they sent people to Kuban to ask for the lot. They thought that it would be better to have a place with many good buildings than to start everything from zero at the Tselina lot. Initially the Kuban Region Land Administration responded favorably to Sower’s request, but in the end they were not able to finalize the contract. Sower tried two more places, but when nothing came of it, they decided to stay at Tselina (Haapalainen 1935, 24).

In 1925 a group of communists from Germany founded the Krasnaja Germanija (Red Germany) commune. There were several other communes, too, since many of the villages of the Salsk region had been emptied by the total failure of crops in 1920. Thousands of people had died of famine-related diseases, and a third of the population had left the region to find food, work, and a better life in the Kuban region. There was a need for new people who could continue farming. For that reason, as a part of the famine relief plan and the New Economic Policy, the Soviet government had reserved some three hundred thousand hectares of land in southwestern Russia for foreign agricultural communes (Voloshinova 2002, 5). The government hoped that these farms would spread the new methods of effective modern agriculture in the region (Hovi 1971, 289). At the same time, many so-called Soviet farms (sovkhoz) were founded in the region. It is interesting to note that it was not only pro-communist groups that wanted to come to Soviet Russia. For instance, in 1922 the Soviet government and the German Krupp Essen Company, which was known for its artillery guns, signed a concession agreement. The Soviet Union rented 125,000 acres of land in the Salsk region to Krupp for agricultural purposes. Krupp then started a model farm that used the latest agricultural machinery, produced by the Krupp Company, for plowing, harrowing, manning, sowing, and harvesting. The agreement, which was actually made before the famous Rapallo agreement between Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic, was made for twenty-four years. The Krupp Company was obliged to pay 20 percent of the harvest as rent for the land. The Krupp farm was, naturally, very effective, because it had no problems with money nor getting the latest technological innovations. With its German farmers and technicians, it became an important producer of grain (Kremlev 2003, 46). For the Soviet side, the rent paid by Krupp was not that important, of course. Just as in the case of other model farms using the latest Western technology and innovations, the experience that could be copied and modified for Soviet agriculture was the most important factor.

7 The Treaty of Rapallo was signed at Rapallo, Italy, on April 16, 1922, between the Soviet Union and Germany. It reestablished normal relations between the two countries, and both agreed to cancel all financial claims against the other and to strengthen bilateral economic and military ties.
“Grain Will Never Grow in the Don Steppe!”
Growing grain had also been part of the initial plan of the Seattle commune. Therefore they were more than puzzled when the local agronomists and also “one specialist from Moscow” stated one-voiced that the commune had spent its money uselessly, buying expensive machinery for grain cultivation. They said that it was a foolish idea even to try to cultivate grain in the region. They asserted to the commune that the Don steppe was doomed to be a half-nomad land suitable only for sheep farming or at the very most for the cultivation of the vine or tobacco (Haapalainen 1935, 39). This news confused the communards and caused much arguing among them. The communards were surprised by the local conditions, which were not what they had expected, but being stubborn and having all the machinery there for grain cultivation, they finally decided to ignore the local specialists and to experiment with wheat, barley, and oats. There is a saying in Russia: one who does not take risks does not drink champagne. Sower took a risk—and won.

![Image](Figure 4: Alexej Pakhomov, Molotba [Threshing], 1925. Courtesy of the Russian Avant-Garde Gallery website, www.russianavantgard.com.)
During the first months, the communards faced a variety of hardships that put their faith to a severe test. Many of the agricultural machines that had been bought in America arrived at the farm months late. For instance, the powerful sixty-horsepower Best tractor that they desperately needed arrived eight months late, which meant that in the spring of 1923 the commune was able to plough and sow only three hundred hectares of land instead of the planned two thousand hectares (Työväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72; Hovi 1971, 290). When the fields were finally sowed, furious winds from the east raised whirls of dust that carried away the grains as well as the roofs of the buildings (Jaakkimainen 1930, 4). Then came the mice. There were millions and millions of mice that pestered the region for a year, eating everything that the people had planted and all they might find: grain, food supplies, shoes, and clothes—they ate everything but the railroad tracks. The hordes of mice once even stopped a train between Tihoretsk and Salsk (Jaakkimainen 1930; Haapalainen 1935, 31, 80). The communards were powerless against the mice, but they were as helpless with cockchafers and weeds. The biggest problem, however, was that the communards had not even tried to prevent these miseries but reacted only when it was far too late to do anything (Haapalainen 1935, 81).

There were other miseries, too. The region and its conditions were unfamiliar to the new settlers. The political situation in the south was still unstable, and Soviet power was just securing a footing. The last large bandit groups in the area had been liquidated by Soviet Special Forces in February of 1922, but there were still smaller groups roaming the area and the communards had to practically work with rifles at the side (Punainen Karjala 1926; Vapaus 1927; Voloshinova 2002, 5). There was a severe shortage of everything. Food and building materials were scarce. Supplies were available in Rostov but the prices were too high. There were hardly any trees in the neighborhood and no stones. The commune was quite isolated from the administrative centers of Salsk and Rostov, and when members of the commune had to go to solve some bureaucratic questions (which were not rare) with the local administration, they were appalled by the endless bureaucracy that often did not in the end solve anything. The communards felt that sometimes the officials of the local administration intentionally did them injustice. The eviction of the former tenants from their homes by the Sower commune had aroused the indignation of the officials. On the other hand, the feelings of injustice may have been caused just as much by the communards’ poor understanding of the Russian language (Haapalainen 1935, 41; Jaakkimainen 1930, 4). The communards may have felt that they were treated unjustly when this was just routine social practice in Russia. All in all the attitude and conduct of the local officials reveals that in the early 1920s Soviet power was still a paper tiger in the south. Old mentalities and habits, including corruption, reigned. As if all this were not enough, the commune was hard hit by malaria that raged in southern Russia and Ukraine in 1924. Every day two dozen people stayed in their
The Sower Commune

beds, weakened by the fever. This was especially worrisome during times of plowing, sowing, and harvesting when there were not enough people to work in the fields. Some people sick with a fever tried to act brave, took an overdose of quinine, and staggered to work. The inspector of the commune left in fear and never came back. When the epidemic was over, around 70 percent of the whole population of Sower had been ill (Haapalainen 1935, 32, 138).

When the malaria outbreak was over and when the commune had finally received all its machinery, the commune was able to start work. The presence of the Sower commune’s machinery in the Don steppe was like something from another planet. The local peasants had been cultivating the land more or less like their grandparents had done in the nineteenth century. Sower was a sign of modern times just like the airplane, the telephone, or moving pictures. In 1924, the garage of the commune had three sixty-horsepower Best tractors, one thirty-five-horsepower Case tractor, three twenty-four-horsepower Fordson tractors, three trucks, and two cars. The commune also had four engines, four eight-blade ploughs, a couple of six-blade ploughs, and one two-blade plough, four harrows with twelve disks, one with seven disks, eight sowing machines, thirteen binders, four mowing machines, two big threshers, and a stacking machine (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72).

The communards had been able to sow only 300 hectares in the spring of 1923, but the next year the cultivated area increased to 1,200 hectares and, with the help of the powerful tractors, to 2,000 hectares in 1925 (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925; Haapalainen 1935, 83). The hopes for a good harvest were high in 1925, but, again, Sower experienced misfortune. This time it was the dry weather that spoiled some of the harvest. Yet Sower was more fortunate than some other farms in the region. The situation was worse, for instance, at the Krupp’s farm, which had to buy seed grain from Sower because it lost its harvest.

By 1928, the commune had been able to build several new dwelling houses, sheds, and other farm buildings, both in the old and the new place. The communards planted more than seventeen hectares of forests around the centers—poplars and acacias. They started to cultivate the vineyard and soon were able to produce their own wine. From the orchard, they harvested plums, cherries, and gooseberries (Haapalainen 1935, 61, 67, 69, 72). The commune was freed of paying rent and taxes during the first three years. After that, the commune was obliged to give the Don Region Land Administration 10 percent of the harvest of grain, vegetables, and hay, and 6 percent of fruits and wine (Haapalainen 1935, 18).

The commune became a prosperous grain-cultivating farm. In 1927, it had 5,200 hectares of arable land of which 2,500 hectares were cultivated. The rest of the land was reserved for hay and meadows. Most of the fields were for wheat, but

---

8 In 1928 the cultivated area was already some 2,900 hectares.
barley and oats were cultivated as well. In addition the farm was self-supporting with all kinds of vegetables. The farm had 800 pigs, 400 sheep, 180 head of cattle, 20 horses, and 1,000 poultry.10 When the communards decided to buy some horses, they naturally turned to the local horse breeders. They bought a couple of quite expensive warm-blooded Don horses and were genuinely confused when these noble riding horses could not haul the heavy American wagons. The local horse breeders must have laughed all the way back home, counting their money.

In 1927 the commune wanted to start to produce dairy products. Many cows were bought and cow barns were built, but there was one acute problem—there were no qualified workers to take care of the cows. To overcome this, the commune decided to recruit new workers straight from Finland. Leo Leino, the secretary of the Communist Party cell of the commune, wrote a letter to the editors of two leftish rural newspapers in Finland, asking for help in finding four girls who would be willing to come to the commune to take care of the cows. The requirements were that the girls should be between eighteen and thirty years old, robust and healthy, sympathetic to the working class but not supporters of the Social Democrats. Knowing that the countryside in Finland was rather religious, Leino added that being religious would not be an obstacle as such, but that a religious person possibly might not feel comfortable in a commune where everybody else was a non-believer (1927).

**Everyday Communism**

The general assembly was the highest ruling organ of the commune. It selected an inspector and an executive committee of six members. There was also a revision board of three members that audited all financial matters and monitored the conduct of all officials and members. The officials consisted of a clerk, a treasurer, and a cashier. All officials were obliged to do physical work, too, except the inspector and the clerk, who were only supposed to run everyday administrative matters.11

All physical work in the commune was divided into several departments or “brigades.” There were departments of field, smithy, building, cattle, kitchen, and general work. Every department was led by a “brigadier”—a specialist in the respective area—who also kept a record of everyone’s working hours. In their meetings, the brigadiers also decided if men had to be taken temporarily from one department to another, for instance at harvest time in July.

The commune boasted that it had freed women from the “slavery of the domestic fireside.” Women were equal with men, and they had the same possibilities to educate and develop themselves. Preparation of food and children’s day care was

---

10 From Leo Leino’s letter to the newspapers *PohjanVesi* and *Savon Työ* in Finland, February 18, 1927. Finnish Central Detective Police postal report No. 4, February 16–28, 1927. EK-VALPO, XXXV C1. KA.

11 From Oskar Hendrickson’s letter to Matti Salmi in Artjärvi, Finland, December 6, 1925. Finnish Central Detective Police postal reports Nos. 49 & 50, December 3–16, 1925. EK-VALPO, XXXV C1. KA.
organized by the community (Haapalainen 1935, 129). In reality there was still a
distribution to men’s work and women’s work—women worked mainly in the com-
munal kitchen and in the cattle house. They may have been freed from the slavery of
the domestic fireside, but they were still subject to the communal fireside.

The rules of the commune followed the communist principle of work and the
distribution of goods: from each according to his ability, to each according to his
needs. Everyone ate meals in the common dining room. Families had separate sleep-
ing rooms, but single men shared rooms (Työväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72). Everyone
owned basically only his or her clothes and a few personal items. The commune
provided everyone with accommodations, food, electricity, and medical services and
medicine. Quite soon it was realized that this system was not satisfactory under the
conditions of the New Economic Policy. On the one hand, the surrounding Soviet
society did not live according to this principle, and on the other, it did not motivate
people to work. There were always people, even in Sower, who tried to manage
by doing the minimum and receiving the maximum. The leadership observed that
this system was not enough to motivate the lazy people to work. Therefore they
decided to pay members a salary. The salary for work was three kopeks per hour; in
addition, everyone received ten kopeks per day whether they worked or not. The
commune also gave everyone money to buy clothes. All adults received thirty-six

Figure 5: Alexej Pakhomov, Molotba [Threshing], 1925.
rubles per year. Children under five received twenty-five rubles; 5–10-year-old children received thirty-five rubles; and 10–14-year-old children received fifty rubles. Teenagers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen received thirty-six rubles and an additional two kopeks for every hour spent in school. Soap, matches, and the posting of letters were rationed as well by a similar system. Accommodations, food, and the necessities of life were still free for all. This change boosted the productivity of work somewhat, but after a while further changes were needed. In the late 1920s the leadership introduced a system where everyone received fifteen kopeks per working hour, but everyone had to manage to make ends meet with this money (Haapalainen 1935, 102–5).

The yearly profit of the commune was shared among the members according to their annual working hours. The members received 25 percent of their share of the profit. Fifty percent was put to the capital of the commune, and the remaining 25 percent was put into a fund for acute needs. Everyone was allowed to spend the profit as they wished (Sower 1926). All men and women between the age of eighteen and fifty-five shared almost the same rights and responsibilities; almost, because women worked six to eight hours a day and men approximately ten (Sower 1926). Actually the length of a working day depended on the year’s natural cycle. During the busy sowing and harvesting weeks, people worked between ten and twenty hours a day (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72). The commune raised the children collectively in a kindergarten. This first raised opposition from some parents, who, for their part, were accused of a petit bourgeois mentality. The educators saw that when the children’s day care was well organized the children were much better taken care of than when they were raised by their parents alone (Haapalainen 1935, 112). All children had to attend school until they were eighteen. The brightest teens were sent to institutes of higher education. There were always some people enrolled in the University of the National Minorities of the West, which was located in Leningrad. Elderly people who did not work shared the same rights and responsibilities as other adults, but received less money for clothing (Sower 1926).

The population of the commune increased when group after group of newcomers arrived from the United States. The second group of communards from the United States, merely eight people, arrived on November 9, 1922. A third group of twenty-two men, six women, and three children arrived in March of the following year. A larger group of nearly one hundred people sailed from New York on the S.S. Canada in July 1923. This group included fifteen Canadian Finns from Vancouver. They had an adventurous journey through hostile Turkey and barely managed to travel all the way to Salsk and the commune. They had high hopes that they would be welcomed at Sower with a brass band, flags, and a feast. Instead, in the commune nobody even knew that they were coming, and the new arrivals had to wait a long

---

12 In 1931 the commune started to use the system of contract jobs and tariffed jobs.
time at the Salsk railway station for transportation because all of the trucks and cars were occupied. When they finally reached the commune, they were shown the place where they could sleep and were given a meal that was “nothing to boast about.” Understandably the anticlimax was a big disappointment for many and did not help them to feel that they had made the right choice to emigrate (Haapalainen 1935, 24–30).

**INTERNAL DISPUTES**

Beside the forces of nature, epidemics, and other external pressures, the commune had to deal with internal disputes. Its members had little, if any, knowledge or previous experience with running a large enterprise. They were not educated in financial or economic matters. The general assemblies were chaotic and boisterous events where every frustrated soul tried to shout out his opinion. Three languages—Finnish, Russian, English—were used, which meant that the few interpreters did their best not to lose their tempers in the whirlpool. There was a severe lack of leadership. The general assembly elected an inspector, the highest official, but because of turmoil and quarrels the inspector was changed four times during the first year alone. Other officials shared the same fate. In the name of democracy, the assembly wanted to discuss every trifling matter. Therefore, the meetings were long and the people had to be called together frequently. In most meetings, the chairman had to be changed two or three times because of the constant bickering and a general disrespect for the rules. A revision committee was elected in the hopes that it would bring some order, but it failed and only multiplied the arguments and problems (Haapalainen 1935, 31, 50). It is possible to identify three major causes for the internal disputes: living conditions, development of the commune, and the debate over what the nationality should be of those in leadership.

**Living Conditions:** People knew when they left North America that living on the farm would not be easy at first. Nevertheless, the difficult conditions, the diseases, and the endless toil without much free time for activities very soon wore down even the strongest and most committed communards. Life was so different from the United States and Canada. The ongoing lack of proper housing did not help to make things better. Building materials were expensive, and the commune could not afford to build much new housing. Most of the material went to the construction of cow barns and other farm buildings. Still, in 1925, the communards were able somehow to build a new concrete house of sixteen rooms (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72; V apaus 1927). Many people also felt that living in isolation on the steppe was too depressing. According to the “official” history published in 1935 by Eero Haapalainen, some members who left the commune within a year or two of arrival complained that “the members were not cultured enough” or “tobacco was cultivated too little.” Some were longing for lakes, some for forests. Some left for
“vacation” and never came back. One person went to Finland to see his old mother; some men went back to the United States to see their wives. A man who used to play the violin at gatherings left because he did not get paid extra for playing the violin. Some people went back because there was not enough to eat, although “they were so fat that the doors were not wide enough for them.” One couple explained that because there were no numbered seats in the dining hall, they left (Haapalainen 1935, 40–45). One wife was so fed up with the commune that she threatened to go out and hang herself from the nearest tree if her husband would not take them back to the United States. In this treeless region the story was often repeated as a good joke (Haapalainen 1935, 32, 128). In many cases, the causes were just excuses, but the fact remains the same: many people were disillusioned and sought to use the first available opportunity to leave without losing face. One has to remember, though, that these cases from Haapalainen’s book were chosen by him with the intention of blacklisting the “deserters” as politically unsound, weak, or foolish characters who had left the commune only because of their own laughable reasons.

Although the threshold to leave the commune was high, many people still left. According to the agreement they had signed, those who left would lose the $500 (US) that they had paid to the commune fund. Money was not the only matter that made leaving difficult. Those who did leave were blamed for obscure political ideas and an individualistic worldview and for wanting to have everything readymade for themselves. They were accused of holding childish, unrealistic ideas about the conditions in Russia. “Theories collapsed when they faced the hardness of real life” (T yöväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–72; V apaus 1927). The leaders of the commune cursed and stigmatized publicly the deserters because they wanted to scare others who were thinking of leaving. Yet, to a certain degree, the motives of the deserters were understood: “Many comrades came here thinking that now when workers and peasants rule, everything will go smoothly and work out fine if we just do our job. But when they met here destruction and ruins, and when there were many difficulties in mending them, they felt disappointed” (V apaus 1927).

Those who returned to America or Finland sometimes publicly spoke about the realities of Soviet life and the unending and joyless toil in Sower. They cursed the commune and the whole Soviet system for cheating honest working people (Jaakkimainen 1930, 4). Some complained that they had been deceived by false reports of the conditions at the commune. One man complained that in the commune the power was in the hands of such men who had a “big mouth but no expertise.” He believed that the opinions of the real farmers were too often ignored and therefore much harm was done (Hovi 1971, 298). But often those who returned kept silent or shared their experiences only within small circles. After all, most of those who returned did not surrender their socialist ideals. They continued to live within the same social circles as they had previously. Blaming the commune or the Soviet
The Sower Commune

system too loudly could easily have left them ostracized from the old social networks in the United States.

**The Way the Commune Should Be Developed:** When the communards realized that they would have to build everything from the ground up, and when the local specialists told them that the area was not suitable for the cultivation of wheat, some people were ready to liquidate the commune. Though the leaders maintained that they should continue as planned, an opposition group consisting of several Finnish and Russian members was formed. It claimed that instead of facing all the hardships, it would be better to liquidate the commune and return the money, or to break the group into a cooperative or an *artel*. Some suggested that the land of the commune should be divided into individual lots. Throughout the first year of the commune’s existence, these matters were endlessly discussed in the general assemblies. That was the period when the commune was troubled by malaria and mice and when many members returned to the United States. However, the leadership won this dispute against an opposition that was never organized or unified in any way. The opposition gradually lost its voice, and sometime around the summer of 1924, it disappeared, maybe because the most vocal critics had already left the commune (Haapalainen 1935, 50).

**The Question of Nationality and Leadership:** The original group of communards in 1922 was predominantly American Finnish. In November 1924, there were 144 people living in the commune: 71 men, 29 women, and 44 teenagers and children. Even at that time the Finns were the clear majority: there were forty-eight Finnish families, twenty Russian, one Latvian, and one Romanian family. Only half of the people spoke any Russian (Fond Severo-Kavkazskogo [n.d.]). More Finnish-speaking people arrived periodically at the commune from the United States, Canada, and Finland. Nevertheless, the share of Finnish-speaking people diminished year by year as many people disillusioned by the hard realities returned to their homelands. By mid-1924, about half of the original members had left the commune; most of them returned home (Hendrickson 1925). Still, the number of people living in the commune rose when demobilized Red Army soldiers, orphans, and homeless people joined. After all, new hands were desperately needed and homeless people and orphans were not demanding when it came to food and living conditions. The commune also received new women from the neighboring villages through marriages (Fond Severo-Kavkazskogo [n.d.]). By December of 1925, the national breakdown of the commune was more diverse than the previous year. Beside Finns, Russians, Latvians, and Romanians, there were Poles, Ukrainians, Estonians, and Serbs. Yet, as an original member, Oscar Hendrickson, wrote to a friend in Finland, “the Finns and people from Savo still made two thirds of the inhabitants” (Hendrickson 1925).

---

13 An *artel* is a general term for various cooperative associations in Imperial and early Soviet Russia. In an agricultural artel all land was pooled and worked in common and income was distributed according to the work performed.
Sower received lots of letters from people in America, the Soviet Union (including Soviet Karelia), and Finland who wished to join the commune. Because of the lack of housing, the commune could accept only a minority of the applicants (Hj. S., 1926). In June 1926, a group of forty people arrived from the United States and one family of six from Finland. Communard Ellen Lund wrote in a letter to her cousin, Fanny Grönlund, in Rauma, Finland, that it was nice to see new faces. They all lived like one big family, working and eating together, only sleeping separately (Lund 1926). Two years later, six people arrived from Finland and eight returned to Finland. At the end of 1928, the number of people had risen to 217 and by the beginning of 1930 to 310 (Sower [n.d.]; Haapalainen 1935).

Every new member had to pay a membership fee of one thousand rubles. A husband also had to pay two hundred rubles to the common household fund for his wife and for each child older than six. A needed craftsman was able to get a discount, or sometimes even a free membership (Työväen Kalenteri 1925, 168–172; Sower

The Sower Commune

1926). It was also expected that if someone had any money left after the obligatory fees, he should lend it to the commune without interest.

There was a sharp change in immigration policy at the end of the 1920s. The Soviet government forbade the commune from accepting any more new members from North America. The share of Finnish-speaking people declined sharply at the end of the decade. American Finns and Finns found this change unwelcome and did not know how to cope with it. Finnish and English became minority languages in the commune. The meetings that had been formerly conducted in Finnish, English, and Russian became conducted predominantly in Russian. Many of the original communards no longer knew what was happening in their home. When they had left America in 1922, they had hoped that they could learn Russian while living in the Soviet Union. Six years later they faced the fact that none of the adults had learned Russian. The secretary of the commune’s Communist Party organization, Leo Leino, wrote that the experience had shown that for a middle-aged Finn it was almost impossible to learn even poor Russian despite the best of efforts and good will. He blamed “the slow Finnish nature” for it. For the children, it was much easier. They played together and went to the same school, and, so, all Finnish-speaking children learned to speak some Russian, some English, some Ukrainian, etc. The children of other nationalities, for their part, learned basic Finnish while playing with the Finnish kids. The grownups were happy to see that at least their children were learning Russian, but for them the language barrier isolated them from the surrounding world and became more and more depressing (Hendrickson 1925). The growing language barrier also caused national tensions. A governmental inspection commission had noted clear national tensions even by 1924 (Land Administration 1924), but at the end of the decade the problem culminated. This led to the question of leadership in the commune. The first leaders had been American Finns, and Finn Kalle Mattila had been the superintendent for years, but the minority Russians probably believed that their voice was not sufficiently heard. A compromise was reached in January 1926 when a Latvian member named Victor Saulit was elected the superintendent of the commune (Cherny 2009; Hj. S., 1926). The Russian minority also succeeded in winning the sympathies of the local authorities in its nationalistic discourse.

A Model Farm

By 1928, Sower was flourishing in many ways. Instead of the half-demolished mud huts, the commune had built a clean little village with houses and all the necessary farm buildings, a power station, a smithy, a sauna, and a cattle yard (Hj. S., 1926). It had become an example not only for the region but for the whole country. During that summer, just as before and after, delegations of various sizes as well as individual visitors came from different parts of the Soviet Union and abroad to see and marvel
at the achievements of this modern mechanized farm, which had transformed the desolate Don steppe into a granary (Leino 1928). One of the tractors in the Sower commune was even proclaimed as the “best and most productive tractor in the Soviet Union,” because it had been in use for an astonishing 2,501 hours in a period of twelve months (Cherny 2009). Tractors and tractorists had a special place in public media, like the newspapers and cinema, starting in 1928 when the enormous project for the collectivization of Soviet agriculture began. For ideological and practical reasons, the tractor was assigned a key role in the development of socialistic agriculture (Dalrymple 1966, 192). Nearly all of the tractors imported into the Soviet Union from 1924 to 1933 came from the United States (Dalrymple 1966). Newspapermen came to get good material and to write about the achievements of modern Soviet agriculture. Writers like Maxim Gorky came to find inspiration for stories about the builders of socialism (Leino 1928).

One of the visitors was a young artist, Aleksej Pakhomov, from Leningrad. He came to the commune in the summer of 1930, seeking inspiration for a series of paintings of the real worker-heroes of the time. It was harvest season, and Pakhomov was amazed to see how differently the commune worked as compared to traditional villages. He wrote that he had never before seen any agricultural machinery, and now in the Sower commune there was a machine for every aspect of work: machines ploughed and machines harvested, and, what was more, they did it not only during the day but also during the night with the help of electric lights. At that time most houses in his childhood village in the Vologda region were still lighted by candles. Pakhomov’s task was to picture “the new socialist man” in agricultural work, a man who was distant from the type of the traditional Russian peasant; the new socialist man was the lord of the machines and knew them thoroughly and could operate them fluently. Pakhomov imagined, like many people, that in socialism, machines would do all the hard and dull agricultural work, but he was surprised to see that even with the machines, the physical labor was still difficult and exhausting. Pakhomov wrote that in the Sower commune, he met “the new men,” but added, that the traditional Russian peasant was visible, too (Matafonov 1981, 140).

This was during the high point of the proletarian movement in literature and art. Artistic creativity flourished at Sower, too. Its theatre group staged plays twice a month. Thanks to the power station built in 1925, Sower had electricity, and communards decided to purchase equipment to show movies in order to soften the otherwise hard and monotonous life. Movies were shown three times a month, and more often during special occasions. The movies were free, and they attracted lots of people from the neighborhood, which also helped to soften previous tensions (Pohjan Voima 1929; Hj.S, 1926). The assembly hall where the movies were shown could accommodate as many as five hundred people and was the largest in the area. It was also a suitable place to organize evening dances. These were so popular that
the Communist Party cell usually took the opportunity to begin the evenings with a political speech or a lecture (Työväen Kalenteri 1925). A political lecture alone hardly would have attracted a large audience. The commune also had a brass band of twenty-three players to assure that the public events were uplifting and memorable. Listening to the radio after work and dinner was a popular activity. There was one radio receiver in the commune’s office, but several communards had their own receivers. The people listened not only to Soviet radio transmissions but also stations and favorite shows from the United States. The popular Lahti station transmitted the latest news and music from Finland (Pohjan Voima 1929). This connection with capitalist countries was, of course, not encouraged by the political and security organs.

From the very beginning the commune published its own newspaper Aavikon ääni (The Voice of the Prairie). It came out in Finnish once a month, and there were special issues on festival days such as the anniversary of the October Revolution. In 1927 the youth cell started to publish a wall paper, also in Finnish, but sometimes there were articles in Russian and English, too. In 1930 these papers were united into one, named Kommunaar (The Communard), which came out every ten days. There were even attempts to publish it like a real newspaper, but because of a lack of white paper the idea had to be abandoned (Haapalainen 1935, 115). The newspapers, a brass band, and a drama group offered a good forum for those wanting some intellectual or creative activity. They also offered variety and joy for all people at the farm.

Sower was producing more than any other commune, collective farm, or individual farm in the whole region. The whole region could be proud of this, but it also raised questions and brought embarrassment. Sower was not the only mechanized farm in the region or in the Soviet Union. The full-scale collectivization of Soviet agriculture that started in 1928 was violent and fast. By 1928 there were fifty-three state grain farms on seven million acres of land; only four years later there were over two hundred farms on forty-one million acres. The Soviets also established hundreds of machine tractor stations in the northern Caucasus and Ukraine alone (Fitzgerald 1996, 473–74). The machinery was predominantly American. The value of American exports of agricultural machinery to the Soviet Union varied between US$5 and $7 million in 1925–1928 and peaked to US$42 million in 1930. From 1924 to 1933 more than eighty-six thousand American tractors were shipped to the Soviet Union; other modern agricultural technologies were mainly imported from Europe, particularly from Germany (Dalrymple 1966, 192–93). What, then, was

14 The Soviet domestic tractor industry was not significant until 1929 when 4,500 machines were produced. The first tractor produced in any numbers in the Soviet Union, the Krasnyj Putilovets [the Red Putilovian], which was produced in the Putilov Steel Works in Leningrad, was a rather poor replica of a Fordson. The design was copied for the Russians by some former employees of Ford’s Highland Park plant. The same process continued in the new tractor plants in Stalingrad and Kharkov. The Soviets had severe difficulties in obtaining raw materials of sufficient quantity and quality. Furthermore, the copying of American designs was complicated by the lack of detailed specifications (Dalrymple 1966, 197, 203).
the key to Sower’s success compared to other Soviet farms? One of the answers is that it was not the technology that solved the problems but the people who used the technology. There were many problems involved in transferring American and German technology to agriculture in Russia, which was in many ways a backward nation. On many of the Russian state farms that had received the latest agricultural machinery, the peasants were given very little training because leaders wanted to get the crops in and out as quickly as possible. People who had perhaps never seen a tractor before were expected to operate and maintain the equipment. This led to problems. Combines that would have worked for ten or twelve years in America were ruined after two in the Soviet Union (Fitzgerald 1996, 476). Hundreds of specialists from American companies like Caterpillar, International Harvester, Advance Rumley, and Deere and Company were recruited, and they came to the Soviet Union to help assemble the machinery and to show the communards how to use it. The problem was that although Soviet farms welcomed the introduction of American technology, the workers resented advice from American experts (Dalrymple 1966, 190, 194; Fitzgerald 1996, 460, 463).

At Sower they had the necessary tractors, combines, and other machinery, but more importantly, they were also skilled enough to use them effectively. The machinery was well maintained, and if any part of a machine broke, it was fixed; the machine was not run until it broke down completely. The nearest spare parts were usually in the United States, and in many cases the communards had to make spare parts themselves. The commune also organized training courses in both Finnish and Russian so that less educated members could become familiar with all the necessary details of tractors and other mechanical devices. It seems that the commune was even preparing to build some of the machines themselves. Enoch Nelson, who moved to the Sower commune in 1924, sought information from his brother about American farm equipment. In one letter, written in May 1925, Nelson requested drawings and specifications for haymaking machines with the hope that the commune might be able to replicate these machines (Lam 2010, 217).

As Fitzgerald has stated, the tricky thing in industrial farming was that since each element was highly dependent on all the other elements, a problem in any one area could foul up the entire system (1996, 471). Sower’s secret was that they realized this fact from the start and tried to act accordingly.

Another reason for Sower’s relative success was the fact that it was composed of motivated members who had crossed the ocean with the primary task of building a model farm and a home for themselves. The core had worked together since 1922, and despite all their arguments and disputes, deep down they were still held together by their original idea. New Soviet collective farms, on the other hand, were a rather novel feature, and they were composed of peasants who had been forced to

---

15 See Report on Enlightenment Work (ca. late 1920s). GARO. f. 4340, o. 1, d. 1, l. 34.
join more or less involuntarily and who often did not support the Bolsheviks. They were not motivated to work in a collective farm, were not familiar with modern technology, and, to put it frankly, in most cases did not represent the best of Russian peasantry. The prosperous farmers were either in the GULAG, or they were not allowed to join the collective farms for political reasons.

New Horizons

In 1929 Sower lost 1,300 hectares of winter wheat because of unfavorable weather conditions in the Don region. The financial loss was fifty thousand rubles, a hard blow for a commune that had struggled so hard for so long to get past its difficulties (Leino 1929a). There were other setbacks as well. More than two hundred pigs died of swine plague before the disease could be stopped. Some cows and a stallion died, too. The cultivation plan for the year 1929 had been 25 percent larger than the previous year. In preparation, the commune had planned to buy new machinery from the United States—suitable Soviet-made machinery was not yet available. Now they had to reconsider the sizeable investments in machinery. The commune had expanded its dairy production and there were many milk cows, but the farm could not expand the cattle for meat production because there were not enough meadows to get the necessary amount of hay. New opportunities opened when the Don Region Land Administration unexpectedly proposed that the Sower commune rent an area of orchards and forests by the Black Sea. The offer was tempting, because the commune saw there a possibility to build a hydropower station and a sawmill. But the commune declined the offer because it just did not have enough people to send to the new location. In January 1929 there were 257 people (119 men, 60 women, 27 fourteen- to eighteen-year-old teenagers, and 51 children). In every work brigade, there was lack of workers, but the commune suffered, too, from a lack of skilled agit-prop (political) workers to run the various courses for the members. There were, for instance, political courses in Finnish and in Russian during the winter, and 84 percent of the members participated in them. After all, one of the main ideological goals of the commune was to root out the remnants of peasant mentality, the religious and the superstitious, and to enlighten the people with “correct” ideological and political knowledge. The commune had been planning to build a special clubhouse for training courses, political lectures, etc., but the building was postponed several times. Courses were held in the assembly hall, which also functioned as the dining hall, and so complicated things. It was also demanding to organize political and educational work especially in the summer when people worked in two shifts in two places separated from each other by several kilometers (Leino 1928). Further, as more and more people arrived, the housing situation showed no signs of improving. There was also an acute need to build new farm buildings. Therefore it was a great disappointment to hear that Sower would receive only sixty thousand rubles
from the government for the construction work, even though the commune had asked for much more. For all they had planned, it was insufficient (Pohjan Voima 1929; Leino 1929a).

In the autumn of 1929, the Finnish communards astonished the Sower collective by announcing that the majority of the Finnish-speaking communards would leave Sower for good and move to Soviet Karelia to establish a new Finnish-Karelian agricultural commune. This news raised many questions among other communards and with the local administration. Some Soviet officials were outraged and saw the decision to leave as a deviation from Communist Party policy. Some even suspected that the Finns belonged to some sort of religious sect (Leino 1929b). According to Leo Leino, the secretary of Sower’s Communist Party cell, there were two main reasons behind the decision to leave. He said that when the commune had been founded in 1922, they had not thought much of anything else but matters of agriculture and economics. During the seven years, they had realized that man does not live by bread alone. Now they had finally admitted to themselves that the lack of fluency in the Russian language isolated them from the building of communism because they had no connection to the cultural front. Back in America and Canada, they had genuinely believed that they could learn Russian, but now they knew that it was impossible (ibid.).

The other reason was the joyless, lonely life on the desolate Don steppe. The lack of Russian made life even harder since they could not take part in the activities

of the local cultural organizations. All they had been able to participate in were some minor cultural activities, but after several years they had come to the end of the road. So the Finns had decided, after long discussions, to leave the Don, and to instead build new collective farms in Soviet Karelia where they could be more actively involved in the social and cultural life of the republic. They were sure that their leaving would do no harm to Sower because its economy had strengthened significantly and because there were many more people wishing to join the commune than the number of people now leaving (ibid.). It is also true that by 1929 the Finnish- and English-speaking “old guard” had begun to feel themselves ignored by the newcomers—especially after 1928 when the Soviet government forbade the admission of any new members from the United States and Canada. The newcomers were in charge of the commune and its economy. Assemblies were held in Russian instead of Finnish or English as they had once been. The old members also thought that the commune was slowing down because the newcomers were not familiar with modern agricultural technology. Many of the newcomers had not seen a tractor before they came to Sower. The old members thought that they themselves were more skilled and experienced than the newcomers. National chauvinism was rising on both sides. The original Russian members probably thought that the Soviet Union/Russia was, after all, their rodina (motherland) and that the Russian language and customs should prevail. These views received support from the Russian-speaking newcomers and the local regional administration.

Motivation toward work declined, and the scanty salary of fifteen kopeks per hour did not help the situation. When the leadership introduced a new wage system based on contract jobs and with different wages for different tasks, it was the last straw. Those members who had been working in America said that they had had enough of contract jobs in the capitalist system and that they would not labor like that in their own commune. Most of the Finns were ready to leave Sower by then, but they did not want to return to the United States. When an opportunity opened to move to Soviet Karelia, where there was a great need for a skilled workforce in agriculture, the decision was sealed (Haapalainen 1935, 54).

Although there were some die-hards who decided not to move but to stay at Sower, the majority of the Finns had come to the end of the road. Soviet Karelia was rising fast under a Finnish leadership that emphasized the development of Karelia on the basis of the Finnish language and “Soviet Finnish” culture. Karelia needed experienced workers and recruited people from the United States, Canada, Finland, and other parts of the Soviet Union. When Edvard Gylling, chairman of the executive committee of Soviet Karelia, proposed this option to the Finns of Sower, they weighed the pros and cons, and finally welcomed the invitation. In the end, around two-thirds of the Finnish-speaking people, about fifty people, left the commune in 1931 and moved to Soviet Karelia (Cherny 2009).
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

EPILOGUE: IN SOVIET KARELIA

Gylling invited the Finns of Sower to begin large-scale modern agriculture in Karelia. Agriculture had not been one of the mainstays of the Karelian economy, and the area did not adapt very well to farming. But there was an economic boom that brought tens of thousands of new workers from different parts of Russia, and from the United States and Canada, too. The size of the migration created pressures on the agricultural sector, which was underdeveloped. The Karelians were required to produce enough feed for the horses that were needed in the area’s lumber industry. In addition, the administrators hoped that adequate supplies of vegetables, milk, butter, and meat could be locally produced by and for the residents of Karelia (Kero 1982-83). Agriculture was being developed in Soviet Karelia through the construction of state-owned farms and the application of new farming techniques. Obviously, the model for these collectives did not have to come from outside the Soviet Union. Old individual farms were amalgamated into collective farms (kolkhozes) or state-owned farms (sovkhozes). At least two kolkhozes—Säde in the Aunus area, and Vonganperä in Uhtua—had been founded by immigrants from America and Canada. The Karelian government gave the Finns from Sower land on which the Finns founded a new kolkhoz called Hiilisuo. Hiilisuo (“coal bog”) sovkhoz was formed on a bog nine kilometers southeast of Petrozavodsk.

The newcomers arrived at Hiilisuo in the spring of 1930, when the land was still blanketed by snow. The circumstances and conditions were very different from those in the Don region, but the farmers did not let that frighten them. The hardest task was to clear and drain the bog. Within three years, the Hiilisuo commune had cleared hundreds of hectares of virgin land for cultivation. In 1933 the Hiilisuo state farm had 3,269 hectares of land north of the Polovinnoye, Dolgoye, and Krugloye lakes. Three-fourths of the land was mineral soil and the rest was bogs (791 hectares) and forests. In the mineral soil, there were only two cultivated plots of land with a total area of 90 hectares, but 337 hectares of the coal bog had been drained for cultivation, and the plots produced a fairly good harvest (Stepanov 1933; Yleiskirjeistö [n.d.]).

Dozens of new Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian emigrants worked there side by side with the former Sower communards. The number of inhabitants increased rapidly when more people arrived from Canada, the United States, and Finland. By 1933 the Hiilisuo state farm had a population of 402 people, of which 245 were men and 157 were women. Finns constituted the majority with 334 people, 33 were Russians, 2 Karelians, and 33 of other nationalities (Spisok Naselennykh Mest 1933, 85). The majority, however, were Finns from the United States.

Gylling’s original idea was probably to make Hiilisuo a model state farm for Karelia and the entire northwestern Soviet Union. Soviet Karelia had been for a long time a poor and backward region, but around the time when Hiilisuo was founded,
the Karelian Republic was rapidly developing. The republic also needed to show the leaders in Moscow and Leningrad that it was making significant progress, and, it was hoped that Hiilisuo would offer a good example that could proudly be presented to visitors and the press.

Because of the harsh climate, it was apparently decided that Hiilisuo would put cattle in first priority and that it would become a large cattle farm. This was not an easy task, though, especially when we know that cattle had never been a priority at the Sower commune. Therefore mistakes were made. The farm bought eighty cows in 1930, but by the fall of 1931, only nineteen were alive. Most of the cows had died of starvation or of diseases linked to malnutrition, because the clearing of the bogs had only begun in the summer of 1930 and the existing fields couldn’t produce enough feed for the cattle. The isolated Hiilisuo was not able to buy and transport enough feed for the cows from other parts of the Soviet Union before it was too late (Kero 1981, 1982–83).

In 1933 the local administration in Petroskoi, the capital of the Karelian Republic, decided to transform the Hiilisuo farm into an experimental farm and an agricultural school where agricultural workers for local needs would be trained. The Hiilisuo farm and school enjoyed support from the local government and party organization, and it received positive media coverage as well.

Eila Tölli-Kalinin lived at Hiilisuo when she was a child, and she remembers it as a good place to live as compared to her previous home at one of the construction sites of the Svir River—it was open, light, and clean. The houses and other buildings were situated amongst trees and meadows. Barns and cow houses were built further away from the center. The farm had a school for little children, and the older ones went to school in nearby Petrozavodsk. Hiilisuo was an experimental farm where they grew, among other things, cucumbers, tomatoes, watermelons, pumpkins, carrots, cabbage, and strawberries. The farm provided Petrozavodsk with vegetables and milk (Tölli-Kalinin 1998).

The good times ended when the nationality policy that was practiced in Karelia was changed in the fall of 1935. Most of the Finnish leadership of Karelia was replaced by Karelians and Russians and people of other nationalities; as a consequence, the Finnish leaders of Hiilisuo had to step back. To make matters worse, during the winter of 1935–36, ninety-five cows at the farm died of arsenic poisoning. The timing could not have been worse because the security organs were jumpy for anything that could have been suspicious. That was the beginning of the end for Hiilisuo and its inhabitants. There were a series of purges in the whole of Karelia, just as in the whole country, that lasted from the early spring of 1936 until 1939. Hiilisuo was an isolated place, but the waves of terror reached it, too. The workers, especially Finns, were accused of being disguised bourgeois nationalists who had committed sabotage, including the poisoning of the cows. Later, there were accusations of espionage,
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

counter-revolutionary agitation, promotion of national hatred, and further acts of sabotage. Many people were arrested, some were executed, some were imprisoned, and hardly anyone returned from the GULAG (Tölli-Kalinin 1998).

It is quite apparent that some Finnish Americans continued living at Hiilisuo, or State-Farm No. 2, as it became known, even after the cattle incident and the terror. But after the purges, the Hiilisuo State-Farm was firmly in the hands of Russians. The story of Hiilisuo as a Finnish-American collective had come to an end. This was also the end of the utopian dream of the founding members of the Sower commune. Veikko Varpula (2000), who was an infantryman during the war, remembers that his battalion was ordered to Hiilisuo sometime before Christmas 1941. He recalls that the people there spoke Finnish and they were from Canada. The situation changed quickly because by September of 1943, there were only twenty-nine people living at the Hiilisuo farm. Of those, only five were Finns. There were fourteen men, but ten of them were either children or elderly (Hiilisuon Paikallisesikunta [n.d.]). We can only guess what happened to those who were still living at the farm when the war began in 1941. Probably most of them were evacuated by the Soviets, and the young men were recruited into the Red Army. It is also possible that many of the non-Russians, especially with Finnish origins, were sent to the GULAG labor camps as suspicious elements. It is plausible, as well, that when the Finnish army took Petrozavodsk, the Finnish military authorities sent some non-Finnish people of Hiilisuo to concentration camps. Maybe some of the remaining Canadian Finns even went to Finland when they received permission to do so.

The original Sower commune in the Salsk region flourished in the early 1930s, but it, too, became a target during the years of the so-called “Great Terror” in 1937–38. The secret police NKVD raided the commune, hunting for foreign spies and saboteurs. The leaders and many members were purged, executed, or died in camps. The purge seemingly paralyzed the commune so badly that it did not function for some time. The Sower commune was liquidated by a resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1939. On the premises, a new collective farm, “Stalin,” was founded in the same year (Zhuravlev 2009; Manoylin 2004).

The Sower commune played an important role in the early days of the modernization and industrialization of Soviet agriculture. The first years were far from easy, but thanks to the example of communes like Sower, the Soviet Union was able to transfer technology from the West and to adapt it to the Soviet environment. The results of this process were clearly seen from the 1960s onwards, after the Soviet Union had recovered from the war and when the agriculture in the Don region was organized following the large-scale industrial principles set down already in the 1920s.


Finnish Central Detective Police postal reports Nos. 49 & 50, December 3–16, 1925. EK-VALPO, XXXV C1. Helsinki: Kansallisarkisto (KA) [National Archive of Finland].


Hj. S. 1926. “Kommuuna ‘Kyöväjä’ 4-vuotias” [The 4-year-old Commune ‘Sower’]. *Punainen Karjala* [Red Karelia].


Victims and Survivors of Karelia


Land Administration. 1924. Minutes of the inspection by the Land Administration in November 1924. GARO. f-1390, o. 11, d. 90, ls. 10–12.

Leino, Leo. 1927. Letters to the newspapers *Pohjan Voima* and *Savon Työ* in Finland, February 18, 1927. Finnish Central Detective Police postal report No. 4, February 16–28, 1927. EK-VALPO, XXXV C1. KA.


———. 1929b. “Kollektivisoimisrintamalta: Miksi kommuuni Kylväjän Amerikan suomalaiset aikovat muuttaa Karjalaan” [From the collectivization front: Why the Finns of the commune Sower are going to move to Karelia]. *Punainen Karjala* [Red Karelia], December 18.


The Sower Commune

Punainen Karjala [Red Karelia], September 9.


Stepanov, N. G. 1933. Ark. No 19. Äänislinnan maiden maanviljelystekninen kuvaus (maanviljelysteknikko N. G. Stepanov, 1933) [An agricultural description of the lands of Äänislinna (agricultural technician N. G. Stepanov, 1933)].


Vapaus. 1927. “Kommuuna Kylväjan” viisivuotisjuhla” [The five-year celebration of “Commune Sower.”]. Vapaus [Liberty], October 27.


The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia during the Process of Soviet Industrialization

Sari Autio-Sarasmo
University of Helsinki

Abstract
Economic development in Soviet Karelia in the 1920s and 1930s was shaped by both local and national goals. The Karelian-Finnish leadership aimed to elevate a peripheral region into a modernized autonomous republic by exploiting its vast forests. The national aim, defined in Moscow by the central decision-making organs of the Soviet Union (the Center), was rapid industrialization of the entire nation. In this process, Karelian forests were to play an important role. However, in spite of the shared goals, the means for achieving these goals were different locally than at the Center. For the Karelian-Finnish leadership, the development of the local economy was the key to meeting its goals. Canadian Finns were to have an important role in this process: they would bring to Soviet Karelia knowledge, skills, and technology. However, the Center wanted to exploit the local resources for the broader, common good without consideration of local concerns. This conflict between the local and national leadership was to have a devastating impact on the fates of those North American Finns who immigrated to Soviet Karelia.

The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia
Soviet Karelia had administrative autonomy, confirmed by statutes, as well as wide-ranging economic autonomy and budgetary rights. Economic autonomy gave the Soviet Karelian leadership the right to control all sectors of the national economy and to control local revenues, the most important coming from forestry. Both the wide-ranging economic autonomy granted Soviet Karelia and the New Economic Policy (NEP) enacted in the Soviet Union during the 1920s supported administrative decentralization and private enterprise, which gave rise to strong economic expectations, especially within the Soviet Karelian Finnish leadership. They firmly believed in economic development based on Karelian timber resources and dependent upon the maintenance of economic autonomy. Primarily because of the Soviet Karelian leadership’s Finnish roots, its experience and education, they had a model for how to achieve this goal (Tsentral'nyj Ispolnitel'nyj Komitet 1923, 70–71; Kokoelma
The Karelian Finnish leadership aimed to transform a peripheral region into a modern republic with the help of the timber industry. This aim fit well with the central government’s plan for rapid industrialization and the modernization of the Soviet Union. The First Five-Year Plan, and especially the Optimal Plan, set high production targets for forestry, targets that were welcomed in Soviet Karelia (Davies 1989, 187–89; Nove 1992, 154, 190; Tucker 1990, 94–95). By modernizing the sawmill industry and building paper and pulp mills, the Optimal Plan matched the enthusiastic expectations of the local leadership to strengthen the timber industry in Soviet Karelia. This modernization would benefit from the vast reserves of forests in Soviet Karelia, the economic autonomy granted to the local government, and the central government’s investments in Soviet Karelian industry as outlined in the plan (Gylling 1929; see also Autio 2002, 85).

According to Edvard Gylling, the chairman of the Karelian Council of People’s Commissars, the increased timber production was connected to the rising revenues of the forest economy. The goals set by the Karelian leadership demanded increased logging as well as increased investments in labor. This kind of thinking was a good example of a model for extensive economic growth. Soviet Karelia was full of unexploited forests; possible concerns about over-logging were dismissed with the response that over-aged and mature forests had been underexploited for years. There was also the sense that the leaders knew how to efficiently manage the timber industry in Soviet Karelia—neighboring Finland offered a good model.

**Federal Control**

Almost immediately after the launch of the Optimal Plan, the organizational restructuring of the timber industry in the Soviet Union began. The People’s Commissariat of Forestry (NarkomLes) and the structure of the all-union timber industry were

---

1 This topic is more widely analyzed in Autio 2002, especially on page 15.

2 Soviet Karelia, Leningrad, and Northern regions comprised 50 percent of all forests in the Soviet Union. For more details, see Autio 2002, 68–69.

3 Extensive economic growth comes from the expansion of the labor force, that is, an expansion of ordinary inputs of labor, reproducible capital (i.e., machines, livestock), and natural resources. Extensive economic growth was common currency in the wider context, too.

4 This attitude was typical of the forestry industry in the 1930s. For Soviet Karelian forest resources, see National Archive of the Republic of Karelia (NARK) f. 286, o. 1, d. 22/199, ls. 1–30; about Soviet Karelian attitudes, see e.g., Iz rezoljutsij VIII Vsekarelskogo s’ezda Sovetov po otshhotnomu dokladu Karelskogo pravitelstva: o zadatshakh razvitija promyshlennosti v pervoj pjatiletke, 18.1.1929 [Decisions of VIII All-Karelian meeting of delegates of the report of the Karelian government of the assignments in the development of the industry during the First Five-Year Plan, 18.1.1929], 17–19; Narodnoe hozjajstvo Karelii [National economy of Karelia]; VIII yleiskarjalainen neuvostojen edustajakokousen 1929 pöytäkirja. Gyllingin selostus [Protocol from the VIII All-Karelian meeting of delegates in 1929, Gylling’s report], 18. RC/17B/FNA.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

reorganized in 1929; the power of local decision-making declined as it shifted instead to the Center. The role of the local leadership and the forest administration was merely to insure the fulfillment of the plan, i.e., the practical part of the process. The Center set the goals and controlled the fulfillment of the plan.

![Figure 1: Timber procurement in Soviet Karelia 1925–30.](source)

At the same time that the Soviet Union’s timber industry came under federal control and the local level lost its right to control local forest resources, Soviet Karelia lost its economic autonomy and local budgetary rights (Tsentr'al'nyj Ispolnitel'nyj Komitet 1931, 58–59). This moved the foundation of economic decision-making from the local level to the Center. Shortly after these changes, the local leadership realized that the Center did not intend to make the investment outlined in the Five-Year Plan; it identified Soviet Karelia as primarily a producer of raw material. For Soviet Karelia this was a clear setback since the timber industry (and its related branches) was the basis of more than 80 percent of the whole economy of Soviet Karelia. From the Center’s point of view, the development was rather clear: the value of the Soviet Karelian economy in the scope of the entire USSR was very modest, approximately 0.3–0.5 percent. Additionally, relative to the entire Soviet timber industry, the Soviet Karelian timber industry was very small, even though it provided

5 State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) f. 5446, o. 1, d. 56, ls. 182, 220; NL:n TPKK:n ja SNK:n päätös NL:n metsätalouden ja metsäteollisuuden uudelleenjärjestämisestä, 3. syyskuuta 1930 [The decision of the re-organization of forest industry and forest economy in the Soviet Union given by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets and the Council of People’s Commissars, September 3, 1930], 51–52.

RC/17B/FNA; GARF f. 5446, o. 1, d. 58, l. 119.
almost 10 percent of all the logging in the Soviet Union. Among all-union timber exports, Soviet Karelia ranked third in 1930 when all Soviet timber exports measured 12.5 million cubic meters and the Soviet Karelian share of the total was 1.5 million cubic meters (see Autio 2002, 359, table 56). The importance of Soviet Karelia was in timber production—to produce sawn logs for the needs of both the export and internal markets. The changed objective of the Center—not to invest in the Soviet Karelian timber industry—impacted the local leadership’s goals to develop the local economy.

After Soviet Karelia lost its economic autonomy, the remarkable increase in forestry work without the needed investments raised concerns in Soviet Karelia. The primary impediment to the successful fulfillment of the Optimal Plan was the lack of a skilled workforce. The year 1930 proved to be a year of intense loggings, high timber exports, and thus also the most demanding year for the workforce. This was an all-union phenomenon: labor shortages and related issues were of crucial importance to the Soviet Union’s planned economy throughout the interwar period (Filtzer 1987, 45; see also Autio 2002, 227–28). Labor shortages, especially in the peripheral regions, became an all-union problem when the focus was shifted to the exploitation of raw materials in those regions (Russian State Archive of the Economy f. 4372, o. 2, d. 769, ls. 24–34). A good example of this is Magnitogorsk. Although it was being built in the middle of a remote and isolated area, ideologically it represented a far more attractive place to work than the forests of Soviet Karelia (see Kotkin 1997; Scott 1973).

As a peripheral region, Soviet Karelia did not attract seasonal migrant workers, and so in 1930, during the most active year of the First Five-Year Plan, it was clear that the Karelian working population was too small to meet the challenge set by the increased production targets. The problem of labor was also geographic: in the relatively more densely populated southern parts of Soviet Karelia, the labor shortage was not as severe as it was in the almost unpopulated northern parts, a kind of periphery’s periphery. The increased timber production targets sent loggers into the northern parts of Soviet Karelia where there were unexploited forests and a good network of water routes suitable for floating (Karelian Archive of Socio-Political History [GAOPDF K] f. 3, o. 2, d. 450, l. 7; Autio 2002, 231–32).

The Center tried to solve the workforce problem, but the solutions offered proved to be shortsighted and mostly unsuitable for the local level. One of the Center’s solutions was the use of prison workers in the timber industry. This solution proved to be problematic for several reasons, including the location of the

prison camps and the accommodation of prison workers at the logging sites as well as the harsh living conditions and the inefficiency of prison labor. Prison labor was employed extensively in Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s (NARK f. 690, o. 1, d. 16/180, ls. 3, 9), even though the local leadership maintained that this measure could not satisfactorily solve the labor shortage, and they continued to urge the Center to solve the problem another way.

The other proposed solution was to use workers from kolkhozes (collective farms). Kolkhozes offered useful labor reserves during the winter, but after the prioritization of forestry work in Soviet Karelia, this practice had its own complications. Logging primarily took place during the winter when the ground was frozen and it was possible to transport timber by horses and sledges from the logging area to the wood yard to await floating. Logging itself was not a problem since it took place during the winter. The problem proved to be spring, summer, and autumn. During the spring, floating required a significant workforce; the same was true in autumn when the floated timber arrived at the sawmills. In the kolkhoz, the main work season was from spring to autumn; workers were needed from the seed time in the spring to the harvest in autumn. Any disturbances in the agricultural sector of Soviet Karelia created severe problems for the local food supply. In Soviet Karelia, where forestry was the prioritized branch of the economy, the demand for a workforce in forestry was the first to be supplied (Karelian Executive Committee 1930; NARK f. 286, o. 8, d. 7/65, l. 93; RGASPI f. 17, o. 3, d. 975, l. 165). This required skilled kolkhoz workers to work as unskilled forestry workers at the logging sites.

The Soviet Karelian leadership had its own plans to solve the problem of a skilled workforce. In spite of a change in circumstances and a reduction in economic autonomy, the local leadership still aimed to modernize the Soviet Karelian economy. The Karelian leadership’s solution was more sustainable and more focused upon the future development of the region than those ideas introduced by the Center. The Soviet Karelian solution was to create a labor pool of professional and skilled workers by recruiting professional and party-conscious cadres from other areas of the Soviet Union.

The loss of economic autonomy had remarkably diminished the local means to recruit skilled workers from outside the region, and the Soviet Karelian leadership required financial support from the Center for the recruitment. However, there were other obstacles besides money. In other areas of the Soviet Union, skilled workers were a clear minority because of the agrarian background most workers shared. Those workers who had the coveted industrial skills had already been recruited to the new industrial centers, such as Magnitogorsk. The most skilled forestry workers, namely Finns, were already in Soviet Karelia. The most natural regions from which to recruit forestry professionals were the other heavily forested areas of northern Europe, such as the nearby Leningrad and Northern regions (oblasts). This, however,
was not an easy task since Leningrad and Northern oblasts were wrestling with problems similar to those in Soviet Karelia, and so hung on to their skilled workers. Recruitment within the Soviet Union would have required remarkable incentives, financial or otherwise, to attract skilled workers. Because the Center’s financial support was insufficient, the recruitment of skilled workers to Soviet Karelia became impossible (Autio 2002, 236–38).

When the Karelian leadership came to this realization, it turned its interest abroad and focused its efforts toward modernization on that other aspect of the Soviet modernization plan, the transfer of foreign expertise. By exploiting new technology and by adapting modern work methods, it would be possible to raise work efficiency in Soviet Karelia and to steadily grow the local economy. This aim fit well with the processes of Soviet industrialization and modernization.

**Soviet Industrialization & Local Modernization**

Stalin equated rapid industrialization with the modernization of the Soviet economy. This techno-centric attitude had been adapted in the early 1920s, and the aim became more focused after the adoption of the planned economy and during the First Five-Year Plan. The whole industrial base of the Soviet Union would be built upon “mechanization,” which meant the minimizing of manual labor through the use of machines. With the help of technology, more work could be accomplished with fewer people, and this would lead to economic development. The slogan for the First Five-Year Plan, “Technology decides everything!” clearly indicated this goal. Under Stalin’s plan, heavy industry was prioritized in order to produce machinery for all other branches of the economy (Autio-Sarasmo 2006).

The adaptation of new technology was strongly pushed by the Center. Not only was the importation of new technology seen as essential for the Soviet Union, but so, too, the importation of foreign expertise. As early as the 1920s Lenin had raised the issue. His slogan “Learn, learn, learn!” garnered a new meaning—to adopt and absorb foreign knowledge. Lenin believed that by borrowing the latest capitalist technology, Soviet industrial managers and technicians would learn from the capitalists (Holliday 1979, 74). Lenin realized that understanding the technology of the West was the only way to develop Soviet innovations and to create the technological basis for economic modernization. Under Stalin’s leadership, the Soviet Union would utilize foreign expertise until the domestic innovations of a developed Soviet Union would eventually beat the West and prove the technological superiority of the Soviet (or socialist) economic system.\(^7\) Stalin desired the maximum mobilization of labor and capital for industrial production.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\) Technological superiority was closely connected to the East-West competition during the Cold War era. See Andrle 1988, 13, 83; Autio 2002, 105; Davies 1989, 35; and Gomulka 1986, 42.

\(^8\) See e.g., Berliner 1988, 161; Holliday 1979, 50–52; for the industrialization process and its background see Andrle 1988, 13; Bettelheim 1978, 114, 400, 416; and Nove 1992, 127.
The key instrument in the realization of economic growth was to be centralized economic planning, which would enable the Soviet leadership to generate very high rates of investment in certain targeted areas of the economy, and most importantly, to manage the transfer of millions of workers from agriculture to industry (Berliner 1988, 246).\(^9\)

In the late 1920s, the Soviet Union had reached agreements with foreign enterprises for joint projects and the transfer of technological expertise; by 1929, there were already 579 foreign experts in the Soviet Union, and that number reached 9,200 by the end of the First Five-Year Plan (Sutton 1971, 11). Concession policy had its origin in Tsarist Russia, where concessions were the means by which foreign knowledge was acquired by Russia. At various times, the Soviet government had granted concessions to foreign enterprises, formed joint stock companies, and hired foreign consultants. This system was continued in the Soviet Union, and during the period of 1929–45, about 175 technical assistance agreements were arranged between the Soviet Union and Western companies. The latter included the most well-known and largest firms in the world. Concessions were important not only for the adoption of foreign know-how but also to acquire foreign investments and loans (Graham 1993, 255; Waldron 1997, 132–33).\(^10\)

The esteem granted to foreign expertise in the Soviet Union raised expectations at the local level when it came to solving the problem of skilled workers. From the local point of view, there were several advantages to inviting foreigners to the Soviet Union. First of all, the primary target of the recruitment effort was a leftist-oriented skilled workforce, which was willing to move to the Soviet Union for ideological reasons. To answer the call to build up socialism, this group of people did not require financial incentives. On the contrary, these workers were willing to pay for the opportunity. These recruits did not only bring their skills, but they also had access to new technology and the knowledge required to use and reproduce it. This helped the Soviet Karelian leadership to “sell” the idea to the Center.

The plan was not only to supply the immediate demand for a skilled workforce. The local leadership wanted to solve the root problem of the labor shortage and to create a wholesale and permanent solution. By recruiting a professional workforce to Soviet Karelia, it would then be possible to create, through vocational training, a local labor pool of skilled workers, which would then provide a solid base for the future skilled workforce of Soviet Karelia. This would enable sustainable development

\(^9\) An estimated 18 million people moved from the countryside to the cities between 1929 and 1935 (Andrle 1988, 32.

\(^10\) These enterprises included, among others, Ford, International Harvester, Krupp, Pennsylvania Railroad, Pratt and Whitney, Siemens, Standard Oil, Union Oil Products, Babcock and Wilcox, Bucyrus Erie, Caterpillar Tractor, Dupont and Metropolitan-Vickers (Autio 2002, 199; see also Jungar 1974, 4–5). Later the concession system was replaced by the license system, which enabled Soviet enterprises to produce certain western products (Hoffman and Laird 1982, 90–91).
The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia During the Process of Soviet Industrialization

at the local level and fulfill the modernization aims of the local leadership (Autio 2002, 251–52).

**FOREIGN EXPERTISE AND NEW TECHNOLOGY**

At the turn of 1929–30, the Karelian leadership proposed to the Center its plan to invite professional workers to Soviet Karelia, especially forestry workers from North America. The most desired professionals were Canadian Finns, so-called “work refugees.” Some of the work refugees had already approached the Soviet Karelian leadership by mail and had volunteered to build Soviet Karelia, the “Republic of Work” (NARK f. 690, o. 1, d. 15/163, l. 50). These letters established the foundation of the Karelian leadership’s argument to organize the recruitment of workers from Canada and to settle these immigrants into Finnish-speaking areas of Soviet Karelia. One aim of the Karelian-Finnish leadership was to integrate the newcomers in order to strengthen the Finnish nationalities policies in Soviet Karelia. From an economic point of view, the purpose was to raise the professional and technological standing of Soviet Karelia. These two aims complemented each other. The collaboration of immigrants and local workers would be easier if they shared a common language, and presumably the Finnish-speaking workers would be more willing to adapt new methods of work and new technologies because of their background: most had learned their skills in Finland before the move to Soviet Karelia (Autio 2002, 248).

Immigrants from Canada were invited to Soviet Karelia on the basis of their professional skills and understanding of new technology. These immigrants were ideologically suitable to live in the Soviet Union because of their political persuasion and the enthusiasm they had to build socialism there. In a letter to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the spring of 1931, the chairman of the Karelian Council of People’s Commissars, Edvard Gylling, justified the invitation of skilled workers from Canada on the basis of the labor shortage in Soviet Karelia and the immigrants’ suitability to the realization of the Soviet modernization plan through the transfer of knowledge and technology. In the letter, Gylling argued that the immigrants should be allowed to bring their tools and technology to the Soviet Union without customs. This “duty-free” immigration would maximize the transfer of technology to the Soviet Union and Soviet Karelia, as Stalin desired. Thus, it was not surprising that the Center replied positively to all of Gylling’s requests (GARF f. 5446, o. 57, d. 14, ls. 77, 155; d. 15, l. 25; d. 20, l. 70). The Soviet Karelian leadership received permission to proceed with the plan; the recruitment of skilled workers from the United States and Canada started immediately (Kero 1983, 88).

---

11 Pis’mo predsedatelja SNK KASSR E. A. Giullinga v Politburo TsK VKP(b) o sozdaniy postojannykh kadrov rabotshikh v lesnoj promyshlennosti, ne pozdnee dekabrja 1930 [The letter sent by the representative of the Soviet Karelian ASSR, E. Gylling in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist party of establishing permanent cadre workers to the forest industry, December 1930], 7–8. Rabotshij klass Karelii v period postroenija sotsializma v SSSR [Workers’ class in Karelia during the period of building socialism in the USSR].
The recruitment project bore fruit: from 1931 to 1934, 5,500 immigrants arrived, most of whom came in 1931 and 1932 (GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 3, d. 226, ls. 62–65; Kilin 1999). By the end of the First Five-Year Plan in 1932, there were in Soviet Karelia about 4,500 immigrants including their families (GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 3, d. 41, l. 11; Kilin 1999, 141). As planned, the immigrants brought along knowledge and expertise that enhanced the Karelian timber industry. The immigrants’ specialized skills were exploited at the logging sites, but also at the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory and the Kondopoga Paper Mill. In 1932, there were 513 immigrants in Kondopoga and about a third of these immigrants were working in the paper mill (GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 3, d. 41, l. 60). The Petrozavodsk Ski Factory received skilled immigrant workers in the early 1930s, and by the middle of the decade, the ski factory had become one of the most successful production units in Soviet Karelia and the most productive ski factory in the whole of the Soviet Union (Kankaanpää 1935; Autio 2002, 161–64).

The other goal of the recruitment of skilled workers was the possible acquisition of new technology and cutting-edge tools. During the interwar period, it was possible to buy technology from the Western market, but the Soviet Karelian leadership had no access to foreign markets nor the currency with which to buy tools from abroad. But even the acquisition of technology itself was not enough; it was necessary to acquire the expertise to use and reproduce the technology. Thus, the recruitment of foreign expertise was connected to the technological modernization of the Soviet Union in general and Soviet Karelia in particular. Immigrants were encouraged to bring new tools and technologies with them, but other tools were also transferred to Soviet Karelia and the Soviet Union.

During the 1930s, research and development (R&D) in the USSR concentrated on “replication, modification and scaling up of existing Western models” (Ofer 1988, 67). Imitation and duplication were the primary means to enhance the Stalinist “mechanization” of the timber industry, and in this process of re-production, Soviet Karelia had a special role. Mechanization was based on obtaining tools from Scandinavia and North America (mainly Canada) and copying them. Swedish saws and Finnish axes were copied in the USSR and transformed into local saws and axes with local names. The Finnish axe became the “Onegan” after the Onega factory in Petrozavodsk where it was first produced. The American Caterpillar bulldozer was reincarnated under the name “Stalinets” (Kero 1983, 134–35; Sutton 1971, 291–92). Stalinets bulldozers were used for hauling. The outcome of the technology transfer was twofold: first, there were better tools for the workers, and second, the production of new tools created the basis for local machinery production. It was expected that work efficiency would increase thanks to these advanced tools, and thus, Karelia’s place in the process of Soviet industrialization would be strengthened.

The People’s Commissariat of Forestry (NarkomLes) demanded the use of the
“advanced technology,” i.e., the new axes, frame saws, and sledges, at the logging sites in order to raise the efficiency of forestry work and to produce more timber for export, so that the Center would have more currency with which to buy the foreign machinery required by the process of industrialization and prioritization of heavy industry. The location of Soviet Karelia in close proximity to good communications networks, Leningrad Harbor, and the world market provided the preconditions necessary for the large-scale export of timber. The Center required as much foreign currency as possible as quickly as possible, so timber harvesting and export became the primary activity of Soviet Karelia in the process of Soviet industrialization (Autio 2002, 188–95, 256). New tools made logging more efficient, which was in line with the Center’s aims. If the goals could be met, it would enhance the local leadership’s modernization project.

The Soviet Karelian leadership understood the significance of foreign expertise to the Soviet process of industrialization, but even more clearly they understood its significance for the modernization of the Soviet Karelian economy. The transfer of expertise focused upon the processes that were the most important for local aims. The Soviet Karelian leadership’s plan was to create vocational training based on the expertise of the immigrants. This would lead to the creation of a local pool of skilled forestry workers. In Soviet Karelia, groups of professionals toured the republic and instructed local forestry foremen (mainly Finns), who then passed on the knowledge to the local forestry workers. Training was organized through practical work; learning by doing was the easiest way to transfer the expertise and the most efficient way to teach new methods (NARK f. 286, o. 1, d. 18/192, l. 69). The task was relatively easy: new methods and tools proved to be at least three times more efficient than the old ones. One Canadian lumberjack cut down a tree in just half the time required by two local lumberjacks. The Canadian lumberjack used a frame saw and Canadian axe, whereas local workers used Russian saws and axes (Bekrenev 1932, 10, 16, 20–22, 29). The Finnish-language newspaper Punainen Karjala (Red Karelia), among others, was harnessed to encourage more efficient methods of work, publishing, for instance, instructions for the construction of a frame saw (Kero 1983, 129; Punainen Karjala 1930a, 1930b).

Additionally, model work sites were established and built throughout Soviet Karelia. These special logging sites were mostly established in the Finnish-speaking areas; at these sites, everything was based on advanced methods introduced by the Canadian immigrants. In Matroosaa, one such site was called Internatsionale (International). All logging stands in Internatsionale were arranged in the Canadian style: both logging and transportation were rationalized. The work was based on the utilization of new technology, and transport was organized with frozen tracks and special log sledges that made it easier to move timber from the logging site to storage (Autio 2002, 252–53). Experts in Soviet Karelia emphasized that the new and
advanced way to organize forestry work provided the only possibility to fulfill the goals of the forestry plan (Bekrenev 1932, 30).

**REALITY FORESTALLS THE PROCESS OF LOCAL MODERNIZATION**

The problems Soviet Karelia encountered in fulfilling the plans changed the Center’s attitude toward the emphasis on local modernization. From the point of view of the Center, it was more important to immediately increase timber production and to generate revenues from timber exports than to establish sustainable development and a healthy long-term economy at the local level. But at the local level, the attitudes of unskilled local workers were influenced by a deepening shortage of consumer goods and food supplies and a general decline in living conditions. These workers soured on the raised production goals and the demands to adopt the new methods of work. In turn, Canadian immigrants, who enjoyed a privileged position, became targets for the disenchantment of the local workers.

In this context, the local leadership found itself between a rock and a hard place. It was clear that the new methods of work and the new tools were better than the old ones, but the local workers were reluctant to adopt them. This was not a new experience in Soviet Karelia. In the early 1920s, Finnish workers had tried to improve the old-style methods of work in the Karelian sawmills but to no avail. At that time, the tension seemed to be between the Finnish-speaking newcomers and the Karelian- and Russian-speaking locals (*Rintama-lehti* 1933, 6–7). In the 1930s, the negative attitude towards immigrants and the unwillingness to adopt the new methods of work were rooted in the unequal position of the local workers and immigrants and a worsening situation at the logging sites.

Immigrants had better accommodations, they had their own shops, and they had (at least in the beginning) higher rations than the local workers. The average salary of the immigrants was much higher: while local skilled workers (mostly Finns) earned approximately 120 rubles per month, skilled immigrant workers earned approximately 375 rubles. Local Karelian and Russian unskilled workers earned far below 120 rubles, and the lower the level of skill, the lower the salary (GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 3, d. 41, l. 60; Autio 2002, 254). Further, with rationing and shortages, prices increased rapidly, and wages did not follow suit, so that people could not afford to buy goods even if there were any for sale. In addition to declining real wages, local forest trusts were often unable to pay the wages owed. In many cases, living standards plummeted. Under these conditions, a better salary could not provide sufficient incentive to adopt new methods of work or to use new tools.

---

12 Spetszapiska Sorokskogo raiotdela NKVD v NKVD KASSR o nastroenijakh lesozavodskikh rabotshikh v svjazi s nesvoevremennoj vyplatoj zarplaty, 21 marta 1936 [Special report from Sorokka’s district NKVD to Karelian NKVD about the sentiments among forest workers of delayed salaries], 252. *Neizvestnaja Karelija* [Unkonwn Karelia]; see also Autio 2002, 276–277.
The slow adoption of new methods and the reluctance to use new tools was clear during the early 1930s. According to an inspection carried out in Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s, most of the new tools remained in storage; less than half of the tools were in use. In the case of Canadian frame saws, less than 50 percent were utilized. Usage of the American two-man saw averaged 60 percent while the utilization of the Canadian axe was higher, no less than 85 percent. There are several explanations for the low utilization of the new tools. First, the use of the Canadian frame saw was promoted by the Canadian lumberjacks, who were seen as an elite group, and so the frame saw was opposed by the local workers (Kero 1983, 105–6; Osokina 1999, 251, 254; Autio 2002, 255). Second, local workers typically worked in pairs, whereas the user of a Canadian frame saw worked alone. The frame saw meant a comprehensive change in the traditional way of working, which explains why the two-man saw and the Canadian axe were much more easily adopted (GAOPDF K, f. 3, o. 3, d. 71, l. 66).

Other problems contributed to the low utilization rates. There were delivery problems: some forest sites received twice the number of ordered tools while some sites received none at all. In the Kondopoga forest management area (lespromkhoz), which was one of the main locations for foreign workers, only 11 percent had new frame saws. Presumably, they would have been willing to use those tools if they had been available. At the same time, in Petrozavodsk, two thousand frame saws were in storage (GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 3, d. 73, ls. 58–69). The same problem plagued work clothes. Mittens, rubber boots, and felt boots were supplied, if it at all, late. Felt boots were delivered to the workers in the spring just before the floating when the workers needed rubber boots. In general, the supply and quality of tools and equipment were poor and did not meet the demand.

During the Second Five-Year Plan, attitudes toward the new tools changed. When production goals increased, work efficiency became even more crucial than before. When personal work targets were introduced and the targets tied to rations, attitudes at the forestry sites changed. Old tools were replaced with new ones, and new work methods were adopted. In 1934 in Soviet Karelia, there were 11,000 frame saws; 2,500 American two-man saws; and 5,500 Canadian axes. During the Second Five-Year Plan, the Canadian way of arranging cutting stands was adopted, and frozen tracks and new sleighs were widely used, especially in Soviet Karelia.

13 NARK f. 286, o. 1, d. 33/315, ls. 41–48; see also “Karonegojoz varustaa uittoja huonoilla kengillä” in Punainen Karjala [“Karonegsojuz is equipping floatings with bad quality shoes” in Red Karelia], no. 107, 12.5. 1931.

14 Iz ottshota Karelskogo obkoma VKP(b) XII oblastnoj partijnoj konferentsii: "O mehanizatsii i rationalizatsii lesozagotovok i splava", 10.—15. Janvarja 1934 [From the report of the Karelian province party committee of the VKP(b) in the XII provincial party conference: Mechanization and rationalization of loggings and floating, January 10–15, 1934], 50–51. Narodnoe hozjajstvo Karelii [National economy of Karelia].
The targets for “mechanized” forestry work were reached during the latter part of the Second Five-Year Plan. In the mid-1930s, NarkomLes started to establish tractor stations at the forestry sites and mechanized forestry sites in the regions specializing in the timber industry. One of the newly established mechanized forestry sites was named Motorinskoje; it utilized Stalinets bulldozers as well as roads constructed out of wooden logs, enabling timber transport with heavy machinery during the summer. When it came to political education and control, the tractor stations at the forestry sites functioned just as did the Machine-Tractor Stations (MTS) in agriculture, which indicated a change in the atmosphere surrounding Soviet industrialization.

Still, the situation at the local level did not improve. On the contrary, in Soviet Karelia, problems—economic, social, and political—became worse. Living conditions were pauperizing, and the atmosphere at the forestry sites turned hopeless. In 1934, the Center changed its attitude towards the goals of local development.

15 GAOPDF K f. 3, o. 4, d. 162, ls. 45–50; Iz spravki selhozotdela Karelskogo obkoma VKP(b) k otchetu na XIV oblastnoj partijnoj konferentsii — "O rabote MTS", 13.–19. iyunja 1938 [Information of the agricultural section of the Karelian province party committee of the VKP(b) in the XIV provincial party conference – The work of the MTS, June 13–19, 1938], 214. Narodnoe khoziaistvo Karelii [National economy of Karelia]. In the MTS there was a special political department (politotdel) whose task was to educate and control workers. This was more efficient control since it took place on the site.
In Soviet Karelia, Stalin accused the Soviet Karelian Finnish leadership as well as Finnish and Canadian immigrants of spreading nationalism. The process culminated in the removal of the Finnish leadership in 1935 and their liquidation the following year. The purges were also directed against ordinary citizens and especially those of Finnish nationality, many of whom were imprisoned between 1936 and 1938 (for more see Kangaspuro 2000; Autio 2002, 142–43). As the Finnish characteristics disappeared from Soviet Karelia, so did the stated objective of modernizing the local economy with the help of skilled workers and new technology.
Works Cited


Bekrenev, N. 1932. *Kanadalaiset metsätöissä Neuvosto-Karjalassa* [Canadians working in the Soviet Karelian forest sites].


Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv Obshestvenno-Politicheskoi Dvishchenii i Formirovani Karel (GAOPDF K) [State Archive of the Socio-Political History of Karelia].

Gosudartsvennyj Arkhiv Rossii-Ko Federatsii. (GARF) [State Archive of the Russian Federation].


The Economic Modernization of Soviet Karelia During the Process of Soviet Industrialization

Iz rezoljutsij VIII Vsekarelskogo s'ezda Sovetov po otshhotnomu dokladu Karelskogo pravitelstva: O zadatshakh razvitija promyshlennosti v pervoj pjatiletke, January 18, 1929.


Karelian Executive Committee. 1930. Karjalan TPKK:n VIII kokoonpanon IV täysi-istunnon päätöksiä 21.–24.7.1930 [Decisions given by the IV session of the VIII assembly of the Karelian Executive Committee July 21–24, 1930].

Karjalan ASNT:n budjetti 1924/25.


Kokkola Punainen Karjala [n.d.]; Taloudellinen katsaus.


Lesnoj eksport SSSR i mezhdunarodnaja lesnaja torgovlja. 1932.

Narodnoe hozjajstvo Karelii [National economy of Karelia].


Neizvestnaja Karelija [Unknown Karelia]. 1936.

NL:n TPKK:n ja SNK:n päätös NL:n metsäatalouden ja metsäteollisuuden uudelleenjärjestämisestä, 3. syyskuuta 1930 [The decision of the re-organization of forest industry and forest economy in the Soviet Union given by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of Soviets and the Council of People’s Commissars, September 3, 1930], 51–52.


Victims and Survivors of Karelia


Russian State Archive of the Economy.

Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI).


Svedenija tsentral’nogo upravlenija narodnohozjajstvennogo utshota Karelo-Finskoj SSR: O rabote promyshlennosti respubliki v 1932, 1937, 1940.

Tsentral'nij Ispolnitel'nij Komitet (TsIK) [Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of the USSR]. 1923. 70–71.

———. 1931. NL:n TPK:n ja SNK:n päätös KASNT:n budjetista 23.1.1931. [Decision of the budget of Karelian ASSR given by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviets of the USSR and the Council of People’s Commissars, January 23, 1931], 58–59. RC/17B/FNA.


Recruitment in North America: An Analysis of Emigrants to Soviet Karelia, 1931–1934

Evgeny Efremkin
York University and Ryerson University

Abstract
This article analyzes Finnish immigration from Canada and the United States to Soviet Karelia in the first part of the 1930s. The author places the move in the context of international, national, and regional socio-political discourses. The socio-economic effects of the Great Depression on Finnish communities in North America, coupled with the determination of the recruiters who were acting on behalf of the Karelian leadership, created an opportunity for many left-leaning Finns to seek livelihood in the Soviet Union. The article also examines data from the Resettlement Agency of the Council of People’s Commissars of Soviet Karelia. Statistical analysis allows for insight into the reasons for immigration and into the differences between the US and Canadian immigrant groups.

Between 1931 and 1934, more than six thousand American and Canadian Finns immigrated to the Soviet Republic of Karelia. Given this unusual migration pattern—a movement from an industrialized to a non-industrialized nation—numerous questions arise as to the causes of this phenomenon. In broader terms, “Karelian Fever” coincided with high rates of unemployment in Canada, as well as with the rapid process of state building and economic change in the Soviet Union. In search of a stable economic, social, and political future, thousands of North American Finns left the Depression-stricken continent and settled in the Soviet Union, which was actively recruiting foreign skilled labor to boost its timber, mining, and construction industries. Nonetheless, on both macro and micro levels, this migration needs to be viewed as a process, and cannot, for the most part, be explained by broad economic and political factors alone. The purpose of this article is to outline the processes and to account for the nature of Karelian Fever. The underlying assumption of the following is that immigrants to Soviet Karelia were rational beings who made rational choices. There was nothing “fanatical” about this migration as many would like to believe.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

The Beginning: 1920s

Recruitment of North American Finns to immigrate and settle in Soviet Karelia began well before the Karelian Technical Aid (KTA) offices opened up in New York and Toronto in 1931. One needs to look no further than to the effects that the 1917 October Revolution had on North America and, in particular, on Finnish immigrant communities. The global magnitude of the social, economic, political, and psychological impact of the Bolshevik victory in 1917 can be equated, for example, with the effects that the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 had on subsequent events in Europe and the world in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. More than anything, the Russian Revolution made many believe that injustices could be fought, and that it could be done on a large scale, even at the national level. For example, the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, and the swift manner in which the authorities dealt with it, demonstrates the influence the October Revolution had on class conflict in Canada. The Canadian government and its industrial leaders were worried, and not without cause, that Bolshevist revolutionary ideals would be transmitted to the large immigrant populations in Canada, and so they quickly dealt with organized radical resistance in a repressive manner.

North American Finns who sympathized or affiliated with left-wing movements before World War I had their ranks swell in the 1920s. American Finns began providing aid to the Soviet Union soon after the Russian Revolution. In 1920 the Finnish section of the American Socialist Party in Duluth organized a so-called “Russian Aid Committee” (Sevander 2006, 31). In the early and mid-1920s similar organizations mushroomed across the country. In charge of the first Soviet-Karelian Aid Committee in the United States was none other than Matti Tenhunen, who later would spearhead Karelian recruitment efforts in New York and Toronto in 1931.

The shock waves that the October Revolution sent throughout the world could not leave untouched the politicized, literate, and organized Finnish immigrant communities, the vast majority of whom represented the working classes, working on the railroads and in the coal mines of Minnesota, and laboring as lumberjacks and domestic servants in northern Ontario. The 1920s witnessed a substantial increase in the popularity of socialism and communism in North American immigrant communities. However, at the same time, as the popularity of socialist doctrines increased, so did the polarity inside the left-wing camp. The split, between those who saw the Soviet Union as a model of communist development and those who considered the Bolshevik state increasingly totalitarian with an ineffective economic system, shaped the nature of Karelian Fever. The radical communist faction, which eventually lost control over the profitable cooperative movement in the 1920s, led the recruitment to Karelia in the 1930s. Tenhunen and Oscar Corgan, two major figures in the struggle over control of the cooperative movement, became chief recruiters in the KTA office in New York (Kivisto 2008, 25).
Recruitment in North America

The 1920s also witnessed the first waves of North American Finnish migration to the Soviet Union. As early as 1921, several American groups had arrived in the Kuzbass region of southwestern Siberia. Further, in 1922, a group of eighty-eight American Finns arrived in the Soviet Union to establish a cooperative agricultural commune, Kylväjä (Sevander 1993, 35). Over the next several years, groups of Canadian Finns from northern Ontario and American Finns from Wisconsin and Illinois would establish similar communes, Säde and Työ respectively (Sevander 2006, 52). This early movement was in large part politically and ideologically motivated, and would differ substantially from the mass movement of the early 1930s, the driving force of which would become the deteriorating North American economy. This early migration was in large part successful, both from the migrants’ perspective and from the point of view of Soviet authorities. Those who returned to North America, and those who wrote back, were bearers of positive news about opportunities in the Soviet Union and the success rates of North American immigrants in the new land. Such reports would play a significant role in the decisions of North American Finns to go to Soviet Karelia in the early 1930s. Local, national, and international discourses of the 1920s help us better understand the movement that occurred in the 1930s.

Great Divide

There is a need to explain the Finns’ predisposition to left-wing politics in North America. The Finnish Civil War of 1918 had influenced the way many Finnish immigrants defined themselves in Canada and the United States. Finns, as many other ethnic groups, strongly identified with the national politics of the mother country. Political developments in Finland generated the conditions for the “Great Divide” in the Finnish community—a division between those who supported the conservative nationalist regime of the “White Guard” in Finland, and those who defended the cause of the “Red Guard,” composed of socialists and communists (Saarinen 1997, 21). This ideological split divided localities, communities, neighborhoods, and even families into warring camps. The presence of the Great Divide and the institutional character it bore with it are central to the history of early Finnish settlements in North America (Saarinen 1999, 3). In fact, it was only by the late 1980s that the subject of this Great Divide ceased to be a divisive force in Finnish North American communities (Saarinen 1999, 269).

Some scholars suggest that socialist consciousness was inherent to many Finnish immigrants even before they arrived in the New World. Other academics argue that the leaders of Finnish communities, the labor aristocracy, injected immigrant neighborhoods with the communist ideology. Nonetheless, there is a consensus that the development of socialist institutions and organizations was a phenomenon unique to the experience of Finnish communities in Canada and the United States. This
implies that the evolution of socialist organizations in North America by no means replicated institutional developments in Finland nor, on the other hand, was it totally alienated from events in the country of origin. Therefore, left-wing institutionalization and radical politicization of Finnish immigrants in North America was a result of a unique interaction between the host society and the Finnish community, which created a new social, cultural, and political Finno-Canadian and Finno-American identity. Arthur Puotinen, in his article, “Church and Labor Conflict in Northern Michigan,” argues that Finnish political radicalism in the United States developed according to the peculiar social conditions that the newly arrived experienced in the New World (1981). He also credits William Hoglund with capturing the unique essence of Finnish North American political radicalism: “if Finland prepared the immigrants for socialism, America ripened them” (143). Finns were one of the latest immigrant groups to arrive in Canada; they often occupied the most dangerous and low-paying positions in the Canadian labor force and, thus, were more vulnerable to radicalization. As a result, we can suggest with confidence that the radicalization of North American Finns occurred as a result of the unfavorable socio-economic conditions they inhabited in Canada and the United States.

![Figure 1: Labor Defender: “The 15th Year of Socialist Construction,” November 1931. National Archives of Canada, Group 28 IV, 4, reel M-7377.](image)

**MEDIA BACKDROP**

North American socialist publications such as *Työmies*, *Vapaa Sana*, and *Vapaus*, and also the socialist English-language press, provided coverage of developments in the
Soviet Union. The press persistently contrasted the promising future of the “workers’ paradise” to the present bleak life in the “land of opportunity.” The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 only intensified the press’s attacks on capitalism in North America.

The effect the media had on Karelian Fever cannot be stressed enough. The published images served their purpose well. The socialist media, particularly in Canada, were, like many media outlets, far from independent. For example, the Communist International continuously pressured the Communist Party of Canada (CPC) and its press organs to adopt the Third Period Policy in its agenda. In fact, it can be argued that from 1930 on, CPC’s policies and programs were determined by the narrowly-perceived diplomatic concerns of the Soviet bureaucracy (Angus 1981, 11).

In its reports, the radical press in Canada never passed an opportunity to draw the public’s attention to the achievements of the Soviet economy and to the breakdown of the capitalist system. For instance, The Daily Worker, a Communist Party newspaper in the United States, often accentuated the successes of the Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union. In one of the articles, entitled “Only in the USSR the Living Standards of the Working Class are Being Raised” (ca. 1931), the author highlights the contrast between the capitalist countries and the Soviet Union:

There is unprecedented, widespread unemployment, involving tens of millions, at the time when the employers are waging continuous attacks upon the already miserable wage-rates of the workers, when in the countries of capital unbearable and cruel slavery actually rules, in the Soviet Union the creative initiative of the wide working masses is steadily growing, wages are going up, the government social insurance funds increasing, unemployment liquidated, the cultural standards of the most backward people being raised.

The contrast between economic progress in the USSR and economic turmoil in the Western hemisphere was too remarkable to ignore. Dedication to the proletarian cause in the Soviet Union was also encouraged by the KTA recruiters in Vapaus columns. Matti Tenhunen often called on Finns to help the Soviet Union to implement its Five-Year Plan. He went on to publish a series of statistical data on industrial growth in the USSR and suggested that Soviet Karelia would fail without the assistance of foreign workers: “help is needed in lumber camps, river runs, saw mills, paper factories, fishing, agriculture, and construction” (Tenhunen, 1931). The combined efforts of the Comintern, the CPC, and the recruiters greatly contributed to the content that socialist media fed North American Finns. It fixated upon a certain image of work and life in the Soviet Union that
aimed to appeal to American- and Canadian-Finnish audiences, and to augment the sympathies of socialist followers disillusioned by the economic depression in North America.

Socialist media were also actively involved in the debate surrounding return migration in 1934–35. With the return of hundreds of disillusioned North American Finns from Karelia, many brought forward and published first-hand accounts of the dire economic conditions and the lack of political freedoms in the Soviet Union. To repel media attacks on the Soviet state, the radicals pressed harder with their own propaganda about Soviet achievements, discounting re-emigrants’ stories as bourgeois and anti-revolutionary. For example, in 1934, when two Finnish-Canadian newspapers, *Canadian Uutiset* and *Vapaa Sana*, published highly critical accounts written by returnees, the radical Vapaus Press responded with the release of a book entitled *Socialismin Voittokulku Karjalassa* [The Triumph of Socialism in Karelia] (Lindström 2008, 84). This book and similar publications in the newspaper *Vapaus* labeled returning immigrants as bourgeois saboteurs who were trying to stir Karelia and the Soviet Union into a war with Finland. The media were the most influential outlets through which information about Soviet Karelia could be made readily available and disseminated across North American Finnish communities.

**The “Karelian Project”**

A number of individuals on both sides of the Atlantic can be said to have had a disproportionately large impact in organizing, encouraging, and accelerating the “Karelian Project”—a scheme to bring North American Finnish workers to Karelia. In order to find leadership and organizational skill to recruit North American Finns, the Karelian government turned to the leaders of Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian communities. The KTA opened up in New York and Toronto in 1931. Matti Tenhunen was to lead the New York office, later to be replaced by Kalle Aronen and Oscar Corgan. In charge of recruitment operations in Canada was John Latva. Some historians suggest that men like Tenhunen were driven by financial motivations. Tenhunen allegedly received commissions for each immigrant he recruited, which became the main impetus for him to find as many recruits as possible. Others argue that recruiters were driven by ideological motives and worked in what they believed to be the best interest of their communities. While it is difficult to pass judgment as to what their true motives were, it is certain that their decisions and actions had a profound impact on the scope and nature of this migration. The recruiters answered directly to Soviet Karelia officials Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio, who, in turn, answered to the Kremlin. As a result, Tenhunen and Latva had a good deal of authority invested in them to organize the Karelian Project as they saw fit. Recruiters, however, faced many obstacles, both from North American Finnish communities and organizations, as well as from the CPUSA and the CPC, which protested against the
emigration of their party members to the Soviet Union, fearing it would weaken the class struggle in North America.

**SOVIET-KARELIAN INSTRUCTIONS: TENHUNEN-BUCK CORRESPONDENCE**

In May of 1931, with the opening of the KTA offices in Toronto, Tim Buck, head of the Canadian Communist Party, attempted to circumvent Tenhunen’s and Latva’s Canadian recruitment operations. In response, Tenhunen sent a series of letters to Buck in which he stated that a specific set of instructions had been sent from the “other side,” i.e., the Karelian leadership and other authorities in the Soviet state structure, and he, Tenhunen, was in charge. In this top-down manner, Tenhunen was to execute orders: “I have very close instructions from [the] other side,” wrote Tenhunen, “from both political and state offices . . . and we went on very nicely working out [the] program for this [Karelian] work on the basis of instructions and the general line set from [the] other side.” He continued, “This organization[al] structure of our Karelian working methods is just [a] duplication of methods applied in [the] US, approved by [the] secretariat here, a delegate in Moscow and approved by all of [the] SU offices, including CI” (Letter from Tenhunen to Tim Buck, May 17, 1931). Tenhunen also reminds Buck of the importance of the Five-Year Plan in the Soviet Union and of the role the Karelian Project was to play in its success. “This [Karelian] project is crucial for the Five-Year Plan,” wrote Tenhunen:
The Karelian question should not be understood as [a] loose economical move by some Karelian industrial experts. . . . It is not [a] question of bringing over some industrial workers to Karelia and try[ing] to solve the problem of [a] lack of workers. It is a step by Polcom [likely the Politburo of the CPSU] over there to solve several basic problems of Soviet Karelia.

When Buck wrote back that the executive committee of the CPC opposed the Karelian venture, Tenhunen immediately referenced the authority vested in him by Karelian leaders: “I think it is [an] error from part of [CPC] comrades if they think that this matter of bringing over about 3,000 workers from US and Canada before end of this year is for discussion.” According to Tenhunen, the recruitment process was not negotiable. Directives had been issued, and they were to be executed: “this matter is not nature of party discussion and it has not been [the] practice in the past to submit decision[s] of [the] Soviet Union for discussion” (Tenhunen to Buck, May 22, 1931). It follows that decisions for the recruitment were dictated all the way from the top, from the Communist officials in Karelia, Moscow, and the Communist International, and were not open to deliberation. Tenhunen allowed the CPC to deal only with matters such as inspecting the political background of the applicants. All financial and technical questions were to be handled by Tenhunen and Latva. Tenhunen also assured Buck that any doubts as to his authority in matters pertaining to recruitment could be quickly settled by contacting the Karelian leadership: “questions of my right to come and organize staff to work and ask you to give political guidance is very easily settled by wiring to other side” (ibid.).

In this same letter, Tenhunen similarly addresses attempts by the Finnish Organization of Canada (FOC) to interfere with the recruitment process. Tenhunen wrote, “The Finnish Bureau had very same opinion that this work must be done in name of Finnish Bureau Committee and under full control of Finnish Bureau or Party.” However, continued Tenhunen, “when the statement was brought up before the leaders in Karelia, they decided to favor of present form of organization we have in US . . . and declared its independency on technical and financial questions.” As a result, instructions from the other side were the guiding principles of the Karelian Project. Neither the CPC, nor the FOC, were allowed a say in the recruitment. The Kremlin and Karelian bosses called all the shots.

The exodus to Karelia was ordered and supervised from above, disseminated through the international communist hierarchy, from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the Comintern to Karelian authorities to the CPC and the FOC. The main design of the Karelian recruitment was executed to its desired conclusions. The Karelian exodus was in fact a “Karelian Project.” However, instructions from the Kremlin were often altered at the local level to satisfy the needs of different interest groups in Karelia and North America. In the same fashion, the masses of North
American Finns who were recruited for work in Karelia used the Karelian Project in their own interests. Although some Finns were persuaded by communist propaganda to help the Soviet Union build socialism, the majority treated the Karelian Project as an opportunity to escape Depression-stricken North America. These Finns in transition were opportunists in that respect. The Karelian exodus was sanctioned and executed from above, while the masses recruited had their own calculated reasons for immigrating to Karelia. This all generated a complex phenomenon—Karelian Fever.

**The Great Depression**

The exodus to Karelia must be placed in the context of the Great Depression. By 1932, the number of unemployed in Canada had reached six hundred thousand, or 32 percent of the population (Lindström 2004, 16). Finnish immigrants, many of whom arrived on the eve of the Depression, bore the most severe effects of the economic crisis. More than 36,000 Finns had arrived in Canada between 1921 and 1930 (17). In fact, among those who left for Karelia a few years later, more than 30 percent were unemployed (Sevander 2006). Moreover, the lack of unemployment insurance programs or any other forms of state support for the desperate made departure to Karelia ever more attractive.

In the early 1930s, capitalism went bankrupt, and with it withered away America’s image as the “land of opportunity.” For example, Aina Norkooli, a resident of Fort William, Ontario, in a letter addressed to her mother, complained about the intolerable conditions in Canada:

> Yes, Canada is at this time a land of misery and it is awful to watch the miserable groups of people who wander about the streets cold and hungry and spend their nights in trains and under the bridges or wherever they can lay down their heads. . . . I too would gladly go [to Karelia] but my husband won’t leave so I have to stay here in this wretched poverty. (Lindström 2004, 22)

By the early 1930s, for many workers Canada had become a land of misery and despair. Xenophobia, socioeconomic prejudice, and general patterns of sociopolitical exclusion—an inevitable response to an economic crisis—must also be taken into consideration. In addition to discrimination in the labor force, where newly arrived Finns were the first to get laid off and the last to get rehired, Red Finns faced state persecution for their communist affiliations. In 1931, the CPC was banned. Its leaders were arrested and their followers fell under suspicion. Many became subject to the close watch of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Finns represented a large percentage of the party’s membership. As a result, they were principally singled out for surveillance and political persecution. Many Finnish strikers and party members
were blacklisted, which made it even more difficult to get jobs (Lindström 2004, 22).

State-organized persecution amounted to a wave of deportations that ensured many Red Finns a one-way ticket overseas. For instance, the mayor of Sudbury, a city with a large concentration of Finns, went on record to ask the Dominion government “to deport all undesirables and Communists” (Balawyder 1972, 181). In this case, the issue was very clear: communists were not wanted in Canada. In her account of the history of deportation from Canada, Barbara Roberts highlights that the grounds for deportation in the early 1930s fell under five headings: “public charge,” “criminality,” “accompanying,” “medical causes,” and “other causes.” “Other causes” covered a multitude of sins, writes Roberts, while “vagrancy” was the most common criminal charge against radicals. Between 1931 and 1933, nearly eight hundred Finns were deported (1988, 134). Most were suspected of “dangerous radicalism,” although officially Finns were often accused of vagrancy, mental illness, or being an “expense to the government” (Lindström 2004, 21). For instance, in 1932, Arvi Tielinen, Thomas Pollari, Viljo Piispa, and Jaakko Mäkynen were convicted on “public charge grounds” for taking part in an unlawful assembly after they had marched in a parade in Timmins, Ontario. In less than a year, they were deported. Prominent individuals in Finnish-Canadian communities, such as Martin Parker (Pohjansalo), an associate editor of Vapaus, were often rounded up and deported (Roberts 1988, 143). In another case, in 1931, Arvo Vaara, the editor of Vapaus, was arrested for participating in a May demonstration, labeled a “particularly clever individual . . . and particularly dangerous,” and deported. “He is a menace to the existing economic and governmental structure of this country,” read the charge (144). In 1930 alone, 1,806 were deported on similar “public charges” grounds (“Bennett’s Answer”).

Facing towering numbers of unemployed, Canadian authorities found deportation an effective tool for solving the economic crisis. The Canadian radical press was persistent in its criticism of the government on this point. In 1930, an article in the Labor Defender, entitled “Bennett’s Answer to Unemployed—‘Deportation’” reads:

Of the 4,025 people deported from Canada during last year, the vast majority were deported because they were unemployed workers and their families who had to get relief because they were sick and could not pay their hospital bills, or because through unemployment and poverty they were driven to small acts of desperation.

Ethnics such as Finns, Hungarians, and Romanians experienced the double burden of the deportation process. In their home countries, the political regimes were anti-communist, and deportees found themselves persecuted from the moment of arrival. The total number of Finns deported between 1931 and 1933 represented
Recruitment in North America

2.3 percent of the total Finnish-born population in Canada. The Labor Defender also mentions a bill introduced, although not passed, in the Senate in July 1931. The bill called for every alien to register and acquire a special identification card with a picture, signature, and fingerprints. This compulsory registration, insisted the senator, “would be a check on the communist agitators acting under the direct instructions from Moscow who are taking advantage of the depression in an attempt to undermine the present social order in Canada” (“On the Canadian Defense Front”). What it meant for ethnic workers, reads the article, is “that any foreign born workers engaged in strike or any other revolutionary activity would be subject to deportation.” Varpu Lindström suggests that deportations had a profound psychological effect on Finnish communities (Lindström, 2004, 23). Individuals and families who witnessed their friends and relatives taken away from their homes and deported for their political beliefs were further persuaded to leave for Soviet Karelia when the opportunity presented itself.

Oiva Saarinen, an expert on Finnish settlements in the Sudbury area, considers specific regional factors that accelerated the emigration flow. For example, Aate Pitkänen, the Finnish-Canadian migrant to Karelia profiled in the documentary film, Letters from Karelia (Saxberg 2004), was compelled to leave by the alleged murder of two Canadian-Finnish union leaders in Thunder Bay in 1929. Saarinen stresses that

---

Figure 3: Labor Defender, “Bennett’s Answer to Unemployed—‘Deportation.’”
National Archives of Canada, Group 28 IV, 4, reel M-7377.
the causes of Karelian Fever are to be found in the mixture of economic and ideological paradigms that affected Finnish-Canadian workers. He suggests that Canadian Finns were not exposed to radicalism by simple communist or socialist agitation, but rather that radicalization occurred in response to the inhumane working conditions these immigrants faced during the Great Depression (Saarinen and Tapper 2004, 55). In other words, ideology served merely to reinforce and rationalize radicalism, otherwise created by harsh working conditions and fostered by the economic crisis.

Finns who lived in ethnic employment enclaves such as Sudbury were much more likely to immigrate to Karelia than, for example, rural North American Finns (Saarinen and Tapper 2004, 49). Radicalization of Finns was much more likely to occur in industrial hubs like Sudbury where Finns were often employed in the mining, construction, and lumber industries, which involved hard work, dangerous conditions, and no day-to-day job certainty. These factors contributed to labor unrest and to the immigrants’ participation in labor organizations. On the other hand, Finns in rural areas were not impacted as severely by the Depression as were industrial workers, and so their radicalism was much more passive in its manifestations. Local triggers are only one factor to take into consideration when examining voluntary migrations.

The Great Depression had severe economic and sociopolitical repercussions for immigrant communities. In particular, it negatively affected those who arrived on the eve of the Depression in the 1920s, among whom Finns were in a majority. The economic turmoil led to increased unemployment, poverty, nativist intolerance, and, thus, a general sense of vulnerability and despair among new settlers. By the early 1930s, driven by economic insecurities and persecuted by the state for association with communist organizations, many Canadian Red Finns found migration to Karelia an attractive change of scenery.

**Public Discourse in the United States of the 1930s**

In 1933 Ralph Henry Smith, a principal at a junior high school in New York Mills, Minnesota, published his master’s thesis, *A Sociological Survey of the Finnish Settlement of New York Mills, Minnesota and its Adjacent Territory*. A critical reading of this primary source provides a good idea of how Finnish-American socialists fared in the 1930s. In 1929 Smith became a principal at a junior high school in New York Mills, a community with one of the largest contingents of rural Finns. His attachment to the Finnish community was solidified in his marriage to a Finnish ethnic from the area, Lila Mildred Oman, who served as a translator for his project. Given Smith’s personal attachment to the Finnish segment of the New York Mills region, his work becomes more than simply a “sympathetic” account of the Finnish community; it becomes almost apologetic. Smith’s main aim in the book is to show that the Finnish “element” in the United States assimilates with relative ease, is prone to amalgamation,
Recruitment in North America

and, thus, is desirable for American citizenship. Taking into account that Smith was writing in the early 1930s, today’s reader detects a conflict in the author’s narrative between a caring predisposition towards the Finnish community and the general discourse of the social sciences in the United States at that time, which sought to classify immigrants as desirable or undesirable elements. Smith’s work then is an attempt “to promote a sounder mutual understanding” between the Finnish immigrant experience and the prevalent discourse of American sociocultural hegemony (Smith [1933] 2005, 221). For example, Smith argues that although customs such as the sauna remain an important component of the community’s life, most features distinguishing Finns as Finns, such as clothing and language, are rapidly eliminated, making the “foreigner, the Finn . . . a good American citizen” (Smith [1933] 2005, 183).

The discussion of communism in the community also carries an apologetic overtone. Smith is far from sympathetic to communism. Although he attempts to be objective of the communist factor in the community’s life, he nonetheless argues that although the ideology had the support of a small minority in the area, “to most of these Finnish people the doctrines of communism are very obnoxious” (121). Smith is eager to demonstrate that the popular sentiment characterizing Finns as communists is misleading and unfounded, given that most of the Finns are very orthodox in their political thinking. A critical analysis of Smith’s master’s thesis speaks volumes about public discourses prevalent in the United States in the 1930s. Assimilation of immigrants was a priority; communism was seen as a threat; and immigrants who were communists were deemed, both by authorities and the public, dangerous and undesirable.

Karelian Fever: A Reaction from Below

The oft-cited reasons for the Karelian exodus include political and ideological convictions, the effects of the Great Depression, a sense of adventure, and a cultural nostalgia for Finland (Vähämäki 2008, 154). Börje Vähämäki, in his “Memoir Accounts of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s,” looks at three different memoirs and comes to the conclusion that the causes of migration differed from individual to individual and from one family to another. The three accounts Vähämäki looks at are the following: Mayme Sevander’s They Took My Father [2004]; Christer Boucht’s Karjala Kutsui (Summoned by Karelia) [1983] — an account of the experiences of Finnish Canadians Aino and Eino Streng; and Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin’s Russia [1991], written by Lawrence and Sylvia Hokkanen. In all three memoirs, Vähämäki finds different motives for going to Karelia.

Aino and Eino Streng did not care much about politics and were attracted to the idea by the advertisements they saw in Finnish halls and in the newspapers. The Strengs were particularly moved by one of John Latva’s speeches, in which he criticized the current economic conditions in North America and praised economic
and cultural achievements in the Soviet Union. Aino was unemployed and had poor English-language skills, which further solidified the Strengs’ decision to emigrate. The couple decided to get married and to go to Karelia for a three-year honeymoon. According to Sevander, at the same time, Oscar Corgan and most other North American Finns who went to Karelia were moved first and foremost by ideological considerations. The ideology of utopian communism as well as North American Finnish roots in communist and socialist organizations were the primary factors that propelled the exodus to Karelia. Essentially, Sevander suggests that the decision of Finns to emigrate was dictated by the prospects of socialism and nationalism in Karelia rather than by its prospects for employment and security. In defense of her argument, Sevander mentions several wealthy individuals, who despite their relative socioeconomic security in North America, nonetheless, opted out for a new life in the first workers’ state (see Sevander 2006). In her book, *Skitaltsi* [Wanderers], she attributes Karelian Fever to what she terms “ideological fanaticism.” On the other hand, according to the Hokkanens, the decision to go was based largely on economic considerations. The Hokkanens were fluent in English and, for the most part, apolitical. As a result, it is difficult to pinpoint one definitive factor that made the movement possible, especially if we look at the social history of immigration. Individual cases seem to demonstrate that decisions to go were complex and depended upon an array of social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological factors.

The social and economic status of the immigrants was another determining factor as to who could go to Soviet Karelia. The poorest of North American Finns could not move to Karelia unless some organization covered their transportation costs. A vast majority of immigrants had to pay for their own travel, and they also had to be able to contribute to the Karelian Machine Fund. In fact, the first question on the immigration application asked applicants to list the amount of money they would be contributing to the fund if approved for immigration. In 1935, several thousand Canadians were still willing to go to Karelia, but they did not have the funds to cover their transportation. Gender also had an impact on the nature of the Karelian exodus. Women were less affected by the Great Depression than men and thus were less inclined to immigrate. Further, Soviet officials made it clear that they were interested in unmarried, skilled men from North America to work in the lumber, mining, and construction industries. Family migration was not discouraged; however, it was not encouraged either.

**DEMOGRAPHICS OF MIGRATION**

Who were the North American Finns? A statistical analysis of the immigration data reveals several important findings. First, literature on Karelian Fever lumps Americans and Canadians together in the general narrative, drawing few distinctions between the North American neighbors. The local populace in Karelia, as well as
Recruitment in North America

the Soviet authorities, made little distinction between the two groups. Soviet state organs often indiscriminately grouped all North Americans under one or the other rubric. For instance, lumberjacks were usually referred to as Canadians, although data reveal that more than 40 percent of the workers from the United States were also registered as lumberjacks. On the other hand, locals often referred to all newcomers as Americans, despite the fact that every third immigrant from the continent was Canadian.

There are several explanations for this trend. One is the preeminence of the United States on the global stage at the time, and Canada’s international reputation as Great Britain’s dominion. Another reason is the ambiguous meaning of the word America in English, as it is more commonly used to refer to the United States of America. In the minds of Russians and Soviets, the far away North American continent had become synonymous with the United States, which, thanks to Soviet state propaganda, was seen as a capitalist, exploitative, and crime-ridden nation, but, at the same time, bountiful and full of opportunities—in short, America.

The social composition of American and Canadian groups reveals differences that are worth noting. Although the disparity is not sweeping, it is significant in that it reflects the diverse causes of migration embedded in the divergent political, economic, and social conditions in the United States and Canada in the years of the Fever. For example, there was a significant discrepancy in the ratio of unmarried immigrants. Whereas every fifth immigrant from the United States was single, almost 40 percent of Canadians were unattached. There was also a considerable age difference between the two groups. Canadian immigrants were younger than Americans. For instance, single Canadians predominated in the 22–30 age group, while there were almost four times as many American singles than Canadians in the 41–50 group. Eighty-five percent of Canadian immigrants were under the age of thirty, compared to only 58 percent of Americans. Lindström provides one explanation for the age difference between Canadian and American immigrants when she notes that immigrants from Finland came to Canada in the 1920s, several decades later than to the United States. They were single and, hit by the Depression, did not manage to settle down before Karelian Fever brought them to the Soviet Union (Lindström 2007, 20).

Second, figures reveal that migration to Karelia was largely a family-oriented movement and, in some respects, a chain migration, albeit an explosive and a short one (Efremkin 2008). Nearly 75 percent of all immigrants came as part of immediate families, as husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, children, brothers, and sisters. Only one of every four immigrants was single.

Karelian Fever had all the attributes of a chain migration, which means that it could have potentially seen an even larger number of North American Finns settle in Soviet Karelia. KTA advertisements, sponsored by the Soviet state and by private initiatives in the United States, targeted a specific ethnic and social group. The ads
about transportation, accommodations, and social conditions in the host country made information readily available for potential immigrants. Moreover, recruiters targeted those people who led lives that could be very easily adapted to the socioeconomic conditions immigrants expected to face in Soviet Karelia; they targeted Finns, socialists, and workers. The Fever began in 1931 and spilled into 1932, revealing the success of the recruitment policy.

Some of the fundamental factors that transform a movement of people into a transplanted community and create ethnic enclaves (or in other words chain migration) include the correspondence by which emigrants inform those who stayed behind of new opportunities and the remittances sent back to help those left behind to immigrate. In the case of North American Finnish migration to Soviet Karelia, these factors failed to materialize and for different reasons. First, letters sent back from Karelia more often than not brought negative news about social, cultural, and economic conditions in Karelia. Although some praised the economic achievements of the young Soviet state, most complained about dreadful living conditions and the almost complete absence of cultural life; they sometimes even hinted at unemployment. Negative correspondence significantly reduced the number of potential recruits. Nonetheless, many were still willing to go to Karelia, and in 1935, as many as three thousand Canadians were waiting for Soviet visas.

Second, remittances, or the money sent back to the home country, usually contribute to both the funding of and the interest in continuous migration. Although I have no data available on the capital that American and Canadian Finns sent back home, my guess would be that the sums were not large. Records show that North American Finns often complained about being underpaid, not paid on time, or even unemployed. Despite the fact that North American professionals in Karelia were better paid than the local population and enjoyed better living conditions, these American and Canadian Finns, by North American standards, did not make sufficient amounts of money to arouse the interest of other North American Finns to follow in their footsteps. Remittances meant the possibility of success for potential migrants, but news of success hardly ever arrived.

Further, numbers show that North American immigrants were predominately male; women represented only a third of the movement. The numerical superiority of men in the movement can partially be explained by labor market conditions in North America. In Canada, for instance, Finnish women enjoyed a better economic situation than Finnish men. Most women were employed as domestic workers, an industry that had not suffered as severely from the Depression, as had the lumber, construction, and farming industries, where the majority of men were employed (Lindström 2007, 12). As with other mass migrations, mobility was heavily influenced by gender, social class, and age.
A striking statistic: 1,064 single men arrived in Karelia and only twenty-five single women. The ratio of single men to single women in the movement was forty-two to one. Lindström and Samira Saramo, leading specialists in the field, have shown that Finnish socialist women, although restricted by domestic, economic, and social factors, were in many respects not less radical than their male compatriots (Lindström 2004; Saramo 2009). If we take this premise as a point of departure, then we can draw a direct link between the economic effects of the Depression on North American socialist Finns and the fundamental causes of the Karelian Fever. One of the main reasons why more men than women went to Karelia was because the Depression did not affect women as harshly as it did men. North American Finns were lumberjacks (48 percent), carpenters (18 percent), construction workers (8 percent), drivers (5 percent), and sawyers (4 percent). It is important to underline that these numbers are representative only of men. Women were, for the most part, registered under a husband’s profession and place of employment. Only in certain cases were the profession and place of employment indicated for women. Among American immigrants, thirty-eight women were registered as officially employed and only seven on the Canadian side. However, lists of the repressed, those arrested in 1936–38, show many more women being employed in the Soviet economy, with the majority occupying the position of homemaker.

What appears to be similar in American and Canadian immigration patterns is the timing of arrival in Karelia. Both groups entered Karelia in roughly equal relative numbers by year, month, and sometimes even day. The pace, the rate, and the pattern of immigrant arrivals in Karelia leave aside any doubt that it was in fact a “fever.”
Moreover, as figure 5 clearly demonstrates, the exodus coincided with the rise of unemployment in Canada and the United States.

Notwithstanding the effects of the Great Depression, the rise and decline of the Fever cannot be explained solely by economic conditions in North America. The political and economic context of immigration policies in the Soviet Union also must be taken into account. The escalating number of immigrants in 1931 and 1932, and their decline in the mid-1930s, was in large part due to decisions made by Soviet authorities. In February 1931, the Soviet Politburo gave a green light to Gylling’s request to bring 2,000 lumberjacks from Canada and the United States. Three months later, KTA offices were opened in New York and Toronto to facilitate recruitment among North American Finns. In September of the same year, the Politburo agreed to admit another 785 North American construction workers, mechanics, and other skilled workers (Takala 2007, 40). In the spring of 1932, the Politburo sanctioned the recruitment of 250 fishermen from North America to Karelia (45). Similarly, a crucial role was played by Gylling and Rovio, heads of the Karelian government and, in essence, masterminds of the Karelian Fever. They continuously lobbied the Kremlin for additional visa permits.

![Unemployment and Fever rates](image)

**Figure 5: Unemployment and Fever Rates.**

Karelian Fever broke out in the autumn of 1931 and lasted until the closing months of 1932. Figure 6 demonstrates its rise and decline. In August 1931, eight weeks following the opening of KTA offices, more than one hundred people arrived in Karelia. The next month, the influx soared to 226, or 12 percent of the total of those who arrived in 1931. In October and November, the Fever hit North American Finnish communities. In these months, more than one thousand made their way to
Recruitment in North America

Karelia, representing 26 percent of all those who arrived between 1930 and 1933. For the next several months, the fever continued fluctuating, and the immigration flow was significantly reduced in the spring of 1932. However, in the summer and autumn of 1932, the influx soared again. In the sixteen months spanning from September 1931 to December 1932, 3,376 North American Finns had come to the Soviet Union. The last large wave of immigrants arrived in the fall of 1933. However, its volume was significantly smaller than in previous years.

There are various political, economic, social, and cultural factors that explain Karelian Fever. However, Politburo directives throughout 1931, Gylling’s efforts to Finnicize Karelia, and the effects of the Great Depression explain best the driving forces of Karelian Fever. These factors also help to clarify the reasons for a drastic decrease in the number of immigrants despite the continuing high rates of unemployment in 1933 and 1934. Sources indicate that many still expressed a strong desire to go. Irina Takala writes that by September 1935, more than 3,000 people (2,232 Canadians and 971 Americans) were ready to embark on a transatlantic journey. However, hit by the Depression, they did not have the means to pay for transportation, and the Soviet authorities refused to subsidize their travel (Takala 2007, 45). Thus, high unemployment rates continued to generate willing immigrants despite the negative correspondence many Finns in Canada and the United States received from friends and family in the Soviet Union.

The KTA offices could no longer facilitate the transfer of North American Finns. The steady depreciation of KTA activities in New York and Toronto resulted from the lack of funds that immigrants in 1933 and 1934, in the midst of the
Depression, could contribute to the Machine Fund, which was a crucial element in the entire Karelian migration scheme. Moreover, Soviet state political offices (in particular the OGPU) were for a long time reserved about American and Canadian immigration, and in due time limited the influx of North American Finns to Karelia by reducing the number of issued visa permits.

CONCLUSION
There was nothing inevitable in the decisions of North American Finns to migrate en masse to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. The long-term causes of the movement can be traced back to the October Revolution and the Finnish Civil War; both events sowed the seeds for the Great Divide in North American Finnish communities. The 1920s witnessed the radicalization of Finns in North America, both by external and internal factors, a process that reached its zenith with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. Short-term causes can be linked directly to the opening of the KTA offices in New York and Toronto in May of 1931. The opening of the recruiting offices, led by well-established socialists in North American Finnish communities, facilitated a well-planned and organized enrollment and transfer of North American Finns to the Soviet Union. Whereas there was a sparse migration trickle in the 1920s, it was in the early 1930s that immigration assumed a mass character with the approval of Soviet authorities to bring large numbers of skilled workers to the republic, and with the information disseminated throughout North American Finnish communities by the recruiters. The promise of free education and healthcare, full employment, and a Finnish-language environment proved too difficult to resist. If we remember, too, that the Soviet Union was a sort of a Mecca for socialist followers, then the enthusiasm of North American Finns for moving to the Soviet Union appears as a calculated and rational impulse.

Researchers in the field tend to waver between the ideological and the economic explanations for Karelian Fever. While I have demonstrated a materialist approach to the topic, by no means have I attempted to exclude the ideological or cultural components of the movement. The economic and ideological factors do not exclude, but rather reinforce each other. While I contend that the immigrants’ choices were calculated and rational, I also reinforce the ideological argument as much as the economic. Many were opportunists and took advantage of the opportunity when it presented itself with the opening of the KTA offices in New York and Toronto. There is a wide and false association of ideological conviction with some kind of sociopolitical fanaticism. Given that the word ideology is often associated with repressive regimes of the twentieth century, and carries negative connotations, Karelian Fever then comes to be explained in straightforward terms: these immigrants were communist to the core (in fact, it is unthinkable to think otherwise), were blinded by their socialist belief, and there was nothing stopping them from going to the USSR.
My research and emphasis on economic factors aims to correct the simplicity of accounts that see North American Finns only through the ideological lens. These were rational individuals in the sense that they made rational choices that they thought would benefit them and their families in the short and long term. As I have shown through several examples, decisions of North American Finnish families to go to Karelia were based on as many factors as there were families. Some families were moved by political and ideological considerations, others wanted to be closer to Finland, while others were desperate to find employment. The vast majority held socialist convictions, almost all of them spoke the Finnish language and were of Finnish heritage, and a large portion was unemployed. On the macro level then, cultural, ideological, and economic factors came together in the early 1930s to make this movement possible. It is important to remember that no matter how strong were immigrants’ desires to go to Karelia, most would have never had the opportunity if not for the efforts of Karelian leaders to get permits from the Kremlin to bring North American Finns across the Atlantic. As a matter of fact, the decisions to bring these immigrants to work in Karelia were also based on a mixture of economic, cultural, and ideological factors, but that is another story.
Works Cited


*The Daily Worker*. [ca. 1931]. “Only in the USSR the Living Standards of the Working Class are Being Raised.”


The Harsh Reality of Fine Words: The Daily Implementation of Immigration Policies in Soviet Karelia

Alexey Golubev, Petrozavodsk State University
Irina Takala, Petrozavodsk State University

Abstract
This article considers the immigration of North American Finns to Soviet Karelia through the prism of daily life. It focuses on how governmental directives were implemented at the local level, and how the challenges of daily life forced the immigrants to re-evaluate the decision to move eastwards across the Atlantic, as well as the socialist project in general. In the first section, the article examines the motives of the immigrants with an emphasis on frictions between multiple Soviet state agencies. Since the motives of these agencies were different and sometimes directly contradictory to one another, the organization of immigration was from the very beginning plagued with inefficient management, indifference to arriving immigrants, and negligence of the conditions in which the immigrants were to live and work. The article discusses the conditions of housing and work and food, the three main spheres in which the Soviet Karelian leadership failed to satisfy demands of the immigrants, primarily because a long bureaucratic chain of management was too inflexible to introduce effective solutions. The article then considers the immigrants’ responses to their dissatisfaction with daily life, from re-emigration to adaptation to attempts to improve the quality of life without relying on official assistance.

Gylling Puts His Eyes on the American Continent
The “nationalities question” had dominated the history of Soviet Karelia from its establishment in 1920. Attempts to build a new revolutionary culture based on Finnish and Karelian ethnicities legitimated and justified the position of the Red Finns in power. Yet these efforts—and, consequently, the leadership of the Red Finns—were challenged by social changes in Soviet Karelia brought about by large-scale Russian immigration during the 1920s. By the early 1930s, Edvard Gylling and his government were losing the struggle to keep the number of Finno-Ugric people in Karelia at least equal to its Russian population. When, with the beginning of accelerated industrialization, the government of Soviet Karelia faced severe labor shortages that demanded large-scale immigration, it therefore considered it a vitally important
opportunity to rebuild the Finno-Ugric majority in the republic. Initially, the government constructed plans in which Finland became the main source of labor immigration to Karelia. In December 1929, the Karelian government sent an official letter to the Soviet leadership, describing the difficult situation in the Karelian timber industry caused by an insufficient labor force and suggesting that suitable workers be recruited from Finland:

In order to accelerate the formation of the workforce and to create groups of enthusiastic labor, we are planning to recruit a certain number of qualified lumberjacks from the northern and central parts of Finland where a large proletarian class of lumberjacks already exists. They are known for their high qualifications and work efficiency, and are, besides, accustomed to the climate and conditions of northern Karelia. (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 17/187, l. 5)

Then followed a request for immigration permits for three hundred Finnish lumberjacks and their families who were supposed to settle in the northern Karelian villages of Ukhta and Kestenga.

This proposal was met with strong opposition from central Soviet bodies. Most objections came from the People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the early Soviet police unit, United State Political Directorate (OGPU). The former argued that the immigration of Finnish lumberjacks to Karelia would weaken the Finnish working class and result in an outflow of Soviet currency from the USSR because Finnish workers would have to support their relatives who remained in Finland. Inadequate living conditions in places where immigrants were supposed to work also became an object of concern. An exposure to daily Soviet realities could “give the reverse results, as due to difficulties in the new place [settlers] will become much less disposed to the Soviet order” (ibid., l. 11). Re-emigration would become unavoidable, which would damage the image of the USSR among the Finnish proletariat (ibid.).

At the same time, the Karelian leadership considered the possible recruitment of Canadian workers, an issue that was also resisted by Soviet national security bodies, though in this case the factor of border proximity could be disregarded (ibid., l. 15). In an attempt to push forward this initiative, Karelian authorities explained that a proposal had been received from a group of Canadian lumberjacks who wanted to come to Karelia as labor immigrants. Gylling’s government stressed that these people, who “would take with them their work equipment, could bring and rapidly introduce American\(^1\) ways of working in forest harvesting” (ibid., l. 5).

\(^1\) Throughout the entire history of North American immigration to Soviet Karelia, Soviet authorities would often confuse the terms Canadian and American, regularly using the latter as a synonym for North American (as in this quotation) and occasionally the former to refer to immigrants from both Canada and the United States.
The refusals did not discourage Gylling and his government. In March 1930, they sent another official letter to the Soviet government, insisting that the Karelian timber industry be radically reorganized and a permanent workforce of forest and industrial workers be created. They argued that if the Finnish lumberjacks from Canada settled in Karelia, they could help local workers to “most rapidly learn foreign methods of forest harvesting,” as Canadian Finns had experience with cutting-edge technologies as well as “the highest labor productivity in the world” (ibid., ls. 23–24).

In the same letter, Karelian authorities outlined how they envisioned the organization of Finnish immigration from Canada and what work and living conditions could be created for Canadian workers. To address the concerns of the Soviet security bodies, immigrants were to undergo a very careful selection. The size of the group would be limited to only slightly over fifty, and its members were to be selected from former participants in the Finnish Civil War on the Red side, who, by that time, had to be members of one of the radical workers’ organizations or of the Communist Party of Canada. Each of the lumberjacks was to have at least three hundred dollars for transportation, work clothes, and tools.

At the same time, the management of Karelles, the main state-owned trust in the Karelian timber industry, which would employ these immigrants, realized that most of these men were currently unemployed because of the Great Depression. Management intended to provide ten thousand rubles for their transportation and five thousand dollars for the purchase of equipment that the immigrants could bring into the country for the needs of the Karelian timber industry. The immigrants were supposed to take up residence in a specially built settlement that would be located close to one of the best collective farms in Karelia. This was also an essential provision: the Soviet Union at that time was experiencing severe food shortages, and the proximity of a good collective farm would allow direct supplies of food for Canadian workers to be organized from it. The management of Karelles decided that Finnish-Canadian immigrants would work as their own team, rather than to be split into mixed groups with local workers. To monitor the quality and quantity of the work, Karelles intended to appoint a representative who, however, “wouldn’t have a right to interfere in their work process and in the organization of work” (ibid., ls. 23–24). This measure was intended to avoid the negative experience of earlier Soviet recruitment campaigns, when foreign workers, dissatisfied with the poor management of local authorities as well as language problems, re-emigrated from the USSR. Finally, permission for the immigrants’ entry was given, and on September 25, 1930, the first small group of Finnish lumberjacks from Canada came to Karelia.

A Canadian logging crew was sent to a harvesting camp near the recently established settlement of Matrosy (in Finnish, Matroosa) located thirty-five kilometers from Petrozavodsk. Before the arrival of the Canadian lumberjacks, the main
workforce there had been peasants recruited from the central Russian regions. They had no experience with forestry work and, consequently, were not very efficient workers. New tools and methods for harvesting the forest, brought by the immigrants, as well as the introduction of ice roads for the transportation of logs, allowed for a sharp rise in the level of production. The Canadian crew used bow and crosscut saws of a new design for felling trees; sledges and skidders for pulling cut trees out of a forest; and horse- or tractor-driven derricks for the loading, unloading, and piling of logs. In January 1931, Väinö Järvi, one of the crew members, wrote to the newspaper Punainen Karjala (Red Karelia) that the experience and skills of the Canadian lumberjacks had to be disseminated among all Karelian forestry workers in order to increase work efficiency. Soon Matrosy, along with other timber industry settlements where North American lumberjacks worked, including Vilga, Interposiolok, and the logging camp Lososinkij, became the centers where the latest technologies for forest harvesting and transportation were taught to local workers.

The entry of this first group of lumberjacks paved the way for the mass migration of North American Finns to Soviet Karelia. Organizations and factories interested in hiring qualified workers were soon sending multiple applications to the government of Karelia describing an urgent need for a qualified foreign labor force. This could not have been more timely, as it coincided with the first sparks of enthusiasm from across the Atlantic Ocean. When news of labor opportunities in Karelia reached the North American Finnish communities, more Finnish immigrants expressed their wish to move to Karelia. By August 1930, 176 applications from Finnish workers in the United States and Canada had been sent to Karelia. The applicants included lumberjacks, builders, mechanics, electricians, smiths, and more. Of these, 140 people had already formed organized groups under the direction of members of the American and Canadian Communist parties (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 15/163, l. 43). Taking into account the positive reaction in North American Finnish communities and the demands of local industry, the authorities in Karelia drafted a more ambitious plan to recruit one thousand Finns. In late September, this plan was discussed at a session of the Council of People’s Commissars (Soviet Narodnykh Kommissarov, SNK) of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR). After revisions, Karelia obtained the right to recruit 885 workers from the United States, Canada, and Sweden (1,485 with family members), who had to enter the Soviet Union before October 1, 1931 (ibid., l. 45).

Permission was secured from the top of the Soviet state hierarchy. The margins of Gylling’s letter to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) (All-Union Communist Party [Bolsheviks]) on the issues of immigration policy included his personal note: “According to information directly from Kirov, the approval is
secured. I have preliminarily agreed on this question with Stalin and Molotov.”3 The final decision was made in March 1931. Resolution No. 35 of the Government of the USSR (SNK of the USSR), dated March 5, stated: “Soviet Karelia’s government is permitted to recruit up to 2000 qualified workers from Canada for forest harvesting operations in Karelia” (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 19/213, l. 2). In September 1931, Soviet authorities agreed that 785 additional foreign workers could move to Soviet Karelia as labor immigrants (NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, ls. 1–2). These permissions, granted by the top Soviet authorities, were later used by Gylling’s government to repel attempts by various state bodies, including the OGPU, People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, and the Supreme Customs Administration, to slow the flow of immigration.

Thus, Finnish immigration from the United States and Canada became a project that involved multiple state agencies. As each pursued its own goals, and since all were within the state hierarchy, their actions affected the lives of immigrants. Only the Red Finnish leadership of Karelia was sincerely interested in this immigration. Supreme Soviet authorities regarded immigrants as a solution to the labor shortages, but from the early days of the immigration there was also persistent opposition. Consequently, at lower levels of the Soviet Karelian state and party bureaucracy where Finns never were a majority, a two-faced attitude toward immigrants was reflected in the implementation of a contradictory policy. Soviet officials of lower ranks tended to adopt the skepticism of the central authorities rather than the enthusiasm of the Red Finns. This skeptical attitude shaped the daily life of immigrants much more than all the good words delivered by the leadership of Soviet Karelia.

Housing Conditions

When American immigrants recalled their first impressions of Soviet Karelia, they often—if not always—remembered the shock of the housing conditions in which they had to live. Housing was one of the most painful social problems for the Soviet regime, and Karelian authorities put much effort into preparing suitable housing for the North American immigrants. In March 1931, for example, a large meeting was organized in the People’s Commissariat of Labor of Karelia and attended by representatives of all current and future employers of North American Finns. At the meeting, new rules regulating the accommodation of workers were established as the Karelian leadership had by that time already become worried by the high rate of turnover among North American workers and their ensuing departure from Karelia. Among the most important agreements reached during the meeting was the one that set new norms for housing conditions for foreign workers—one room for two single men and one or two rooms for one family. To ease the adaptation process, the

3 Vyacheslav Molotov (1890–1986), a prominent Bolshevik leader, at that time the chairman of the Soviet government.
meeting also resolved to keep arriving foreigners together in large groups assigned to factories and logging camps so that they might live in relatively compact and homogeneous communities (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 230, ls. 11–13).

These administrative efforts proved, however, ineffective. In the Soviet Karelia of the 1930s, it was barely possible to provide North American workers with the conditions to which they were accustomed. Housing conditions shocked the immigrants: they were not used to living in bunkhouses, five to six people to a room, without any facilities. It was not uncommon that two or three immigrant families had to share one room. Sometimes accommodations had no electricity or furniture, were swarming with bugs, and were unfit for the winter. A typical reaction to such conditions was recalled in a memoir by Christer Boucht, who remembered children crying all night long as they had to sleep on rigid benches in rooms stuffed with up to twenty-five people. Their house—a bunkhouse, or barrack—was so dilapidated that inhabitants could see the sky through cracks in its roof (1973, 73).

In the immigrants’ dreams—and probably in the stories of American and Canadian recruiters—Petrozavodsk was a large beautiful city with straight and broad streets, multi-story buildings, and many parks and gardens (Boucht 1973, 66). In reality, in the early 1930s, the capital of Karelia was a small and dirty town with less than a third of the streets paved, cows and goats grazing at the crossroads, and few streetlights. Horses were the major means of transportation. The electric power supply was often cut, and almost a quarter of the population lived without it at all. There was no sewage system or centralized water supply. Over 97 percent of the housing in Petrozavodsk consisted of one- or two-unit wooden houses. Much of the housing was old, and new houses had not been built since World War I. On average, one apartment was the residence for up to six people, and most of these apartments had only one room (Pashkov and Filimonchik 2001, 87). Many families could not even dream of an apartment of their own and had to rent a room or even just part of a room. Extreme overcrowding with poor sanitary conditions led to a high incidence of disease as well as a high mortality rate (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 154, ls. 63–64).

Under such conditions, local authorities could provide immigrants with no other type of housing but barrack-type bunkhouses. Memoirs of immigrants and archival documents offer similar accounts of the conditions in which people were forced to live for many months. The passage below describes the living conditions for foreign workers employed by one of the Petrozavodsk building companies:

The bunkhouses given to the foreign workers are unfit for the winter time (thin walls provide little protection from the cold). The norms [established for living conditions] are rudely violated, the living quarters are overcrowded as several families live in one room. The bunkhouses for workers with families are not equipped with stoves, electric lighting is
very weak. As a rule, furniture is not available. Extreme overcrowding of the bunkhouses resulted in the abundance of bugs in them. [...] There are cases of mass diseases, especially among children. (NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 23)

Multiple official resolutions in 1931 and 1932 insisted on the necessity “to oblige all economic organizations responsible for the admission of the immigrants to increase the rate of building of new houses and infrastructure.” The building of housing for the immigrants was proclaimed as “over-urgent, the first to be provided with funding, building materials and labor force, so that the deadline of its completion could be met straight in time” (NARK, f. R-690, o. 6, d. 4/12, ls. 218–20). Yet change came very slowly. Numerous inspections of the immigrants’ living conditions, which had been regularly organized since 1931, revealed that none of the Karelian organizations that employed immigrant workers completed their plans in time. Most often they lacked building materials and sufficient labor (NARK, f. 3, o. 2, d. 790, ls. 5–11, 53–64, 86–87). One inspection in the autumn of 1932 found that some of the houses occupied by foreign workers had no stoves, and that their roofs were leaking to such an extent that some rooms were completely unfit for use when it rained. Appeals to the administrators of the enterprises where they worked brought no results. At one point, repairs were started but then stopped because of a lack of nails (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 22/254, l. 53).

In numerous logging camps where North American Finns worked, the housing question was even worse during the early stages of immigration. People were often settled in temporary worker huts unfit for the winter and lacking any facilities. Inspectors from Petrozavodsk reported that one of the bunkhouses in Matrosy, housing twelve families primarily from Canada, had no ovens and only two stoves located in corridors, which were too weak to heat the entire house. The kitchen and dining room were in a particularly bad state, as they were dirty and dark, and had no washing facilities or even enough flatware (NARK, f. 3, o. 3, d. 256, l. 29). In some places, accommodations were simply unavailable. For example, in the village of Shunga, where sixty-one North American miners (along with forty-eight family members) worked during the summer of 1932, the workers had to huddle in the houses of local peasants, because the mine had no residential buildings of its own (NARK, f. 3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 86).

Initially, the North American Finns responded enthusiastically to the inspections, hopeful that they would bring immediate results. However, the inspectors had no real power to improve even the worst housing conditions. Without real leverage to affect the management of organizations employing foreign workers, all inspectors could do was to pass formal resolutions: “to purchase water tanks within two weeks” or “to get rid of cockroaches within ten days” (NARK, f. 3, o. 3, d. 256, l. 115).
Sometimes the recommendations of the inspectors were just absurd: “it is suggested that the sewage must be constructed within three days” (ibid.).

Soon immigrants realized that there was no point in waiting for help from above and started to solve their housing problems themselves. Initially, immigrants built temporary housing that was quite different from local bunkhouses. A whole American Town emerged in the southern part of Petrozavodsk, comprising eight two-story houses with two separate porches. These houses were divided into four sections, each with eight rooms and a shared kitchen. The toilet was outside, in the yard, but was kept in excellent sanitary condition. There also was a large playground for children and a sports field between the houses (Takala and Golubev 2007, 107; Sevander 2006, 69).

Later, immigrants organized building cooperatives, pooling their financial resources and building their own houses. It was in this way that the first three cooperative houses were erected near Lake Onega in Petrozavodsk, soon followed by one more; the latter was immediately dubbed a foreign currency house (Sevander 2006, 69). Two-room apartments with separate kitchens and premises for bathroom units (not operable yet because of the lack of a water supply system and a sewage) became objects of envy and desire for local residents. Once these cooperative houses were built, American and Canadian immigrants gradually moved from the American Town to their new individual apartments. In 1936, across the street from the American Town, a large house with sixteen apartments was built in an American design. It was called Iskurintalo (the house of superproductive workers). Each apartment had a bathroom and toilet, and yet both were still useless because of the lack of corresponding facilities (see Niskanen in Golubev, et al., 2008, 339). In the mid-1930s, American and Canadian immigrants living in the Finnish communities in Petrozavodsk, Kondopoga, and other logging settlements also built individual one-family houses.

**Provision of Food**

Food, just like housing, was a very painful issue for North American immigrants. Bolshevik ideals held that a centralized system of state-owned canteens would be created in order to free time for Soviet families. Upon arrival, immigrants learned what this meant in practice, as they were bound to eat in these state-owned canteens. According to their accounts, the food provided was expensive and of low quality, as a letter sent home from Kondopoga demonstrates: “We live quite poorly. [The authorities] keep on pressing, but don’t care about meals. Local lunch is nothing of comparison to what the American unemployed are used to eat: a first course is a soup—a watery skilly,⁴ a second course is several vendaces,⁵ and the total price is 1.5 rubles”

---

⁴ A thin soup or gruel.
⁵ A species of freshwater fish widespread in Northern Europe.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

In some places, in order to get this meager lunch, people had to stand in lines for an hour or two, as the infrastructure was absolutely insufficient (primarily the canteens themselves, but also economic mechanisms in the Soviet-planned economy, such as delivery and distribution of food). One of numerous Karelian government inspectors, sent in March 1932, reported that a canteen in Petrozavodsk, specially assigned for foreign workers, served eight hundred people while its facilities were fit for only two hundred. It was unable consequently to cook simultaneously for all the workers, and huge lines formed as workers waited to be served, sometimes for two or three hours. The choice of dishes was also very limited: no meals, in particular, were prepared for children or for people with special dietary requirements (NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 23).

American and Canadian immigrants were also shocked by the unsanitary conditions of Soviet public canteens. Huge accommodations in which hundreds of people dined had no separate facilities for cooking, dishwashing, or food storage. In addition, the facilities were infested with rats and cockroaches (NARK, f. R-685, o. 1, d. 3/26, l. 114). Attempts undertaken by Finnish Canadians and Americans to change the situation, at least in small ways, resulted in a lamentable end. At some point, foreign workers in Stroiob’edinenie, at their own expense, rebuilt a canteen intended for their families. Shortly thereafter, it was closed under the guise of reconstruction, but within several days the immigrants learned that the administrators of the canteen had sold most of the furniture (NARK, f. R-685, o. 2, d. 116/217, l. 115).

Because of the low quality and strangeness of the food, many immigrants became ill soon after arrival, and a number died of gastrointestinal diseases (NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 9). The lack of vegetables and fruits in the diet led to the spread of scurvy: during the summer of 1933, over a hundred foreign workers had scurvy in Petrozavodsk alone (NARK, f. R-1230, o. 7, d. 6, l. 103).

The stress on the Soviet economy caused by the accelerated industrialization led to mass-scale shortages of food and consumer goods in the early 1930s and the introduction of rationing for practically everything. Yet despite these shortages, many immigrants were so fed up with public canteens that they gave up going to them, instead cooking for themselves at home (NARK, f. 3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 9). In this respect, North American immigrants were in a far better position in comparison to the local population, as they had considerable support in the form of special shops operated by Insnab. Insnab, a typical Soviet-era abbreviation (from inostranets, “foreigner,” and snabzhenie, “provision”), was a state-owned organization established in 1932 with the goal of distributing food and consumer goods among foreign workers. Soviet society—which was hailed as the only one in the world to avoid the Great Depression—lived under conditions far worse than those that many nations encountered in the 1930s and even during the world wars.6 In this context, foreign work-

---

6 For a more detailed account, see Osokina 1998.
ers were to be convinced that while a market economy allegedly gave no assurance for the future, a socialist economy, though yet characterized by relatively low living standards, guaranteed a moderate subsistence level for today and social security for tomorrow. Insnab became such a guarantee, functioning until 1935 when food rationing was finally lifted.

Provision for foreign workers and specialists was substantially better than that provided to the local population, although the difference would gradually decrease. Canadian and American immigrants had much higher food rations than those of the local population and could buy those rations at lower prices. The rations for immigrants included such products as flour, fish, and butter, which local inhabitants could only buy on the black market. An American or Canadian worker received in his monthly ration three kilograms of cereals and three kilograms of sugar, while a local worker received just one kilogram and eight hundred grams, respectively.7

Shopping in Insnab, very meager by American or Canadian standards, was nevertheless a source of envy for the local population, which had no privileges of this kind. Yet even with these privileges, it was not always possible to purchase the food, since the best shops were located in Petrozavodsk, while outside the capital town of Karelia, food shortages were common even for Insnab shops. Besides, the system of Insnab was characterized by theft, the replacement of high quality foods with those of poor quality, and improper conditions for the storage of food. The Insnab shop in Petrozavodsk had, for example, no storage facilities for food, which often spoiled. As a result, many immigrants suffered from intestinal diseases (NARK, f. R-1230, o. 6, d. 10, l. 61).

**Labor Distribution of Immigrants**

In Karelia, almost all immigrants were employed by large state-controlled companies. The largest employer was Karelia’s timber industry (including forest harvesting), in which over 60 percent of all North American immigrants worked. The second most common field of employment was the building industry (21.3 percent), followed by automobile service (3.5 percent) and agriculture (3.2 percent) (NARK, f. P-3, o. 5, d. 276, l. 71). Most lumberjacks were Canadian Finns (55 percent to 45 percent Americans), while Americans dominated in other professional spheres (73 percent to 27 percent in the building industry, 80 percent to 20 percent in automotive service, 67 percent to 33 percent in the mining industry, and 60 percent to 40 percent in agriculture) (ibid.).

The timber industry was the main source of income for both Soviet Karelia and the Soviet budget in general. Hampered by primitive tools and the lack of a qualified labor force, it became the area in which most Canadian and American immigrants worked and to which they contributed more than to anything else.

---

7 Concerning immigrant rations, see NARK, f. 3, o. 2, d. 791, l. 104; concerning rations for local inhabitants, see Osokina 1998, 251.
Already by the autumn of 1932, 1,049 workers from North America (1,742 people including family members) were employed by the central Karelian trust responsible for forest harvesting operations, Karelles. One of its logging settlements, Matrosy, where the first Canadian team of lumberjacks settled, soon earned fame not only in Karelia, but throughout the USSR. By 1933, 480 Finns lived in Matrosy (82.5 percent of its total population), most of whom emigrated from either Canada or the United States, and this settlement became the center through which the new logging methods were transferred to the newly formed class of Soviet professional lumberjacks (Spisok naselennykh mest 1935, 82). For comparison, in 1931, the average Karelian lumberjack produced 4.3 cubic meters (152 cubic feet) of wood per person per day, while for lumberjacks from other Soviet regions, the rate was slightly over 3 cubic meters (106 cubic feet); by contrast, North American lumberjacks produced 8.5 cubic meters (300 cubic feet) per person per day (NARK, f. R-286, o. 1, d. 22/200, l. 12), and Canadian lumberjacks who worked in Matrosy managed to achieve an average—unchallenged in the USSR—of 12 cubic meters (424 cubic feet) of harvested wood per person per day (NARK, f. R-286, o. 7, d. 4/25, l. 12).

From 1932 to 1935, the Karelian press regularly published information about the performance of North American lumberjacks from Matrosy (Kan 1935, 35–37). By mid-1935, 178 North American workers (338 including family members) were employed at the Matrosy logging site. Fifty-seven of them were immigrants from the United States and the rest from Canada.8

Such a rate of production was largely the result of the use of special tools—bow saws, cross-cut saws, and so-called Canadian (or American) axes. Canadian-produced axes became famous throughout the entire USSR as their design fit forest harvesting much better than conventional Russian axes, while Swedish and American bow-saws allowed fallers to work alone and increase their efficiency.9

In general, because of the presence of skilled American and Canadian specialists, it was in Karelia that many innovations in Soviet forestry were made, including the wide-scale introduction of trucks and tractors in harvest and transport operations (Krasnaja Karelija 1932a, 1; 1932b, 2). During the early 1930s, all drivers employed in mechanized timber transportation were Finns from the United States and Canada (NARK, f. R-685, o. 1, d. 1/3, l. 86). Additionally, North American workers taught local lumberjacks how to operate the new machines and to work in groups and teams. Regular excursions for specialists and workers in the Soviet timber industry were organized to Matrosy, Lososinnoe, Vilga, and Interposiolok (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 230, l. 10; NARK, f. R-1632, o. 1, d. 3/39, l. 13). A special school was established in Matrosy to teach the local workers North American methods (Wissanen 1934, 53–56; Kero 1983, 130–31). The experience of the immigrants was analyzed

8 Calculated on the basis of: NARK, f. R-685, o. 2, d. 28/340, l. 16.
9 For a more detailed account, see Tonkell 1933, 4–7; Bekrenev 1932, 10–12; and Kero 1983, 109–12.
by the specialists of the Forest Section of the Karelian Research Institute, and many North American immigrants were employed to work in its experimental allotment in Padozero (NARK, f. R-690, o. 3, d. 62/509, l. 67).

Apart from the most common occupation among North American Finns, that of a lumberjack (approximately 45 percent of the immigrants), there were also many workers in building-related occupations—carpenters, joiners, painters, plasterers, roofers, concrete workers, plumbers, electricians, etc. (around 30 percent). Most of them worked in the Karelian trust Stroioedinenie, building domestic housing and public buildings in Petrozavodsk and Kondopoga. Additionally, because of a lack of housing and insufficient state funding for its construction, American and Canadian workers joined building crews on a cooperative basis—an economic strategy that they borrowed from their earlier life in the United States and Canada—trying thus to provide decent accommodations for their families and later for all who needed it. The most successful experiment in cooperative building in Petrozavodsk was the cooperative Rakentaja (fittingly, “builder” in Finnish). By 1932, it had 1,500 members, over 56 percent of whom were Finns (Krasnaja Karelija 1932c, 2). Immigrants from the United States and Canada also played a significant role in the construction of such large and important industrial plants as the pulp and paper factory in Kondopoga and the ski factory in Petrozavodsk.

Kondopoga, a town fifty kilometers to the north of Petrozavodsk, was one of Karelia’s industrial centers, and, because of its job opportunities and its proximity to the capital of the republic, had one of the largest Finnish immigrant communities in Karelia. The first plans for the building of a hydropower station and a paper factory there were approved in 1921, and two years later construction began. A hydropower station commenced operation in January 1929, and in June 1932, a paper factory equipped with modern Western machinery was also launched. In 1935, the construction of a pulp factory in Kondopoga was completed, and the combination of the two was then called Kondopoga Pulp and Paper Factory (Grigoriev 1976, 16–17; Jegorov 1976, 20–22; Sundfors 1976, 22–25; Filimonchik 2000, 201–7).

Since the late 1920s, large groups of Canadian and American immigrants had arrived in Kondopoga despite the protests of the Soviet security bodies. The Finnish leadership of Karelia tried to recruit to Kondopoga the largest possible number of qualified workers who would be familiar with the Western equipment and able to teach others how to operate it. A slogan was developed: “to make the Kondopoga paper factory a school for the ethnic Karelian and Finnish proletariat” (Krasnaja Karelija 1930). Teams of qualified North American miners, builders, carpenters, and mechanics not only worked with enthusiasm to build the hydropower station and pulp and paper factory in Kondopoga, but they also disseminated new methods and forms of labor and helped local workers in mastering new professional skills. By

10 Calculated on the basis of the database of the project “Missing in Karelia” (see above).
October 1, 1932, 150 North American immigrants were employed in Kondopoga’s factories and building sites. The total number of Finns from North America living in Kondopoga was 278 (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 22/254, l. 52).

In the 1930s, Finnish immigrants also played a prominent role in both the construction and development of the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory. Commissioned in 1931, this factory was one of the most significant Soviet projects during the First Five-Year Plan. It had modern equipment and produced skis for both the civilian population and the Red Army. Finnish-American specialists proved their worth even during the construction of the factory. Its initial design did not take into consideration local conditions, and the experience and skills of the immigrants were widely applied for multiple alterations and the optimization of the technological process (Krasnaja Karelija 1931). As in the case of the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper Factory, the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory was supposed to become a forge for the ethnic Karelian and Finnish proletariat. The People’s Commissariat of Labor of Karelia demanded that 75 percent of the employees of the ski factory had to be representatives of the Finno-Ugric people of Karelia (NARK, f. P-89, o. 1, d. 21, l. 1), a goal fulfilled by 1934, when 15 percent of the total labor force in the factory was Karelian and 60 percent Finnish (Tuomainen 1934, 76). Of over three hundred Finnish workers, approximately half were immigrants from the United States and Canada.¹¹

**Working Conditions**

The years of industrialization are often associated with Stalin’s propaganda efforts and the attempt to mobilize the Soviet proletariat with enthusiastic and encouraging reports, for example, by filling newspapers with headlines and articles that resembled war-time summaries with metaphors like “feat of labor” and “breaches on the labor front.” Many (if not most) achievements of the two First Five-Year Plans were a result of the severe intensification of labor, or, as Leon Trotsky wrote, they were “largely due to people’s muscles and nerves” (Rogovin 1993).

Yet the enthusiasm of millions of Soviet workers during the years of industrialization was not a mere invention of Stalin’s propaganda, but a genuine reality of the time. The atmosphere of mass enthusiasm is reflected in the novels and stories of the 1930s, as well as in personal sources—letters, diaries, and memoirs. And although Canadian and American workers were often skeptical of the Soviet methods of economic development, they could not resist being influenced by the atmosphere, as demonstrated in an excerpt from a memoir by Viljo Nurminen, an emigrant from Canada and a former worker at the ski factory of Petrozavodsk:

> We, the workers who came to the Soviet Union from capitalist states, were under a strong and dignifying influence of Soviet people who

¹¹ According to the “Missing in Karelia” project database, in January 1935, 137 North American Finns were employed in the ski factory: 64 American and 73 Canadian immigrants.
worked selflessly for the common good of the Socialist future. After the ordeal that life in capitalist states like Finland, the United States, and Canada was, we realized the delight of free creative labor for the first time only here in the USSR. It is impossible to forget the enthusiasm of socialist competition of those years: all workshops and departments of the [ski] factory were aching to achieve the highest level of production. This passionate labor atmosphere that we had never experienced earlier consumed us completely. (1976, 45)

However, such enthusiasm never lasts for years, especially under the conditions and hardships the workers faced. In addition to the unsatisfactory conditions of daily life, working conditions were also often far from ideal. North American Finns and the management of their employing enterprises and organizations were often in conflict, especially during the early stages of immigration, when, for example, Canadian lumberjacks in Matrosy battled regularly with the director of the logging camp who opposed the introduction of the new technologies (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 230, l. 10). The management of the factories often interpreted employee initiatives, suggestions for improvement, and the independent position of North American Finns as a lack of discipline and an unwillingness to recognize management’s—or somebody else’s—authority (NARK, f. R-685, o. 2, d. 90, l. 16).

In 1932 a scandal erupted between foreign workers and the management of a mine in Shoksha (a village located approximately fifty kilometers to the south of Petrozavodsk), which belonged to the Karelian state trust Karelgranit. Apart from a typical list of complaints related to daily matters (lack of accommodations, improper medical treatment, insufficient food rations, etc.), the immigrants openly accused the mine’s management of sabotage. They informed the top administration of Karelgranit that they had to quarry granite with the most primitive tools, i.e., crowbars, without work shoes or even gloves, while the special machines that they had brought from the United States stood idle in the storehouse, one already irreparable (NARK, f. R-46, d. 1/.1, ls. 80-82). The bureaucratic system of the Soviet economy was so inefficient that the administration of Karelgranit found itself unable to force the management of its mine in Shoksha to satisfy any of the immigrants’ daily needs or to satisfy their professional demands. The correspondence between the trust and the mine subordinate to it lasted for half a year and yet no changes took place.

Sometimes it turned out that the experience of foreign workers, their expertise, and equipment were not required in Karelia. In May 1931, Finns brought from the United States to Petrozavodsk a brick-making machine for a local factory. It cost over sixteen thousand dollars and was able to produce seventeen thousand bricks per hour (NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 19/213, ls. 111–12). A year later, they complained that the machine had been idle for nine months and nobody cared about it (NARK,
Suggestions for improvements made by foreign workers were seldom realized, and workers received almost no bonuses. Egalitarianism was a common practice at the work locations, and workers received the same wages regardless of their contributions, while the difference in salaries between various organizations could be quite high: for example, a carpenter of the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory earned seven to eight rubles a day, while a carpenter of the building trust Karellesstroi only five rubles (ibid., l. 7). Sometimes, salaries were paid only after a two- or three-month delay. One American woman expressed her displeasure: “In the United States I received thirty dollars as a monthly unemployment benefit, could buy good sandwiches with butter and meat and had no need to work, while here no matter how hard you work—you won’t get anything but just skilly” (NARK, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 359, l. 8).

And sometimes it turned out that even immigrant workers themselves were actually not needed at all. Since the immigration of workers from the United States and Canada to Soviet Karelia was planned once a year, and Karelian economic organizations had only one chance to apply for laborers—which was far in advance of the actual immigration—they often rushed to ask for as many specialists as possible, anticipating a future demand in the labor force. As a result, upon arrival immigrants sometimes found themselves in a situation where the Karelian organizations that employed them did not actually have jobs for them. Such was the case with North American Finns who were hired by the Karelian state trust Karelschungit in 1932. Karelschungit was founded in April 1932 by the Karelian leadership to mine shungite—a combustible mineral that was intended to be used as a replacement for coal in a number of industrial enterprises in Leningrad. With these plans in mind, the management of Karelschungit signed a contract with the Resettlement Administration to find and employ mining specialists in the United States and Canada. The Resettlement Administration fulfilled its part of the contract, and during 1932, seventy-six people moved from North America to Karelia to work in the mines of Karelschungit. However, none of the enterprises in Leningrad chose to use shungite in their manufacturing process, which left recruited miners (both foreign and local) without a job (NARK, f. R-973, o. 1, d. 1/4, ls. 89–93; NARK, f. R-690, o. 1, d. 254, l. 51).

Finally, illusions were further shattered when immigrants realized that it was very hard to change places of employment. Officially, North American immigrants, unlike illegal Finnish immigrants, were free to leave one job and find another, but in reality things were quite different: Petrozavodsk could not accommodate all who wished to move there, and these workers were simply not allowed to work in a number of other places. As a result, many of the immigrants found themselves in the role of “serfs.” There was only one radical outcome under such circumstances—to leave the Soviet Union. “What kind of democracy is this,” they wondered, “when you can’t take a job of your choice?” (ibid.).
Re-emigration

For some, their first impressions differed so drastically from what they had been promised back in the United States or Canada that upon arrival in the port of Leningrad they immediately purchased return tickets. Such people were few, but because of dissatisfaction with daily Soviet life and disillusionment with the official Soviet ideology and rhetoric, even by the middle of 1931, the number of people wishing to leave Karelia was growing at a fast pace.

The exact number of re-emigrants is hard to estimate exactly. Immigrants were permanently on the move, even though a change of job required official permission, which was not easy to obtain. Occasionally, the Resettlement Committee would lose track of some of these immigrants, and they disappeared from the committee’s register. As a result, our calculations of the number of re-emigrants can only be approximate because archival documents offer differing, contradictory, and hard to verify statistics. Many workers left Karelia for other regions, or left Soviet Russia entirely, without waiting for the expiration date of their employment contracts, sometimes even without getting their salaries, and not all of them informed the Resettlement Committee of their departure.

According to statistical data prepared for the Karelian committee of VKP(b), 290 adult immigrants left Karelia between 1931–33, with 232 of them moving abroad and 58 to other regions of the USSR (NARK, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 75, l. 35; NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 66). Re-emigration reached its peak in 1933, and by the autumn of 1935, according to the data of Karelian GPU, the number of re-emigrants reached 968 people (adult men and women) (NARK, f. P-3, o. 5, d. 276, l. 73). The documents of the Resettlement Committee provide different figures: those claim that by October 1, 1935, 1,608 people had left Karelia (NARK, f. P-690, o. 3, d. 70/623, l. 48); however, this number most likely included immigrants from Finland and other countries.

After 1936, it gradually became more and more difficult to leave the USSR; however, between 1936 and 1938, at least 170 North Americans re-emigrated from Karelia (79 of them left for the US or Canada and the rest for Finland). Comparisons of various sources provide the basis to argue that between 1931 and 1935, approximately thirteen hundred to fifteen hundred North American Finns left Karelia.

A retrospective look gives a clear understanding of why so many Finnish immigrants wanted to leave Soviet Karelia. Below is an excerpt from a letter written in Finland by Edvard Mason, an American Finn, to the Resettlement Committee during his trip back to the United States. This letter, dated March 18, 1932, indicates motives shared by the majority of other re-emigrants (it was written in English and is reproduced here in the original spelling and punctuation):

12 Calculated on the basis of NARK, f. P-3, o. 5, d. 277, ls. 86–133.
Dear Comrade,
I am back from Petroskoi\textsuperscript{13} and on the way to USA. When I arrived there with Lehtimäki’s group, I found things much different there as was described in New York. We was promised work in the aeroplane shop, but there was nothing of this kind, and nothing under construction, or in the sight, that such shop would be constructed in nearest future. We was promised 3 room apartment, but there was no house of that kind built in all town and we had to put in poorest leaving quarters one could ever think of. Sufficient food was promised, but it was poorest I ever eat in all my life. And wages, which was going to be 300 rubels per month, was little over 200 rubels per month for the time I worked there on the building. And when they wanted me to go to lumber camp, I refused, demanding the work for which I assigned, then they told me I could quit, which I did. I demanded the money back what I paid to you and Lehtimäki, they refused, offering me the rubles, which I couldn’t use. (NARK, f. R-685, o. 2, d. 99, l. 95)

Upon return, many re-emigrants wrote first-hand accounts to Finnish American and Canadian newspapers describing the hardships they had to overcome during their Karelian odysseys. The reaction of the Karelian press to such publications was vitriolic. The accounts were labeled as “dirty libel against socialist way of life,” while other American and Canadian Finns published refutations similar to the one provided below:

\begin{quote}
Refutation. We, the workers of [logging camp] Lugolambi who arrived from America, strongly reproach the people who arrived here [in Karelia] being trusted as comrades, but got caught—voluntarily or not—in a despised harsh provocation against the working class of the USSR and Karelia. We declare that we are free citizens of the USSR, work enthusiastically upon our own will, and here one will never find, as counterrevolutionaries say, alleged forced labor and other unbearable conditions. We state that the accommodation and other conditions here are quite satisfactory and unanimously reproach those bourgeois accomplices who distribute false rumors and serve to fascists and other counterrevolutionaries.

We reproach the actions of the people who had come here to build Soviet Karelia and in a period of several months threw up their jobs, threw up harvested logs having not floated them to the destination point. We are convinced that each man and woman should stand on the labor front as sentinels, and desertion is shame. We who stayed here promise
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Petroskoi is the Finnish name of Petrozavodsk.
to float the logs to their destination points, to accomplish the tasks set for us and to work under the guidance of the working class. Approved at the meeting of workers on April 19, 1932. (NARK, f. P-3, o. 2, d. 790, l. 108)

The stories of re-emigrants sobered Finnish communities in North America, with the exception perhaps of only the most radical members. In 1933, the number of Finnish immigrants to the USSR decreased by four times, and by the summer of 1935, it had almost ceased. In the meantime, North American Finns kept on leaving Karelia. Both those who left and those who stayed had similar impressions—all other emotions were shadowed by the feeling that they had been cruelly and dishonestly deceived.

**Conclusion**

In a state with a centralized economy, the success of any large-scale initiative was achievable only if all levels of the Soviet bureaucracy—from the Kremlin to minor officials—were interested in or, at least, did not hamper it. The pyramid-like structure of state and party management provided no other alternative. In the case of North American Finnish immigrants, the Red Finnish leadership of Soviet Karelia—located in the middle of this pyramid—was the only interested party. When it came to the implementation of the official policy, it turned out that the success of the immigration depended not on Edvard Gylling and his Red Finn compatriots, nor on official decrees of the SNK of the RSFSR, but on local officials for whom the arrival of Canadian and American immigrants brought only additional troubles and for whom the implementation of immigration policies was nothing more than an irritation. As all aspects of immigration policy were state-driven, the presence of these uninterested low-level bureaucrats was in many ways instrumental to the disappointing conditions of life and work that immigrants faced upon arrival in Karelia. Hence came the numerous cases described in archival documents where valuable equipment brought by immigrants was stored for months or even years and consequently became worthless before it had even been put to use, or when orders and directives given by Karelian authorities were ignored or even openly challenged on the local level.

In a broader perspective, another reason for the failure of the immigration policies of Soviet Karelian authorities can be traced to different visions of Soviet regional development. For the Karelian leadership, the immigration of North American Finns was another step in the implementation of their model of a balanced and self-sustaining regional economy. Immigrants were valuable specialists treasured for their American and Canadian professional experience and skills. By the turn of the 1930s, however, another vision started to dominate the Soviet leadership: this
one was based on the extensive exploitation of peripheral resources without intensive investments in their secondary sectors. Within this model of regional development, professional experience and skills were less important, although initially the Soviet leadership allowed the entry of immigrants in order to address shortages in the labor force in the timber industry, the most important industry of the Karelian primary sector. At the same time, however, Karelia also became the testing ground for the extensive use of forced labor through the system of GULAG camps. The latter would soon render useless—from the point of view of central authorities—any additional entry of North American immigrants, as well as the preservation of their high social status. Elimination of privileges and the later repressions were, in a way, a part of this twisted logic of Soviet economic and political planners.

Thus, both from above and from below, the immigration of Finns from the United States and Canada seemed a strange and unreasonable project. Despite the official rhetoric and regional support, immigration and the relatively high status of immigrants lasted only as long as Red Finns still held on to the last remnants of their power. As soon as they were finally removed from leadership, the North American Finnish community in Karelia was left open to all kinds of attacks.
The Harsh Reality of Fine Words

WORKS CITED


Natsional'nnyj arkhiv Respubliki Karelija (NARK) [National Archives of the Republic of Karelia].

Victims and Survivors of Karelia


Osokina, Elena. 1998. Za fasadom “stalinskogo izobiliya” [Behind the facade of “Stalinist abundance”]. Moscow: ROSSPEN.


The Harsh Reality of Fine Words

The Great Purge

Irina Takala
Petrozavodsk State University

Abstract
The article discusses the impact of Stalin’s repressions on the life of North American immigrants. It starts by recreating the historical background of the Great Purge, including the early anti-Finnish campaign of 1935–36 and “national operations” of the Soviet secret police (Narodnyj Komissariat Vnutrennikh del, NKVD), which became the basis for the second, much more disastrous Finnish operation of the NKVD during 1937 and particularly 1938. It then focuses on the Finnish operation of 1937–38 itself, discussing the reasons, course, scale, and effects of this operation. A special emphasis is placed, in particular, on the local initiatives in pushing forward the repression of Finnish immigrants in Soviet Karelia. The article also discusses the reactions of North American immigrants to the Great Purge. It concludes with a statistical analysis of North American victims of the Great Purge in Soviet Karelia, including its demographic and social impact on Canadian and American communities.

The Beginning
The Great Purge, unlike earlier campaigns of arrests or exiles that were conducted in the Soviet Union and aimed at specific social groups, encompassed all, without exception, from the highest levels of the Communist Party hierarchy to ordinary citizens. The mass repressions of 1937–38 were carried out in two major directions, along so-called “kulak” and “national” lines. Together with the extermination of internal enemies—“kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements,” wide-scale ethnic cleansings were carried out against “external enem[ies], equally dangerous for the state” (Takala 2000, 181). It was inevitable, then, that most victims of the repression were from ethnic minorities that represented “bourgeois-fascist” states located on or near the Soviet border, such as Germans, Poles, Latvians, Estonians, and Finns.

The two lines of the Great Purge explain the character and scale of repressive actions in Soviet regions. In Karelia, the lines were determined by the proximity of Finland to the Soviet Union and by the significant number of Finnish immigrants who lived in Karelia. The share of people repressed under the “national line” in 1937–38 amounted to 55 percent. Although the share of Finns in the population of Soviet Karelia in the mid-1930s barely exceeded 3 percent, more than 40 percent of
all victims of the Terror in Karelia were Finns while Karelians comprised 27 percent, and Russians 25 percent (Takala 2002, 123).

Technically, the launch of the so-called “Finnish Operation” in Karelia can be dated to as early as the autumn of 1935 when Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio, two prominent Finnish politicians of Soviet Karelia, were transferred to Moscow, and the Fifth Plenum of the Karelian Regional Committee (obkom) of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (VKP(b)) declared it necessary to destroy “Finnish bourgeois nationalists” (Krasnaja Karelija 1935a). The first targets were political immigrants, Red Finns, who occupied many leading positions in Soviet Karelia. Newspapers filled with articles unmasking the bourgeois nationalists, and many local party committees underwent thorough inspections, and, sometimes, were completely reorganized (Takala 1992, 44–46). Many Finns were expelled from the VKP(b) and lost their positions; every region of Karelia, especially Petrozavodsk and the border areas, was overrun by a wave of arrests. Many military units of the Leningrad Military District were purged of Finns; the Karjalan Jääkäripataljoona [Karelian Jaeger Brigade] was disbanded, and many of its Finnish officers were arrested (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 296, ls. 64–68; d. 314, ls. 64–65). In 1935, among those Finns who were expelled from the VKP(b), forty were arrested by Narodnyj komissariat vnutrennikh del (NKVD, The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and fifty more were on the wanted list, while an equal number were to be resettled from the territory of Karelia (calculated on the basis of the Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 333, ls. 6–65, 78–102). In 1936, there were no large-scale public campaigns against Finns, but people continued to disappear. Without any commentary in the press, Finns were removed from top-level positions and expelled from the VKP(b). Pjotr Irklis, the new leader of the Karelian party organization, repeatedly sent memoranda to Moscow reporting the ongoing struggle against “nationalist, espionage and interventionist elements” (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 4, d. 59, l. 33).

The campaign of 1935–36 affected North American Finns only in passing. The Resettlement Agency was dissolved, and the NKVD started to build files on them. However, the authorities still avoided open attacks against American and Canadian immigrants; moreover, they even publicly demonstrated goodwill toward them. Irklis, in his scathing speech against the Finnish leaders of Soviet Karelia, which he delivered at the plenum of the Karelian committee of the VKP(b) in October 1935, criticized the recruitment policy of the former Finnish leadership, but at the same time added: “We, of course, never objected and will never object [to] the workers who came to us, we are sincerely glad that they [are] together with us, under the guidance of our Party, [to] advance the great cause of socialism” (Krasnaja Karelija 1935b). Yet some precautionary measures were also taken against North American immigrants.
In the autumn of 1935, three members of the agricultural commune Säde were arrested including Kalle Siikanen, the commune chairman; Eelis Ahokas; and Juho Niemi. Siikanen and Ahokas had come to Karelia from Canada in 1926 to found the commune, and Niemi had immigrated from the United States in 1932. The men were accused of sabotage and participation in a counter-revolutionary group. Siikanen was also charged with “being the right hand of Ed[v]ard Gylling in questions of agriculture” (Archive of UFSB in RK, fonds of criminal cases, archival numbers P-1903, P-3164, P-9404). Families of the arrested men were exiled to the north of Karelia and forbidden to come to Petrozavodsk. But in the mid-1930s, the fates of people were still decided by courts. In the spring of 1936, Niemi and Siikanen were acquitted and released, and returned to the commune with their families. Ahokas was sentenced under Article 58/10\textsuperscript{1} of the Soviet Criminal Code to one year of compulsory labor. In 1938, they all were executed (Lahti-Argutina 2001).\textsuperscript{2}

At the same time, in October 1935, the chairman of the famous Petrozavodsk Second Soviet Farm (Sovkhoz No. 2, Hiilisuo), Aaro Holopainen, who came from the United States in 1931, was arrested for conducting “bourgeois-nationalist policy.” This farm, a brainchild of Edvard Gylling, was established in 1930 by American Finns who came to Karelia from the commune Kylväjä in the North Caucasus.\textsuperscript{3} It was to become a model farm and a forge of agricultural specialists (Punainen Karjala 1930). By the autumn of 1935, the Sovkhoz No. 2 employed about three hundred Finns, mostly illegal immigrants from Finland, while there were no more than ten Russians and Karelians (Council of People’s Commissariat of the KASSR, f. R-698, o. 5, d. 65/616a, l. 9; Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-1230, o. 9, d. 40, ls. 1–2). North American Finns—about forty people—occupied nearly all the leading positions in the sovkhoz and, consequently, became the first victims. The local cell of the VKP(b) was dissolved, and all measures of the sovkhoz leaders were severely criticized (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-93, o. 1, d. 1, ls. 40–42; Council of People’s Commissariat of the KASSR, f. R-698, o. 5, d. 65/616a, ls. 8–30). Holopainen, while under arrest, was sentenced to capital punishment in September 1938, and on October 1 was executed near Petrozavodsk. A week later, his twenty-three-year-old son, Toivo, who was born in the United States, was executed at the same place.

The anti-Finnish campaign of 1935–36 did not affect the Karelian timber industry in which North American Finns played a key role with over 60 percent of the immigrants employed in this sector of the Soviet Karelian economy. We have identified

\textsuperscript{1} Propaganda or agitation that contains a call to damage, weaken, or overthrow the Soviet power or for the perpetration of counter-revolutionary crimes; distribution, production or storage of counterrevolutionary literature (the 1927 Criminal Code of the RSFSR).

\textsuperscript{2} Throughout this article, unless explicitly expressed, the fates of Finns repressed during 1937–38 are cited from Lahti-Argutina (2001).

\textsuperscript{3} For more about Kylväjä and Hiilisuo, see the article of Mikko Ylikangas in this issue.
only one case of mass arrests: on February 19, 1936, four forest workers from North America were arrested in Sofporog, or Sohjanankoski in Finnish (Kestengskij, now Louhskij, district). Two of them, Canadian immigrants Johan Heiniemi and Jalmari Randell, were soon released, while two American immigrants, Reino Numminen and Kaarlo Sipilä, were sentenced under Article 58/10 of the Soviet Criminal Code to three years of imprisonment. Their later fates are unknown, but the fact that they were rehabilitated only in 1992 most likely means that they perished in the GULAG camps and nobody ever searched for them.

Organizers of the recruitment efforts to resettle North American Finns in Soviet Karelia—Matti Tenhunen, Kalle Aronen, and Oscar Corgan—were not affected by the repression of the mid-1930s, apart from changes to their employment status. It is possible that someone took them from the line of fire. The events of 1935 in Soviet Karelia were directly related to the changes in Moscow and the Comintern: the main targets of the anti-Finnish campaign were activists of the Finnish Communist Party (FCP), who were a tiny minority among North American immigrants. After members of the so-called “Moscow opposition of the FCP” (Kullervo Manner and Hanna Malm) were arrested and Karelian leaders Kustaa Rovio and Edvard Gylling were removed from Karelia, the NKVD arrested Otto Vílmi, Väinö Kangas, Heino Rautio, and several other activists of regional groups of the Finnish Communist Party, which had been established in the early 1930s under the auspices of the Comintern and with the formal approval of Soviet leadership. At that time, Heino Rautio was head of the publishing house Kirja, and after his dismissal, its entire VKP(b) cell was reorganized. During the November 13, 1935, session of the Karelian committee of the VKP(b), fourteen employees of Kirja were expelled from the party, including Teemu Törmälä, Kosti Klemola, Felix Kellosalmi, Victor Paju, Lauri Letonmäki, and others (Takala 1992, 44–46). But just before these events, Matti Tenhunen and Oscar Corgan, who had worked at Kirja, were transferred to different jobs: Corgan was appointed to work as the director of a bookstore in Uhtua (Kalevala, which was a border territory) (Sevander and Hertzel 1992, 73), while Tenhunen became head of the Karelian Regional VKP(b) Press (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 6, d. 10792, l. 3). Still, the fate of Corgan and Tenhunen had already been decided: both were arrested in the autumn of 1937 and executed in Medvezh’egorsk, while Aronen was caught in the last wave of arrests in the summer of 1938 and executed in Petrozavodsk in September. All three were rehabilitated between 1956 and 1958.

4 Rehabilitation of victims of the repressions of the 1930s to the early 1950s, without written requests or complaints from victims or their relatives, began in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, but it applied only to those convicted by extrajudicial bodies (the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR of January 16, 1989). In 1991, the law “On rehabilitation of victims of political repressions” (No. 1761-1 of October 18, 1991) was passed in Russia. This law significantly expanded the number of people who were subject to rehabilitation, including, in particular, all those convicted under so-called counterrevolutionary articles.

5 For more details, see Takala 1994.
The reaction of Finns to the first campaign varied. Already in the autumn of 1935, Petrozavodsk was full of rumors that the Soviet nationality policy was about to change, that mass repression was about to be launched against Finns, and that they had to escape from Karelia at all costs (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 255, ls. 71, 119–20). Some people did leave, while others sought asylum in remote forest settlements, and still others refused to believe the rumors, understanding the first campaign as a nightmare that had to end soon.

As anti-Finnish measures were expanded, fears grew, and some rose up in opposition. Teemu Törmälä, a top manager of the publishing house Kirja who was expelled from the VKP(b) and fired from his job, went to Moscow to search for the truth. He visited the Central Committee of the VKP(b), the Central Committee of the Finnish Communist Party, the editorial office of the newspaper Pravda, and, according to his accounts, was assured by everyone that the anti-Finnish repression would soon end and justice would be restored (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 3, d. 255, l. 9). The end of 1936 and the beginning of 1937 indeed became a short break in the struggle against Finnish bourgeois nationalists. But it was only the calm before the storm.

**NKVD Orders**

The purges that followed one after another throughout the 1930s, as well as the mass propagandizing of Soviet society, were intended to accustom ordinary citizens to the idea that state terror was routine, and, further, that the interests of the state had absolute priority over universal human values. The regime succeeded in this approach: uneducated people readily attributed the problems that plagued the Soviet Union to its enemies. Rising international tensions and threats of war were used to build up feelings of fear and suspicion. Gradually, the Moloch of Stalinist repressions drew more and more social groups under its fist, and the terror finally turned from selective to complete and unstoppable.

The February-March 1937 Plenum of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) opened a new and most terrible period in the history of Soviet repressive policies. By the end of the summer, when Nikolai Ezhov, the people’s commissar of internal affairs of the USSR, signed Operative Order 00447, “The operation for repression of former kulaks, criminals and other anti-Soviet elements” (July 30, 1937), based on the resolution of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), the terror had become total. The operation was ordered to start on August 5, 1937 (in some southern and eastern regions on August 10 and 15), and to be completed within four months. For its implementation, the Soviet of People’s Commissars of the USSR allocated 75 million rubles from its reserve fund. All republics and regions were assigned target figures for the number of arrests: for Karelia, the initial target was one thousand people, of whom three hundred were of the “first category” (execution). In
full, Order No. 00447 dictated that 368,950 people had to be repressed in the Soviet Union. Of these, 75,950 were to be executed (“Rasstrel po raznorjadke” 1992).

Two weeks later, on August 15, 1937, Ezhov signed Order No. 00486, “The operation for repression of wives of traitors of the Motherland,” which became the basis for repression of relatives of “enemies of the people,” including “socially dangerous children of convicts.” By early 1938, 27,114 wives and 36,795 children of “enemies of the people” were repressed in the Soviet Union (Chukhin 1993).

Simultaneously, so-called “national orders” of the NKVD were issued. The most important were Orders No. 00439, “The operation for repression of German citizens suspected of espionage against the USSR” (July 25, 1937); No. 00485, “The operation for repression of members of the Polska Organizacja Wojskowa (POW), Polish illegal immigrants, political emigrants from Poland, former members of Polish Socialist Party and other Polish political parties” (August 11, 1937); and No. 00593, “Operation for repression of former employees of the China Far East Railway and re-emigrants from Manzhouguo (Harbinites)” (September 20, 1937). Of course, these orders, particularly the latter, can be called “national” only by a long stretch of the imagination, yet it was these that became the basis for the mass repression of many ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union, including Finns.

These documents introduced simplified orders for procedures of investigation and execution of sentence. The execution of sentence was commissioned to a specially created extrajudicial institution, troika, established within the NKVD offices in all Soviet regions (republics, krais, oblasts) and comprising the first secretary of the regional committee of the VKP(b), the head of the local NKVD office, and the regional prosecutor. In Soviet Karelia, as everywhere, the composition of the republican troika would change several times since during the Great Purge judges could easily be turned into victims. During the year-and-a-half-long campaign, four first secretaries (Irklis, Nikolskii, Ivanov, Kuprianov) and two people’s commissars of internal affairs (Tenison, Matuzenko) served in the Karelian troika. Only Prosecutor Mikhailovich managed to remain in his office—and, consequently, in troika—until November 1938. The “Polish” and “Harbinite” orders further simplified the procedure of trial and execution by introducing a new practice, so-called dvoikas (“tosome” or “NKVD and the prosecutor of the USSR commission”). People who were repressed in the national operation of the NKVD were registered in special lists (which included a short biography for each victim), so that one signature could decide the fate of several dozen people at once.

6 See, Sbornik zakonodatelnikh i normativnykh aktov o repressijakh i reabilitatsij zhertv politicheskikh represii [Selected legislative and regulatory acts on repressions and rehabilitation of victims of political repressions], 1993, 86–93.

7 During the autumn and winter, a number of instructions were issued which sanctioned operations against other ethnic groups, as, for example, the Memorandum of the NKVD of the USSR No. 49990 of November 30, 1937, “On repression of Latvians.”
The “national” line of the Great Purge was supervised by the Third Department of the NKVD (struggle against espionage), while the “kulak” line was supervised by the Fourth Department (struggle against internal counterrevolution).

The Finnish Operation of 1937–38

In Karelia, the work on the “liquidation of anti-Soviet elements” was launched immediately after the February-March 1937 plenum, and it is possible to date the large-scale operation in Karelia to as early as March 1937, nearly five months before the issue of Order No. 00447. Beginning with the second half of March 1937, numerous reports were sent from Petrozavodsk to the Central Committee of the VKP(b) regarding the reorganization of party work as well as facts demonstrating the “revival of bourgeois nationalism.” Within one month of the plenum, the new Karelian leadership uncovered and destroyed “fascist nationalist groups of Finnish terrorists” and “counter espionage and subversive rebellious organizations” in all border areas of Soviet Karelia, in the republican trust of the timber industry, Kareles, and in the People’s Commissariat of Land (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 4, d. 263, ls. 38–43; d. 266, ls. 57–62). Gylling, the former chairman of the Soviet Karelian government, still lived and worked in Moscow when a special resolution of the Karelian Committee of the VKP(b), adopted on March 26, renamed all kolkhozes and streets bearing his name (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-3, o. 4, d. 266, ls. 1–2).

In general, it is difficult to differentiate the “kulak” and “national” operations: in many cases “internal and external counter-revolution” were presented as one united threat, which is most evident from the case of the “counter-revolutionary nationalist organization in Karelia,” codenamed the “case of Gylling-Rovio” (Takala 1992). A first report of this case was sent to Moscow at the end of July 1937. The membership list of this organization comprised fifty people, all of whom were Finns, with the exception of two Karelians, Pottoev and Yushchiev, and a Veps, Makaryev. Karl Tenison, the people’s commissar of internal affairs of Soviet Karelia, identified Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio as the leaders of the organization and asked his superiors to sanction their arrest in Moscow “with their subsequent transfer to our jurisdiction” (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. KRO, o. 1, p. 42, ls. 95–101). It is interesting that this initiative had clear local roots, as Karelian leaders in Petrozavodsk did not know that Rovio had already been under arrest for three weeks, and Gylling for two.

Officially, the mass operation in Karelia started on August 5, 1937. Each fifth day, a telegram was sent from Petrozavodsk to Moscow, to the Eighth (Archival)
Department of the Glavnoe Upravlenie Gosudarstvennoj Bezopasnosti (GUGB) [Main Directorate of State Security] NKVD, with information regarding the number of people arrested and convicted by the *troika*. During the first month of the operation (August 5 to September 5, 1937), 728 people were arrested (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. KRO, d.168, ls. 1–23, calculations). As we have mentioned, all measures for the extermination of internal and external counter-revolution were planned to be completed within three or, at the latest, four months, but the first weeks proved that many local leaders were satisfied neither with deadlines nor with the quotas for arrests as given in Ezhov’s orders. The Central Committee of the VKP(b) and the NKVD of the USSR received numerous telegrams with requests to increase the quotas for arrests, especially for capital punishment. Karelia was part of this “initiative,” and the central leadership eagerly satisfied the local requests (Takala 2002, 114). As the result, by November 20, the date that had initially been given as the deadline for the operation’s completion, the Karelian *troika* had sentenced to death 1,690 people (72 percent of its convictions), far more than its quota of 300 (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. KRO, d.168, ls. 1–23 (calculations), ls.37–42). In general, however, after the main NKVD orders had been issued, the Soviet Karelian leadership found itself in a relatively difficult situation.

The local office of the NKVD directed efforts mostly toward the repression of Finns and Karelians, although the orders dictated that it search as well for counter-revolutionaries among the Germans, Poles, Latvians, and Estonians (to say nothing of “Harbinites”), all of whom were tiny minorities in Soviet Karelia. 8 In his directives to the Karelian districts, the people’s commissar of internal affairs, Karl Tenison, demanded that his subordinates keep “a thorough register of all Finnish nationalist elements, primarily among political immigrants, former Social Democrats, former members of the Finnish Communist Party and the VKP(b), illegal immigrants from Finland, American Finns and Swedes” (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. KRO, o. 1, p. 42, l. 63). He also continued to complain to Moscow that his work was complicated by the lack of official directives on the “Finnish line.” Some sources allow us to suppose that a draft NKVD order on the Finnish operation was indeed prepared, and that its author—Corps Commander Mikhail Frinovskij—suggested that the repressive measures be taken not only against Finns, but also against the “Karelian and, in general, Finno-Ugric population” (Chukhin 1997). The order was never issued, but the Karelian leadership was granted permission for the Finnish operation: it was based on NKVD Orders No. 00485 (Polish) and No. 00693, “Operation for repression of illegal crossers of the border of the USSR” (October 23, 1937).

In December 1937, the first register lists were compiled with the names of

---

8 According to the 1933 Census, the share of Poles, Germans, Latvians, and Estonians in the population of Karelia did not exceed 0.2 percent (656, 623, 684, and 621, respectively) (Perepis’ naselenija AKSSR 1933 Vyp. 1.1934: xviii).
people from “groups accused of espionage and subversive activities,” and the Karelian dvoika started its work. The scale of its work is incomparable with previous repressions: the first nine register lists (December 4–30) included 900 people, of whom 727, or 80.8 percent, were sentenced to death. The ethnic composition of the victims also underwent a significant change: now Finns constituted 64.2 percent of the executions (Takala 2002, 116, appendix 2, table 2).

The first results were summarized in a long memorandum that Karl Tenison sent to Nikolai Ezhov and Mikhail Frinovskii on January 10, 1938. As of January 1, 1938, 5,340 people had been arrested in Soviet Karelia including “70 residents and 1,267 agents of foreign intelligence services.” Of the 874 people arrested as part of the anti-Finnish campaign, 59 were claimed to be “resident agents” of the Finnish intelligence service and 283 its “illegal agents.” An additional 480 were claimed to be “participants in counter-revolutionary nationalist insurgent or subversive organizations” (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. Secretariat, o. 1, p. 82, l. 52).

In early January, the arrests by and activities of the extrajudicial bodies were suspended: the formal deadlines for all operations had passed. Yet it was only a brief respite before the decisive assault. The year 1937 came to embody the terror of that time, but in many places, including Karelia, the bloodiest events were to take place in 1938.

On January 31, new instructions were issued to extend national operations and the functioning of the extrajudicial bodies until April 15, 1938. At the same time, for nine Soviet republics, twelve krajs and oblasts, and one autonomous republic, i.e., Karelia, the operation under the Order 00447 was extended until March 15, and new quotas for arrests were established. Soviet Karelia could repress an additional 700 people, of whom 500 could be executed (“Vstrechanye plany” 1992). In May, the NKVD of the USSR issued a new order, No. 1160 (May 28, 1938), which once again extended national operations until August 1, 1938 (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. KRO, o. 1, p. 54, ls.12–13). In Karelia, mass arrests continued until August 10, and individual cases continued even after this deadline.

**Last Chords**

The final results of the operation were summed up in mid-August. They clearly demonstrate how much “more effectively” the secret police bodies worked in 1938: in comparison to 1937, the number of repressed Finns more than tripled, from 743 to 2,446 people (Takala 2002, appendix 2, table 4). According to the reports, the intelligence services of ten states (Japan, Germany, England, France, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Turkey, Norway, and, of course, Finland) “operated” in Soviet Karelia (Archive of UFSB in RK, FDSP, f. Secretariat, o. 1, p. 82, l. 17). Altogether between January 1 and August 10, 1938, 5,164 people were repressed, including 1,903 (33 percent) within the “kulak” line and 3,208 (55 percent) within “national” operations.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

These data, which are based on materials of the Karelian NKVD from 1938 to 1939, cannot be characterized as complete. For instance, they do not include the results of operations involving the resettlement of families of “enemies of the people,” carried out in Karelia during July and August 1938. On the whole, we have only a general picture of what was happening in Karelia during the summer of 1938. In the areas where Finns formed visible minorities—Prionezhskij, Kondopozhskij, Kalevalskij, Priazhinskij rajons, and, of course, Petrozavodsk—arrests were made daily. People were seized on the streets in broad daylight in full view of shocked passersby. There were “hot” days when lorries full of people were driven away from large factories including the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper Factory and the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory. At the same time, large-scale operations were carried out to resettle families of repressed Finns from Petrozavodsk and the border areas.


An anti-Soviet organization of Finnish bourgeois nationalists was revealed and destroyed on the territory of the Karelian ASSR. Ringleaders of this counter-revolutionary organization, its chairmen Gylling and Rovio, did not find support for their vile intentions among the working Karelian population and used illegal immigrants from Finland, remaining unconquered kulaks and members of the Karelian rebellion [of 1921–22]. Apart from that, Gylling reinforced the enemy lines by recruiting (North) American Finns from Canada through the specially organized Resettlement Agency. This measure was justified by the insufficient labor force in the Karelian timber industry. Finns arrived from Canada with private cars, typewriters, foreign currency, and instructions from foreign intelligence services [. . . .] Among the Finns arrested during 1937–38, there were 2,100 spies, or 20 percent of all Finns living in Karelia.

Bourgeois-nationalist Finnish organization placed in responsible and leading positions only its supporters, i.e. Finns. Consequently, they concentrated in their hands the most important party, administrative, and public organizations, as well as industrial enterprises, agriculture, and transportation [. . . .] Their measures to frustrate plans set by the party and the government led to the current complicated situation in Karelia, which struggles hard against the consequences of their subversive activities.

The nationality policy in Karelia, because of Gylling, Rovio, and their henchmen, became totally distorted. Workers of Karelia had to read
newspapers and books, listen to radio programs, educate their children in the language foreign to them. Ethnic tensions and hostility were cultivated in all possible ways.

The staff of the NKVD of the KASSR carried out special work to register remaining Finnish Americans. Personal records were made for 1,416 people, of whom 81 are foreign nationals. Most Finnish Americans live in border areas and a certain part in Petrozavodsk.

I am asking for your order to resettle from the border areas of the Karelian republic 1,416 Finnish Americans to Omsk or Arkhangelsk oblasts where they should be employed exclusively in timber harvesting. Besides, I am asking for sanction to resettle 1,500 families of repressed Finns living in border areas and Petrozavodsk to outside of Karelia. (Matuzenko 1938a)

We do not know whether Moscow granted the requested sanctions. It is likely that there were no specific instructions on the resettlement of “Finnish Americans,” because in late August Stepan Matuzenko once again appealed to Nikolai Ezhov with a similar request:

In order to destroy the favorable soil in which foreign intelligence services can implant new espionage organizations on the territory of Karelia, particularly in border areas, it is necessary to hasten the issuing of sanctions to resettle from Karelia all Finnish Americans who arrived from Canada, as well as families of repressed Finns, Estonians, Latvians, Germans, and Poles. (Matuzenko 1938b)

Despite the lack of formal approval, the “cleansing” of border areas and the Karelian capital was carried out during the entire summer of 1938. People were resettled from Petrozavodsk, Uhtinskij, and Rebolskij rajons to “rear” rajons of Karelia, including Kemskij, Pudozhskij, and Zaonezhskij. According to instructions, resettlement was enforced on “families of enemies of the people, repressed Finns, Swedes, Estonians, Latvians, and ethnicities which live outside of the Soviet Union” (Karelian Regional Party Archive, f. P-35, o. 1, d. 493, l. 108). People were usually given twenty-four hours, and sometimes as little as two hours, to pack. The scale of the operation can be estimated only on the basis of indirect data. For example, it is known that between July 20 and August 23, 395 families, or 922 people, including 417 children, were resettled from Petrozavodsk (Chukhin 1995, 12). In October, Matuzenko reported to Ezhov that after the resettlement operation, 1,350 Finns (including families of the repressed) still lived in border areas of Karelia, and he asked
for permission to complete the operation (Archive of UFSB in RK, f. Secretariat, o. 1, d. 82, ls. 81–82).

The last notes of the mass operations were the events of the autumn of 1938. On September 17, Ezhov signed Order No. 00606 to create special *troikas* “for trial of cases of the people arrested under the NKVD of the USSR Order No. 00485 and others.” This meant the immediate massacre of those who had been arrested during the spring and summer of 1938 under the national orders. During two incomplete months of Karelia’s special *troikas* (Kuprianov, Matuzenko, Mikhailovich), 1,805 people were convicted, including 1,499 Finns, and of those convicted, 1,708 people (94.6 percent) were sentenced to execution (Takala 2002, appendix 2, table 7).

The joint resolution of the SNK of the USSR and the Central Committee of the VKP(b), “On arrests, procurator control, and investigation” (November 17, 1938), suspended mass repressions. The peak of the Great Purge had passed.

**Tragic Statistics**

The fate of many North American Finns is described in Mayme Sevander’s books (1992, 1993, 1996, 2000). Her father, Oscar Corgan, was executed in 1938. Searches conducted by Sevander and Eila Lahti-Argutina produced reliable data on 739 North American Finns who were repressed during 1937 and 1938. Of course, this list is incomplete. Lahti-Argutina’s martyrrology does not indicate the country of origin for many of the victims. For example, only from other archival sources can we learn that Arho Erola, a worker for the Karelian Building Trust, who was repressed and executed in April 1938 (Lahti-Argutina 2001, 84) had arrived in Soviet Karelia from the United States in one of the first immigrant groups in December 1930 (Council of People’s Commissariat of the KASSR, f. R-685, o. 2, d. 69, l. 85). For some people, however, archival documents do not provide any information related to their repression. Fredrick Lindholm, the art director of the Finnish National Theater during the 1940s and 1950s, arrived in Karelia from Canada in 1931. In the spring of 1938, he was arrested along with an entire building crew of twelve Finns while they were building a pavilion on the Petrozavodsk railway station. Imprisonment followed, then the GULAG camp in Solikamsk, where his hands were broken. Yet he was lucky: he was among very few Finns released before the Soviet-Finnish War (the Winter War), and he was able to return to Karelia and even complete his education in art school in 1941 (Takala 2002, 156–58). The name of Fredrick Lindholm is not mentioned on any official list of repressed or rehabilitated people.

There are many such examples. Still, the current data provide a general idea of the state terror employed against North American Finns, and allow us to identify the features and patterns of this terror.

Among 739 North American Finns who were, according to the martyrrology of

---

9 Calculated on the basis of Lahti-Argutina (2001).
Lahti-Argutina, repressed during 1937 and 1938, 323 people arrived in Karelia from Canada (17 were born in Canada) and 416 from the United States (94 were born in the United States). This is roughly proportionate to the number of Americans and Canadians in the immigration flow to Karelia where 58 percent of the immigrants were from the United States and 42 percent from Canada. If we assume that by the late 1930s approximately 4,500 to 5,000 immigrants still lived in Karelia, the share of the repressed among them would be 15 percent. Among all Finns repressed in Karelia during 1937–38, the share of North American immigrants would also be 15 percent.

The proportion of men and women among the repressed is almost equal among both American and Canadian groups of immigrants: 384 men (92 percent) among American Finns and 311 men (96 percent) among Canadian Finns. The American group suffered major losses in the age group of 45 to 55: 160 people, or 42 percent of the repressed American men. The most damaged age group of Canadian Finns were men between 30 and 40: 156 people, or 50 percent. This corresponds to the age composition of both immigrant groups.

The arrests of North American Finns spiked during two periods: between December 1937 and February 1938 and again between July and August 1938, which corresponds with the official sanction granted to the “Finnish operation” and then just before the end of the Great Purge. Nearly all victims were accused under one or several paragraphs of the 58th Article, “Counter-revolutionary crimes,” of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR. Sentences were severe: 84 percent of Canadian Finns and 71 percent of American Finns were sentenced to execution.

One more conspicuous fact: while 58 percent of North American immigrants were rehabilitated during Khrushchev’s Thaw, 42 percent of the Finnish Canadians and Americans who were repressed in Karelia were rehabilitated only during the second wave of rehabilitations, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to the 1989 Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and a special law adopted in 1991. It means that nobody searched for them during the first wave of rehabilitations during Khrushchev’s Thaw.
Works Cited

Archive of the Council of People’s Commissariat of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) and Its Organizations.


Karelian Regional Party Archive.


———. 1938b. “On the resettlement of Finnish Americans and families of repressed Finns from the Karelian ASSR” [memorandum]. Archive of UFSB in RK, FDSP.

Natsional’nyj arkhiv Respubliki Karelija (NARK) [National Archive of the Republic of Karelia].

Perepis’ naselenija AKSSR 1933 g. Vyp. 1 [The census of the Karelian ASSR, 1933, Volume 1]. 1934. Petrozavodsk.

Punainen Karjala. [Red Karelia]. 1930.
“Rasstrel po raznorjadke, ili kak eto delali bolsheviki” [Execution according to plans, or how Bolsheviks did it]. 1992. Trud, June 4.


Sbornik zakonodatelnykh i normativnykh aktov o repressijakh i reabilitatsii zhertv politicheskikh repressij. [Selected legislative and regulatory acts on repressions and rehabilitation of victims of political repressions]. 1993. Moscow.


**CANADIAN AND AMERICAN FINNS IN THE GULAG**

*Dmitri Frolov*

*National Archives of Finland*

**ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the massive GULAG system of the 1930s, focusing on Kazakhstan’s Karaganda camp, KARLAG. The author discusses the treatment of political prisoners and their families.

One result of the Great Purge of the 1930s was the mass-scale transfer of whole populations within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Canadian and North American Finns who lived in the territory of Soviet Karelia were also targeted by these resettlements.

From the early 1930s, Kazakhstan, the region of Karaganda in particular, became a place of exile for tens of thousands of forced migrants. More than sixty-five thousand prisoners and “special settlers” were concentrated in this area during that period, including many Canadian and American Finns. In Karaganda (Middle Kazakhstan), there was a camp, part of the GULAG\(^{10}\) archipelago, called “KARLAG” (Karaganda’s camp, or lager), which operated from the 1930s to the 1950s. Because thousands of Soviet citizens were deported to the Karaganda region, there developed unique ways of life and relationships between the different nationalities that were moved to the region. The first groups of deported Koreans came from the Far East. The next settlers came from the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Belorussia. Other nationalities such as Germans, Chechens, Crimean Tartars, Karelians, and Ingrian Finns were also resettled to Kazakhstan during the war and post-war period.

The idea of constructing special camps and places of exile was not new for Stalin’s government. However, in 1929 the USSR launched a new policy of collectivization, consolidating individuals with their households, land, property, and livestock into collective farms, or *kolhozes*. The goal was to increase the food supply for urban populations, the supply of raw materials for industry, and agriculture for export. This marked the end of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which had allowed

---

10 GULAG (1930–1959, Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerej [Main Labor Camps’ Administration]) was founded in the USSR as a part of Ob“edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (Unified State Political Administration, or OGPU) in April 1930. The GULAG system was responsible for all correctional and labor camps in the USSR.
peasants to sell their surpluses on the open markets. In many cases, peasants opposed collectivization and sabotaged the party’s policy by burning crops, attacking local activists, and destroying machines and kolkhoz property.

The resistance to collectivization was so strong that Stalin’s government had to react in equal measure. At the end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930, the mass-scale transfer of population started in the central agricultural regions of the USSR. At this stage Karelia was not targeted. Local authorities began to confiscate the property of rich peasants (kulaks) and move them from the targeted regions. All kulaks were divided into three main groups: counterrevolutionary activists, rich kulaks, and others kulaks. In practice, it often meant that not only kulaks, but also “middle-class peasants,” or serednjaki, could be suspected of crimes or of general opposition to the collectivization activists.

Canadian and American Finns did not initially share the fates of the 50,929 families who were transferred to Kazakhstan in 1930–31 (GARF, f. 9479, o. 1, d. 89, l. 205). The whole number of those transferred, according to the Russian researcher Viktor Zemskov, was more than 1.14 million (Zemskov 2005, 20). Middle Kazakhstan itself came to seem to be a huge concentration camp for hundreds of thousands of people. Within this territory of 1.78 million square kilometers was located one of the largest GULAG camps—KARLAG.

On May 13, 1930, on the base of the Ob"edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (Unified State Political Administration, or OGPU) concentration camp1 and reformatory, a special sovkhoz2, Gigant (Giant), was organized to use the labor of prisoners in agriculture. By September 17, 1931, it had been transformed into the Karaganda correctional labor camp. The administrative center for KARLAG was the nearby village of Dolinka. Thus began KARLAG’s twenty-year history. Founded in 1931, it was in use until 1959. The camp had more than twenty sub-camps in different parts of the Karaganda region. The “population” of KARLAG grew from year to year: in 1932 there were 10,400 inhabitants, and by 1949, the number had reached 65,673.

In 1922 the security police agency—Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (State Political Administration, GPU)—was established. Later, after the formation of the Soviet Union it was renamed Ob"edinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie. OGPU was the successor of CheKa (Chrezvychajnaja Komissija, Extraordinary Commission) and the predecessor of NKVD (Narodnyj komissariat vnutrennikh del, The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs). Its main tasks were to suppress counterrevolution, to uncover political dissidents, and, after 1928, to enforce the collectivization of farming. It had its own regiments and escort troops. OGPU was

1 In fact, these kinds of camps were not called “concentration camps” but “correctional camps.” Correctional labor was to reform people with antisocial inclinations.

2 Sovkhoz (Sovetskoe Khozjajstvo)—Soviet state-owned farm. The sovkhoz differs from the kolkhoz, where the land was owned by a collective of peasants.
absorbed into the NKVD in 1934 (Petrov and Skorkin 1999).

In 1934, incarceration facilities in the USSR were united under the jurisdiction of the NKVD. In the same year, GULAG was also subordinated to the NKVD. Moreover, NKVD was the authority responsible for many functions in the Soviet government; for example, Soviet archives also fell under this ministry’s sphere of interests beginning in 1938. In other words, the NKVD did its best to fuse all spheres of life under its power. The GULAG was not an exception. It was responsible for the fates of about two million prisoners, both political and criminal (see Zemskov 1991). According to the official data, there were more than thirty so-called Camp Administrations (Lagernoe Upravlenie) and fifty-three main GULAG camps across the former USSR. Labor camps had their own sub-camps. According to the statistics presented by the Virtual Museum of the GULAG, there were more than 110 sub-camps (Virtual’nyj muzej Gulaga).

The GULAG was responsible not only for receiving, isolating, and containing the prisoners; it was also responsible for employing them. Certainly, the first and the chief task of the GULAG was the isolation of criminals, their punishment, and the correction of their political views. But the Soviet state was also interested in the use of hundreds of thousands of prisoners as part of the labor force. From 1930 to 1934 the inhabitants of GULAG camps were used as a solution for the new economic policy of industrialization in the USSR. Table 1 is based on the statistics of the GULAG’s detainees according to Zemskov (1991).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>People Detained in Labor Camps</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>People Detained in Labor Camps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>510,307</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>663,594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>725,483</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>715,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>839,406</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>746,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>820,881</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>808,839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>996,367</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>1,108,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1,317,195</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>1,216,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1,344,408</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>1,416,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1,500,524</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1,533,767</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>1,415,596</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1,711,202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>983,974</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>1,727,970</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of detainees from 1934 to 1953 (to January 1, each year) (Zemskov 1991).

Kazakhstan, with its unique territorial position in the USSR, was very suitable for the GULAG structure. Moreover, the Karaganda region itself was of great importance for Kazakhstan’s economy, and many thousands of Soviet citizens were deported there. The ethnic groups that “settled” in Kazakhstan were of different origins: Russians, Ukrainians, Koreans, Belorussians, and Finns.
Coal, as well as plains that were suitable for cattle breeding, made the central part of Kazakhstan a very prosperous region. Forced settlers were employed not only in agriculture; they also worked in mines. The work was rather dangerous and, because of the lack of experience, accidents occurred almost weekly. According to Ljudmila Mikheeva, former director of State Archives of the Karaganda Region, in 1945 there were from 900,000 to 1,209,000 forced settlers in Kazakhstan (2009).

Although the number of “special settlers” in the USSR was rather high, most of the camps had not been prepared for the accommodation of prisoners. In many cases GULAG officials estimated the number of possible settlers incorrectly. This is why the construction and establishment of many camps and their sub-units was not complete when the first groups of forced migrants started to arrive in Kazakhstan. In some cases prisoners were placed in buildings hastily prepared for their new purpose and poorly fit for accommodation. It was common enough that the forced settlers dug themselves mud huts or lived in tents. According to the reports of local authorities, about 50 percent of the sixty thousand newcomers lived in mud huts, tents, and barracks (GAKO, State Archives of Karaganda Region, f. 13, o.1, d.1. l.s. 94–95). The lack of clean water, poor living conditions, and insufficient medical treatment led to the spread of disease among the workers. In some camps, dysentery was common. However, the most dangerous disease was typhus. Local officials tried to prevent the spread of this epidemic and organized special tents for the sick workers (Zhumashev and Mikheeva 2007, 15).

**Special Orphanages**

As indicated above, the GULAG was an organization that was responsible for the fates of many people—not only of adults, but also of children. According to Soviet law, family members of the repressed person could also be imprisoned or sent into exile as a “member of the family of the people’s enemy.” In some cases, when both parents were repressed, children were sent to special orphanages. Relatives could also be separated and sent to different orphanages.

Children of Canadian and American Finns were also among those children whose parents were sent to GULAG camps. Unfortunately, because of the lack of archival information, it is very difficult to calculate the exact number of North American children in the orphanages of Kazakhstan. Files of the local Security Service of Kazakhstan concerning repressed foreigners in the region are still closed to researchers. However, in some cases it is possible to get additional information about these orphanages in Karaganda from the local archives, for example, the State Archives of the Karaganda Region (Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv Karagandinskoj Oblasti, GAKO).

In 1930 special orphanages for children whose parents were in GULAG camps had been organized in Spassk, a village near Karaganda. The living conditions in the
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

orphanages were so awful that Kazakhstan officials sent a special commission to investigate. The commission announced in a report that the “orphanage is in a critical condition. The physical state of the children is weak. There is mass illness among them, as well as thievery. There is a lack of food and goods, and the personnel are incompetent and prone to alcoholism” (Mikheeva 2010, 8). According to the archival sources, a new director, who had been sent to the orphanage in 1934, mentioned in his report 365 healthy children, 1,676 sick, and 116 emaciated children, and 45 children who had died. At the end of the 1930s, the orphanage was transformed into a children’s criminal colony, which was later subordinated as a sub-unit for family members of people’s enemies of KARLAG in Spassk village. About three thousand prisoners, mostly women, were accommodated here.

KARLAG, as a part of GULAG, had the same administrative structure as other labor camps in the USSR. In 1931 KARLAG had 14 sub-camps and 64 labor units; in 1941, 22 sub-camps with 159 labor units; and in 1953, 26 sub-camps with 192 labor units. Moreover, each labor unit was divided into sub-divisions (farms, etc.). Labor units and sub-divisions could be located from 5 to 650 kilometers from the main camp.

The Spassk sub-camp was one such unit. In 1940 there were about 3,162 prisoners of a total 34,000 prisoners of KARLAG (Mikheeva 2010, 9). The prisoners of the Spassk camp were mostly involved in agricultural activities to improve the food rations of the KARLAG. In 1941 a plan was conceived to construct a spinning and weaving mill in Spassk with a capacity of up to two million pairs of woolen mittens a year (Mikheeva 2010, 9).

In 2010, the National Archives of Finland started negotiations in Karaganda to gain access to the registration cards of prisoners in Kazakhstan’s GULAG camps. The first step had already been taken in 2009 when Finland had received about two hundred Finnish registration cards for prisoners of war. The National Archives of Finland is currently negotiating with the local authorities for access to the thousands of civilian registers.

These registration cards will allow us to follow the fates of Canadian and American Finns in Kazakhstan. One of these is Heino (in Russian transcription Heimo) Rautiainen, from Canada, who came to the USSR in the 1930s with his father Emil Rautiainen. This is most likely the Rautiainen family—Emil, Heino, and Sigrid—from Iron River, Michigan. A local researcher, Ekaterina Kuznetsova, interviewed Heino in 1989. After his father’s arrest, Heino was transferred to an orphanage. In 1942 he was arrested as a “foreigner” and sent to Karabas, a KARLAG filial.

Among the files of KARLAG children there were also some Finnish names. It is not clear whether they were from Finland proper or North America (see Sevander 2006). The main issue for us is the exact number of North American children in KARLAG. Although all aspects of prisoner registration had been recorded in detail.

166
in accordance with numerous rules and regulations, GULAG administration officials were not able to register prisoners properly through the whole duration of 1930–56. For example, officials commonly confused nationality and citizenship. In some cases, camp officials recorded the prisoner’s citizenship or nationality in the same paragraph. This led to confusion regarding the total number of North American Finns in the USSR, as well as the number of those who died in the camps and hospitals. Because of such issues, some of these people are still considered missing. According to the Karaganda state archives, at least two girls with Finnish names had been in an orphanage in the Karaganda region: “Order No. 3, 10.02.1936. Venska Lempi and Venska Hengi to be registered as pupils of the orphans’ home.”

**Prisoners of War**

The beginning of World War II opened a new period of history for Kazakhstan—the period of the prisoners of war. In 1939, after the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Soviet Union founded the Main Prisoners of War Administration (UPVI), which was a sub-unit of the People’s Commissariat of the Interior (NKVD). In July 1941, according to an order of the Main POW Administration, based in Spassk, a branch of the KARLAG camp, POW camp N99 (Spassozavodskij lager), was formed. During its whole history, more than 66,000 prisoners of war of 40 nationalities passed through the camp, and 7,765 prisoners died there. They were buried in the territory of Karaganda (see Frolov 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006).

The Main POW Administration was responsible not only for the fates of the prisoners of war, but also for the quarantine inspections of Soviet citizens who were transferred to the USSR after the war. One example of these people is Kerttu Nuorteva, the daughter of Santeri Nuorteva, the former leader of Finns in Soviet Karelia, who returned to Soviet Russia from the USA. Kerttu was arrested during the Great Purge, and she spent several years in the Karaganda camp. During the war years she was sent to Finland as a spy. She was arrested in Finland and sentenced to death by military tribunal. Her fate after the war is unclear. However, according to the terms of the armistice, she was repatriated to the Soviet Union. After a quarantine interrogation in UPVI, she was sentenced and returned back to the KARLAG in Kazakhstan (Manninen 2006).

Those Canadian and American Finns who were involved in the mass resettlements carried out in the 1930s shared the fates of other GULAG prisoners. Hard labor, poor food rations, and lack of sufficient medical treatment led to a high mortality rate among the inhabitants of labor camps. Each camp or sub-camp had a

---

3 There were two paragraphs in the prisoners’ personal card: “citizenship” means the country the prisoner lived in before he was arrested; “nationality” means the national group to which the prisoner belongs.

4 UPVI (Upravlenie po delam voennoplennykh i internirovannykh) (Main POW Administration of the USSR) was part of the NKVD and was responsible for prisoners of war and interned civilians.
cemetery for the prisoners. KARLAG and its Spassk sub-camp shared a cemetery in Spassk. More than 5,100 prisoners of war and interned civilians of various nationalities are buried there. Among them are over 140 Finns. However, because of the lack of statistics about prisoners’ nationalities, it is impossible to calculate the exact number of Finns who have been buried in Spassk.
Works Cited


Gosudartstvennyj Arkhiv Karagandinskoj Oblasti [State Archives of Karaganda Region] (GAKO).
Gosudarstvennyj Arkhiv Rossiskoj Federatsij [State Archives of Russian Federation] (GARF).

Mikheeva, Ljudmila. 2009. Personal interview.
———. 2010. Istorija v dokumentakh [History in Documents]. Karaganda: [n.p.].


FINNS IN THE WHIRL OF THE SOVIET UNION’S FOREIGN POLICY

Markku Kangaspuro
University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT
The beginnings of the Soviet Union as well as Finnish-led Soviet Karelia date back to the First World War. However, the decade before the Second World War, with its Stalinist Purges and the outbreak of the Winter War (1939–40), changed the destiny of Karelia’s Finns. During the Stalinist Purges, thousands of American Finns fled from Karelia to Finland or back to North America or to forest work stations in Karelia or to other parts of the Soviet Union. Thousands were repressed and executed; they died in forced labor camps and remote regions of exile. American Finns fell into the whirl of one of the mightiest powers in history, with little opportunity to have a say in the events that took control of their lives and determined their fates.

In many ways, Karelia’s fate has been intertwined not only with relations between the Soviet Union and Finland, but also with the European politics of the USSR. Soviet Karelia was established in order to pacify Soviet Russia’s western border and to stabilize the security situation around the Baltic Sea where Petrograd, the future Leningrad, was located. Its establishment paved Soviet Russia’s way to the Tartu Peace Treaty with Finland in 1920. Then, ten to fifteen years later, events beyond Karelia’s borders again affected its development. The onset of the Great Depression led to mass immigration to Karelia from North America and Finland, and, in 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, and extreme right-wing authoritarian and fascist governments were established in several European countries. In the Soviet Union, the security organizations began to gather more power, and the border areas in particular fell under their strict control. The process culminated with the Stalinist Purges, which cleansed the border areas of minority nationalities and strengthened central power institutionally, with Russian nationalism then called Soviet patriotism. American Finns, who had been recruited to Karelia just a few years before, could not believe how quickly the political climate could change, and how they, as builders of socialism, once welcomed with open arms, could so suddenly become suspected enemies of the state.
### The Time Before the Winter War

In the year before the Soviet Union launched the Winter War on November 30, 1939, it made several attempts to establish new security arrangements along its western borders, acquiring military bases from Finland and re-drawing the border in the Karelian Isthmus. But Finland was not ready to make any concrete security agreements with the Soviet Union, and all its alternative attempts to convince the Soviet Union of its Nordic orientation and neutrality failed. Boris Yartsev (Jartsev), alias Boris Rybkin, had arrived in Finland in April 1938 to try to convince the Finnish government of the need for a security agreement. He attempted to assure the Finnish government of the credibility of the Soviet Union by promising them that the Soviet government wanted to end all hostile propaganda against Finland by “removing Red Finns from the leading positions of Karelia” (Inkilä, 1938). In the midst of the Stalinist purges and the general suffering of Soviet Karelia’s Finnish population that summer of 1938, it was a very cynical announcement. Fortunately, the majority of American Finns in the region had succeeded in moving back to Canada, the United States, or Finland, but four thousand to five thousand Finns still remained.

News of the firings, imprisonments, and changing nationalities policies—not to speak of the indecent living standards and hunger that followed forced collectivization—had already reached North America by the mid-1930s as disappointed emigrants began returning from Karelia. The Communist Party of Canada and other Canadian Finnish leftist organizations fell into a deep crisis. Returnees were bitter, angry, and embarrassed. Some demanded the return of the money that they had invested in the overseas trip and funds for machinery. From the very beginning, it was a question of a series of sharp disagreements between the Communist Party of Canada and the Karelian Technical Aid (KTA) as well as other Finnish organizations. The question concerned the extent of KTA’s independence and of the financial and political losses to the Canadian organizations caused by emigration. Throughout the entire 1930s, Canadian and Finnish organizations had unresolved disputes over this question, and one of the primary obstacles to its resolution in the second half of the 1930s was the fate of Karelia’s Finnish leadership and of Finland’s Communist Party representatives in the Comintern. All of them had been replaced and had disappeared from the political stage. Nobody could provide answers about their fates to the North Americans. After 1935, all communication regarding Karelia’s Finnish leadership on political matters ceased. From then on, Finnish representatives in the Comintern could not deal with Karelia’s issues, and, further, by 1937, they, too, were isolated from Finland’s political scene.

The Winter War changed the situation in this respect, too. The Comintern’s channel to Canada and America was opened up, and support for Otto Ville Kuusinen’s puppet government in Terijoki was sought from party organizations and trade

---

1 The Terijoki government was set up as an alternative to Finland’s legal government in Helsinki.
Victims and Survivors of Karelia

unions. The German-Russian non-aggression treaty (Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) brought confusion and demoralization within communist and leftist movements all over the world, as the Intelligence Bulletin of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Headquarters reported on January 22, 1940 (“The Struggle will be Long” 1940, 122–23). In Finland, the reaction was similar, and the majority of Social Democrats and Communists went to fight for their country.

The establishment of the Kuusinen government was not a decision made by Kuusinen and other Finns themselves but rather by the highest Soviet leadership. Historians still debate whether it was an initiative of Stalin himself or of Leningrad’s party leader, Andrei Zhdanov, who was responsible for political operations during the war. In any case, Kuusinen, his ministers, and his army commanders were invited back to their political roles from different parts of the Soviet Union—some from GULAG lagers—and taken on board, including Kuusinen’s son, Esa Kuusinen, who would serve as the secretary of his father’s government.

Although from the perspective of the Soviet Union, the Terijoki government was a miserable failure (as indeed was the entire Winter War), for Karelia’s Finnish and Karelian population, it came almost as a blessing. The nationalities policy was suddenly changed to a pro-Finnish policy, much as it had been reversed to an anti-Finnish policy just a couple of years before. Finns received the right to move back to Petrozavodsk and other places from which they had been deported, and the Finnish language was adopted for use in schools, cultural life, and the media. After the end of Nikolai Ezhov’s leadership of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs and State Political Administration (Narodnyj komissariat vnutrennikh del, NKVD, and Ob’edinnoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie, GPU) in November 1938, a gradual change in policy was evidenced even by the beginning of 1939. In March, the Soviet Union again attempted to resume security negotiations with Finland. Additionally, articles in Canadian and American newspapers critical of the Karelian situation created concern among the leadership of the Comintern, and indeed the Communist Party of Canada actively sought clarification of the fate of North American Finns in Karelia. This negative publicity bothered the Soviet foreign ministry and hindered both its aims and those of the Comintern (Rentola 1994, 125). The Comintern’s general secretary, Georgy Dmitrov, informed Leningrad’s party secretary—Stalin’s close aide Andrei Zhdanov—of the longstanding critical situation of the Communist Party of Canada. Zhdanov ordered his subordinates in Karelia’s party organization to sort out the question of Karelian Technical Aid in Canada and launched a counterpropaganda campaign discrediting the criticism of North American Finns in Canada. North American Finns in Karelia were again needed, and on April 24, 1939, the party secretary of Karelia, Gennadi Kuprijanov, published an article in Pravda describing the achievements of Karelia’s timber industry, underlining the central role of Canadian Finns (Takala 1993, 24). This was the first time in nearly five years
that Finns were represented in a positive fashion in Karelia. In the article ordered from Kuprijanov by the higher echelons of the party leaders, three Canadian Finns—Partonen, Vuorela, and Santanen—were elevated to exemplary shock workers. The orchestrated writings of Canadian Finns were also sent to Canadian newspapers to improve the negative image of Karelia. As a consequence of new developments in international politics and changes in domestic Soviet politics, the situation of North American Finns also changed. Repression and public political pressure against them eased, and some were even granted the right to return from deportation.

To some extent this development—a new, relaxed situation after the purges in the Karelian-Finnish community—can also be read in the letters of Canadian Finn Lisi Hirvonen to her sister, Anna Mattson (Hirvonen 1932–39). Lisi and Eino Hirvonen immigrated to Soviet Karelia and first arrived in the Finnish-Karelian district of Uhtua in 1932. Within a year, they moved to Petrozavodsk to work in the famous ski factory, as did many other Finns. Eino did not enjoy it there for long and found a place in the Finnish National Theatre as an actor in September 1933. He toured throughout the Karelian districts. On August 15, 1936, Lisi wrote to her sister that Eino was still in Uhtua and had already been there for a year, seeking admission to a local school. It seems that Eino had left Lisi because he had not been in contact with his fiancée after leaving Petrozavodsk. The theatre was closed down as a result of the purges in 1937. Edvard Gylling was arrested in Moscow in July 1937, and Eino was arrested along with many others in 1938 (Lahti-Argutina 2001, 538; Autio-Sarasmo 2002, 130).

Lisi’s work place, the Petrozavodsk Ski Factory, established in 1931, was perhaps the most profitable and rapidly growing enterprise in Karelia. It was led by the Red Finn Elias Tuomainen, who had moved to Karelia from Kuopio in 1921. Lisi was an award-winning shock worker, and she wrote in her letters about the trip to Leningrad that she was granted in 1935, as well as Women’s Day celebrations, and a celebration of the October Revolution in the same year. But in her letters, she also asked, as early as 1934, for her passport, which she had left with her mother in Canada. She perhaps wrote of it yet again for the last time, at least according to my interpretation, when she hinted at the question in her letter of January 17, 1939: “I would like to ask you something, maybe you can guess. Could you ask Jacki and Eemeli, and Harry’s Lisi might also take part, she promised if this comes to anything at all.”

On September 10, 1938, Lisi Hirvonen wrote that she had moved from the factory to a forestry worksite over one hundred kilometers from Petrozavodsk. She had already been at the worksite for over three months. It is unclear whether she had

---

2 Shock workers were the most effective, best paid workers, intended to be models of the “new working class.”
3 Lisi did not mention which school Eino sought to attend, but at the time, several Finnish-curriculum vocational schools were located in Uhtua.
moved “voluntarily” in order to avoid arrest, had been fired from the ski factory and was therefore forced to find new work, or if she had been deported or had received an administrative order to do the forestry work. In any case, the time of her move to the forest punkt coincides with a period when the NKVD sentenced thousands of Finns to execution, forced labor, and deportation. Among these Finns was Edvard Gylling, who, following a year’s detention, was sentenced to be executed on June 14, 1938.

The ski factory’s director, Elias Tuomainen, and other Finns working there were publicly criticized in August 1937. Tuomainen was arrested on September 29, 1937, and after one year of imprisonment and interrogations, on October 10, 1938, he was deported to a work lager in Krasnojarsk GULAG, where he died on November 2, 1940 (Lahti-Argutina 2001, 538; Autio-Sarasmo 2002, 163). The blow to the ski factory’s Finns, Tuomainen’s arrest and GULAG sentence, and Lisi’s move to the forest punkt all fit perfectly together. Lisi moved away from Petrozavodsk, probably in June 1938, the same month that Gylling and many others were executed. However, Lisi had at least some good fortune. After one year, she was able to return to Petrozavodsk. On July 7, 1939, she wrote that she had moved back, although initially she had not been sure if she could return to Petrozavodsk or where she might end up living. She had even returned to her former workplace in the ski factory and found a place to live, sharing a room with a girl she knew. Perhaps Lisi’s return to the factory was a part of the public relations campaign that Kuprijanov had ordered in Karelia. The Soviet leaders had to show that everything was well and good in Karelia, and not simply rely on propaganda. On July 19, 1939, Lisi wrote that she had gone to Summer Park the previous evening, but the weather was cold and there was not anything “that could amuse anymore anyone as old as we are.” The weather was not the only thing that was cold in Karelia’s (usually hot) July. Lisi also must have felt a chill inside herself after all she had experienced. I suspect that she wrote again in a roundabout way about the possibilities of moving back to Canada. “I have not yet asked anywhere about the thing. It is so hard to think about that, so for the moment I’m planning to just see how things go.”

She did not have a Canadian or Finnish passport, and from 1934 onwards, immigrants had been pressured to take a Soviet passport and citizenship. As a Soviet citizen, Lisi could not speak openly of her wishes to return to Canada, although she spoke of it in a more general way in her letters. In the last letter of her collection (July 1939), she wrote of her longing: “I often think about you all and miss you so much, now that I’m so alone here, but that’s my fate. I’ve been thinking that I should have stayed in Canada, should not have gone flitting off like a hobo. . . . Oh well, never mind, I can’t get time back.” In her current situation she hoped to be “getting on with life again, with little cat steps.” It was a realistic wish, at least on the basis of the warmer winds that were blowing from Moscow. However, the thaw did not continue
for long, and within the four months, Lisi’s life would change drastically again. At the latest, by October or the beginning of November, the Soviet Union decided to solve its security problems on the border with Finland by military force. On November 30, 1939, it launched the Winter War. We do not know if Lisi had managed to find a better home, meet her old friends, or find any reasons to enjoy life during those four months prior to the outbreak of war. Perhaps she lived in Petrozavodsk during the war until the summer of 1941 and the Finnish occupation of Petrozavodsk. More likely, she was evacuated to Siberia or sent to Kazakhstan’s labor camps, survived, and returned to Karelia after the war, or perhaps she remained where she lived during the war, or maybe, like so many others during the war, she died in some remote area of the Soviet Union during her evacuation.

In 1947, after the war, 4,999 Finnish inhabitants remained in Karelia. Because the recruitment of Ingrian Finns to Karelia had not yet begun—not until 1949—the five thousand Finns were largely from Finland and North America. Statistics from 1950 reveal that, of the Finns from abroad living in Karelia, only 1,752 were left—405 from the United States and 205 from Canada (Takala 1993, 25). In 1949, Kuprijanov, Karelia’s party secretary, asked Stalin for permission to recruit Ingrian Finns to Karelia. By March 1950, about twenty thousands Ingrians had moved to Karelia before Kuprijanov was arrested as part of Stalin’s final operation, one in which Soviet and party leaders from Leningrad, along with their associates, were arrested and executed (known as the “Leningrad Case”), and the NKVD’s Yuri Andropov (later the party’s general secretary from 1982 to 1984) stopped the movement. The intention had been to recruit about one hundred thousand Ingrians for forestry work in Karelia (Suni 1998, 24). Actually, Kuprijanov’s Ingrian recruitment plan repeated Gylling’s plan of twenty years prior to recruit one hundred thousand American Finns. Indeed the reason for halting the immigration was the same in both cases: because of Karelia’s status as a border region, the security organizations considered immigration “a security risk.”

**FINNS AGAIN**

What happened then with the nationalities policies of Soviet Karelia during the Stalinist purges of 1937–38 and after? After Gylling and Rovio were replaced by the Latvian Pjotor Irklis and the Karelian Nikolai Bushujev in 1935, and in particular during the regime of their successors, Nikolai I. Ivanov and Petr V. Soljakov (1937–38), and after them during Kuprijanov’s regime until March-April 1939, Finns encountered not only repression, but an anti-Finnish campaign. The purpose was to change the identity of Karelia from that of Karelian-Finnish to Karelian-Russian. Central to this were the decisions made between 1936 and 1938 that resulted in the replacement of the Finnish language with the Karelian language between 1938 and 1940 (Kangaspuro 2000, 334–342; Sarhimaa 1999, 35–39). On January 17, 1939,
Lisi wrote from the forest *punkt* about the difficulty of the situation for her in terms of culture and daily life. “Any minute now I’m going to turn illiterate. I seem to be too old to learn to read the language of this country, and that’s all there is. It would be good to be able to read and write at least a little bit. I do understand quite a lot and can read a bit, so that I manage to do my shopping.”

The purges of Finns and Karelians escalated in 1937, and the ultimate purpose of the operation carried out in the years 1937–39 justifies the use of the term “ethnic cleansing.” The mid-1930s was a time of restoration for Russian national pride. In Karelia, this was carried out in sharp contradiction to all manner of Finnishness, whether Red or White. Finns were dehumanized, and the nationalistic pathos of Russianness dominated the public sphere. At that time, xenophobia was deeply rooted in the minds of the population. Every Finn was a potential spy and a counterrevolutionary preparing for the chauvinist onslaught of Finland in order to annex Karelia (Zakovskij 1937, 4–9, 14–21). For the NKVD, the proof of such a conspiracy was the nationalistic rhetoric of both Red and White Finns. Both had spoken of a Greater Finland, even though their ideas for its political system were in opposition to each other. Within the new Russian-Soviet patriotism, Finnish nationalism, regardless of the color, was dangerous. It threatened the unity of the country, and, thus, Finns were treated as separatists (Service 1997, 200, 206; Kangaspuro 2000, 267, 275, 288, 292).

But the Second World War and the Winter War were again turning points for Karelia. The Kremlin established the Finnish Democratic Republic. Otto Ville Kuusinen, the Finnish secretary of the Comintern, was appointed prime minister of the Terijoki government. Finns were needed again as a veil for the Kremlin’s policy. In Karelia, the Finnish language and its literature were restored, and people were released from the prisons and the GULAG camps. Although the facade of the republic had changed, the darker undertones of Russian policy continued. As the Karelian party secretary Gennadi Kuprijanov defined it, the adaptation of the Finnish language did not mean the restoration of a Finnicization policy (Kuprijanov 1940, 48, 78–79, 84–85, 90–92).

In March 1940, during the “Interim Peace,” the status of Karelia shifted from an autonomous region to a republic and the Kremlin established a new Karelian-Finnish Socialist Soviet Republic, even though there were only about 696,000 people living there by 1941, significantly fewer than Stalin’s minimum requirement of one million. Additionally, this was the first time the word Finnish had been included in the name of the republic, an awkward feature of the new national republic given that the vast majority of the population was Russian. The number of Karelians, Vepsians, and Finns among the population was no more than approximately 130,000–140,000 (Hyytiä 1999, 33). The purpose of the new Soviet Republic has been the subject of continuous speculation: was it or was it not Stalin’s plan to occupy Finland in the
near future? One explanation has been that it was Stalin’s plan, as it had always been the plan of Russian leaders, while a second explanation has been that the decision was made only as a consequence of the establishment of new Finnish areas within Karelia. Most of the areas that had been conquered from Finland were incorporated into the Republic of Karelia. A third explanation holds that it was an attempt to cover the political and military disaster of the Winter War. A definitive conclusion will require more evidence.

Although the new republic with its Finnish government was a surprise for many of the republic’s Russians and Karelians (Goryshin 1939, 26–27), the political situation and atmosphere were not like those of the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike Gylling, Otto Ville Kuusinen was a puppet ruler. The strong man of Karelia was Gennadi Kuprijanov, the ethnic Russian first secretary of the Karelian party organization. The formal political transition did not mean a transition in any deeper sense. As Kuprijanov declared immediately after the establishment of the republic, there was to be no return to a policy of Finnicization. Karelia was a firm and loyal subject of the Soviet Union (Kuprijanov 1940, 48, 78–79, 84–85, 90–92). Within five years, the Finnish-Karelian national identity of the area had been replaced by Soviet patriotism, based on the Russian language and culture. The Continuation War (1941–44), Finland’s brotherhood of arms with Nazi Germany, “justified” Stalinist xenophobia and repression in Karelia, particularly in the eyes of the Russian population. In the retrospective context of the Great Patriotic War, the victims of Stalinism in Karelia were “proven” to be as aggressive and expansionist as the official propaganda had accused them of being. On the other hand, in the new republic, the Finnish population was needed, and several thousand Finns from nearby Murmansk province were moved to Karelia (Laine 2001, 55). According to the official census, in 1933 Finns in Karelia had numbered between 12,000 and 15,000, but following the purges of 1937–38, those numbers dropped to 8,322 in 1939. However, we have good reason to doubt this number because, as far as we know, the censuses were manipulated in both 1937 and 1939, so as to cover the demographic losses of the 1930s (Takala 2002, 25). Nikolai Ivanov reported about four thousand Finns living in Karelia following the purges, as a result of the executions, sentences to forced labor camps, deportations to other parts of the Soviet Union, and people moving away under pressure (Ivanov [n.d.], 9–10), a total that we find plausible. After the war, Ingrian Finns were also allowed to move to Karelia, and by 1959, the number of Finns had increased to 27,000 (4.3 percent of the total population).

In 1948, Finland signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union. In this treaty, Finland was formally integrated into the Soviet Union’s security framework. Soviet Karelia lost its significance to Soviet foreign policy. In 1956, Karelia’s status shifted to that of an autonomous republic. By 1954, Russian had replaced Finnish as the language of instruction, although Finnish
was still taught as a compulsory subject to all Karelian and Finnish children. After that—and officially in 1958—a Finnish curriculum ceased to be taught in the schools. The decision was made as part of Khrushchev’s educational reforms of 1958–59. The law stipulated that Russian should replace all the national languages that had been used as the medium of instruction (Sarhimaa 1999, 39). Additionally, the processes of industrialization and mass immigration decreased the share of Karelians and Finns in the area and weakened their influence.

Karelians did not have their own written language, and the status and the use of Finnish were limited. According to the latest census conducted in 1989, the share of the Russian population had increased to 74 percent. Even the proportion of White Russians and Ukrainians was as high as Karelians (10 percent). However, the Karelians, living in the Republic of Karelia and northwestern regions of Russia, formed the largest (131,000 in 1989) national minority of the former Soviet Union that did not have a literary language of its own. The share of linguistically Russified Karelians reached 48 percent overall, and 56 percent in urban areas (Klementjev 1992, 149–150; Anttikoski 1996). The meaning of the name Karelia has lost all national connotations, and all that is left is the geographic meaning. Nowadays the word Karelia is simply a name given to one administrative area of the Russian federation.

In the spring of 1990, Finnish President Mauno Koivisto announced in a TV interview that people who were directly related to Finnish parents or grandparents had the right to move back to Finland. At that time Finland suffered from a shortage of workers, and the idea was to recruit easily adaptable (as it was understood) Ingrian people to Finland. Unfortunately for those who did return, instead of a warm welcome and a prosperous new beginning, they arrived in the midst of a poor economic climate with high levels of unemployment. And although in Russia they had been considered Finns, in Finland they were labelled Russians, or ryssä, in Finnish, a negative epitath.
Works Cited


Ivanov, Nikolai. [n. d.] Sekretarju TsK VKP(b) tov Stalinu I.V. [Ivanov, N. to the secretariat of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union comrade Stalin I.V.] (correspondence), f. 3, o. 5, d. 86, ls. 9–10. Gosudarstvennyj archiv obshchestvenno-politicheskikh dvizhenij Respubliki Karelija, Petrozavodsk, Russia. (From the context the letter is possible to date to late 1938 or early 1939.)


Zakovskij, Leonid. 1937. *Hävitämme spionit, diversantit ja tuholaiset loppuun asti!* [We will destroy spions, saboteurs, and vermins to the end] [book]. Petroskoi: [n.p.]. Renvall 17B, Helsinki, Kansallisarkisto.
CONTRIBUTORS

Sari Autio-Sarasmo, PhD, is a senior researcher at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki. Her latest publications include Reassessing Cold War Europe (co-edited with Katalin Miklóssy, Routledge, 2011) and Suunnitelmatalous Neuvostokarjalassa 1928–1941: Paikallistason rooli Neuvostoliiton teollistamisessa [Planned Economy in Karelian ASSR 1928–1941: The Role of the Local Level in the Industrialization of the Soviet Union] (Finnish Literature Society, 2002). She is the co-editor (with Arja Rosenholm) of Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values and Concepts (Kikimora Publications: Aleksanteri Papers 4/2005). She has written on Soviet economic modernization, and her recent research focus is on east-west interaction and the diffusion of knowledge during the Cold War era.

Evgeny Efremkin is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at York University and a sessional instructor at Ryerson University. Efremkin’s dissertation focuses on the sociopolitical history of North American Finnish migration to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. With the help of a comprehensive statistical analysis, he aims to explain the causes of the exodus to the Soviet Union, as well as immigrants’ tragic fates in Karelia. Efremkin has published and presented widely on topics in twentieth century immigration and transnational histories.

Dmitri Frolov is a doctor of social sciences, professor, and the head of the project “Documents Relevant to Finnish History in the Archives of the Former USSR” in the National Archives of Finland. He has researched and published widely on Soviet and Finnish war history, forced migration, and prisoners of war in World War II. Frolov is an author of a number of books and articles including the following: “Finnish Prisoners of War: Specifics of Custody and the Image of Enemy” in Prisoners of War and Forced Labour: Histories of War and Occupation (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Sovetsko-Finskij Plen 1939–1944: Po Obe Storony Koljuchej Provoloki [Soviet-Finnish captivity 1939–1944: On both sides of the barbed wire] (Aleteia, 2009); Finnish Prisoners of War in the Soviet Union, (Kazakhstan Pedagogical University, 2006; and Sotavankina Neuvostoliitossa: Suomalaiset NKVD:n leireissä talvi- ja jatkosodan aikana [As a prisoner of War in the USSR: Finns in the NKVD Camps during the Winter and Continuation Wars] (Finnish Literature Society, 2004).
Alexey Golubev received a degree of Candidate of Science in history from Petrozavodsk State University in 2007. Afterwards, he worked first as senior lecturer, then as docent at the Department of History of Northern Europe, Petrozavodsk State University. Since 2011, he has been enrolled in the doctoral program in history at the University of British Columbia. He was the chief editor of the academic series *Oral History in Karelia* (four volumes published between 2006 and 2008). He has co-edited a volume on the history of the Russian provincial press before 1917 (with Alexandr Kozhanov and Valentina Volokhova), *Provintsialnaia zhurnalista i zhiznRossijskoj imperii v XIX–nachale XX vv* [Provincial Press and the Life of the Russian Empire During the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries] (Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2008).

Markku Kangaspuro is a professor and director of research at the Aleksanteri Institute, the Research Centre of Russia and Eastern Europe, University of Helsinki. His expertise covers political history, especially the former Soviet Union; the political development of Russia; identities and nationalism; and modernization and development problems. His recent publications include *Perestroika: Processes and Consequences* (edited with Jouko Nikula and Ivor Stodolsky) (Finnish Literature Society, 2010); *Modernisation in Russia since 1900* (edited with Jeremy Smith) (Finnish Literature Society, 2006); and “The Victory Day in History Politics” in *Between Utopia and Apocalypse: Essays on Social Theory and Russia* (Kikimora Publications, 2011). Kangaspuro’s current research project, *Memory at War*, with five European universities, focuses on the memory politics of the Second World War and political use of history. He is also the editor-in-chief of *Idäntutkimus—The Finnish Review of East European Studies*.

Samira Saramo is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at York University and a contract lecturer at Lakehead University. Saramo’s dissertation builds a social history of Finnish North Americans in Soviet Karelia through the use of personal letter collections, with a focus on narrative and identity constructions. Saramo has published and presented on Finnish socialist women in Canada, Finnish Canadians and Bolshevization, the letters of Finns in North America and Soviet Karelia.

Irina Takala is docent and head of the Department of History of Northern Europe at Petrozavodsk State University. Her research interests include the history of Finland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, history of Soviet Karelia in the 1920s–1930s, Stalinist repressive policies, Finns in Russia, and the history of alcohol consumption in Russia. She is the author of two monographs: *Veselie Rusi: Istorija alkogolnoj problemy v Rossii* [The Russian Revelry: The History of the Alcohol Problem in Russia] (Zhurnal Neva, 2002) and *Finny v Karelii i Rossii: Istorija vozniknovenija i gibeli*
diaspora [Finns in Karelia and Russia: The Rise and Fall of the Diaspora] (Zhurnal Neva, 2002). Takala has also authored over 150 articles in journals, edited volumes, and conference proceedings.

Mikko Ylikangas, PhD, has worked since 2004 as a programme manager at the Academy of Finland. His research interests include the cultural and political history of the Soviet Union, the Finnish diaspora, the history of architecture and town planning, and the history of medicine. He is the author of *Rivit suoriksi! Kaunokirjallisuuden poliittinen valvonta Neuvosto-Karjalassa 1917–1940* [Straighten up the lines! Political Control of Literature in Soviet Karelia 1917–1940] (Kikimora Publications, 2004), and *Unileipää, kuolonvettä, spiidiä: Huumeet Suomessa 1800–1950* [Opium, Death’s Tincture, Speed: Drugs in Finland 1800–1950] (Atena, 2009).