

Why Karelian "fever"?



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"The fever."

"It was the fever."

"The fever got them."

"They went because of the fever."

I have heard such phrases numerous times since 1993 when I began to study North American Finns who went to the Karelian region of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. "Karelian fever," the term applied to their immigration, it would seem, is an apt one.

But the question arises, why a "fever"? Here my interviewees have been more ambiguous in their answers:

"It was the time."

"It was the recruiters."

"That Oscar Corgan [prominent recruiter to Karelia], I could listen to him all day."

Unfortunately, few of the survivors of Karelian fever either heard the actual recruitment speeches or if they did were often too young to understand them. Those whom I have interviewed were most often

the children of those who made the decision to leave for Karelia, taking their families with them. Yet it would seem that something in the message of the recruiters who traveled to Finnish communities in the U.S. and Canada beginning in 1931 contained ideas capable of triggering a social movement.

The first clue is that the recruitment to Karelia was conducted exclusively in Finnish communities. That is, the recruitment message was directed specifically at those of Finnish ethnicity. The other point to note: the logistics of recruitment were simple. The Finns, in contrast to the majority of other immigrant groups, remained isolated both linguistically and demographically through the 1920s. They could still be reached by the Finnish language. In a sense, the medium was the message. It was Finns who were wanted in Karelia. Advertisements appeared in North American Finnish newspapers inviting people to apply to join the work force there. Such advertisements coincided with the appearance of recruiters in the Finn halls of North America.

Until recently speculation on a cause for Karelian fever has centered on the Great Depression. The economic downturn in the early 1930s, it is alleged, motivated

Finnish-Americans to abandon an uncertain social system for one that promised both security and fairness. Supporting that explanation was the high instance of membership in the American Communist Party and other left wing organizations among the Finns. They were predisposed to condemn capitalism and to hold up the Soviet Union as an idealistic alternative.

Such a predisposition ran deep among many North American Finns. The children of Finnish radicals learned to read with textbooks that extolled Lenin and condemned capitalism. When older, those in Minnesota, for example, attended Young Pioneer Camp at a campsite on the Iron Range called Mesabe Park, owned and operated by so-called Red Finns. Small wonder, the argument runs, such people abandoned the U.S. and Canada for Karelia.

But would all those factors combine to create a "fever"? I would argue that they were necessary, but not sufficient. Far greater numbers went to Karelia than comprised the hard core Reds among Finnish-Americans. Moreover, those who went were far from destitute.

In fact, the real explanation for Karelian fever lies precisely in what made recruitment so easy: namely

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the isolation and alienation of the Finnish-Americans themselves. Sinclair Lewis in his novel *Cass Timberlane* set in the fictional town of Grand Republic, Minnesota, a thinly disguised Duluth, reveals the heart of the matter. Finnish immigrants faced deep and pervasive discrimination. Judge Timberlane's friend Dr. Drover is described as hating "Jews, Poles, Finns, and people from the Balkans."¹ Another friend complains: "...Finns and Communists and Poles and Svenskas... never pay their rent and use the bannisters for fire wood."² The ethnic groups derided may change, but the Finns join the Poles as ubiquitous targets of prejudice. A character named Eino Roskinen is *Cass Timberlane's* rival for a woman considerably younger than he. As a Finn, Lewis explains, Roskinen was at the bottom of Minnesota's Scandinavian pecking order. Thirty years before the events of the novel, as its author probably well knew, a landmark legal case in Duluth had confirmed the Finns' status as Caucasians. For Finns in early twentieth century America, such status could not be taken for granted.

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 were wanted. In Karelia, they would be

first not last at the immigrants' table. In Karelia, they would acquire new found status precisely because they were Finns. The very act of recruiting in Finnish communities amounted to a kind of courtship among those formerly spurned.

Diverse sources confirm that national pride and identity lay at the heart of the recruitment message. In the memoir-novel *A Grave in Karelia*, a character recalls that the recruiters who came to the Finn halls had promised, "that the Soviet government had decided to make Karelia a totally Finnish speaking area."³ The regime therefore sought Finns to settle there.

Records of interrogations of Finnish-Americans in Karelia confirm that fictional account. One such interrogation conducted in 1935 with a Finnish-American named Niemi unveiled the ethnic message of the recruiters. Niemi was told that in going to Karelia, he and other Finnish-Americans would contribute to the rebirth of the Finnish nation. Karelia "has a great future and must be a homeland to the Finns."⁴ Such was the message, Niemi recounted, that enticed him to Karelia from the U.S.

North American Finns went to Karelia because they felt compelled to go. Few, in fact, went to escape the enforced poverty of the Great Depression. Finnish-Americans had to pay their way. Some

Canadian lumberjacks had their tickets provided, but for the most an element of prosperity was incumbent on those intending to book passage for Karelia. In addition, those recruited were encouraged to contribute their savings to the Karelian "machine fund." Large donations, they were told, facilitated the processing of documents needed to enter the Soviet Union.⁵

Finns donated willingly because ethnic pride and national identity lay at the heart of the invitation to Karelia. For some, the "fever" provided an opportunity to fulfill the socialist vision. But the recruitment message insisted that the Finns especially were chosen to fulfill that vision, no less than in the land of the *Kalevala*, a natural choice for the Finnish homeland.

Migration to Karelia also fulfilled another need for some Finns. Return to Finland would have been a defeat, tantamount to admitting failure in the new world. Karelia was the homeland where North American Finns could build anew and enjoy a status both the old country and the new one had denied them. Finnish identity mixed with immigrant frustration to create the "fever" of Karelian fever in the years of the Great Depression.

For more information please see the web site <http://www.d.umn.edu/hist/karelia/>.

Notes

1. Sinclair Lewis, *Cass Timberland* (New York: Random House, 1946), p. 20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
3. Ernesti J. Komulainen, *A Grave in Karelia*, trans. Ritva Koivu (Ann Arbor, 1995), pp. 111–112.
4. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvenno-politicheskii dvizhenii i formirovaniia Karelii, f.3, op.5, k.207, d.277, l.42; interrogation of 4 Oct. 1935.
5. For discussion of such matters see I. P. Takala, "V Poiskakh

El'dorado. Severoamerikanskii Finny v dovoennoi Karelii," in *Voprosy Istorii Evropeiskovo Severa (Petrozavodsk: Izdatel'stvo Petrozavodskogo Universiteta, 1993)*, pp. 94–96.