

# INTRODUCTION

*Markku Kangaspuro, Helsinki University*

*Samira Saramo, York University and Lakehead University*

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 overpoliticized both from the employers' and employees' side.

The personal tragedy of many families also made the remembrance of Karelian Fever a delicate and painful thing. For individuals, the remembrance 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/

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-Sarasma 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.

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