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### FINNISH FACTOR IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AUTONOMOUS KARELIA

The paper analyses the influence of various Finnish political forces on national mobilisation of eastern Karelians and evaluates the so-called Finnish factor (politics of white Finland and Red Finns) in the establishment and development of Karelian autonomy.

Ключевые слова: Karelia, Finland, autonomy, Karelian Labour Commune, KASSR, Soviet Karelia, Red Finns

Recently, studies of the peculiarities of Bolshevik nationalities policy received a new impetus due to the publication of Terry Martin's *The Affirmative* Action Empire [19], in which he suggested a model that encompassed and generally explained variations and contradictions in Soviet nationalities policy of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it is clear that a better understanding and explanation of all contradictions of the nationalities policy in the USSR demands further accumulation and interpretation of empirical evidence and a careful examination of the interaction between the historical, social and cultural experiences of various ethnic groups, on the one hand, and state policies aimed at them, on the other. The conception of modernisation of the Soviet leadership implied a transition to unification of nations and to the ultimate victory of internationalism through the growth of local nationalism and nation-building. It was implemented in very different manners in various regions of the former Russian Empire, changed with the course of time under the influence of domestic and foreign political factors, and had a number of local peculiarities. The establishment of autonomous Karelia is a very relevant example for the study of this subject.

In Soviet historiography, the establishment of the Karelian Labour Commune (KTK) in the summer of 1920 was traditionally viewed as the victory of the nationalities policy of the Soviet power, which gave the right of self-determination to nations of Russia, and as the historical choice of Karelian people themselves [42], [44]. It is notable that in contemporary Russian historical writing these reasons are still referred to in order to refute the views of those Finnish and Russian historians who explain the establishment of the Karelian Labour Commune as driven by primarily military, strategic and foreign-policy considerations [33; 426], [57; 6– 14]. While overstating the level of nationalist consciousness among Karelians, Soviet historians almost completely ignored the so-called Finnish factor in the establishment and development of autonomous Karelia. Only recently has Russian historiography begun to address this phenomenon serious-

ly [28], [39], [37], [52], [55], with very contradictory assessments of the role of the Finns in Soviet Karelia during the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s. At the same time, a number of works were published in the West, which examined the peculiarities of the development of Soviet Karelia during the first two decades of Soviet rule [13], [14], [17], [25], [36], approached this subject in various manners. For some authors, the birth of autonomous Karelia was primarily a national experiment organised by Red Finns and initially supported by the Soviet leadership, which very soon revealed fundamental contradictions between the Russian centre and national periphery (Markku Kangaspuro). Others wrote of "national economic" experiment, seeing Karelia under the Red Finnish leadership as a "double periphery" to both the Soviet centre and Finland (Nick Baron). Others put emphasis on political and military strategic factors, arguing that the establishment of the autonomous Karelian Labour Commune was a purely political project staged by Moscow (Yurii Kilin).

In this year which marks the 90th anniversary of autonomous Karelia, I would like to present my views on this subject.

## PAN-FINNISM AND ETHNIC MOBILISATION AMONG KARELIANS

Karelia, a region located on both sides of the border between Russia and Finland, is one of numerous European border regions that had often become a bone of contention between neighbouring nations. By the early ninth century, Karelians had already formed as a separate ethnic group among other Finnish tribes and had settled in the areas of the Karelian Isthmus and to the north of Lake Ladoga. The period of unified Karelia and the flourishing of its population lasted until the early fourteenth century, although Karelian lands became the battlefield between Western and Eastern powers – Sweden and Novgorod state – since the early twelfth century. Swedish influence gradually increased in the western part of the Karelian Isthmus,

where the local population was baptised in the Catholic faith, while eastern Karelians fell under the influence of Novgorod and the Russian Orthodox Church. Formally, for the first time Karelians became subjects of these two states in 1323, when Sweden and Novgorod divided their territories [18; 30–47]. Since then, the state border had for many centuries been a division line between the Finnish and Russian Karelias.

From the fifteenth to the seventeenth century many Karelians left the disputed border territories and migrated to the north-east, colonising together with Russians the vast territories between Lake Ladoga, Lake Onega and the White Sea. By the early nineteenth century, when during the last Russo-Swedish war the Russian Empire conquered Finland, eastern Karelians inhabited territories located within two provinces: Olonets province and Arkhangelsk province (so-called Olonets Karelia and White Sea Karelia). The ethnic composition of Russian Karelia was for centuries characterised by the numerical parity between two groups more or less equal in size, Russians and Karelians, and it was a purely Orthodox region. However, White Sea Karelia was doomed to play a significant role in the history of the Finnish culture: between 1820s and 1840s, Elias Lönnrot collected here the majority of ancient verses for the national Finnish epic poem Kalevala. Since the mid-nineteenth century Karelia served as a source of inspiration for Finnish writers and poets, artists and composers (a cultural movement known as Karelianism). All of this played a major role for a national awakening of the Finnish nation and the emergence of the Finnish national identity.

Along with this, interest about Russian Karelia in Finland also existed on a different level: since the second half of the nineteenth century Karelianism evolved from a national cultural doctrine into a political idea of 'a Greater Finland'. It combined ethnic and national ideals with a political programme, which implied that Finland, entire Karelia and the Kola Peninsula had to be united within 'natural borders' [18; 253–256]. Trips by Finnish political activists who strove to spread this programme among the local Karelian population became a common phenomenon in Olonets and Arkhangelsk provinces. During the early twentieth century, the doctrine of 'a Greater Finland' appeared in the international arena in form of the 'Eastern Karelian question', which from the very beginning combined elements of enlightenment and pro-Finnish ideology. During the first Russian revolution of 1905, propaganda activities of Finnish activists in Russian Karelia reached a dangerous level. They were expressed in the creation of Finnish schools and village libraries for the local population, distribution of literature in the Finnish and Karelian languages, and missionary activities of Lutheran priests. To promote all of these, in 1906 several Finnish intellectuals and Karelian merchants founded the Union of White Sea Karelians. The Russian press called these measures

'pan-Finnish propaganda' or the movement of 'pan-Finnism' – which, it should be noted, was quite effectively and quickly eradicated by the tsarist authorities.<sup>1</sup>

'Pan-Finnish propaganda' failed to exert any considerable influence on eastern Karelians, moreover, this very concept can be regarded as artificially constructed by the Russian authorities in conditions of deteriorating relations between Saint-Petersburg and the Great Duchy of Finland [5; 25-26, 30-31], [23; 91–94]. Unlike Finns, who had by that time reached Phase C in terms of Miroslav Hroch, which is characterised by mass nationalist movement for self-determination, eastern Karelians only approached the level of 'nationalist propaganda' (Phase B in terms of Hroch). Moreover, the nationalist-minded groups which carried out this propaganda comprised Finnish intellectuals and Karelian merchants who lived permanently in Finland, while their nationalist ideas aspired for union between the Finnish and Karelian peoples and the ensuing establishment of 'a Greater Finland', rather than for independent Karelia. Indeed, foundations for this kind of Karelian nationalism with a pro-Finnish flavour existed only in several border districts of White Sea Karelia where the local population was economically and culturally oriented to Finland.

As the result, before 1917 all attempts of Finnish nationalists to involve Karelians in their movement did not arouse interest among the latter, since they did not share with the Finns a common religion or culture, neither were they able to understand Finnish as their mother tongue. Northern (White Sea) and southern (Olonets) Karelians had no established communication and transportation links and, consequently, no permanent contacts between each other, which discredited the very idea of 'united' Karelia. Administratively, Karelians were divided by the provincial border, in terms of economy their lands were also very diverse, and only a smaller part was oriented towards Finland. Coupled with differences in Karelian dialects and the absence of an urban population and ethnic intelligentsia, this prevented the formation of nationalist movements among Karelians.

### AWAKENING BEGINS

The events of 1917 created new opportunities to raise the Eastern Karelian question in the international arena and to realise the ideas of 'kinship unity', especially because certain Finnish political groups considered the struggle for the independence of Finland in relation to the future of Eastern Karelia. When Finland became independent, the Eastern Karelian question became once again an important part of Russian politics, yet various political forces approached it in very different ways.

At the height of the Finnish Civil War, in February 1918, representatives of the People's Delegation of Finland (Red Finnish government) discussed with the Bolshevik leadership of Russia the possi-

bility of the transfer of Eastern Karelia to Red Finland in the future. At the same time, Karl Gustav Mannerheim, the commander-in-chief of the White Finnish army, issued an order in which he swore that he would not "sheathe the sword" until "the last soldier and hooligan of Lenin is driven away from both Finland and White Sea Karelia" [58; 127]. On the other hand, in a discussion with leaders of the Karelian Enlightenment Society he stressed that Finland's main aim is liberation, rather than the conquest of Karelia. According to him, the priority was to awaken the national identity of Karelians, to raise them against Bolshevism, while Finland was to serve as a catalyst of this process by giving an initial impetus to this movement and by supplying arms to Karelia [24; 37–38]. However, Mannerheim's 'oath on a sword' was heard by supporters of extreme measures as a call for conquest of territories located to the east. Military raids of volunteer units upon the White Sea and Olonets Karelias followed in 1918 and 1919, which were justified in Finland by strategic, economic and 'kinship' interests. The invasion of White Finnish forces was confronted not only by Red Army units and local self-defence forces, but also by military units of Red Finnish guards (so-called Murmansk Legion) who had fled their motherland after the defeat in the Civil War. Multiple fights between Red and White Finns, which started in White Sea Karelia during spring 1918, dipped the local population deeper into the whirlpool of revolutionary events. This situation was appropriately characterised by Edvard Gylling who said that the Finnish Revolution drew Karelia into armed class struggle [4; 80].

Failures of the raids of Finnish volunteers demonstrated that the Eastern Karelian question could not be solved by military means and forced the government of Finland to increase diplomatic pressure on Soviet Russia. Among the arguments they used to find support for territorial claims on Russian Karelia was the absence of autonomy and the right for self-determination for the eastern Karelians. It was these questions of self-determination and the future of Karelia, as well as of granting economic rights to autonomous Karelia that became the main theme in Soviet-Finnish diplomatic relations during 1918–1923.<sup>3</sup>

Attitudes in Eastern Karelia itself were contradictory and often changed under the influence of the current situation.

Already in the spring of 1917, activists of the Union of White Sea Karelians, which was reestablished under the name of the Karelian Enlightenment Society, wrote a petition to the Russian Provisional Government where they proposed an idea for creating an autonomous Karelian region within the Russian state in order to facilitate Karelia's cultural and economic development. Actually, Karelian nationalists hoped to use new political conditions to attract attention to the problems which they had raised during the first Russian revolution, including the soonest possible introduction of the

Karelian language in schools and liturgy, appointment of teachers, priests and officials who were able to speak Karelian, opening of new secondary schools, teachers' colleges and theological seminaries in the White Sea and Olonets Karelias, and state-funded construction of new roads [6; 6–8], [31; 78–81]. At the same time, the Society also launched active propaganda and enlightenment campaigns in Karelian regions adjacent to the Finnish border.

The idea of autonomy was further developed in a constitution project of autonomous Karelia which was announced at the meeting of representatives of almost all Karelian volosts (minor administrative regions) in Uhtua (White Sea Karelia) on 13 July, 1917. The project proposed that Karelia would remain a part of the Russian state, its selfadministration bodies would be elected by a general election, while overall administration of Karelia would be carried out by a Commissar appointed by the Russian government. There were plans to raise the status of the Karelian language and to carry out land and church reforms. This "Karelian autonomous administrative district" was to include not only regions inhabited by Karelians and Vepsians, but also Russian-dominated territories that were important for economic prosperity, like Petrozavodsk and its surrounding area [15; 46-48]. It should also be noted that the proposed district borders (Finnish border the River Svir – Lake Onega – the River Vyg – the White Sea – Kandalaksha) mostly coincided with the border of Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic created later in 1923. This project's authors were two leaders of the Karelian Enlightenment Society: Paavo Ahava (Afanasiev), a Karelian merchant from Uhtua who had earlier moved to Finland, and Iivo Härkönen, a Finnish writer with Karelian origins whose ancestors were famous for knowledge of traditional Karelian poetry. They were assisted by Finnish writer Eino Leino and two professional Finnish lawyers [15; 46].

Ensuing revolutionary events, the declaration of independence of Finland, and the rise of the Bolsheviks to power forced the Karelian nationalists to choose between several possible alternatives for the future development of Eastern Karelia. Finnish military raids, the activities of the Karelian Enlightenment Society in the north and of the Bolsheviks in the south, ongoing Civil War, Allied intervention – all of this quickly changed the situation in Karelia and intensified peasant movement in the region. Yet one can not say that the majority of Karelian population had any kind of nationalist aspirations, to say nothing of a united nationalist movement. Purely nationalist ideas and slogans could not have any considerable impact on the Karelian population: the level of life in both the northern and southern parts of Karelia was very low, and in these conditions the social programme of the Bolsheviks and not the calls of the nationalists seemed more appealing to common people. For the absolute majority of local peasants, the most important arguments were pro-

mises of peace and security, economic stability, a just solution of the question of land, and regular delivery of provisions.

However, different groups continued proposing their strategies to Karelians, which included incorporation into Finland, autonomy within Russia and

full independence for Karelia.

In March 1918, inhabitants of Uhtua, which had already been occupied by Finnish volunteer units, decided that White Sea Karelia would join Finland under certain conditions. These conditions included economic autonomy, the right of the local population to exploit the natural resources of Karelia, the granting of a loan for economic stimulation, and the granting of equal rights with the citizens of Finland [16; 98–99]. By August, a decision to join Finland under conditions of economic autonomy was also taken by the inhabitants of Reboly (Repoola), after which detachments of the Finnish Army entered the territory of its volost [22; 175–182], [24; 401–410]. However, most inhabitants of White Sea Karelia opposed Finnish intervention. Their attitude to the Finns was at least cautious, as they had good reason to believe that the Finns were more interested in the natural resources of Karelia, while those Karelians who had served in the World War I desired only peace and rest [16; 98–99], [24; 111].

Moreover, military raids of White Finns provoked those forces which stood for establishment of an independent Karelian republic. Those Karelians who fled Finnish-occupied territories to Kem formed a unit which would later grow into the socalled Karelian Regiment. Supported by the British,<sup>4</sup> during the summer and autumn of 1918 it together with the Murmansk Legion formed from Red Finnish exiles carried out a successful operation against the White Finns, pressing them back to the border. The political idea of "Karelia for Karelians" was expressed and advocated by several White Sea Karelians who also became the founding members of the Karelian Regiment and the Murmansk Legion, particularly by Grigorii Lezheev (Riiko Lesonen), a former ensign of the Russian Army, and Iivo Ahava, son of Paavo Ahava (Afanasiev), who grew up in Finland [24; 269–271].

The idea of independence was later developed at the meeting of the representatives of eleven volosts of White Sea Karelia which was convened at the initiative of the leadership of the Karelian Regiment in February 1919 in Kem. Fifteen delegates accepted a resolution which declared Karelia an independent state with a democratic form of government, in which all natural resources belonged to the people. Yet simultaneously the resolution stated that the elected National Committee (which included Iivo Ahava and Gregorii Lezheev) was authorised to convene the Constituent Assembly of Karelian people, which would have to decide whether Karelia should become part of Finland or Russia [5; 33–38]. The same idea was expressed in an address read to Karelian representatives in the Finnish and Russian languages – actually, it was on

its basis that the final resolution was passed. The address said that scarcely populated Karelia did not "think of itself as of a great power," but rather had to seek a reliable ally. Linguistic, cultural and geographic proximity worked in favour of a union with Finland, which was, thus, desirable in general; however, economic factors favoured that Karelia had to remain a part of Russia. In any case, the ultimate solution of this question depended on what form of government and political force would eventually dominate in both states. The Karelian people "could join only that state, which would possess a more democratic form of government and social order" [5; 35]. It should be noted that the text of the address was written by Oskari Tokoi, a political advisor of the Murmansk Legion and an active participant of the Finnish Civil War on the Red side [15; 108]. Thus, it was economic and political factors that became most important, while national aspirations of Karelians were left in the background and the idea of independence was only mentioned in passing.

However, the resolutions of the meeting in Kem came into conflict with the plans of the Allied command and the White Russian government of the Northern District,<sup>5</sup> which envisioned no future for Karelia other than as a part of future White Russia [15; 108–110]. They also had too little in common with the intentions of Finnish political groups, which during 1918 and 1919 founded a number of organisations with an aim to annex Eastern Karelia. As a result, relations between the population of White Sea Karelia, on the one hand, and the White Russian government and the Finnish activists, on the other, became more tense, while the slogan "Karelia for Karelians" gathered more and more supporters.

In Olonets Karelia, ideas of a union with Finland and of self-determination were less popular, although the situation there in the hungry year of 1918 was extremely complicated. While the Bolshevik regime secured its positions in Olonets Karelia, tension rose caused by requisitions of grain from the peasants, imposition of contributions, taxes and fines, establishment of poor peasants committees (kombeds), and forced conscription into the Red Army. In the summer of 1918, peasants from several volosts of Olonets Province sent requests for help to Finland [24; 295–297], but these separate, isolated and spontaneous actions of local population did not have a clear and well-defined programme and can hardly be viewed as a 'rise of nationalism' [24; 297]. Most Olonets Karelians did not envision their future outside Russia, yet resolutions passed by congresses of local peasant Soviets under Bolshevik control, which denied any possibility for Karelia to become a part of Finland and declared loyalty to Soviet Russia, can also hardly be characterised as "shining examples of the awakening of national consciousness of Karelian people" [42; 9, 13], [49; 21]. Most Olonets peasants took a wait-and-see attitude evaluating new authorities. For them, priorities remained focused on the question of re-distribution of land and measures against approaching hunger. Finland's attempt to provoke a rising in southern Karelia also failed. A raid of Finnish volunteer units to Olonets Karelia, which lasted from April to August 1919, did not bring any substantial results due to disagreements with the White Russian government of Northern District and lack of support from the local population [37; 34–36].

In the meantime, White Sea Karelia had become a bargaining chip among Finland, the White Russian government of Northern District and the Allied expeditionary forces. In these conditions different groups of Karelian nationalist activists started discussions with each other and with Karelian refugees in Finland "in order to reach full mutual understanding among all Karelians." Indeed, Karelian nationalism was far from being rock solid. Those Karelians who found refuge in Finland wanted the status of a Finnish protectorate, while nationalists remaining in Karelia dreamt of independent Eastern Karelia which would have full sovereignty in all respects [18; 361]. By summer 1919, discussions resulted in the establishment of the Provisional Committee of White Sea Karelia based in Uhtua. Its main aim was to pave the way for a Karelian national assembly, which was to settle the question of independence [15; 122–123].

The withdrawal of the Allies, delivery of food supplies from Finland and the defeat of the White Army in northern Russia could not change the situation. In March 1920, just after Red Army units entered Uhtua, a congress of representatives of twelve volosts of White Sea Karelia and a part of Olonets Karelia was convened there. 124 delegates represented approximately a third of all Karelian volosts and a quarter of the whole Karelian population. The congress elected the Provisional Government of White Sea Karelia and declared that Karelia was to become independent of Russia, while its people were to determine the form of government and state order by free voting [32; 68–72]. After discussions between Karelian nationalists and Soviet representatives, Red Army units withdrew from Uhtua, and the Karelian government sent a delegation to a border railway station of Rajajoki, where at that time truce negotiations were held between Finland and Soviet Russia, to declare resolutions of the Karelian congress.

### **AUTONOMY ARISES**

The course of events in White Sea Karelia and political pressure from Finland on Soviet Russia during peace negotiations forced Moscow to start seriously looking for a possible solution of the Eastern Karelian question. The foundation of Uhtua Republic was viewed as a first step to establishing a buffer Karelian state that would later become a part of Finland – a prospect that also led to protests among southern Karelians. On 28 April, 1920, the executive committee of Olonets *uezd* (a territorial

unit larger than *volost* and encompassing several of them) passed a resolution declaring that a congress of working Karelian people would be convened to reveal their true opinion of national self-determination. At the same time it sent an official declaration to the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia which affirmed that all forty thousand inhabitants of Olonets *uezd* would never be reconciled with "any decision, no matter from where it originates, on the union of Karelia with Finland" [33; 428].

Normalisation of relations with Finland required, however, more effective measures. The failure of negotiations in Rajajoki evidenced that a peace treaty could be signed only if such a solution to Eastern Karelian question was found which would satisfy both sides. In this difficult political situation and anticipating negotiations in Tartu, the government of Soviet Russia accepted a proposal by Edvard Gylling, a Finnish Social Democrat who expressed his ideas in several speeches and documents during 1919 and 1920. Having lived until the spring of 1920 in Sweden, where he emigrated after the defeat of the Red Finns in the Civil War, Edvard Gylling was well known by the Soviet leadership, since he headed the delegation of the Red Finnish government in the 1918 negotiations with Soviet Russia. The Red Finns, in turn, started to view Eastern Karelia as a compact settlement area for Finnish emigrants and a certain kind of base to prepare further continuation of revolutionary battles in their homeland [40; 24–30].

The main idea of Gylling's proposal which he sent to Moscow in autumn 1919 was that the establishment of "the Karelian commune as a separate region with borders in the White Sea, Lake Onega, the Finnish border and the Arctic Ocean" would solve three most urgent problems: it would satisfy the national aspirations of Karelians, destroy Finland's argument for claims to Eastern Karelian territories, and create a springboard for preparation of a new revolution in Finland and the Scandinavian states. The Karelian commune was to become a kind of socialist alternative to the bourgeois Finnish state [3; 257–258]. In Gylling's opinion, this 'truly revolutionary strategy' had to be implemented by those who were well familiar with the Karelian question – i.e. Red Finns. The future status of Karelia was discussed at several sessions of the Politburo with the participation of Lenin, and on 7 June, 1920, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) "responding to the need of social emancipation of Karelian working class" passed a resolution which declared the establishment of a new autonomous region, the Karelian Labour Commune, including the territories of the Olonets and Arkhangelsk provinces inhabited by Karelians [8; 537].6 The responsibility for organising work was placed on the newly established Karelian Revolutionary Committee. Its members were Finns Edvard Gylling and Jaakko Mäki, and Olonets Karelian Vasilii Kudzhiev.

Simultaneously, in late April the Red Army launched a large-scale offensive in White Sea Karelia. By August Bolshevik units had captured all border *volosts* with the exception of Reboly and Porosozero. The Provisional Government of White Sea Karelia fled to Finland. In July 1920, delegates of the All-Karelian Congress of Representatives of Working Karelians hailed the establishment of the Karelian Labour Commune and confirmed what had already been clear during preparation of the congress – that the majority of the Karelian population wished to remain a part of Soviet Russia [3; 35–37]. Thus, by the start of peace negotiations in Tartu the Soviet side had at its disposal evidence that Eastern Karelia had received autonomy.

Discussion of the question of what areas were to constitute the Karelian Labour Commune took much time. The authorities of Olonets province proposed a purely 'national' plan with a capital in Kem, which shaped the territory of the commune exactly along the borders of ethnic Karelian areas. In this case the Murmansk railway and most prominent industrial centres would have stayed outside of the territory of the KTK. Edvard Gylling, a professional economist, realised that successful economic development of the commune – a necessary part of efforts to enlist support for the Soviet power among the Karelian population – was possible only if necessary industrial, labour and natural resources would be secured. He consequently insisted on so-called 'national economic borders', which would ensure the viability of autonomous Karelia [27; 289–292], [36; 321–322]. In the end, in order to create "most favourable objective conditions for comprehensive political, economic and cultural development of all peoples of Karelia," the Commune also incorporated areas with predominantly Russian population. According to the decree issued by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars on 4 August, 1920, the territory of the KTK included eighteen volosts of Olonets, Petrozavodsk and Povonets uezds of Olonets province, and nineteen volosts of Kem uez of Arkhangelsk province, as well as towns of Kem, Olonets and Petrozavodsk. The latter became the administrative centre of the new region [10; 18–19]. At first this decision had a moderate impact on the ethnic composition of Soviet Karelia: Karelians, the title nation, still constituted the majority of sixty percent.

In two years, however, Olonets province was dissolved and the territory of the KTK considerably increased when it incorporated thirteen adjacent volosts of Povenets and Pudozh uezds of the former province, the territory with ninety-nine percent of Russian population. As the result of these (temporary, as was said at that time) territorial acquisitions the ethnic composition of Soviet Karelia changed forever: the share of Russian population increased to 55.7 percent, the one of Karelians decreased to 42.7 %. During 1923 and 1924, even more territories became parts of Karelia in the north and south with considerable Russian and Vepsian populations, respectively. By the end of 1924, approximately 233

thousand people lived in Soviet Karelia, of whom about 54 % were Russians, 40.6 % – Karelians, 3.8 % – Vepsians, and 0.5 % – Finns. 9

During the establishment of the KTK, the question of the basic principles underlying Karelian autonomy remained unsettled. As a result, the entire period of the commune's existence was characterised by a fierce struggle between Red Finns and the leadership of the still existing Olonets province, which regarded autonomous Karelia as a temporary formation, a kind of diplomatic trick of the Soviet government prepared in the wake of peace negotiations with Finland in Tartu. These tensions were aggravated by conflicts in the leadership of the KTK, which were personified in the figures of Gylling and Kudzhiev, as well as by disagreements within the Finnish immigrant community. The future of Karelian autonomy was determined by the similarities between Gylling's proposals and the general course of the Bolsheviks' nationalities policy of that time. The establishment of the KTK and its ensuing reorganisation into an autonomous republic was a part of the process to reform the Soviet Union. In Stalin's words, "in the USSR autonomy is the most realistic, the most exact form of union between peripheries and central Russia" [11]. Although there were certain differences in views of the status and level of Karelian autonomy among the Soviet leadership in Moscow [36; 318], [37; 77-87], they did not prevent them from taking a principled decision that a Karelian republic had to be established. The Soviet leadership also decided to rely on external forces – Finnish political immigrants, members of the Communist Party of Finland, which was founded in 1918 in Moscow, whom the Bolsheviks regarded as their allies in revolutionary struggle. Actually, they had no alternatives: the provincial authorities of Petrozavodsk and Arkhangelsk did not demonstrate any interest in the Karelian question, while several Bolshevik party members from southern Karelia (like Vasilii Kuzhviev) were not trusted by the central authorities, since almost all of them enlisted in the party after 1917.<sup>11</sup> Of course, there were no Bolsheviks among local Karelian nationalists (Provisional government of White Sea Karelia).

That Red Finns were appointed to govern this new autonomous region allowed Bolsheviks to remove one of the major obstacles on the way to "implementation of Soviet autonomy", namely a lack of "intellectual forces of local origin in the periphery" [11]. Throughout the 1920s to the mid-1930s, the Finnish diaspora in Soviet Karelia went through rapid growth due to immigration from Finland (Red Finns and illegal immigrants), as well as from North America – a result of the immigration policy of Gylling's government. By 1926, the number of Finns in Karelia was two and a half thousand people, while by the mid-1930s it reached fifteen thousand. Constituting less than one per cent of the population in the early 1920s and 3.2 per cent in 1933, Finns occupied prominent positions in the Soviet, Communist Party and administrative hierarchies, ran large factories and important organisations, and worked in the sphere of culture, education, and science.<sup>12</sup>

# FROM THE KARELIAN LABOUR COMMUNE TO THE KARELIAN AUTONOMOUS SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC

Thus, the most distinguishing feature of the ethnic and political situation in Karelia during the 1920s and early 1930s was that Eastern Karelia where Russians and Karelians constituted an absolute majority was governed by a small groups of Finnish political immigrants, who were also responsible for building the newly created autonomy. However, during the first two years of existence of the KTK its government, which was in conflict with all regional authorities and was torn apart by internal contradictions, had no real levers of power. It was only the Karelian rising of 1921–1922 that secured leading role of Red Finns in the region, as the central leadership realised the need to provide its Karelian project with some real support.

The establishment of the KTK and the conclusion of the Peace of Tartu gave the Bolsheviks an opportunity to announce the end of the civil war in Karelia and the solution of the Karelian question. However, the economic and political situation in Karelia remained very difficult, which promptly used by Finland. Finns regarded the provisions of the Peace of Tartu with their own interpretation, which allowed them to criticise the Soviet government for non-implementation of the latter's commitments in Eastern Karelia. The peasant rebellion in White Sea Karelia (November 1921 to February 1922) caused by terrible famine was supported – and even partly organised – by Finnish nationalist activists and Karelian refugees who had fled from their motherland during 1919–1920. The rebels had a centralised commanding authority – the Karelian provisional government, and acted under the slogan "Karelia for Karelians". Regular units of the Red Army were sent to fight Finnish volunteers and Karelian peasants, and by the mid-February 1922 the latter had to leave the territory of the KTK. Overall, between eleven and twelve thousand Karelians fled to Finland, which was approximately a third of the population of northern Karelia.

This rebellion helped the leadership of the KTK to eliminate the diarchy in Karelia. As Gylling believed, it forced the Bolshevik leadership to ultimately realise that Karelia had to be governed in a different way than ethnically Russian provinces and that Karelian and Finnish worker questions were closely linked to each other. If the Karelian Labour Commune was to become a properly functioning region, its population had to realise "that the KTK is their own state, that it was Finnish bourgeoisie that attacked it and tried to destroy the efforts of Karelians to build their own life." In order to reach this goal, the Karelian language had to be introduced in all official bodies of the commune to create trust

between local population and the Soviet administration. Later the status of the commune was to be upgraded to a Soviet republic which would build its relations with Soviet Russia on the basis of a bilateral treaty. Before its conclusion, Soviet Karelia had to be declared an autonomous republic, which would possess more rights than other autonomous republics of Soviet Russia [40; 46–47].

By the Karelian language Edvard Gylling actually implied bilingualism ('Karelian-Finnish' and Russian languages) in administration and education, which had to accelerate the progress of literacy and culture and to ease the spread of Bolshevik ideology among the Karelian population. Active introduction of Finnish in the region with predominantly Russian and Finnish populations was due not only to the prominent position of Red Finns in the administrative hierarchy of Soviet Karelia. It was also facilitated by dialectal and territorial dissociation of the Karelian language as well as by political – including foreign political – factors. Bilingualism in Karelia was granted official status following resolutions of the first two All-Karelian Congresses of Soviets (February and October 1921) and of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party: its organizational bureau ordered in March 1922 that the authorities of the KTK had to introduce Finnish as the second (to Russian) language of education and administration [1], [3; 223-227]. These resolutions also implied that Karelian dialects would be publicly used both in written and oral forms, and the Karelian population was granted the right to choose the language of education. This situation was reflected in the term 'Karelian-Finnish language', which was first used in the decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee on the transformation of the Karelian Labour Commune into the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (KASSR) on 25 July, 1923 [7; 59–61].<sup>1</sup>

The main idea behind Gylling's slogan "through Karelian nationalism – to Communism," which he had already suggested in 1920, was to first solve economic problems, before national or cultural ones. This approach generally coincided with Stalin's statements that the main aim of Soviet autonomy, no matter what form it took, was the central government's responsibility to peripheral populations, which had to be achieved primarily by consecutive and careful economic policy ("to let common people enjoy the material fruits of revolution" [11]).

The central leadership finally chose to support Gylling's line. In 1922, first significant financial aid was granted to Soviet Karelia and forest harvesting operations were resumed. As a result, mass famine and unemployment were successfully averted. In the autumn of 1922, Olonets province was dissolved with all its administrative bodies, and Vasilii Kudzhiev and Petr Anokhin, two main opponents of the Red Finns, were transferred from Karelia [33; 446]. The diarchy was over, and only one administrative and party hierarchy remained. A Finn, Iogann Järvisalo, was appointed as the head of the Karelian

Communist Party organisation. Transformation of the KTK into the KASSR in July 1923 was a logical consequence of these changes. The social situation in Karelia also stabilised, mainly due to the economic policies of the Gylling's government, which was able to secure certain financial privileges for Karelia, including a separate budget. No other Soviet autonomy was granted similar economic freedom. Gylling also conducted in ethnic Karelian areas so-called 'border policy', which implied that these territories would be supported so that their level of economic and cultural development would soon reach that of central Russian dominated areas in Karelia. These measures were successful and led to the rapid economic development of Karelia in the 1920s [54; 116–122].

That Eastern Karelia remained a part of Soviet Russia and was granted autonomous rights was, thus, to a considerable degree a result of the activities of Edvard Gylling and other members of the Finnish Communist Party. Another Red Finn Otto Kuusinen, Secretary of the Comintern's Executive Committee, had good reasons to say that establishment of the KASSR was "an important result of our common work" [7; 59]. Soviet Karelia as "an exemplary society on the border with Finland" was destined "to prepare ideologically the ground for the Finnish revolution" [3; 258]. The model proposed by Edvard Gylling, including his formulation of principles for drawing geographic borders of autonomous Karelia (which took into account not only ethnic, but also economic and political factors), completely coincided with Lenin's and Stalin's (then People's Commissar of Nationalities) views on this question, which made Gylling's ideas realisable. However, in the end the borders of Karelia, as well as its real autonomous power, would become quite different from what was planned initially, which was typical for Soviet realities. Changing under the influence of competing narratives (support of national movements – necessity to centralise - multi-level domestic and foreign political context), they affected the course of the Bolshevik nationalities policy and made it very inconsistent.

## PAN-FINNISM OR PROLETARIAN INTERNATIONALISM?

When emphasising the importance of the efforts of the Red Finns, on the one hand, and of the White Finnish government, on the other, on Moscow's decision to establish Karelian autonomy, one should be very careful in attempts to explain and assess these efforts. For example, contemporary scholarly literature regularly becomes a place for debates on so-called 'pan-Finnish' ambitions of Red Finns and, in particular, Edvard Gylling [26], [27], [34], [36], [46], [48], [52]. I would argue that the opinion of Gylling as a Finnish nationalist and an advocate of 'a Greater Red Finland' [17; 43–46, 94–99], [27; 281–282, 290], [35; 132], [37; 85–86], [43; 378–379], which is mainly based on a few of his state-

ments of the early 1920s, is inaccurate and does not reflect the true intentions of the Red Finnish leadership, which emigrated to Soviet Karelia. The way in which Gylling's letter to Sirola (already cited above) is interpreted by different scholars [27; 280– 282], [37; 41–42], [38; 4–5] is very characteristic in this respect. In my opinion, this document clearly evidences the contrary: the political rhetoric and real actions of Gylling and of the Red Finnish leadership during the first years of the Karelian autonomy were determined by exclusively political imperatives and Communist ideology, rather than by Finnish nationalism, which was actually an evolved ideology of the 'right-wing Finnish patriots' [27; 282]. Not only Russian Bolsheviks were obsessed with the idea of the world socialist revolution and the belief in its proximity. For Gylling, the autonomous Karelian commune - which was destined "to prepare ideologically the ground for the Finnish revolution" – undoubtedly was to remain "a part of the Soviet Republic of great Russia not only politically, but also in terms of economy and defence" [3: 258]. His wish to build an exemplary society on the border with Finland – a society which would demonstrate the advantages of the socialist system to the Finnish working class and peasantry – was the dominant idea of the Finnish leadership of Soviet Karelia during its entire period in power. Santeri Nuorteva, the Chairperson of the Central Executive Committee of the KASSR, claimed: "the Free Karelian Republic as the defender of the power of the working class in this remote north-western periphery of the Federated Soviet Republic will always be an integral link in the great task to achieve a worldwide soviet regime" [9, 2]. In this respect, the ultimate goal of the Red Finns was a dream of world communism, rather than of 'a Greater Finland'. <sup>15</sup> Construction of 'a Greater Red Finland' can rather be attributed to the Soviet leadership, which signed peace treaties with 'Finnish socialist workers' republic' in 1918 and with 'People's Government of the Finnish Democratic Republic' in 1939.

The solution of the language question in Karelia by force, which began to prevail in the early 1930s and which is evaluated by several scholars as a bright example of pan-Finnish ambitions of the Red Finns [17; 143–147, 238–241], was in reality to a considerable degree provoked by the top Soviet leadership, which set a course for a stricter policy of 'indigenisation' (known as 'korenizatsiya') preceding the struggle against 'national deviationism'. Actually, the future of Karelia, as well as many other ethnic regions, was determined far outside its borders. Objectively, the language and national policy of the Red Finns corresponded well to what Terry Martin, who developed the model of Miroslav Hroch, called 'phase D': creation by the Soviet authorities of new official languages and new ruling elites in the Soviet periphery [41; 76]. With the help of the Finnish language and Red Finnish leadership, the Bolshevik Party built a national Karelian region, which was to make Karelians a part of the great ideas of proletarian internationalism.

The struggle against 'national deviations', which broke out in the early 1930s with the collectivisation in the background, gave a start to a new stage of Soviet nationalities politics, and Karelia could not stay away from this process. Accusations of "growing tendencies to stand apart from state-wide line of development" and local nationalism, which were first brought against the Gylling's government in 1933, were produced at that time against many prominent Communist party or state figures in union and autonomous republics of the USSR.

The removal of the Finnish leadership from power in Karelia in 1935 and the launch of a campaign against "Finnish bourgeois nationalism" were determined by changes occurring in the Soviet Union and caused by a whole complex of domestic and foreign political factors. The creators of autonomous Karelia were accused of what they had themselves resisted fifteen years before in the early years of Soviet Karelia – of plans to separate from the USSR and form a union with bourgeois Finland. <sup>16</sup> In the conditions of

the accelerated 'socialist attack' and deteriorating foreign political situation, the Soviet state as a part of preparations for a future war tried to eliminate everywhere unreliable (even hypothetically) elements; this elimination was carried out on the basis of ethnicity. Stalin's government also intensified its efforts to tighten centralised control over all spheres of public life. In these conditions, excessive independence of the Soviet periphery, particularly of border regions, was comprehended by Moscow as a threat to the integrity of the state. The time of experiments was over, and Karelian autonomy established with the help of the Red Finns during the Civil war, was in the very different foreign political environment of the mid-1930s, regarded by the Soviet authorities as a dangerous anomaly, and its Finnish leadership as the fifth column.

Translation from Russian by Alexey Golubev Proof-reading by William L. Hancock, Jr.

#### **NOTES**

- For more details, see: see in: [5; 22–31], [21], [29].
- Compare with: [30; 70–72].
- More detailed information on the Karelian question in the Russian-Finnish relations during 1917–1922 is available in: [15], [16], [24], [37], [56].
- British troops occupied the coast of the White Sea from June 1918 to October 1919. Their goals included operations against both Bolsheviks and Germans. White Finns were regarded by British as allies of the latter.
- This was the name of a semi-independent region located in the north of the European Russia and protected during 1918 and 1919 by the Allied forces and the White Russian Army.
- The resolution came into effect after its publication on 8 June, 1920, therefore this date is considered as the official date of the establishment of the KTK.
- Calculated on the basis of: [12; 12–13].
  Calculated on the basis of: [12; 12–13], [2; 6–10].
- Calculated on the basis of: [2; 10, 27], [44; 181]. Compare with: [45; 34].
- For more details of this struggle see: [15; 70–99], [27; 294–298], [40; 24–50].
- Vasilii Kudzhiev, an Internationalist Menshevik, joined the Bolshevik Party only in 1919.
- <sup>12</sup> More details see in: [52; 16–32], [54; 107–148].

  More details see in: [37; 55–67], [20].
- A more detailed analysis of the language policy of the Finnish leadership of Soviet Karelia is available in: [38], [54; 126–136].
- Similar assessments can be found in works by other scholars. See: [36; 332], [46; 143–151].
- For the fates of the Finnish leaders of autonomous Karelia, see: [50], [51].

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