

Pogorelskin Revises the Past

In our criticism of a series of articles on Karelian fever by Alexis Pogorelskin, we argued, "Karelian fever cannot be understood without appreciating its Marxist roots."¹ In her reply to us, Pogorelskin frames her response in this way: "I will argue that the phenomena known as Karelian fever are far more complex; grounded in history, culture, and ethnicity; and hence more comprehensible [sic] than the ideological motivation that Hudelson and Sevander insist upon."² With the claim that that there is more to Karelian fever than Marxist roots, we agree. This point is evident in all four books by M. Sevander as well as in our own earlier paper where we acknowledge that Finnish ethnicity was a significant factor in the emigration of Finnish-Americans to Karelia.³ Where then is the disagreement? The problem is that where Pogorelskin claims to present a more comprehensive picture, in fact she goes out of her way to excise a part of the picture. In particular, she wants to deny the role of a specifically Marxist ideology in the phenomenon of Karelian fever. This leads her to make a number of claims that are flagrantly at odds with the historical record.

Consider, for example, her claim that the Finnish Social Democratic Party (Sdp) "was non-Marxist."⁴ The Finnish Labor Party was founded in 1899. At the party congress in Forssa in 1903

the party officially endorsed the Erfurt Program of the German Social Democratic Party, a program written by Friedrich Engels and Wilhelm Liebknecht, leaders of the Marxist faction within the German socialist movement. The Finnish Party also changed its name to the Social Democratic Party of Finland and affiliated with the Second International. In his *History of Finland*, John Wuorinen says of the Finnish Sdp that, "Its socialism was the Marxian creed formulated by the Socialists at the Erfurt congress in 1891" and goes on to say that the Finnish Sdp "carried the creed of Marx the length and breadth of the land."⁵ Challenged with such evidence by *New World Finn* reader, Harri Siitonen, Pogorelskin has conceded that the Finnish Sdp was founded on Marxist principles, but, she has argued, the Marxists were isolated in the Siltasaari group based in Helsinki which, she claims, played only a marginal role within the Finnish Sdp after 1905.⁶ Other historians give a decidedly different picture of the role of the Siltasaari group within the Sdp, pointing out that the group included men like K. Manner and O.W. Kuusinen who "dominated the leadership in the years after 1906."⁷

A similar assessment of the Marxist character of the Finnish Sdp can be found in *A History of Finland* by Eino Jutikkala and Kauko Pirinen, who say of the

Finnish Party that, "It adopted the Marxist philosophy in 1903 and grimly took up the weapons of class strife."⁸ Jutikkala and Pirinen go on to note that the Finnish Party was long immune to the revisionist currents present in other European countries, a point also made by D.G. Kirby in his *Finland in the Twentieth Century*.⁹ Calling the 1903 endorsement of the Erfurt Program "a clear reminder of the party's Marxist centrism," Kirby goes on to point to the radicalizing effect of the upheavals of 1905 on the Finnish Sdp, saying that, "After 1905, the Social Democratic Party adopted a rigidly class-conscious Marxist ideology which took its inspiration from the ideas propounded by Karl Kautsky."¹⁰

Like Kautsky and most other Marxists of the Second International, the Finnish Sdp favored an electoral path to socialism. In Finland this strategy paid off. Kirby notes that the Finnish Sdp was the "only Marxist party in the world to obtain an absolute majority (103 seats) in a parliamentary election before the Russian revolution."¹¹

Pogorelskin dismisses our claim that the Finnish Sdp adhered to the orthodox Marxism of the Second International as "the fiction of my critics."¹² Now neither of us pretends to be a specialist in Finnish history, but it is important to note that in saying that the Finnish Sdp was "not Marxist"

and that our claim to the contrary is a "fiction" Pogorelskin is denying what appears to be a consensus among real specialists in Finnish history. All of the works cited above in support of our view are respected works by serious scholars. All come from the shelves of the library of the University of Minnesota Duluth, Pogorelskin's home institution. Has she never read them? Are they all works of fiction? Far from offering a more comprehensive view of Karelian fever, Pogorelskin is giving us a bowdlerized account of it.

The significant presence of Marxist ideology in the Finnish Sdp is of importance in considering the figure of Edvard Gylling. According to our account, Gylling came under the influence of the Social Democracy of the Second International while he was in Germany in 1904 and joined the Finnish Sdp, then adhering to the centrist Marxism of Kautsky, when he returned to Finland in 1905. We also pointed out that Gylling served on the editorial board of the party's theoretical journal, which professed a Marxist standpoint, wrote an introduction to the Finnish translation of *Capital*, worked as part of a leadership group within the Finnish Sdp which professed to be Marxist, and that he served on the side of the reds during the Finnish civil war.¹³ We took all of this as good evidence that Marxist ideology played a significant part in Gylling's thinking for over a decade before the Bolshevik revolution, contrary to Pogorelskin's claim that Gylling "converted to Marxism belatedly if not reluctantly in 1918."¹⁴

What does Pogorelskin say about this evidence of Gylling's earlier interest in Marxism? Nothing. Instead, she presses an argument intended to show that Gylling was not a Marxist at the time of the uprising that led to the Finnish civil war. Her argument appeals to the fact that Gylling opposed the revolutionary uprising led by radicals within the Sdp and that Gylling only served on the side of the reds in an effort to stave off disaster.¹⁵ This argument could only work to show that Gylling was not a Marxist at that time if we were to assume that all Marxists would have supported the uprising. But this is clearly not the case. O.W. Kuusinen, Y. Sirola, and indeed all of the members of the Siltasaari group, all of them Marxists even on Pogorelskin's view, and all of them men with whom Gylling worked in the leadership core of the Sdp, opposed the uprising.¹⁶

Pogorelskin seems to think that all Marxists in the pre-war era shared the outlook of the Bolsheviks of 1917. This assumption shows a remarkable insensitivity to the world of the Second International. With the war and the successful Bolshevik uprising in Russia, the Marxist movement was split into two camps: those who threw in their lot with the Bolsheviks and became Communists, and those, like Kautsky, who opposed the Bolsheviks and publicly denounced them. Many of those who did rally to the Communist banner had little understanding of the Bolsheviks and retained much of their pre-World War I outlook. Nonetheless, they viewed the Bolshevik success in

Russia as a great step forward and saw an opportunity to join with the Bolsheviks in creating a socialist society. Edvard Gylling was one of those who rallied to the Communist cause. In her reply to us, Pogorelskin makes a point of saying that "Gylling did not join the thousands of Red Finns who found refuge in the New Russian Soviet Socialist Republic" and goes on to suggest that Gylling threw in his lot with the Communists only after he had entered into a deal with Lenin to establish a Finnish enclave in Karelia.¹⁷ But, this ignores the letter we cited in which Gylling wrote to comrades in Moscow asking to be included as a founding member of the Finnish Communist Party, a letter written well before Gylling approached Lenin with his proposal for Karelia.¹⁸ We agree with Pogorelskin that Edvard Gylling was a complex human being. He was a larger than life tragic figure of Shakespearean proportions. He was also a Marxist and a supporter of the Bolshevik revolution. Pogorelskin wants to excise these aspects of Gylling's make-up but can offer no good reason for doing so.

What is it that Gylling wanted to establish in Karelia? Central to Pogorelskin's view of the Karelian experiment is that Gylling "sought to create in Karelia the Finnish homeland that he had left behind in 1918."¹⁹ Pogorelskin sees Kuusta Rovio and Matti Tenhunen as sharing this project, saying that "Rovio defended Gylling's policy of Finnicization" and attributing to Tenhunen the view that "we must Finnicize Karelia."²⁰ We will consider the

claim about Rovio below. Here we just want to remind the reader that Pogorelskin's claim about Tenhunen is based on the testimony of a single witness interviewed by Stalinist agents bent on making a case against Tenhunen. Adopting this view that what Gylling, Rovio, and Tenhunen really wanted was a Finnish homeland in Karelia, Pogorelskin concludes that these men did not have any deep commitment to Soviet Communism and even argues that somehow support for the Karelian experiment implied lack of support for the Soviet Union.²¹

We hold a different view of the experiment in Karelia. We maintain that all three of these men embraced the cause of Soviet Communism before they ever entered into the experiment in Karelia. We pointed out that Gylling joined the Communists before the Karelian experiment, that Rovio had worked in Petrograd, joined the Bolsheviks, and formed a lasting relationship with Lenin well before 1917, and that from America, Tenhunen had supported Soviet Communism long before becoming involved with Karelia.²² This is true as well of many North American Finns, among whom strong support for Russia/the Soviet Union existed prior to the outbreak of Karelian fever. It is noteworthy that over three hundred Finnish Americans left for various parts of Russia to build socialism as early as 1922. This had nothing to do with Finnicization. In America the Finnish-language radical press of the twenties and early thirties, hundreds of letters and interviews in the possession of M. Sevander and scores of

documents published in her works provide solid evidence of support for Russia among Finnish-Americans long before the exodus to Karelia. Pogorelskin denies all of this, claiming that "it should be emphasized that they [Finnish-Americans] supported the Soviet experiment only in Karelia."²³

We also rejected Pogorelskin's claim that support for Karelia somehow implied lack of support for the Soviet Union. On our view, reflecting their Marxist, internationalist outlook, Gylling and Rovio aimed at establishing in Karelia a multi-ethnic republic within which Finns and Finnish-Americans could join Russians and native Karelians in the Soviet attempt to build a multi-ethnic socialist state.

In her reply to us, Pogorelskin returns to an argument that she had made earlier regarding what she sees as a plan by Gylling and Rovio for the "Finnicization" of Karelia.²⁴ The argument turns on a discussion of policy in Karelia regarding the use of Finnish language as the language of instruction in Karelian schools. Pogorelskin claims, "by 1931 Karelia's schools were offering instruction in Finnish only."²⁵ This would seem to provide some support for her view and that of the NKVD that Gylling and Rovio aimed at establishing in Karelia a "Finnish homeland" rather than a multi-ethnic republic. Her argument is based on a discussion of the matter by John Hodgson, but there is some confusion in Pogorelskin's use of Hodgson. Hodgson himself refers to articles by Rovio where Rovio claims success in replacing Russian with Finnish as the lan-

guage of instruction in Karelian areas. Pogorelskin takes this as evidence that Rovio was a Finnish nationalist who did not really support the Soviet Union. However, a closer reading of Hodgson shows that Pogorelskin's claim seriously misrepresents the matter.

When Gylling and Rovio arrived in Eastern Karelia in 1920, language instruction in all schools was in the Russian language, a language that was not the language of the native Karelian population. The native language, which was related to Finnish, had no written form in 1920. With the support of Soviet leaders in Moscow, Gylling and Rovio sought to substitute Finnish for Russian as the language of instruction in schools within the Karelian speaking areas of Karelia. It is this that was accomplished by 1931. Accordingly, Hodgson says, "In 1931 the goal was achieved. All schools in Karelian areas [*italics ours*] of the Autonomous Republic, numbering approximately two hundred and seventy-five, were operating in Finnish."²⁶ But Russian schools continued to operate in other parts of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia. Hodgson's numbers make this clear. He says, "At the end of 1931 there were, in all, some five hundred schools in Karelia."²⁷ Pogorelskin confuses a claim about all schools in Karelian areas of the Republic with a claim about all schools in the Karelian Republic. Contrary to what Pogorelskin says, the Karelian Republic remained a multi-ethnic republic with schools offering instruction in Russian as well as Finnish. The argument that the language policies supported by

Gylling and Rovio in Karelia indicated a narrow, nationalist vision for Karelia cannot be sustained.

In her effort to excise the Marxist and pro-Soviet aspects of Gylling's complex character, Pogorelskin ends up arguing that Gylling's Stalinist critics were absolutely right: that Gylling was operating under false pretenses, that he lied when he said he was a Communist, that he was at heart a Finnish nationalist, and that he and his supporters were no friends of the Soviet Union. In *New World Finn* Pogorelskin writes, "To save Karelia for the Finns, Gylling fabricated a Marxist revolutionary past for himself and maintained a façade of loyalty to the cause of the proletariat, albeit the Finnish one. He lied to Moscow that he recruited only lumberjacks to North America..."²⁸ There is no evidence to support these claims.²⁹

There remains only the matter of Oscar Corgan, father of Mayme Sevander. In our earlier criticism of Pogorelskin we objected to her

slander, based on speculative, and unreliable evidence, charging Oscar Corgan with being an agent of the Soviet security apparatus. As part of this criticism, we offered evidence to show that her speculations regarding Amtorg rested on a supposition that was factually false. Also as part of this criticism, we reported that Pogorelskin "cites the memoirs of Aino Kuusinen as suggesting that Corgan worked for Soviet Security" and we offered ground for doubting the reliability of this source.³⁰ Dropping the Amtorg argument and ignoring worries about the credibility of her source, in her reply to our criticism Pogorelskin returns to the Kuusinen memoir, pouncing on our use of the word "suggests" in this context as misleading.³¹ But in fact our use of the word "suggests" was a direct quotation from Pogorelskin herself. In an earlier article Pogorelskin had said, "It is also possible that a significant difference existed among recruiters to Karelia. Korgan [Corgan] may not have

been of concern to the Special Sector because he, in effect, had been working for them and not for Gylling. Aino Kuusinen, wife of Otto Kuusinen, the highest ranking Finn in Stalin's government, suggests [*italics ours*] something of this in her memoir."³² Apparently Pogorelskin now finds her earlier "suggests" too weak and thinks the evidence now supports a firmer conclusion. By such Baron Von Munchausen strategies she may, if she likes, try to strengthen her argument, but it is altogether uncharitable of her to take us to task for accurately quoting her earlier more modest claim.³³ For our part, the reasons stated in our earlier critique of her work remain sufficient to dismiss her reckless charges against Corgan.

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Notes

- 1 Mayme Sevander and Richard Hudelson, "A Relapse of Karelian Fever," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 2/2000 (Turku) p. 32.
- 2 Alexis Pogorelskin, "The Migration of Identity: Critics Confounded/Karelian Fever Explained," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 1/2001 (Turku) p. 24.
- 3 Mayme Sevander, *They Took My Father* (Duluth: Pfeifer and Hamilton, 1992); *Red Exodus* (Duluth: OSCAT, 1993); *Of So-*

- viet Bondage* (Duluth: OSCAT, 1996); *Vaeltajat* (Turku: Migration Institute, 2000); Sevander and Hudelson, *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 2/2000 (Turku), p. 32.
- 4 The claim remains on her internet website on Karelia as of April, 2001. <www.d.umn.edu/hist/karelia/formative%2.0.html>
- 5 John Wuorinen, *A History of Finland* (New York and Lon-

- don: Columbia University Press, 1965) pp. 199–200. On the affiliation of the Finnish Sdp with the Second International, see Harry Laidler, *History of Socialism* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1968) p. 543.
- 6 Pogorelskin makes this claim in her "Reply to Siitonen" in the letters section of *New World Finn* (February, 2000). She makes a similar claim in "The Migration of Identity" p. 25.

- 7 Anthony Upton, *The Finnish Revolution 1917–1918* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980) pp. 9–10.
- 8 Eino Jutikkala and Kauko Pirinen, *A History of Finland* 4th edition revised (Printed and bound in Finland by Amer Group Ltd. Weilin & Göös, Espoo, 1984) p. 210.
- 9 Jutikkala and Pirinen, p. 210; D.G. Kirby, *Finland in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) p. 72.
- 10 Kirby, p. 32. On the Erfurt Program, see p. 72. Karl Kautsky, a leading figure in the Second International and editor of the German theoretical journal, *Die Neue Zeit*, was known by contemporaries as the "pope of Marxism." On Kautsky, see Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880–1938* (London: NLB, 1979). See also Lesek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism Vol. II "The Golden Age,"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) Chapter II. In her reply to Harry Siitonen mentioned above, Pogorelskin claims that the Finnish Socialists were not Marxists but instead followers of Kautsky. This remark betrays a serious lack of understanding of the Marxism of the Second International.
- 11 Kirby, p. 33.
- 12 Pogorelskin, "The Migration of Identity" p. 24.
- 13 Sevander and Hudelson, "A Relapse of Karelian Fever," p. 32.
- 14 Pogorelskin, "New Perspectives on Karelian Fever: The Recruitment of North American Finns to Karelia in the Early 1930s," *Journal of Finnish Studies* (December 1997) Vol. 1 No. 1. p. 167.
- 15 Pogorelskin, "The Migration of Identity." Pogorelskin makes this argument a centerpiece of her reply to us, coming back to it at least three different times. See p. 24, p. 25 and p. 26.
- 16 Upton, p. 174–178; Jutikkala and Pirinen, p. 227. See also John Hodgson, *Communism in Finland: A History and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) pp. 35–52.
- 17 Pogorelskin, "The Migration of Identity" p. 25.
- 18 On this letter, see Arvo Ylärakola, *Edvard Gylling: Itä-Karjalan suomalainen rakentaja* (Otava: Helsingissa: 1976) pp. 161–162.
- 19 Pogorelskin, "The Migration of Identity" p. 27.
- 20 Pogorelskin, op. cit. p. 26 and p. 27.
- 21 Pogorelskin, "New Perspectives" p. 167 (on Tenhunen and Rovio).
- 22 Sevander and Hudelson, "A Relapse of Karelian Fever" p. 38.
- 23 Pogorelskin, web page at <http://www.d.umn.edu/hist/karelia/why.html>
- 24 Pogorelskin, "Migration of Identity" p. 26. Earlier versions of this argument appear in Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling and the Origins of Karelian Fever," in *The Dividing Line: Borders and National Peripheries* (Renvall Institute Proceedings: University of Helsinki, 1997) p. 45 and "Finn Forum" in *New World Finn* Vol. 1 No. 7 (February, 2000) p. 9.
- 25 Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling and the Origins of Karelian Fever," p. 45 and "Finn Forum," *New World Finn* (February 2000) p. 9.
- 26 Hodgson, p. 158.
- 27 Hodgson, p. 158 n. 48.
- 28 Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling and Karelian Fever," *New World Finn* (February 2000) p. 11.
- 29 On the matter of the lumberjacks, see Mayme Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, pp. 22–23.
- 30 Sevander and Hudelson, p. 33. On the ground for doubt, see Martin Rintala, *Eastern European Quarterly* Vol. 9 No. 3 (1975) p. 381.
- 31 Pogorelskin, "Migration of Identity," p. 27.
- 32 Pogorelskin, "New Perspectives," p. 174.
- 33 In fact while Kuusinen claims Corgan was a secret assistant to Gorin, she does not claim that Corgan knew that Gorin was anything other than the representative of Amtorg he claimed to be. And, for the record, Mayme Sevander said that Kuusinen had visited in her parent's home once – not that Kuusinen was a regular visitor as Pogorelskin reports.