

The recruitment of identity: the sources of Karelian Fever

*Poor naked wretches,
wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting
of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless
heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd
raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these?
(King Lear, Act III, Scene 4)*

Readers of *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* will have followed my disagreements with Mr. Hudelson and Mrs. Sevander regarding explanations for the phenomena known collectively as Karelian fever. Sources, as much as interpretation, divide us. In this essay I will offer new material from sources that I have previously cited. I will also expand on those that I used and explain why such sources are critical for understanding Karelian fever. It remains to note my continued amazement at Hudelson and Sevander's criticism of those sources and my use of them. Mrs. Sevander, who has seen Karelian archival material on Karelian fever, has overlooked the most important archival sources on the subject. Mr. Hudelson, who by his own admission cannot read Russian, has nonetheless joined her in criticizing the Russian sources that I cite.

The former party archive of Karelia, now the State Archive of Social-Political Movements and the Formation of Karelia (hence-

forth GAOPDF) contains records of interrogations of North American Finns that date from the mid-1930s. The Karelian branch of the secret police or NKVD, under orders from its superiors in Leningrad, conducted such interrogations. The powerful First Party Secretary of Leningrad, S. M. Kirov, took a dim view of recruitment of foreigners to a critical border region. Kirov instructed the Karelian NKVD to investigate the recruitment, going over the heads of Karelia's most important administrators, Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio.

One interrogation in particular is moving in its candor and significant for its wealth of detail and information. On October 4, 1935, Aho Niemi gave a deposition regarding "the extensive agitation for resettlement in Karelia."¹ Niemi then worked as a carpenter in the Sada commune in the Olonets region of southern Karelia. He had come to Karelia in 1931, having lived briefly in the U.S. He was born in Finland in 1873. From 1926 to 1927 he was a member of the Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP) and then a member of the American Communist Party. Niemi apparently became involved in politics only in his fifties. By his own admission he came to Karelia not because of his politics, but because of his ethnicity.

He recounted to his interrogators that Matti Tenhunen, who as

head of Karelian Technical Aid and hence in charge of U.S. recruitment from 1931–1932, had conducted "agitation for the resettlement of Finns to Karelia ... at meetings, clubs, evening gatherings and triumphant farewells of Finnish-Americans to Karelia."² Niemi described in detail the content of Tenhunen's message. Tenhunen urged his Finnish-American audiences "not to let the Finnish nation die ... Karelia ... must be a homeland of the Finns ... we must finnicize Karelia..."³

My critics dismiss Niemi's testimony as that of "a single witness interviewed by Stalinist agents bent on making a case against Tenhunen."⁴ As I have indicated above, those who interrogated Niemi were members of the secret police charged by their superiors in Leningrad with uncovering the sources and motivation of recruitment to Karelia. They sought to uncover Tenhunen's role rather than to discredit it. Niemi's ingenuousness gives his testimony credibility. Far from serving the needs of his interrogators or meeting their expectations, he regretted his decision to come to Karelia, calling it "stupid" and "ill-considered."⁵ Why? The very fact of the interrogation confirmed that contrary to Tenhunen's message, "Karelia" was no "homeland of the Finns." Niemi's regret in coming did not stand him in good stead with his interrogators.

More significantly, Niemi is far from being "a single witness." Material in the GAOPDF abundantly confirms that the leadership of Karelia sought to recruit in North America only those of Finnish ethnicity as the "most appropriate" for Karelia.⁶

Kustaa Rovio, who came to Karelia in 1929 (not in 1920, as Hudelson/Sevander state)⁷ made the position of the Karelian administration clear in a letter to Stalin written in May 1932. Seeking Stalin's assistance in expediting Soviet visas for those already recruited, Rovio explained to the General Secretary that "the more [Canadian and American Finns] there will be among us, the stronger will be the political situation in Karelia ... of the 300,000 Finns in the U.S.A. and Canada, we can easily collect the workforce that we need."⁸ Newly imposed production targets of the First Five Year Plan impelled the Karelian leadership to expand its workforce. Rovio, as he explained to Stalin, confined recruitment of that workforce to the North American Finnish diaspora.

To launch the recruitment effort, Gylling and Rovio, along with Leskov (the head of the Karelian Timber Trust) formed a Special Group from among members of the Sovnarkom or Council of People's Commissars of Karelia. Their goal was two fold: 1) to discourage, if not prevent, the immigration of Russians who might flock to Karelia in search of work,⁹ 2) to establish and oversee the apparatus for recruitment in the U.S. and Canada. The Special Group drafted a secret directive which charged the recruitment

agencies with recruiting in North America those of Finnish ethnicity only.¹⁰

How important the North American Finns were to Gylling and Rovio's conception of Karelia could be seen in the privileges that the Special Group accorded them. Because the recruitment in North America coincided with the forced collectivization of Soviet agriculture, Gylling regarded the issue of food rations for foreign workers as critical. In the early 1930s many of the agricultural regions of the Soviet Union were ravaged by famine and near civil war conditions brought on by collectivization. Gylling charged the Karelian Commissariat of Supply with providing "rations according to the norm for foreign workers and in the event of necessity ... supplemental delivery of rations."¹¹ Starvation existed in Karelia in the early 1930s, but not for North American Finns.

Gylling also accorded privileges to the offspring of North American Finns who attended schools or institutes in Karelia. They received stipends 30% higher than those granted to Russians at the same institutions.

Through the course of the early 1930s as North American Finns arrived in Karelia, resentment built among the Russian population. By the spring of 1934, the situation was near the breaking point. An industrial accident on the shore of Lake Onega in April of that year brought matters to a head. I intend to write about this incident and its meaning at greater length elsewhere. For now I will simply cite some of the more telling comments which investiga-

tors of the accident recorded. Those records now repose in the GAOPDF.

The Russian complaints were numerous. North American Finns received salaries higher by 30%, and they treated Russians with contempt.¹² One of the NKVD investigators observed that the problem came from the top: "the leadership of the Sovnarkom ... will protest against accusations leveled at Finnish-Americans."¹³ At the investigatory hearing, Rovio "heckled Russian engineers," calling them "inexperienced and cautious, even lazy, still only Boy Scouts."¹⁴ He scoffed that "without the Finnish-Americans," the project would not have gotten off the ground.¹⁵

I have cited the foregoing for several reasons. Such material places Aho Niemi's testimony in context. It also reveals the unintended consequences of Gylling's nationality policy: ethnic conflict and resentment. He and Rovio had in fact intended something very different. They made no secret of what they intended by recruitment in North America. As they told the Central Committee in March 1930, "cadres must be recruited who correspond to ... the national structure of Karelia otherwise ... the danger threatens of Karelia's losing its national character."¹⁶ By national character they meant Finnish language and ethnicity.

My critics' contention that "Gylling and Rovio aimed at establishing in Karelia a multi-ethnic republic" falls before the archival record. Gylling and Rovio sought to create and sustain an enclave within the Soviet Union

that would preserve Karelo-Finnish identity. Gylling deplored the Russian in-migration to Karelia in the course of the 1920s.¹⁷

Tenhunen recruited Finnish-Americans "to a homeland of the Finns" because that is precisely what the Special Group within the Karelian Sovnarkom had directed him to do.

Gylling's educational policy also reflected his intentions. My critics point out that in 1931 both Russian as well as Finnish language schools existed in Karelia. That fact misses the whole point of Gylling's effort to impose Finnish as the language of Karelia.

The issue of language in relation to school instruction must also be put in its context. The rapid expansion of Finnish language schools accorded with a June 1929 resolution "which called for an increased tempo in the Kareli- zation of the party, state, trade union, and cooperative apparatus, as well as of school and cultural institutions."¹⁸ Because in 1923 Finnish was made the literary language of the Karelians who had previously lacked one, Kareli- zation meant in effect finnicization. Clearly, the Karelian administration wanted the Finnish language to dominate.

Gylling's method undermined instruction in Russian. For 10 years he had sought to expand "the network of Finnish language schools" by cutting the budget for Russian schools.¹⁹ In the period 1929–1931, Rovio noted triumphantly that "even Veps, who were originally so hostile to Finnish began to study in Finnish schools."²⁰

As for the Russian schools in the two overwhelming Russian re-

gions of Karelia, Poventsa and Puudosi, one wonders what their subsequent fate might have been given the budget cuts imposed on Russian language instruction and the energy with which Karelian authorities had already pursued Kareli- zation. The latter policy had as noted amounted to "a vigorous program of finnicization."²¹ This at a time when as part of the recruitment effort, North American Finns were told that they "could live [in Karelia] entirely immersed in Finnish."²²

My critics and I part company over our interpretation of the Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP) and more particularly, Gylling's role in it. They argue that the Finnish SDP was a Marxist party and that Gylling "was a Marxist and supporter of the Bolshevik revolution."²³ The issues are important for several reasons. Gylling's politics determined the character of the Karelian ASSR whose development he guided. Gylling, I believe, conceived the idea of recruiting North American Finns to Karelia. His politics also determined on what basis he and Lenin negotiated Karelia's autonomy in the first place.

To call Finnish Social Democracy and Russian Social Democracy "Marxist" and thus equate them is to miss the whole point. A world of difference separated them. As Yrjö Sirola, a leading Finnish Social Democrat observed, "the question of Bolshevism and Menshevism was considered strictly a Russian matter and of no concern to the Finnish labor movement. Before the [Finnish] Civil War, January-May 1918, Finnish Social Democrats were barely acquainted with

the writings of Lenin."²⁴ Timo Vihavainen likewise observes that "Finnish Social Democrats had until 1917 lived in remarkable isolation from the Russian revolutionaries ... Russian methods of ... struggle as well as their political doctrines were rejected, if they were known as all."²⁵ Instead, according to Vihavainen, Finnish Social Democrats "clung to orthodox Kautskyite teaching."²⁶ Their actual program was vague in promoting "popular power" and universal suffrage²⁷ which Finland already enjoyed. "Clinging" to Kautsky's teachings, as Vihavainen describes it, suggests that the party merely paid lip service to Kautsky's ideas. At any rate the more radical Marxism of the *Siltasaarelaisuus* group failed to dominate. The reason for Marxism's failure to define Finnish Social Democracy is not far to seek. Marxism failed to address the most burning issue in Finnish politics.

In the years that Gylling came to political maturity, growing Russification repeatedly threatened the Grand Duchy's autonomy. The critical issue for Gylling, as for many others in the Finnish SDP, arose from Finland's success in the nineteenth century in developing a national culture. Would the new century see the birth of a politically independent state to house that culture?

Gylling supported the February and October (Bolshevik) revolutions in Russia only in so far as those events promoted Finnish independence. Gylling, along with Otto Kuusinen and Karl Wiik, negotiated with Kerensky for internal independence for Finland in April 1917. To their chagrin the Provisional Government rejected

their proposal.²⁸ Eight months later Gylling succeeded. Joined by Kullervo Manner and again by Karl Wiik, he obtained de jure recognition from Lenin's government of the independence that Finland had declared on 6 December.²⁹ It was possibly during those discussions that Lenin took Gylling's measure.

The supreme irony is that when Gylling and Lenin met in the Kremlin in the first week of May 1920 to negotiate the future status of Karelia, they bargained not from a "Marxist internationalist outlook," determined to create a "multi-ethnic" entity out of Karelia.³⁰ They faced off from the perspective of nationalists who could meet each other's needs. Lenin, like all Russian rulers since the second quarter of the thirteenth century, sought to secure the northwest border of the Russian state. He was poised to re-gather the Russian lands, thus recreating the Tsarist empire, the task completed just as his final illness began in the spring of 1922.

Gylling's interests were no less historically grounded. He sought to create a homeland for Finns in a region that linguistically and by tradition, it could be argued, legitimately belonged within the sphere of Finnish culture. Each got what he wanted from the other. Gylling helped secure Soviet control of Karelia by the time that negotiations over the Russo-Finnish border began in Dorpat in the fall of 1920. He also secured Lenin's support for promoting Finnish culture within an autonomous Karelia.

My critics terminology confuses rather than explains. Marxism

did not link Gylling to Lenin; it sooner divided them. Both John Hodgson and Timo Vihavainen have pointed out that Finnish Social Democracy regarded Russian radicalism as irrelevant. Lenin's own revolutionary roots lay in Russian populism and even farther back in the radicalism of the Decembrist Southern Society. To the degree that he was a Marxist, Lenin pursued a very different brand of the master's teaching from that of Gylling, steeped in the plight of Finland's rural poor and "clinging," however loosely, to Kautsky's moderate socialism. Gylling was a nationalist and in the end so was Lenin, imbued with the Russian radical tradition sooner than the tenets of international socialism. In 1920 they found a common language. The Karelian Workers Commune, which in 1923 became the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, was launched.

I will now turn to the process of recruitment. My critics state that "there is no evidence to support" my claim that Gylling lied to Moscow regarding the occupations of those North American Finns recruited to Karelia.³¹ The GAOPDF provides the evidence to confirm my point. Moscow gave permission to recruit North American lumberjacks only in order to harvest the "green gold" or forest wealth of Karelia. That stricture was easily circumvented. Karelian Technical Aid sent the visa applications of those recruited to Petrozavodsk. There the applications were modified so that "musicians, artists, tailors, hair dressers, etc., were made out to be lumbermen." The doctored appli-

cations were then sent to the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Moscow which issued visas to the "lumberjacks."³²

Such liberal recruitment met the needs of Gylling and Rovio, who sought the demographic weight that only the North American Finnish diaspora could provide. It also met the needs of the recruiters. Karelian Technical Aid; headed first by Tenhunen, then Kalle Aronen, and finally by Oscar Corgan; received a commission from the Swedish-American Line for each Finnish-American who booked passage to the Soviet Union with that company.³³ In fact, for each adult recruited the shipping company paid \$11.50. Children earned the recruiters half price: \$5.75. In all, including special bonuses, Karelian Technical Aid received \$60,022.50 in commission from the Swedish line.³⁴

In sum, Gylling and Rovio had made it clear that Karelo-Finnish ethnicity constituted the only requirement for recruitment to Karelia. It was not in their interest to limit recruitment by a political litmus test, Marxist or otherwise. Nor, as it turned out, was it in the interests of the recruiters to do so either.

My critics describe Edvard Gylling as "a larger than life tragic figure of Shakespearean proportions."³⁵ Their hyperbole serves them ill. There was nothing Elizabethan about Gylling. He fits all too well into the schema of Soviet history. In the early 1920s both Lenin and Stalin, as Commissar of Nationalities, supported Gylling's brand of ethnic politics. Lenin approved of Gylling's proposals for Karelian autonomy

within the new Soviet Socialist Russian Republic. Gylling's administrative skill and authority contributed to the stability of a contested border region. Stalin put his stamp on Gylling's policy of "Karelization" which included imposing Finnish as a literary language on the Karelians. Karelization thus meant in practice finnification.

By the early 1930s Moscow began to rescind its accommodating policy. Stalin's determination to conduct fast paced industrial development of the Soviet Union threatened Karelia's viability as a Karelo-Finnish enclave. When Gylling cleverly sought the much needed expanded workforce in North America he ran afoul of his superior in Leningrad, S. M. Kirov, who represented a faction in the Politburo profoundly concerned over the potential threat that Hitler posed to the Soviet Union. Kirov took a dim view of the

recruitment of foreigners to settle next door to Finland, a state openly hostile to the Soviet Union. In the event of hostilities, whose side would the Finnish-Americans be on? At the same time, Stalin sought to consolidate his power by more draconian methods than he had used against his opponents in the 1920s. Kirov was murdered, and local party bosses like Gylling were removed from power. They would all perish by 1937-38.

The North American Finns were recruited under dubious circumstances at best, something that so appalled Aino Kuusinen when she came to the U.S. in the early 1930s.³⁶ Carl Ross has movingly described the environment in which recruitment occurred. Finnish-Americans had "created a distinct way of life in ethnic enclaves that retained their own values ..." ³⁷ Isolated and idealistic, they were sitting ducks for recruit-

ers on commission to win settlers for a new Finnish homeland in Karelia. When the horror of the Great Purge struck in 1937 they were once again sitting ducks.

Alas, Gylling and Rovio found themselves in the same vulnerable position. Policies which Moscow had so recently supported were now anathema. Precisely because Moscow had supported autonomy for Karelia, it knew so little about what went on there. NKVD investigators, starting in 1934, sought to learn who the foreigners were who had so recently arrived in Karelia. How were they recruited and why had they come? Without knowledge of the twentieth century archival sources, one might well have recourse to sixteenth century analogies or worse. Simplistic notions of "Marxism" and "internationalism" will not explain Karelian fever.

Alexis Pogorelskin

Notes

1. GAOPDF, f.3, op.5, kor.207, d.277, l.42; "Excerpt from Protocol of Interrogation."
2. Ibid., l.43.
3. Ibid., l.42.
4. "Pogorelskin Revises the Past," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, 2/2001, p. 30.
5. GAOPDF, f.3, op.5, kor.207, d.277, l.43.
6. Ibid., l.20. K. Rovio to tov. Stalin, 20 May 1932.
7. *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, 2/2001, p. 30.
8. GAOPDF, f.3, op.5, kor.207, d.277, l.20. K. Rovio to tov. Stalin, 20 May 1932.
9. One method, as "Rovio urged" was to give "preference... to national workers (Karelians, Finns, and Veps) when hiring men for new jobs." Jilt. Hodgson. *Communism in Finland* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 161.
10. Ibid., l.64. "Investigatory Report on the Resettlement Administration of the Karelian ASSR." Top Secret, 4 Oct. 1935.
11. Ibid., l.50; "Protocol," Top Secret, Resolution No. 7, 10 March 1931.
12. Ibid., ll.39-40; "On the investigation of the pipeline affair," April 1934.
13. Ibid., l.41.
14. Ibid., l.111.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., f5002, op.2, d.11, l.21; Gylling and Rovio to the Central Committee, 9 March 1930.

17. See his editorials in Punainen Karjala for 8 Oct. 1927, 28 July 1927, 31 March 1931 as cited in Hodgson, p. 161.
18. Sovetskaia Kareliia: ocherki partiinogo sovetского i kul'turnogo stroitel'stva AKSSR. (M-L: Ogiz, 1935), p. 94; cited in Hodgson, p. 158.
19. Rovio, L. "Kielikysymys Neuvosto-Karjalan Kansallisuuspolitiikassa," *Kommunisti*, no. 8 (80), Aug. 1931, pp. 385; as cited in Hodgson, p. 156.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 383; as cited in Hodgson, p. 158.
21. Paul M. Austin, "Soviet Karelian: the Language that Failed," *Slavic Review*, vol. 51, no. 1 (Spring 1992), p. 20.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
23. *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, 2/2001, p. 29
24. See Hodgson, p. 48 for this statement and the sources to confirm this point.
25. Timo Vihavainen, "Internationalists' Ordeal. The Peculiar Story of the Red Finns in Soviet Russia," *Scandinavian Journal of History*, no. 10 (1985), p. 61.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. Hodgson, p. 25.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
30. *Siirtolaisuus/Migration*, 2/2001, p. 30.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
32. GAOPDF, f.3, op. 5, kor. 207, d.277, l.17; "Protocol of Interrogation," 12 March 1934.
33. Mrs. Sevander describes the special relationship between Karelian Technical Aid and the Swedish-America Line. She does not mention the payment of commissions. See her *Soviet Bondage* (1996), p. 16.
34. GAOPDF, f.3, op.5, kor.207, d.277, l.69, "On investigation into the activity of the Resettlement Administration of the Karelian ASSR," Top Secret, 4 Oct. 1935.
35. *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, 2/2001, p. 29.
36. Aino Kuusinen, *The Rings of Destiny: Inside Soviet Russia From Lenin to Brezhnev* (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1974), p. 95. Kuusinen termed the recruitment of Finnish Americans a "monstrous swindle."
37. Carl Ross, "The Utopian Vision of Finnish Immigrants: 1900-30," *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 60 (1988), p. 482.

Mari Niemi Siirtolaisuusinstituuttiin aluepäälliköksi

Filosofian maisteri, varanotaari *Mari Niemi* on palannut 1.8.2001 alkaen Siirtolaisuusinstituutin Pohjanmaan aluekeskuksen aluepäälliköksi. Niemi oli virkavapaalla ajalla 17.5.1999–31.7.2001 ja työskenteli Etelä-Pohjanmaan kulttuurin kehittämiskeskushanke Trissassa projektipäällikkönä.

Mari Niemi aloitti työnsä Siirtolaisuusinstituutin Pohjanmaan aluekeskuksessa aluesihteerinä jo 11.8.1997. Niemen virkavapauden ajan aluesihteerin tehtäviä hoiti vi-

ransijaisena *Tuula Koskimies-Hautaniemi*, joka nyt jatkaa aluekeskuksessa toimistosihteerinä.

Siirtolaisuusinstituutin Pohjanmaan aluekeskus on avoinna arkisin kello 9–15 ja muulloin sopimuksen mukaan. Siirtolaisuusinstituutin aluekeskus sijaitsee Peräseinäjoen kunnantalossa.

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