

Disillusionment on the Grandest of Scales:

Finnish-Americans in the Soviet Union, 1917-1939

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From the time of the Russian Revolution onward, the Bolsheviks were often portrayed in mainstream American media as the “enemy.”[1] Many Americans, however, chose to go to the Soviet Union despite public opinion, and the Soviets welcomed them. Transitioning from a rural economy of peasants to an industrial economy of proletariats required technological expertise. Four distinct groups of Americans chose to move to the Soviet Union. African-Americans, both Communists and non-Communists, were recruited as agricultural experts to Central Asia to aid in cotton production.[2] Others, primarily skilled workers and specialists, were recruited to factories or construction projects in Ukraine or the Urals; Kharkov, Cheliabinsk, Magnitogorsk, and Kuznetsk were all home to large industrial projects—and hence many foreigners.[3] Some Jewish-Americans made their way to Eastern Siberia, where Stalin had created a Jewish Autonomous Region in Birobidzhan, a sparsely populated area just north of Manchuria.[4] The fourth group was a cohort of Finnish-Americans who settled in Karelia, an autonomous region in northwest Russia bordering Finland.

Why did these Americans choose to go to the Soviet Union? The role of the Great Depression, which struck the United States in 1929, cannot be ignored as a factor of immigration. Some Americans, finding no work commensurate with their qualifications in the United States, found in the Soviet Union a willing employer. Amtorg, the Soviet trade mission in New York, received an astounding 100,000 requests for immigration in an eight-month period in 1931.[5] Most requests were not granted, but as many as 11,000 Americans were employed in the Soviet Union in 1932.[6]

Like other Americans who immigrated to the Soviet Union, some Finnish-Americans considered emigration as possessing material benefits. Sylvi Hokkanen, an American who lived in Karelia for seven years, wrote: “Of course we didn’t expect to find wealth and material comforts in the Soviet Union, but we did feel that there would be an opportunity to work for a better life with a good chance of success.”[7] Others were drawn by the lure of a free education for them or their children, like Eino Tuomi. He pointed out proudly that he had “managed to give all three of our daughters an education of their own choice.”[8]

Most Finnish-Americans, however, did not go for primarily economic reasons. Many of them were fairly well-off economically, owning homes, cars, farm equipment, and the like. They paid their own way to the Soviet Union, and they emigrated with entire families.[9] Why, then, did Finnish-Americans choose to emigrate? For many, the decision was based in politics.

Finnish-American Politics

“We were not traitors. It has to be understood that we were the children of idealists. Their idealism was worded in communist ideals—that there should be equality for all.” —Mayme Sevander [10]

The Finnish-American community in the United States was often politically radical, heavily influenced by left-wing socialist and communist movements. This trend was rooted, in part, in the Finnish national awakening. The national revival took place from 1885 to 1907, a time period corresponding to the main wave of Finnish immigration to America. Included in this cultural revival were strong socialist, temperance, women’s rights, and workers’ movements. These

movements also took root among the Finnish émigrés in America.[11] In America, Finnish immigrants often labored in lumber camps or mines under terrible working conditions. Their anger at the exploitation they and other immigrants suffered from found its outlet in radical political movements—the labor union movement, socialism, and eventually communism.[12] At the time, workers across the country were unionizing, and Finns joined them in demanding better working conditions and pay. Finns played large parts in major miners' strikes in the Mesabi Range of northern Minnesota in 1907 and in Michigan's Copper Country in 1913.[13]

By 1903, forty Finnish-American clubs had formed the Imatra League and had begun to take steps to promote socialist ideas among the clubs. The Imatra League had 23,697 members in 1908, almost all of whom were Marxist in orientation.[14] A Finnish-American Workers' League was also founded in August 1904. In 1906, delegates at a conference in Hibbing, Minnesota, formed the Finnish Socialist Federation and affiliated themselves with the American Socialist party. The initial group was formed from socialist clubs with approximately 2,500 members. A few years later, in 1912, the Federation had grown to 13,667 members.[15]

The Federation's activities centered on "Finn Halls." These halls—the cultural centers of the Finnish-American community—became political centers as well. There, Finns could dance, watch theater, and absorb and discuss leftist politics.[16] Many of the children of Finnish-American socialists were raised as socialists from birth. They attended the Finnish halls regularly with their parents, but they also participated in summer camps, demonstrations, protests, and non-religious Finnish Sunday Schools.[17]

The Finnish Socialist Federation on several occasions experienced dissension and even splits. After the 1913 copper miners' strike in Michigan, many Federation members joined the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.). The Federation was strongly influenced by communism after the founding of the Communist Party in the United States. The socialist and communist Finns split over these influences, and communist Finns formed their own Finnish halls.[18] In 1923, the Federation officially affiliated itself with the Workers' Party, the public organization of the Communist Party in the United States.[19] Federation members made up about 40 percent of the Workers' Party in the 1920s.[20]

By 1921, four major Finnish-American radical newspapers were printed regularly: *Työmies* (Working Man), *Raivaaja* (Pioneer), *Toveri* (Comrade), and *Eteenpäin* (Forward). These publications represented a range of political views across the leftist spectrum.[21] *Työmies* was the official mouthpiece of the Finnish Socialist Federation, and later of the Finnish section of the Workers' Party.[22] *Eteenpäin* and *Toveri*, like *Työmies*, were linked to communism. *Raivaaja* was the newspaper of the Social Democrats, a group that broke from the Federation and retained its links to the American Socialist Party. Carl Ross estimates the circulation of the Finnish Communist press alone to have been nearly 40,000 at its peak; if the circulation figures of *Raivaaja* and *Industrialisti* (the I.W.W. organ) are added, the total circulation of the Finnish radical press numbered around 60,000. Because newspapers are almost always shared with others, this represents a substantial radical movement within an immigrant community of roughly 400,000.[23]

Not all Finns in the United States, of course, were members of radical political movements. Many Finns were "Church Finns"—members of the Lutheran Church, far more conservative, and advocates of temperance.[24] These Finns did much to distance themselves from their more radical brethren. In the wake of the Mesabi strike of 1907, for example, the conservative Finns were so opposed to the striking miners' socialism that they established the "True Finns Movement" (Tosi-

suomalaisliike) in February 1908. The movement claimed to be the true voice of Finnish-Americans and asked the mining companies not to judge all Finns as radical. They accused Finnish-American socialists of devastating the reputation of Finns everywhere and blamed them for the miners' "blacklist." The leaders of this movement reportedly recommended that the U.S. Department of Immigration deny Finnish socialists entrance to the country.[25]

Despite the divisions within the community, speakers traveling among Finnish-American communities to recruit immigrants to Karelia found a welcome there. Americans and Canadians were recruited primarily by two organizations: Amtorg, the Soviet trade mission in New York, and Soviet-Karelian Technical Aid (Neuvosto-Karjalan Teknillinen Apu).[26] Mayme Sevander's father was head of Soviet-Karelian Technical Aid for a time. She recalls that he told Finns in his recruiting speeches that:

Karelia ...needs strong workers who know how to chop trees and dig ore and build houses and grow food. Isn't that what we Finns have been doing in the United States for the past thirty years? And wouldn't it be wonderful to do that same work in a country that needs you, a country where there is no ruling class, no rich industrialists or kings or czars to tell you what to do? Just workers toiling together for the common good.[27]

The recruiting speeches were often the source of a person's "Karelian fever." Estimates of the number of Finnish-Americans who caught "Karelian fever" vary, but a widely accepted figure is approximately 6,000.[28] The fever was particularly concentrated and widespread in 1931 and 1932. The vast majority of immigrants arrived in Soviet Karelia in these years; few immigrants arrived after 1933.[29]

Many groups had farewells appealing to communist sentiment printed in Finnish newspapers:

We the undersigned, leaving behind this country of capitalistic exploitation, are headed for the Soviet Union where the working class is in power and where it is building a socialistic society. We appeal to you, comrades, who are staying behind, to rally round communist slogans, to work efficiently to overthrow capitalism and create the foundation of a Republic of Labor.[30]

In order to be accepted to go to Soviet Karelia, potential emigrants did not have to be members of the Communist Party. They only had to be in good health, be willing to work hard and endure difficulties, and receive a reference from a Communist-affiliated organization.[31] All the emigrants, however, had in common at least an openness to consider new, often utopian ideas.[32]

It is a matter of some debate within the historical community whether ideology or ethnicity more strongly motivated the Karelian fever. Alexis Pogorelskin argues that ethnicity was the primary factor both for the recruitment of the emigrants and for the emigrants' decisions to leave.[33] Mayme Sevander and Richard Hudelson, on the other hand, argue that ideological motivations for emigration outweighed nationalist ones and that Finnish ethnic identity "did not exist in isolation from ideological factors." [34]

Two facts, however, seem to indicate that neither nationalist desires nor Marxist ideology can explain the Finnish-Americans' emigration completely. First, recruiters to Karelia did not target churchgoing, Suomi Synod Finns. The recruiters generally spoke in Finn halls, where radical politics reigned supreme. This seems to indicate that it was not simply Finns who were wanted in Karelia, but a certain kind of Finns—those who would support the aims of the Soviet Union. Second, it was indeed Finnish Communists (or Communist sympathizers) who were targeted for

recruitment. Recruiters did not target any other nationality for settlement in Karelia; they preferred Finns.

Arguing that nationalism was the primary factor, as Pogorelskin does, ignores the fact that most Finns in the United States did not go to Karelia. If nationalism were such a compelling factor, then one would expect a larger portion of the entire Finnish-American community to emigrate. Arguing that political ideology was the dominant motivator, as Hudelson and Sevander do, also leaves something to be desired. There were far more Finnish Communists in the United States than the emigrants who went to Karelia. This seems to indicate that a complex range of factors—ideology, ethnicity, and perhaps others—united to create the Karelian “fever” in the Finnish-American community.

Korenizatsiia and Karelianization: Early Soviet Nationality Policy

After the Russian Revolution and subsequent Civil War, the victorious Bolsheviks faced two pressing questions: How should they unify the various peoples residing within the boundaries of their new country? How were they to, in Stalin’s words, make Soviet power “near and dear to the masses of the border regions of Russia?”[35] For centuries, the Russian Empire had dominated the territory of the U.S.S.R. Understandably, perhaps, the non-Russian nationalities of the new U.S.S.R. associated Russians with colonialism and cultural chauvinism. In order to restore order and promote peace, Lenin and his colleagues instituted a policy of korenizatsiia. This Russian word, which can be translated roughly as “indigenization,” indicated the program to spread Bolshevism among the non-Russian nationalities.

The goal of korenizatsiia was to make Bolshevism “comprehensible” to the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union.[36] According to this policy, use of national languages was to be encouraged, both in the educational and public arenas. Also, korenizatsiia encouraged the development of national Communist parties and the staffing of government organs with nationals.[37] Josef Stalin, who was at the time the People’s Commissar of Nationality Affairs, explained in an October 10, 1920 Pravda article that recruiting local Communist cadres enabled the masses to see that “the Soviet power and its organs are the products of their own efforts, the embodiment of their aspirations.”[38]

The korenizatsiia policy had particular success in the area of language and literacy. Many nationalities of the U.S.S.R. did not have written languages until after the Communists were in control. [39] This “fight for literacy” was a crucial element of korenizatsiia, and it was, overall, a successful endeavor. By 1939, 87.4 percent of the total population of the U.S.S.R. was literate—a dramatic jump from the 56.6 percent literacy rate just 13 years before, in 1926.[40] It should be noted that these figures are deceiving because they relate to the population as a whole, not ethnic groups; certain ethnic minorities were still overwhelmingly illiterate until after World War II, and a gender imbalance still existed.[41] Nevertheless, the Soviets made large gains in literacy during the period before World War II.

The final element of korenizatsiia was the creation of autonomous soviets, autonomous oblasts or okrugs, autonomous republics, and Union republics for different nationalities. The amount of governmental power ranged from significant (Union republics) to very limited (autonomous soviets). This complex subdividing of territory was based on the theory that each national minority

deserved a territory of its own, and it was by this rationale that Karelia existed as an autonomous republic.[42]

The Bolsheviks gained control of Karelia early in the Russian Civil War, and the Karelian Workers Commune was created on June 8, 1920. The area became the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923.[43] In most of the western territories of the U.S.S.R., developing local Communist cadres under the korenizatsiia policy was not a problem. In Karelia, however, much of the population was illiterate, and inexperienced at industrial work. Because of the general lack of education among the ethnic Karelian population, Finns—refugees from capitalist Finland and immigrants from North America—dominated the government.[44] The ethnic Karelians in the region spoke a language similar to Finnish.[45] The leaders of Karelia, after examining the Karelian language, decided that it was only a Finnish dialect. They resolved to develop local dialects through improved education and to eventually use standard Finnish throughout the region.[46] The official languages of Karelia were Russian and Finnish.[47] Those speaking various forms of Finnish (including the Karelian “dialect”) were supposed to be taught Russian, and those whose mother tongue was Russian were supposed to be taught Finnish. This met with mixed results at best, and the newspaper Punainen Karjala (Red Karelia) criticized the language barrier that still existed between Russian and Finnish-speaking workers in July 1933.[48]

The term “Karelianization” was common beginning in the mid-1920s, but often nationality policy in Karelia was really Finnicization, in large part because of the efforts of Edvard Gylling, the leader of the Karelian Autonomous Republic.[49] Gylling began to worry in the mid-1920s that immigration of Russians and other non-Finns to the region would overwhelm the Karelian population. According to the 1920 census, the population of the Karelian Workers Commune was 145,753. Of these, 60.8 percent were Karelian, 37.4 percent were Russian, and 1.8 percent were of other ethnicities. In 1923, when the area became the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, several primarily Russian districts were annexed to the republic. This, along with persistent Russian immigration, shifted the population ratio considerably. In 1925, only 41.7 percent of the population belonged to one of the Finnic nationalities—Karelians, Finns, or Veps—while a full 56.7 percent were Russian.[50]

Gylling persuaded government authorities to recruit Finnish workers from North America and Finland; in this way, much of the culture of the region could be preserved (as Finns and Karelians are ethnically similar). Because many Finnish-Americans were also skilled lumberjacks and industrial workers, their presence would help Karelia fulfill its quotas for the first Five Year Plan.[51] There are also references to Finnish-Americans in the Kuznetz basin, Rostov, and Karelia as early as 1921.[52] Still, the majority of Finns arrived only in the early 1930s, after the full-fledged recruitment campaign had begun.

Upon their arrival in Karelia, the Finnish-Americans found a culture that was not very different from the one they had left behind. The Finns had concert halls, theaters, social clubs, and schools; they could (and often did) spend most of their time in Finnish-language venues.[53] Finnish culture in Karelia during the period of korenizatsiia flourished. A major Finnish-language Communist newspaper, Punainen Karjala (Red Karelia), was published regularly.[54] Finnish was the medium of instruction in many schools. The Karelian Pedagogical Institute, based in the regional capital of Petrozavodsk, trained teachers for both Finnish-speaking and Russian-speaking middle schools and secondary schools.[55] Petrozavodsk was home to the frequently touring Finnish Dramatic Theater. One such tour in 1936 took eight actors by skis on a 1200-kilometer trek to isolated settlements and lumber camps.[56]

Petrozavodsk also boasted a Finnish opera company; Jukka Ahti and Katri Lammi, husband and wife singers who had emigrated from the United States, were among its brightest stars.[57] The Karelian Radio Symphony Orchestra was made up nearly entirely of Finnish-American musicians, and a beautiful Philharmonic hall was built in Petrozavodsk for them.[58] Brass bands were another Finnish-American cultural contribution to Karelia. Lauri Hokkanen, another immigrant, was a trumpeter in a ski factory band that was composed primarily of Finnish-Americans. The group was called on to perform at funerals, dances, and civic functions.[59] By 1932, Petrozavodsk had five men's and two women's baseball teams.[60]

Despite their achievements, life was not easy for the new arrivals. As soon as they arrived, the immigrants came face to face with the human costs of Stalin's collectivization campaign. The train stations were filled with starving, exiled "kulaks." Immigrant Kaarlo Tuomi writes:

All the stations were packed with hordes of exiled peasants from the steppes of Russia and the Ukraine.... They were literally dying of starvation before our eyes; rags hung on one, and the silent entreaty of the children was unbearable as they went back and forth through the train begging for bread.... 'You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs,' Lenin once quipped, and we accepted this grimly. But it was easier to joke about broken eggs than to see broken people and hear their pitiful cries.[61]

Faced with the realities of Soviet living conditions, between one-third and one-half of the immigrants returned to America.[62] Some immigrants returned immediately after reaching the desolate Petrozavodsk train station.[63] A June 1931 New York Times article reported that of a group of 40 Finnish-Americans who traveled to Karelia, 22 requested transit visas from Finland to return to America a month later.[64]

Those who made it past the train station encountered living conditions far below what they were accustomed to. Most families were initially assigned one spartan room in a barracks; some families even had to share rooms. The barracks had no running water, no indoor plumbing, no central heating, and an abundance of bedbugs and roaches.[65] At first, foreigners had the privilege of shopping in Insna (Supplies for Foreigners) stores. These stores carried more items than stores for ordinary citizens and provided "luxury" items such as white bread, fresh fruit, sweets, caviar, and butter.[66] All foreigners' special rationing privileges were removed in the autumn of 1935, and they then had to contend with the crowded, poorly stocked Soviet stores.[67] Some foreign workers never had such privileges because they were too far from an Insna store. Americans working on collective farms in 1931, for example, subsisted on soup and black bread, with occasional porridge or dried fish.[68]

Although the living conditions were more primitive than they were used to, the Finnish-Americans had generally positive experiences in the era of korenizatsiia. They arranged Finnish schools and activities, socialized with other Finns, were active in music and sports in the republic, and were tolerated—even welcomed—by the government. This was not to last. Changes in nationality policy in the mid-1930s marked the beginning of much harder times.

Nationality Policy Changes

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union's nationality policy made a distinct shift toward Russification. Efforts to achieve proportional representation of nationals ceased, the Russian language was emphasized again, national military units were disbanded, and local cadres were punished for nationalism. This dramatic change marked the beginning of the Stalinist terror.

Although the changes in nationality policy may have seemed abrupt, korenizatsiia was never intended to be permanent. In a 1930 address at the 16th Party Congress, Stalin explained:

It may seem strange that we who stand for the future merging of national cultures into one common (both in form and content) culture, with one common language, should at the same time stand for the flowering of national cultures at the present moment, in the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. But there is nothing strange about it. The national cultures must be allowed to develop and unfold, to reveal all their potentialities, in order to create the conditions for merging them into one common culture with one common language in the period of the victory of socialism all over the world.[69]

Before cultures could assimilate, Stalin argued, they first (paradoxically) had to develop on their own. Korenizatsiia, this “flowering of national cultures,” was only a temporary means to reach the final end of unity in a single, worldwide, socialist culture. This culture would most likely be Russian, as events following Stalin’s speech would prove.

During the first Five Year Plan (1928-1932), the Communist Party upheld Stalin’s viewpoint that the U.S.S.R. was in the period of “flowering cultures.” In the mid-1930s, however, Stalin began to pursue a nationality policy that indicated that the U.S.S.R. was progressing toward the “merging” phase.[70] This period in nationality policy moved all regions of the Soviet Union, including Karelia, towards Russification. The first step was removing local leaders who were seen as too nationalistic. In 1933 and 1934, 1.3 million members were expelled from the Communist Party in the most comprehensive purge of the party to that point. The purge was especially concentrated in rural areas. Non-Russian republics suffered 12 to 14 percent more expulsions than industrial areas.[71]

In 1933, a plenum of the Central Committee in Karelia decreed that local nationalism was the greatest danger in the republic. According to the declaration, Karelia’s leadership had purposely pursued a policy of Finnicization “with the goal of annexing Karelia and uniting her to Finland under the slogan of a ‘Great Finland’ extending all the way to the Urals.” One of the specific practices condemned under this decree was the recruitment of Finnish settlers from North America. [72] Once Kirov, the head of the Party in Leningrad, was killed, the campaign against nationalism in Karelia intensified. Kirov was replaced with Zhdanov, who in 1935 began to launch attacks on “Finnish nationalism” in Karelia. A midsummer festival happened to fall on Finland’s Flag Day (June 24), and Soviet authorities alleged that blue and white Finnish flags had been flying at the event. Moreover, they said, the leadership of Karelia “had [not] noticed anything improper in this fascist blasphemy.”[73]

The organizers of the festival said that they had not seen any blue and white flags, nor had they known that the date was Finland’s Flag Day. The explanations were not accepted, and Karelia’s leadership soon felt the results. Kustaa Rovio, the secretary of the Communist Party in Karelia, was ousted from his post that same summer. Edvard Gylling was removed from his post in November of the same year. Accused nationalists, whatever their credentials, were removed from the Party.[74] The commander of the Karelian army was removed from his post and banished to Moscow after allegations that the officers conspired with the Finnish army.[75] Arrests continued to occur throughout Karelia in 1936 and early 1937 under the direction of Zhdanov’s associate Irklis, a Latvian.[76] On July 25, 1937, Irklis himself was arrested and charged with espionage. This day marked what Finns called the beginning of the “Great Hate”—the Stalinist mass arrests, or great purges.[77]

Throughout the Soviet Union, similar events occurred as nationality policy shifted. By 1937, the topic of korenizatsiia had completely vanished from the media and had become taboo.[78] The increased Russification of the Soviet Union became a legal reality in a series of March 1938 decrees. National military units were abolished on March 7, which effectively made Russian the sole language of the Red Army. Until then, the units had made it possible to draft young men who knew no Russian, since the official language of each of these units was the language of the republic which the unit was from. National military units had also served to develop cadres of non-Russian officers for the Red Army.[79]

On March 13, the Central Committee and Council of People's Commissars passed a resolution requiring compulsory instruction in Russian for all non-Russian schools in the Union Republics and autonomous republics. Most schools for national minorities (that is, people living outside of their ethnic group's designated territories) disappeared from the educational system. Efforts to introduce minority languages to the higher education system were stopped, and Russian became the sole language of instruction at the post-secondary level. This gave Russian children preference and better educational opportunities in all Union Republics. One of the arguments used to justify the necessity of Russian was the need for all soldiers to know Russian, given universal conscription. [80]

Not only were changes in policy carried out, but also the earlier policies of korenizatsiia were denounced. Nikita Khrushchev was the head of the Ukrainian CP at its Fourteenth Party Congress in June 1938. At the Congress, Khrushchev viciously accused korenizatsiia as having been a tool of capitalist domination.[81] Resolutions of the Congress represented a complete break with the earlier policies.

As nationality policy shifted, xenophobia increased across the Soviet Union. Anyone with foreign citizenship or ties to a foreign country fell under suspicion. A January 1936 decree from the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) ordered fraternal parties, that is, the Communist parties of other countries, to assess the political reliability of their members who lived in the U.S.S.R.[82] These verifications (proverka) resulted in deportations, arrests (usually on accusations of espionage), and executions.[83] In August 1936, a trial was held in Moscow for the members of an alleged "Trotskyite-Zinovievite terrorist center" that supposedly planned the 1934 murder of Kirov. In open court, the defendants testified that "there existed an international Trotskyist conspiracy with ties to foreign governments and intelligence agencies." [84] These "confessions" only fueled the fire of xenophobia. A January 1938 Politburo decree extended the "operation for the destruction of espionage and sabotage contingents made up of Poles, Letts, Germans, Estonians, Finns, Greeks, Iranians, Kharbinites, Chinese, and Rumanians." [85] This order extended to citizens of the U.S.S.R. and foreign nationals alike.[86]

All foreigners, though, not only those of the nationalities listed in the Politburo decree, came under suspicion because of their foreignness.[87] Possibly 20 percent of all those arrested in the purges' peak years of 1937 and 1938 were foreign-born.[88] Communications from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to the U.S. Secretary of State reveal that Embassy visitors in 1938 were repeatedly stopped for questioning after leaving the complex. Embassy documents reveal that the mother of Elmer John Nousainen, an American citizen with dual nationality, notified the American Embassy that her son had disappeared. Nousainen apparently did not return home after a visit to the American Embassy on July 18, 1938. His traveling companion, one Mr. Ranta, also did not return home.[89] Nousainen was accused of espionage and sentenced to eight years in the Gulag; he

returned home only after 16 years.[90] His experiences would be shared by many other Finnish-Americans in the late 1930s.

The Experiment Goes Awry

During the increased xenophobia of the 1930s, the Finns fell under suspicion because of their foreign connections. This suspicion of foreigners manifested itself first in pressure, beginning in 1935, to become a Soviet citizen. Michael Gelb argues that inducing foreigners to renounce their foreign citizenship was little more than a tactic to subject them to the repression of the secret police.[91] Often, immigrants were either tricked or forced to take Soviet citizenship.

A Finnish-American couple in Petrozavodsk was tricked into taking on Soviet citizenship in 1936. Sylvi Hokkanen was preparing to teach Finnish and English, but she was suddenly told that she would need a Russian passport to teach. Because things were still going fairly well for the couple, she and her husband Lauri decided to apply for a Russian passport, not realizing they were renouncing their American citizenship. Lauri Hokkanen writes: "We went ahead and applied for a Russian passport not realizing by doing this, we were becoming Russian citizens and thereby losing our American citizenship." [92] Within a year, the Great Terror would begin, and the Hokkanens would come to regret their decision to apply for a Soviet passport. After much effort, the Hokkanens were able to reinstate their U.S. citizenship and return home in 1941.[93]

Arthur John Kujala, a Finnish-American immigrant, was pressured to take Soviet citizenship every time the police renewed his residency documents, but he refused to renounce his US citizenship. In September 1937, his passport was stolen, but he was arrested when he reported the theft and spent two years in prison camps before the U.S. Embassy managed to have him deported.[94]

Beginning in 1937, the campaign against foreigners intensified in Karelia and was no longer restricted to citizenship issues. The Finnish language was outlawed, and all Finnish institutions were shut down. The Finnish language was then replaced with Soviet Karelian, a language that was created by a Leningrad philologist.[95] Nearly half of the words in this new language came from the Russian-influenced Aunus dialect of Karelian, and the rest of the words were pure Russian. Russian grammatical endings were used for the words, and the language was written in Cyrillic script. Even Karelians with a good knowledge of Russian had trouble understanding the new language.[96]

Finnish teachers were fired from their positions and all schools became Russian-speaking. Students at the Karelian Pedagogical Institute who had been preparing to teach in Finnish were suddenly told that they had to pass their final exams in Russian. Only a few were successful; others were forced to drop out or spend extra time learning the Russian required.[97] Finnish-Americans were terrified that their language might mark them as enemies of the state.[98] Their fears likely were justified; Finns were among a list of nationalities classed as suspicious in a January 1938 Politburo decree.[99]

The arrests of the purges decimated the Finnish-American community in Karelia. In the Karelian ASSR during the Great Terror, ethnic Karelians were more than three times more likely to be arrested than ethnic Russians. Ethnic Finns, however, were nearly 38 times more likely than ethnic Russians to be arrested.[100] Other statistics, too, indicate that arrests of ethnic Finns were particularly widespread. Finnish historian Auvo Kostiainen says that only 8,300 Finns (from Finland and North America) remained in Karelia in 1939; there had been 12,100 Finns residing in Karelia in 1933.[101] Arvo Tuominen declares that at least 20,000 ethnic Finns (not only Finnish-

Americans) were arrested in the purges and sent to prison camps.[102] A study of Finnish-Americans who immigrated to Karelia conducted by Mayme Sevander listed 2,384 immigrants, living and deceased, who were accountable for at the time of her research.[103] Of these, she asserts that 526 were arrested during the purges. A mere 46 of those arrested ever returned to their families, and those that did were in prison camps for eight to fifteen years.[104] If Sevander's statistics hold true, then a full 22 percent of the Finnish-American community was arrested during the purges, and 20 percent of the community perished during the purges.

Vignettes and stories may reveal the human cost of the purges in Karelia better than statistics. One morning half the Karelian Symphony Orchestra was absent from rehearsal; they had all been arrested overnight.[105] In Cheliabinsk, a city in the Urals, a tractor factory employed many Finnish-Americans. The Finns were told one day in the summer of 1937 that all adults were to report to an assembly hall at a certain time. After assembling, every single one—more than 300 people—was arrested. Only two, women who still held American passports, ever managed to escape the prison camps.[106] Over one hundred Finns were arrested from the lumber camp of Vonganperä; only one of them ever returned.[107] Among Lauri Hokkanen's coworkers in the machine repair division of the Gylling ski factory in Petrozavodsk, 23 were arrested in one night in July 1938.[108] One Karelian village was so decimated by the purges that only a 16-year-old boy and a 60-year old man remained.[109]

Many more men than women in the Finnish-American community were arrested, but many Finnish-American women and children were exiled.[110] Those living close to the border were exiled to lumber camps farther inland, since it was dangerous for "enemies of the people" to live so close to the border of Finland.[111] Some residents of Petrozavodsk were sent to the lumber camp of Kalajoki to work. Other Finnish-Americans, including the famous Finnish-American opera singer Katri Lammi, were sent to Lime Island, an island in Lake Onega where poisonous lime was mined. Lammi reportedly put on a show as she was being exiled, parading around in her opera costumes and singing a Soviet patriotic song at the top of her lungs.[112]

Though young Finnish-Americans were generally not arrested, the children of the Finnish-American community were deeply affected by the purges, too. In many families, the main breadwinners were arrested. The children were then compelled to work their way through high school or college, if they wanted to continue their education.[113] In some families, both parents were arrested, and younger children were placed in orphanages. Some of these children lost their ethnic identity as a result.[114]

Conclusion

This study ends in the year 1939, but the story of the Finnish-Americans does not end there. Some immigrants were drafted into the Soviet Army to fight in the Winter War with Finland, where some were killed and others taken prisoner by the Finnish army. Those who were POWs often returned amidst suspicion and were placed in Soviet labor camps after their liberation. Many civilians, not drafted, were evacuated during World War II to the Urals or other distant regions of the Soviet Union. Others died during the fateful Siege of Leningrad. After the war, the immigrants and their descendants were scattered across the Soviet Union – to Kazakhstan, Estonia, Ukraine – and others even to Western countries.[115]

Still, by 1939, the damage was done. The North American Finnish community, who had come to help the Soviet Union build socialism, was decimated in the purges of the 1930s. The mass arrests

took away nearly an entire generation of Finnish-American men, and the effect on the community was profound. One early study of Karelia, published in Finland in 1934, reaches a conclusion that sums up the experiences of the entire community, particularly in the later 1930s: “Rarely have honest workers been so tragically deceived, for the contrast between the fine promise and the dreary reality is so sharp that even the most red-hot communists have turned snowy white in their political opinions in a very brief period.”[116] The disillusionment, for the Finnish Americans, began shortly after arrival in the Soviet Union. After witnessing the truth of Soviet life, nearly one-half of the immigrants returned to the United States. Of those who remained, more might have chosen to leave except for the fact that they held Soviet passports and could not.[117]

In another sense, too, the experience of the Finnish-Americans reflects broader trends in history. Although the Finnish-Americans were immigrants and not natives of the Soviet Union, they reflect the experience of most national minorities. National minorities across the Soviet Union experienced the same trends in nationality policy—the development of local language and culture, the crackdown on nationalism, the arrests, and the return to Russification. The Finnish-Americans, then, are a useful case study in Soviet nationality policy and its effects on ethnic and linguistic minorities.

As a targeted nationality during the Stalinist purges, the Finnish-Americans learned to fear the Soviet regime and even their own neighbors. Mayme Sevander writes: “The fear. How can I describe that fear? Russians’ lives have been ruled by fear since the days of Ivan the Terrible. As adopted Russians, we American Finns shared that fear.”[118] The optimism that the Finnish-American immigrants had once had for their adopted homeland was largely erased as they experienced the realities of the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Theirs is a story of disillusionment on the grandest of scales.

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NOTES

[1] See, for example, Peter Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 21.

[2] Yelena Khanga and Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian American Family, 1865-1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 74.

[3] Andrea Graziosi, "Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920-1940: Their Experience and Their Legacy," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 33 (1988): 40. On Magnitogorsk, see John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American in Russia's City of Steel* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942).

[4] The region came into existence in 1931, when the Central Executive Committee of the USSR decreed that a Jewish region would be founded in Birobidzhan. It was not officially established as an autonomous region with its own government until 1934. See Robert Weinberg, *Stalin's Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 35.

[5] "6,000 Americans to work in Russia," *New York Times*, August 24, 1931, p.7.

[6] Graziosi, 40. She writes: "By the second quarter of 1932, when the peak was probably reached, 42,230 foreign workers and specialists... were working in the yards.... About 50 percent were Germans or Austrians. Americans (the 5,234 American and Canadian Finns who had reached Karelia by 1932 perhaps included) made up another 25 percent."

[7] Lawrence and Sylvia Hokkanen, *Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin's Russia* (St. Cloud, Minn.: North Star, 1991), 9.

[8] Mayme Sevander, *Red Exodus* (Duluth, Minn.: OSCAT, 1993), 176.

[9] Paula Garb, *They Came to Stay: North Americans in the U.S.S.R.* (Moscow: Progress, 1987), 30.

[10] Mark Stodghill, "Harsh Lessons in Idealism," *Duluth News-Tribune*, Dec. 15, 1996, p. 1E

[11] Carl Ross, "The Utopian Vision of Finnish Immigrants: 1900-1930," *Scandinavian Studies* 60 (1988): 482-483. Hereafter Ross, "Utopian Vision."

[12] Eugene Van Cleef, *The Finn in America* (Duluth, Minn.: Finnish Daily Publishing, 1918), 28-29; Sevander, *They Took My Father* (Duluth, Minn.: Pfeifer-Hamilton, 1992), 4-6.

[13] Carl Ross, *The Finn Factor in American Labor, Culture and Society* (New York Mills, Minn.: Parta, 1977), 106-118. Hereafter Ross, *Finn Factor*.

[14] Albert Joseph Gedicks, Jr., *Working Class Radicalism Among Finnish Immigrants in Minnesota and Michigan Mining Communities* (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 151.

[15] Ross, "Utopian Vision," 487-488.

[16] Hokkanen, 6. For a discussion of the role of theater in Finnish halls, see Timo Riipa, "The Finnish-American Radical Theatre of the 1930s" in *The Best of Finnish Americana*, ed. Michael Karni (New Brighton, Minn.: Penfield, 1994), 109-115.

[17] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 16-18; Aili Jarvenpa, *A Coming Home for Me* (New Brighton, Minn.: Sampo, 1994), 4; Sirkka Tuomi Holm, "Daughter and Granddaughter of the Finnish Left," in *Red Diapers: Growing Up in the Communist Left*, ed. Judy Kaplan and Linn Shapiro (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1998), 36. For more recollections of Finnish halls and their impact on the

children of the Finnish-American community, see Irja Beckman, *Echoes from the Past* (New York Mills, Minn.: Parta, 1979).

[18] Holm, 35-36.

[19] Ross, "Utopian Vision," 489-490.

[20] Ross, *Finn Factor*, 164; Gedicks, 165.

[21] These were not the only newspapers of the Finnish-American left; countless smaller newspapers were also published in the U.S. and Canada. In her memoirs, Ruth Engelmann recalls anarchist newspapers that her Finnish-American family used to receive. See *Leaf House: Days of Remembering* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 99.

[22] Kaarlo Tuomi, "Karelian Fever: A Personal Memoir," in *The Best of Finnish Americana*, ed. Michael Karni (New Brighton, Minn.: Penfield, 1994), 118.

[23] Ross, *Finn Factor*, 163-164.

[24] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 23.

[25] Ross, *Finn Factor*, 116.

[26] Kero, 232; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Soviet Union 1933-1939* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 661, note 75.

[27] Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 19.

[28] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 41; Kero, 232.

[29] Kero, 232, 235.

[30] Työmies, Oct. 3, 1931; qtd. in Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 36.

[31] Tuomi, 117.

[32] Varpu Lindström and K. Börje Vähämäki, "Ethnicity Twice Removed: North-American Finns in Soviet Karelia," in *The Best of Finnish Americana 1978-1994*, ed. Michael Karni (New Brighton, Minn.: 1994), 142.

[33] "Karelian fever became a fever because the recruiters' message endowed their audiences with a status that American life had so far denied them. In Karelia, the Finns would be wanted. In Karelia, they would be first not last at the immigrants' table. In Karelia, they would acquire new found [sic] status precisely because they were Finns." Alexis Pogorelskin, "Why Karelian 'Fever'?", *Sirtolaisuus/Migration* 27, no. 1 (2000): 26.

[34] Richard Hudelson and Mayme Sevander, "A Relapse of Karelian Fever," *Sirtolaisuus/Migration* 27, no.2 (2000), 31

[35] Josef Stalin, "The Policy of the Soviet Government on the National Question in Russia," in *Works*, Vol. 4 (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), 370. Hereafter Stalin, Vol. 4.

[36] Stalin, Vol. 4, 370.

[37] Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*, trans. Karen and Oswald Forster (Boulder, Colo.:

Westview Press, 1991), 21; Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 108.

[38] Stalin, Vol. 4, 370-371.

[39] The Karelian literary language was not created until after the era of korenizatsiia, however.

[40] Simon, 48-49.

[41] John Dunstan, *Soviet Schooling in the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 19. Dunstan gives the literacy rate in 1939 as 89.1 percent, slightly higher than Simon's figure. According to Dunstan's inspections of Soviet records, rural women were the least literate group within the USSR. Only 79.2 percent of rural Soviet women in 1939 were literate, as opposed to 97.6 percent of urban Soviet men (the most literate group).

[42] Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 33, 68.

[43] M.I. Shumilov, "Rozhdenie sovetskoi vlasti v Petrozavodske i Karelii," in *Voprosy Istorii Evropeiskogo Severa* (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1999), 93.

[44] Gelb, 1105.

[45] Reino Kero, "The Role of Finnish Settlers from North America in the Nationality Question in Soviet Karelia in the 1930's," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 6, no. 3 (1981): 229.

[46] Kero, 231.

[47] Kero, 236.

[48] Kero, 231-234.

[49] Kero, 230.

[50] Tuominen, 284. Russian immigration persisted throughout the 1920s and 30s. According to Karelian archives, 13,868 settlers from elsewhere in the Soviet Union moved to Karelia in 1931-35. See G.I. Mezentsev, ed., *Rabochii Klass Karelii v period postroeniia sotsializma v SSSR* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1984), 14. [The Working Class of Karelia in the Period of Building Socialism in the USSR]

[51] Michael Gelb, "Karelian Fever: The Finnish Immigrant Community During Stalin's Purges," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45, no. 6 (1993): 1092; Kero, 230-232.

[52] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 54-57.

[53] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 45.

[54] Hokkanen, 85.

[55] Hokkanen, 30.

[56] Hokkanen, 85; Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 56-57

[57] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 110.

[58] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 93-94. The Philharmonic hall was later destroyed by Soviet forces during World War II.

[59] Hokkanen, 45.

[60] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 168-169.

[61] Tuomi, 121-122.

[62] Gelb, 1091; Tuomi, 125. Gelb gives the figure as “possibly half,” while Tuomi places it at “at least a third.”

[63] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 47.

[64] “American Reds Seek Return From Russia,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1931, p. 12.

[65] Hokkanen, 17, 50; Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 23

[66] Hokkanen, 55; Eva Stolar Meltz and Rae Gunter Osgood, *And the Winds Blew Cold: Stalinist Russia as Experienced by an American Emigrant* (Blackburg, Va.: McDonald and Woodward, 2000), 74; Sylvia R. Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 94.

[67] Kero, 240; Stolar Meltz, 73-75

[68] “Russians Elated by Farm Success,” *New York Times*, June 7, 1931, Section 3, p. 4. See also Margulies, 92-99, for a discussion of the differences in living conditions of foreign specialists favored by the state and foreign workers living in provincial areas.

[69] Josef Stalin, “Political Report of the Central Committee to the Sixteenth Congress of the C.P.S.U.(B.),” In *Works*, Vol. 12, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), 380. Italics in original.

[70] Simon, 137-138.

[71] Simon, 31.

[72] Martin, 357.

[73] Tuominen, 294-295.

[74] Tuominen, 295-296.

[75] Gelb, 1098.

[76] Tuominen, 299; Gelb, 1098.

[77] Tuominen, 299.

[78] Simon, 41.

[79] Simon, 153.

[80] Simon, 150-153. This was, of course, less than a week after the national military units were abolished.

[81] Simon, 152.

[82] William Chase, “The Origins of the Polish Operation and the Rise of Soviet Xenophobia, 1929-1938” (unpublished paper, 2002), 16.

[83] Chase, 18-19.

[84] Chase, 19.

- [85] Chase, 30; Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire: Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996), 776. Hereafter Martin, Ph.D. diss.
- [86] Chase, 30.
- [87] See, for example, Gelb, 1102.
- [88] Chase, 31.
- [89] U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Soviet Union 1933-1939* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 661-662.
- [90] Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, 112.
- [91] Gelb, 1096.
- [92] Hokkanen, 73.
- [93] Hokkanen, 105-109.
- [94] Gelb, 1096; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, The Soviet Union 1933-1939* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 914-915.
- [95] Martin, Ph.D. diss., 787; Tuominen, 305.
- [96] One Karelian teacher told the Finnish Communist Arvo Tuominen: "Well, yes, a language of our own we have but hardly anything do I understand." Tuominen, 305.
- [97] Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 101-102.
- [98] Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 100-101.
- [99] Chase, 30; Martin, Ph.D. diss., 776
- [100] Martin, book, 426-427
- [101] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit: Suuren lamakauden laitton siirtolaisuus Neuvostoliittoon* (Keuruu, Finland: NP, 1988), 195.
- [102] Tuominen, 234.
- [103] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 41.
- [104] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 184.
- [105] Sevander, *They Took My Father*, 77.
- [106] Tuominen, 303.
- [107] Tuomi, 127.
- [108] Hokkanen, 93.
- [109] Tuominen, 306-307.
- [110] Tuomi, 129.
- [111] Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 107-108; Tuomi, 129.
- [112] Hokkanen, 95; Sevander, *Red Exodus*, 109-110.

[113] Sevander, Red Exodus, 18.

[114] See Sevander, Red Exodus, 121-122, for stories of two such Finnish-American children.

[115] For more on the fates of individual immigrants, see Sevander, Red Exodus, 153-157, 162, 184.

[116] Gelb, 1104; Akateeminen Karjala-Seura, East Carelia: A Survey of the Country and its Population and a Review of the Carelian Question (Helsinki: NP, 1934), 112. Aino Kuusinen, the wife of the secretary of the Finnish Communist party, reached the same conclusion, calling the Karelian recruitment a “monstrous swindle” and a “disgraceful business.” *The Rings of Destiny: Inside Soviet Russia from Lenin to Brezhnev*, trans. Paul Stevenson (New York: Morrow, 1974), 95.

[117] Michael Gelb argues that virtually all those who could leave Karelia did. Gelb, 1091, 1096.

[118] *They Took My Father*, 98-99.