

The Migration of Identity: Critics Confounded/Karelian Fever Explained

"Are my eyes really brown?" Humphrey Bogart, in the role of an American expatriate, asks Major Heinrich Strasser, the Nazi commander of German troops in Casablanca. Bogart is wide-eyed with disbelief as he reads Strasser's notebook filled with misinformation about himself and other enemies of the Third Reich in North Africa.

I had a similar reaction when I read the Hudelson/Sevander essay about my work on the recruitment of North American Finns to Karelia in the early 1930s, which appeared in a recent issue of *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*.¹ Bogart's character mockingly suggests that error and irrelevance arise from ideology and fanaticism. Hudelson and Sevander monomaniacally insist "Karelian fever cannot be understood without appreciating its roots in Marxist ideology."²

I will argue that the phenomena known as Karelian fever are far more complex; grounded in history, culture, and ethnicity; and hence more comprehensible than the ideological motivation that Hudelson and Sevander insist upon.

Edvard Gylling, who is central to any discussion of Karelian fever, presents a paradox that my critics have failed to understand. A Social Democrat who opposed the uprising of 1918 yet served in the revolutionary government, a Finnish nationalist who administered a Soviet republic, Gylling

appears to follow a career that is beset with contradiction.

My critics on the other hand contend that both Gylling and the Finnish Social Democratic party to which he belonged were unqualifiedly Marxist. Echoing Carl Ross,³ whom they do not cite, they state that the Finnish Social Democrats adopted the Erfurt program of German Marxism at the party's founding, and that fact suffices to explain its subsequent politics. They claim that "Historians of Finland are unanimous in their descriptions of the Finnish [Social Democratic] party during this time as Orthodox Marxist."⁴

The truth about Gylling and Finnish Social Democracy is far more compelling than the fiction of my critics. Upon founding their party in 1903, the Finnish Social Democrats almost immediately split into two groups.⁵ One group in Helsinki wanted to separate itself from the bourgeoisie in the fight against Russification. The other, in Tampere, sought to cooperate with bourgeois groups to unite the Grand Duchy in opposition to Tsarist oppression. The division plagued Finnish Social Democracy up to 1917. As one leading figure in the party explained it, Finnish Social Democracy in its early years attempted to cope with both class struggle and the struggle for national independence.⁶

Gylling's preference for Finnish independence over social rev-

olution emerged most notably in the events that led to the Finnish civil war. In the heated party debates of 1917, Gylling opposed a workers' insurrection to seize power.⁷ He sought to safeguard Finland's newly won and fragile independence rather than imitate the Bolsheviks in social revolution. In fact, Gylling's position, shared by many in the party, was to call for the withdrawal of Russian troops in Finland on the grounds that it was too risky to rely on the support of the Bolshevik government whose hold on power, they believed, would be short-lived.⁸

Kustaa Rovio numbered among those who supported Gylling's position. Then head of the Helsinki militia, Rovio looked with dismay at the formation of units of Red Guards and Civil Guards, both groups set on conflict.⁹ Rovio would later share the administration of Karelia with Gylling.

Once the civil war began, Gylling did everything that he could to prevent radical elements from taking over the leadership of the Social Democratic party.¹⁰ He remained a firm opponent of revolution, still seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict despite the violence that had begun to engulf Finland by late January 1918.¹¹

It is true that Gylling joined the revolutionary government. His expertise in finance and econom-

ics (Gylling had been Chairman of the Seim's Board of Overseers for the Bank of Finland) made him indispensable in that regard. On March 8, 1918; he assumed the position of Minister of Finance in the revolutionary government.¹² But he was its last member to capitulate, hoping to the end to negotiate a compromise peace with the Whites. Only a price on his head compelled him to flee Finland.¹³

Gylling did not join the thousands of Red Finns who found refuge in the new Russian Soviet Socialist Republic. Instead he went to Stockholm. From there he proposed to Lenin that the Red Finns who had managed to cross the border should be settled in Karelia, creating a distinctive Finnish enclave within the new Bolshevik state.¹⁴ Lenin had no interest in Gylling's novel proposal, and it came to nought in 1918.

Gylling made the same proposal two years later. This time Lenin listened.¹⁵ Facing tough negotiations over Karelia after repeated attempts by Finland to seize the region, he now saw Gylling's proposal as a way to consolidate the Russian Republic's claim to it. There was nonetheless a peculiar partnership. Gylling had by now joined the recently formed Finnish Communist party, but he made an odd member of the new party. Having opposed revolution in Finland in 1917–1918; he still advocated parliamentary means to bring about social change in his former homeland.¹⁶ He also had a great deal to learn as a new party member. In the years before 1917, Finnish Social Democrats had regarded the interminable conflicts

of Russian Marxists as irrelevant for Finland. According to Yrjö Sirola, Lenin's writings were almost unknown in Finland in those years.¹⁷

Gylling was not unqualifiedly Marxist, Orthodox or otherwise, as my critics insist. He was a Finnish nationalist, reform minded and progressive, who opposed class warfare and social upheaval, particularly within a small and vulnerable national group like the Finns. His partnership with Kustaa Rovio, subsequently so important for the cause of Karelian fever, began at the time of the Finnish civil war because both men shared an aversion to social upheaval in Finland and to alignment with Lenin's new regime. Finnish identity is critical to an explanation of their conduct both in Finland and the Soviet Union.

In 1996 the Karelian State Archive produced an extensive exhibition of Gylling photos and documents which the archive's director N.Ia.Kop'ëv generously put at my disposal. Prof. Irina Takala of Petrozavodsk State University, with equal generosity, placed at my disposal her encyclopedic knowledge of the former Party Archive of Karelia. It was she who led me to the Special Sector documents to be discussed below, emphasizing their unique importance for understanding Karelian fever.

The material in the State Archive permits an overview of Gylling's career before and after 1917. Before he was a Social Democrat, Gylling had belonged to the political grouping known as the Old Finns.¹⁸ The Old Finns were socially progressive and opposed

both to Russification and to the continuing dominance of Swedish culture in Finland. Gylling's doctoral dissertation analyzed the exploitation of Finland's rural poor under Swedish rule.¹⁹ He went on to become the Social Democrats' expert on agrarian issues.

Gylling's role as the architect of the Social Democrats' agrarian policy and leading expert on the rural poor in the Seim confronted him with the dilemma that threatened Finland's autonomy as surely as Russification, namely the massive migration of its rural poor to North America in the years before World War I. As a pioneer in the application of statistical methods to social questions,²⁰ Gylling knew just how many Finns constituted the North American Finnish diaspora, a fact that he would later put to good use in Karelia.

It is one of the many ironies to arise from Finland's civil war that Gylling became the leader of a Soviet autonomous republic. His career of reform and compromise, of respectability and intellectual achievement, had sooner prepared him for the so-called "ministerial socialism" that some Finnish Social Democrats pursued in the early 1920s, that is the effort to form a coalition with bourgeois parties.²¹ Edvard Valpas, who had led the only decidedly Marxist faction within Finnish Social Democracy before 1917, the so-called *Siltasaarelaisuus* group, remained in Finland.²²

Gylling came to Karelia not because of long time sympathies for Bolshevism or even Marxism. He came to Karelia because he had carefully negotiated with Lenin

conditions to maintain the autonomy and Finnish character of the region. According to Gylling the Russian Central Executive Committee had decreed in 1920 that Karelia would have "its own organs of self rule with broad freedom of action."²³

The Karelian archival documents at my disposal reveal the ways in which Gylling implemented those guarantees. An expert in state finance, Gylling quickly acquired control of the Karelian state budget, negotiating the rights to keep 90% of the autonomous republic's income in Karelia.²⁴ His language decree of 1924 insured the dominance of Finnish over Russian.²⁵ In one sense it could be said that Gylling had resolved the conflict that had divided the Finnish Social Democrats before 1917. By crafting a measure of independence for Karelia under the aegis of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he had merged national independence with the resolution of the class struggle.

By 1930 the resolution had broken down, and Gylling's primary concern became how to maintain the Finnish character of Karelia. He now faced a demographic dilemma of a sort that he had been all too familiar with before 1917. Gylling expressed this concern at the time that he noted the need for an enlarged force in Karelia to meet the elevated production quotas set by the First Five Year Plan. Gylling then petitioned the Central Committee for permission to bring Finns from the USA and Canada "because otherwise bringing in tens of thousands of new [non-Finnish] cadres, the

danger threatens Karelia of losing its national character."²⁶

Less than a year before, in the summer of 1929, Kustaa Rovio had joined Gylling in the administration of Karelia. Rovio's tenure in Karelia coincides precisely with the period of Karelian fever; his previous career in the Soviet Union helps explain his support of it. From 1920 to 1926 Rovio had overseen the military training of Finns in Leningrad.²⁷ He then served as rector in Leningrad of the Communist University for Western Minority Nationalities.²⁸ In other words, Rovio like Gylling had devoted himself almost exclusively to the cause of Finns while in the Soviet Union.

Once in Karelia, Rovio defended Gylling's policy of Finnicization.²⁹ In all official photos of Rovio in Karelia that I have seen, he sits or stands next to Gylling. Such placement, I believe, symbolizes the close working relationship the two men had. They were removed from positions of power in Karelia within months of each other, punished for their nationality policy.³⁰

My critics contend that I claim that "Soviet Russia did not matter" for Rovio.³¹ I can only respond that Rovio's career clearly suggests a commitment to his own Finnish identity over any other. Between his arrest and execution in 1937, it is safe to surmise that he regarded the Soviet experiment with dubiety. My critics also note that Rovio sheltered Lenin, then on the run from the Provisional Government in the summer of 1917. Rovio's deed should not obscure the fact that he joined Gylling in trying to prevent a

workers' uprising in Finland later that year and insulating the former Grand Duchy from the revolutionary turmoil in Petrograd, his friendship with Lenin notwithstanding.

It is time now to turn to the Special Sector documents and what they tell us about the motives behind Karelian fever.³² It is ludicrous to compare these documents, as my critics do, to doctored evidence of the sort used "in the political trials of the Stalin era."³³ The Special Sector documents were secret, internal investigatory material, precisely of the sort now being used by reputable scholars both in Russia and the West to write the social history of the Soviet Union. In the absence of open sources to record public opinion, the investigations of the NKVD remain to provide a wealth of material to understand Soviet society and politics from the inside.

On a personal note, I offered my copies of those documents to Mr. Hudelson. He responded, "Don't bother. I can't read a word of them." I find it a peculiar practice indeed to condemn documents which you are incapable of assessing or even comprehending.

Prior to investigation of the Special Sector documents, I had become dubious of the traditional explanations of Karelian fever of the sort that Hudelson and Sevander offer. I noticed that while recruiters had ostensibly sought a work force for Karelia to help build socialism, the recruitment had remained confined to Finnish communities and to Finnish language publications. Such recruitment was not difficult to

conduct. Many Finnish-Americans remained demographically segregated as well as linguistically isolated. The recruitment message could reach them quickly. At the same time I began to wonder if the medium were not itself the message: Finns were wanted because they were Finns.

Richard Impola's translation of Ernesti Komulainen's autobiographical novel *A Grave in Karelia*,³⁴ coupled with the revelations in the Special Sector documents, confirmed my earlier surmise. Like the NKVD interrogators, I too asked the same basic question: just what had brought the wave of North American Finns to Karelia in the first place? In the Special Sector documents I found that Matti Tenhunen had insisted in his recruitment speeches that "people can sign up and go [to the Soviet Union] without political convictions."³⁵ What mattered, according to one of those who heard him, "not to let the Finnish nation die...we must Finnicize Karelia..."³⁶

In Komulainen's novel Tenhunen becomes Hentunen. One character ruefully remembers that Hentunen had recruited North American Finns, "telling them that the Soviet Government had decided to make Karelia a totally Finnish speaking area."³⁷ Gylling's language law of 1924 had attempted to do just that.

I should note that I do not deny Tenhunen's Marxist sympathies. I

have in my possession a Finnish language pamphlet entitled *Karl Marx* written by N. Lenin. The Työmies Society, which Matti Tenhunen then directed, published it in Superior, Wisconsin, in 1921. In 1931 to 1934 Tenhunen sought those who could read that pamphlet to go to Karelia. It did not matter whether they had actually read it or not.

Sevander has done yeoman service in her research among the survivors of Karelian fever. I do not deny her claim to possess hundreds of testimonies that confirm "the ideological motives for the majority of these people."³⁸ But the questions you pose determine the answers you will receive. Those whom I have interviewed in depth whether in Finland, Karelia, or North America confirm, when queried, the importance of Finnish identity combined with Karelia's Finnish character to explain why they or their parents were willing to go. My own surmise is that those who went, whether as Leftist visionaries, or seeking an escape from the Great Depression or simply adventure, perceived a measure of security in the expectation that they would find in Karelia the same Finnish culture that were leaving behind in North America.

The issue of Oscar Corgan, Sevander's father, is naturally a sensitive one for her. She has crafted a heroic portrait of him else-

where. Unfortunately, Aino Kuusinen does more than "suggest" that Corgan worked for Soviet security. She states explicitly that he was a "secret assistant" of "a wily agent whose true name was Gorin."³⁹ I asked Mrs. Sevander if she had ever known Aino Kuusinen or knew of her father to associate with her. "Oh, yes," was her reply. "She was at our house all the time." If true, Kuusinen was in a position to know the nature of Corgan's activities.

The issues that divide me from my critics lie at the heart of the work of the Migration Institute and this publication: what encourages or impels people to migrate from one homeland to another. Gylling sought to recreate in Karelia the Finnish homeland that he had left behind in 1918. Those who went to Karelia in the early 1930s had not immediately flocked to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s as soon as the Bolsheviks launched the first Marxist state. North American Finns went when they were recruited as Finns to a Finnish homeland to insure, as Gylling stated, "the national character" of Karelia. In sum, Marxist ideology will not suffice to explain the motives of either the recruiters or the recruited to Karelia in the early 1930s.

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Notes

1 Richard Hudelson, Mayme Sevander, "A Relapse of Karelian Fever," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration*, 2/2000, pp. 31–35.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3 *Ibid.*; Carl Ross, "The Utopian Vision of Finnish Immigrants: 1900–30," *Scandinavian Studies*, no. 4, v. 60 (1988), p. 486.

4 H/S, p. 32.

5 John H. Hodgson. *Communism*

- in Finland. A History and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 5. The value of Hodgson's book lies, in part, in the fact that, writing in the early 1960s, he was able to correspond with surviving members of the Finnish SD Party. He relies on their testimony to document his account of the party.
- 6 Yrjö Sirola, "Rabochaia revoliutsiia v Finliandii v 1918g." *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, no. 8, v.79 (August 1928), p. 169.
- 7 Hodgson, p. 40–41, 51. For a full discussion of Gylling's role in 1917, see pp. 20–52.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 60. "Gylling as late as December 1917 sought the withdrawal of Russian troops and was a vigorous champion of Finnish independence."
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 69. Only Karl Wiik and Gylling "sought to the very end a peaceful solution."
- 12 Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Karel'skoi ASSR. (Henceforth Tsentral'nyi Gos. Arkhiv KASSR.) Kino-fono-fotodokument, no. 14.
- 13 *Ibid.*, no. 15.
- 14 Hodgson, p. 147.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 148; Gylling was able to communicate with Lenin via a member of the Soviet Trade Delegation in Stockholm. See Tsentral'nyi Gos Arkhiv KASSR., f. 2795, op.1, d.1/8, l.22.
- 16 *Suomen työväen vallankumous 1918: Arviota ja itsekritiikkiä* (Leningrad: Kirja, 1928), p. 105 as cited in Hodgson, p. 148.
- 17 Hodgson, p. 48. Hodgson cites extensive memoir literature by both Sirjola and O. W. Kuusinen on this point.
- 18 Hodgson, p. 7.
- 19 Edvard Gylling. Suomen Torpparilaitoksen Kehityksen pääpiirteet Ruotsinvallan aikana. Helsinki, 1909/Tsentral'nyi Gos Arkhiv KASSR, Kino-fono-fotodokumenty, E. Gylling, no. 12.
- 20 Gylling served as an actuary in the Central State Bureau of Finland, 1908–1912 and in the same capacity in the Statistical Bureau of Helsinki, 1912–1918. See Gylling. "Biografia," Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Obshchestvenno-politicheskikh Dvizhenii Formirovani Karel'ia, f.3, op.6, r.2633, l.31. (henceforth GAO-pDFK)
- 21 Hodgson, pp. 121–129.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–10 and 124.
- 23 Rovio i Giulling, "V Tsk VKP," 9 March 1930; GAO-pDFK, f.5002, op.2, r.11, l.17.
- 24 *Ibid.*; Tsentral'nyi Gos. Arkhiv KASSR. Kino-fono-fotodokumenty, E. Gylling, no. 29 (excerpt from minutes of Obkom Bureau meeting of 19 May 1926. f.689, op.1, d.29/334, l.9.).
- 25 Tsentral'nyi Gos. Arkhiv KASSR, f.690, op.3, d.1/9, l. 107. Further discussion regarding Gylling's Finnicization of Karelia can be found on my web site "Karelian Fe-
- ver," <http://www.d.umn.edu/hist/Karelia/index2.html>. See "Historians Speak."
- 26 Rovio i Giulling, "V Tsk VKP," 9 March 1930; GA O-p DFK, f.5002, op.2, r.11, l.21.
- 27 Hodgson, p. 86.
- 28 Hodgson, p. 156.
- 29 *Ibid.* Rovio argued that without the dominance of Finnish, "the formation of an autonomous republic [out of Karelia] would have been nonsensical."
- 30 See especially, E. Giulling, "Vykorchevat' korni natsionalizma, *Krasnaia Karelia* (29 October 1935). In the article signed by Gylling, but not written by him, he appears to denounce his entire policy in Karelia as a nationalist deviation.
- 31 H/F, p. 32.
- 32 These documents can be found in the former Partarkhiv Karel'skogo obkom VKP(b), now GAO-pDFK, Osobyi sektor, f.3, op.5, kor. 207, d.277. (Hereafter Osobyi sektor.)
- 33 H/F, p. 33.
- 34 Ernesti J. Komulainen. *A Grave in Karelia* (Ann Arbor: Braun-Brumfield, 1995).
- 35 Osobyi sektor, l.5.
- 36 Osobyi sektor, l.42.
- 37 *A Grave in Karelia*, p. 112.
- 38 H/F, p. 33.
- 39 Aino Kuusinen, *The Rings of Destiny: Inside Soviet Russia from Lenin to Brezhnev* (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1974), p. 94.