

# A Relapse of Karelian Fever

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In a series of recently published papers, Alexis Pogorelskin appears to be arguing that the attempt to establish the Karelian Workers Commune in Soviet Karelia, commonly understood as an experiment in utopian communism, is better understood as the product of a Finnish nationalism that has little if anything to do with Communism, Marxism, or socialism.<sup>1</sup> This, or something like this, seems to be at the heart of the "new perspective" Pogorelskin brings to the study of Karelia. In fact, Pogorelskin's new perspective is not altogether clear. In its most extreme forms it seems to be denying any role to communist ideology. In its more reasonable form, it concedes the importance of ideology but insists on the greater importance of nationalism, of a sense of Finnish identity, in accounting for Karelian fever. In her most recent article "Why Karelian 'Fever'?" (published in *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 1/2000) for example, Pogorelskin concedes that ideological motives were necessary but not sufficient, with Finnish ethnic identity supplying the missing motivating condition.

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But there are serious problems even with this more moderate claim. For, even in her latest work Pogorelskin continues to privilege "national" over ideological factors in understanding Karelian fever. Thus, she argues that the "real explanation" for Karelian fever lies in immigrants' Finnish ethnic identity and tells us that "national pride and identity lay at the heart of the recruitment message" that drew North American Finns to Karelia.<sup>2</sup> This idea that "nationalist" factors outweighed ideological factors is a persistent theme in Pogorelskin's "new perspective." In much of her work this theme is also coupled with an analysis of the primary actors in the Karelian drama that divides these actors into two camps.

We believe this "new perspective" is deeply flawed, that in her determination to maintain the view that the "real explanation" of Karelian fever is Finnish nationalism, Pogorelskin is led to make claims that are patently false, that the two camp model creates divisions that are not real, and that Pogorelskin's new perspective obscures more than it reveals. While we agree with Pogorelskin that Finnish identity was an important aspect of Karelian fever, it does not belong to one camp rather than to another and did not exist in isolation from ideological factors.

At the center of Pogorelskin's argument stand Edvard Gylling, Kustaa Rovio, and Matti Tenhunen. Gylling had been a leader in the Social Democratic Party of Finland before the First World War and the Finnish civil war. Following an agreement with Lenin formed in 1920, Gylling served as the leader of the Autonomous Republic of Karelia which was eventually established within the boundaries of the newborn state. Kustaa Rovio, also a Finn, served as Gylling's second in command in Karelia. Matti Tenhunen, a Finnish-American, served as the first Director of the Karelian Technical Aid Agency, an agency in North America responsible for recruiting North American Finns to come to Karelia.

In making her case that Finnish nationalism was more important than Marxism or Communism for understanding Karelian fever, Pogorelskin advances the following claims: (1) That the Finnish Social Democratic Party, was not Marxist, (2) That Gylling was not a Marxist, (3) That in working to create the Autonomous Republic of Karelia, Gylling, Rovio, and Tenhunen were motivated by Finnish nationalism rather than by any support for Communism or the Soviet Union, and (4) That the emigration of North American Finns to Karelia was more a prod-

uct of Finnish nationalism than communist ideology. We believe that each of these claims is false and that Karelian fever cannot be understood without appreciating its roots in Marxist ideology.

### **Was the Social Democratic Party of Finland marxist?**

Contrary to what Pogorelskin says, there is overwhelming evidence that the Social Democratic Party of Finland was Marxist. Historians of Finland are unanimous in their descriptions of the Finnish party during this time as orthodox Marxist.

### **Was Gylling a marxist?**

Pogorelskin says that Gylling "converted to Marxism belatedly, if not reluctantly, in 1918."<sup>3</sup> She also tells us that, "To save Karelia for the Finns, Gylling fabricated a Marxist revolutionary past for himself and maintained a facade of loyalty to the cause of the proletariat, albeit the Finnish one."<sup>4</sup> There is strong evidence that Pogorelskin is mistaken and that Gylling was telling the truth about his earlier Marxism.

In Berlin where he was exposed to the Marxian socialism of the German Social Democratic Party in 1904, Gylling wrote to friends that he had become a socialist. Upon returning to Finland, in 1905 he joined the Finnish Sdp which was committed to the Marxist Erfurt Program. In 1906, Gylling became editor of a theoretical journal, affiliated with the party, that professed a moderate Marxist standpoint. He also ar-

ranged for, and wrote an introduction for, a Finnish translation of Marx's *Capital*. For over a decade he worked within the leadership core of the Finnish Sdp, a core made up of individuals who Pogorelskin herself identifies as Marxist. And, when, against the best efforts of Gylling and others within the leadership group, the Finnish Sdp resorted to a revolutionary rising, Gylling served as Finance Minister in the "Red" government and the last Chief of Headquarters of the revolutionary Red Guard, justifying his action on the grounds of the necessity of solidarity with the working class.<sup>5</sup>

### **Did Gylling, Rovio and Tenhunen support Soviet Russia?**

In 1918, well before the Karelian experiment began, though Gylling remained loyal to the hope of a parliamentary path to socialism, he wrote a letter to comrades meeting in Moscow, asking to be included as a founding member of the Finnish Communist Party.<sup>6</sup> This is an action that makes no sense except in the context of a general support for the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

Pogorelskin depicts Kustaa Rovio as a Finnish radical for whom "communism" meant Finnish Karelia rather than any support for Soviet Russia. But evidence belies this. Rovio had worked in his younger days in metal shops in Petrograd where he learned Russian and joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party. When Lenin was in hiding following the failed Bol-

shevik uprising of July 1917, it was at the home of Kustaa Rovio in Helsinki that he stayed. And, until his death, Lenin remained on close friendly terms with Rovio.<sup>7</sup> Pogorelskin's claim that for Rovio, Soviet Russia did not matter, is wildly untenable.

Pogorelskin also claims that Matti Tenhunen was more of a nationalist than a communist and claims that Tenhunen was not a strong supporter of Soviet Russia. But Tenhunen had served as an editor of *Työmies*, a Communist Party newspaper published in Superior, Wisconsin, long before he became involved in recruiting North American Finns to go to Karelia, and *Työmies* had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> Pogorelskin gives us no reason to think that Tenhunen had abandoned his support for Soviet Russia.

In summary, then, there is simply no evidence for Pogorelskin's claim that Gylling, Rovio, and Tenhunen were not supporters of the Soviet Union, and there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

### **Was Karelia more about nationalism than communism?**

Pogorelskin argues that for both the leaders and the mass of North American Finns who emigrated to Karelia, Karelian fever had a great deal to do with the role of Finns in the Republic of Karelia. We have no quarrel with this claim. However, we do reject Pogorelskin's claim that this implies a lack of support for Marxism, Communism, or the Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

In Finland and North America the Finnish labor movement understood itself both as a movement for national restoration and as a part of the international struggle for communism. When North American Finns sailed for Karelia they undoubtedly took pride in being Finns and looked forward to showing the world what the Finns could do in Karelia. But they also sailed to build in Karelia a workers paradise that would advance the cause of Soviet Russia. The decade long research done by Mayme Sevander with the families of North American Finns who emigrated to Karelia, research involving hundreds of interviews and hundreds of written responses to inquiries, clearly shows the central importance of ideological motives for the majority of these people.<sup>10</sup> Outstanding Finnish researcher, Reino Kero, also gives prominence to the ideological factor in the Red exodus.<sup>11</sup>

### The Special Sector documents

Another point that needs clarification concerns Pogorelskin's use of "Special Sector" documents from the archives of the security agencies of the Soviet Union. She claims that these documents throw new light on what happened in Karelia. The documents include reports of interrogations conducted by Stalin's agents sent to Karelia. They lay the foundations for charges against Gylling, Rovio, Tenhunen and others that later would lead to their arrest and execution. The central charge against these leaders is that they

were Finnish nationalists who were not loyal to the Soviet Union. People who knew Gylling and Rovio found these charges preposterous. What new evidence, then, does Pogorelskin find in these Special Sector documents?

What is truly astonishing about Pogorelskin's use of NKVD (secret police) documents is that she takes the documents as providing credible evidence of the truth of the charges made against Gylling and others upon their later arrest. But, based on what has long been known about the manipulation of evidence in the political trials of the Stalin era, we believe that Pogorelskin's "new perspective" rests on a highly uncritical use of these documents. In her determination to establish her claims that Gylling, Rovio, and Tenhunen were primarily nationalists not committed to Communism, Pogorelskin embraces the dubious findings of Stalin's internal security agents. The Special Sector documents provide no credible evidence for Pogorelskin's "new perspective."

### Oscar Corgan

Another figure mentioned by Pogorelskin in her "new perspectives" deserves to be mentioned. Oscar Corgan became Director of the Karelian Technical Aid Agency 1932. In 1934, Corgan and his family sailed for Soviet Karelia. In her "New perspectives," Pogorelskin contrasts the role played by Corgan with the role played by Matti Tenhunen. She argues that while Tenhunen was fundamentally a Finnish national-

ist for whom the fate of Soviet Russia was unimportant, Corgan was a committed Communist with strong loyalties to Moscow. Indeed, she goes on to speculate that Corgan "may" have been "in effect" working for the security apparatus of the Soviet Union. And, noting that Corgan was also murdered by Stalin's agents, she observes that, "if true, Korgan's connection with Moscow did not save him."<sup>12</sup>

Pogorelskin points to the *absence* of early charges against Corgan. It is this that leads Pogorelskin to say that it is *possible* that Corgan worked for Moscow rather than Gylling. Pogorelskin also cites the memoirs of Aino Kuusinen as "suggesting" that Corgan worked for Soviet Security. However historian Martin Rintala, in reviewing Kuusinen's memoirs, makes a point of saying that "caution in accepting her statements is advisable."<sup>13</sup>

Pogorelskin also suggests that there is some significance to the "fact" that while Corgan did work with Amtorg (a Soviet trade agency), Tenhunen did not, taking Tenhunen's refusal to work with the Moscow based Amtorg as a possible indication of his lack of support for Soviet Communism. And where does Pogorelskin find evidence of Tenhunen's refusal to work with Amtorg? Why, in the "Special Sector" reports of Stalin's internal security forces. But why in the world should we take this as a reliable source, especially when there is clear evidence to the contrary? In a 1931 list of directions to emigrants, Tenhunen clearly tells them to buy supplies and equipment through Amtorg.<sup>14</sup>

Again, in her eagerness to prove her "two camp" analysis, Pogorelskin is led to rely on very dubious sources and ignore evidence to the contrary. And, further undermining Pogorelskin's view, Aino Kuusinen, whom Pogorelskin offers as evidence to support the two-camp view that Corgan belonged to Moscow rather than Gylling, mentions Edvard Gylling as *supporting* the work of Corgan in North America.

In the end, Pogorelskin's picture of Oscar Corgan is nothing more than a tissue of conjectures, conjectures that overlook a good deal.

Matti Tenhunen and Oscar Corgan both served as Directors of the Karelian Technical Aid Agen-

cy charged with recruiting North American Finns to come to Karelia. Tenhunen and Corgan were very much alike. Both were respected and intelligent men. Both were active in the Communist Party in the United States long before they ever became involved with Karelia. Both were enthusiastic supporters of Soviet Russia. Both worked for *Työmies*, the Finnish language Communist newspaper published in Superior, Wisconsin. Both were highly appreciated speakers. Both were early leaders of the Finnish cooperative movement. They were comrades and friends. Their families were close. Both were murdered by Stalin's agents in the purge of the leader-

ship of the Karelian Finns. And both are buried in the same mass grave in Sandarmokh, where their names and portraits appear together on the same cross. In her effort to paint Matti Tenhunen as fundamentally a Finnish nationalist, who had no real loyalty to Russian Communism, Pogorelskin is forced to ignore Tenhunen's past, to rely on the testimony against him reported by Stalin's security agents, to slander Corgan on the basis of flimsy conjectures, and to ignore the long and close relationship between the two men. In the end Pogorelskin's "new perspective" fails dismally, adding insult and injury to misrepresentation.

## Notes

1. Alexis Pogorelskin, "Preface" to L. Hokkanen et. al. *Karelia: A Finnish-American Couple in Stalin's Russia* (St. Cloud: North Star Press, 1992); "Edvard Gylling and the Origins of Karelian Fever," in *The Dividing Line: Borders and National Peripheries* (Renvall Institute Proceedings: University of Helsinki, 1997); "New Perspectives on Karelian Fever: The Recruitment of North American Finns to Karelia in the Early 1930s," *Journal of Finnish Studies* (Dec. 1997) Vol. 1 No. 1 pp. 165–178; "Edvard Gylling and Karelian Fever," (in two parts) *New World Finn* Vol. 1 Nos. 6 and 7 (January and February 2000); "Why Karelian 'Fever'?" *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* Vol. 27 No. 1 (Turku: 2000) pp. 25–
26. See also "Edvard Gylling's Early Career & Formative Influences," on the internet web site constructed by Pogorelskin at <[www.d.umn.edu/hist/karelia/formative%20.html](http://www.d.umn.edu/hist/karelia/formative%20.html)>.
2. The quoted phrases are from "Why Karelian 'Fever'?" in *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 1/2000 (Turku) pp. 25–26.
3. Pogorelskin, "New Perspectives," p. 167. Pogorelskin cites no evidence to support this "reluctantly." A similar claim about Gylling's "conversion" to Marxism in 1918 appears in "Edvard Gylling and the Origins of Karelian Fever" p. 266. There the only evidence for a "conversion" is that Gylling joined the newly formed Finnish Communist Party. But since most of those who joined the worldwide Communist move-
- ment in 1918 had been Marxists before they joined, this fact is no evidence for a conversion to Marxism.
4. Alexis Pogorelskin, "Edvard Gylling and Karelian Fever," (Part II) *New World Finn* Vol. 1 No. 7 (February 2000) p. 11. [italics ours]
5. This picture of Gylling is drawn from Arvo Yläräkkö, *Edvard Gylling: Itä-Karjalan suomalainen rakentaja* (Otava: Helsingissä: 1976) and from Arvo Tuominen, *The Bells of the Kremlin: An Experience in Communism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983).
6. Yläräkkö, pp. 161–162.
7. This sketch of Rovio comes from Tuominen, p. 289.
8. Pogorelskin herself notes Tenhunen's work for *Työmies* and

- Työmies*' support for Soviet Russia in her "New Perspectives." She offers no reason to support her claim ("New Perspectives" p. 167) that Tenhunen's support for Karelia "implies" something less than enthusiastic support for Soviet Russia.
9. Pogorelskin, "New Perspectives," p. 167.
  10. Mayme Sevander, *They Took My Father* (with Laurie Hertzel) (Duluth: Pfeifer-Hamilton, nd); *Red Exodus* (Duluth: OSCAT, 1993); *Of Soviet Bondage* (Duluth: OSCAT, 1996); *Vaeltajat* (Turku: Institute of Migration, 2000).
  11. Reino Kero, *Neuvosto-Karjalaa rakentamassa* (Helsinki, 1983), pp. 83-85; "The Role of Finnish Settlers from North America in the nationality question in Karelia in the 1930s," *Scandinavian Journal* (1981); *Suureen Länteen. Siirtolaisuus Suomesta Pohjois-Amerikkaan* (Turku, Institute of Migration, 1996) pp. 274–280.
  12. "New Perspectives," p. 174.
  13. Martin Rintala, *Eastern European Quarterly* Vol. 9 No. 3 (1975) p. 381.
  14. Mayme Sevander, *Of Soviet Bondage*, p. 5.

## Suomalaista kulttuuria Saksassa

Saksaan vuonna 1965 muuttanut suomalais-syntyinen *Kaarina Dehls* lahjoitti kansallispu-kunsa Hampurin kansatieteen museolle. Dehls hankki karjalaisen Antrean pukunsa Suomesta vuonna 1968 ja puku on palvellut pitäjäänsä monissa ikimuistoisissa tilaisuuksissa; mm. presidentti Kekkonen Saksan vierailun kunniaksi järjestetyssä juhlassa. Puku on juhlistanut myös lukuisia Hampurin suomalaisen merimieskirkon järjestämiä itsenäisyys- ja joulujuhlia sekä alueen muita Suomi-tapahtumia.

*Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg* -museolla on Euroopan suurin kansatieteen kokoelma. Museon Eurooppa-osaston johtaja, tohtori *Bernd Schmelz*, otti arvokkaan lahjoituksen ja Dehlsin laatiman selostuksen puvun historiasta kiitollisena vastaan.

Kaarina Dehls toimii matkaoppaana Saksassa vieraileville suomalaisille, saksalaisille ja itävaltalaisille matkailijoille. Hänen sydämen asianaan on tehdä Suomea tunnetuksi ja jakaa maastamme tietoa mm. kirjoittamalla lehtiin Suomi-aiheisia artikkeleita. Dehls on tehnyt useita suomalaisuutta kuvaavia lahjoituksia eri museoille Saksassa. Siirtolaisuusinstituutin arkistokokoelmia hän on myös kartuttanut huomattavasti.

Kuvassa Kaarina Dehls pukuineen Hampurin kansatieteen museon portailla. – Kuva: *Eike Dehls*.

