

THE CASE OF YURII DMITRIEV AND THE CASE OF RUSSIAN KARELIA

“Tucked away” behind Finland, the Russian Republic of Karelia is nowadays chiefly known in the West for the scandalous trial against Yurii Dmitriev, local historian and chairman of the Karelian branch of the human rights organization Memorial who, in 2016, was accused of sexually abusing his adopted daughter. Obviously, the real reason for this accusation is that, since the 1990s, Dmitriev has published a lot of material on Stalin’s purges in Karelia in the 1930s and discovered mass graves at Sandarmokh and other places.¹ Such material is contrary President Putin’s current policy of “patriotic” history writing, in which the Soviet victory in the Second World War is the main theme. In 2020, the 75th anniversary of this victory was celebrated with much pomp and ceremony all over Russia.

THIS COMMENTARY aims to provide a context for the Dmitriev “affair” by presenting Karelia, its people, its history and its economic and political development.² At the end of the text, some comparative conclusions for Russia in general are drawn. The commentary is primarily based on Russian press and official material, as well as on Finnish research, which is best informed concerning Karelia.

The land and the people

The Republic of Karelia is one of Russia’s 85 federal subjects and has the longest border with a Western country, namely, Finland, which has two Karelian provinces. Present-day Karelia includes areas seized from Finland during the Second World War. Among Russia’s six western border regions, Karelia is the only ethnically-based unit.

These days Karelia has a relatively small and decreasing population spread over a vast area, mostly living in Petrozavodsk and urban areas. The overwhelming majority of the population is Russian, while Karelians, the titular nation, make up only 7.4% (45,570),³ and the other Finno-Ugric peoples, Finns and Vepsians even less.⁴ The Karelians and Vepsians have gradually become thoroughly Russified and adhere to the Russian Orthodox Church, unlike most Finns. Nowadays, only around one half of Karelians speak their own language as they have become quite urbanized. However, even among the less urbanized Vepsians, only 37.5% (2002) speak their own language.⁵

SINCE GORBACHEV’S perestroika efforts were made to make Karelian the second language of the republic. A process of creating a new literary language in Latin script started. However, this was difficult because Karelian has several dialects. Some schools started teaching Karelian and Veps, the university of Petrozavodsk set up a Faculty of Baltic-Finnish Philology and Culture in 1993, and books and newspapers, radio and television programs were produced in both languages.⁶ A “Congress of the Karelians” in the republic is regularly held in Olonets and is devoted to the development of the language, welfare, civil society and environmental issues.⁷

However, after Vladimir Putin became President of Russia, the process of Russification in Karelia and elsewhere resumed. The amount of cultural events, mass media productions and education in Karelian and Finnish was reduced. Street signs are generally in Russian, and the National Finnish Theatre in Petrozavodsk mainly stages plays in Russian.⁸



The Republic of Karelia

Status: Subject of the Russian Federation, part of its Northwestern Federal District.

Geography: Area: 172,400 km². 723 km border with Finland, located south of the White Sea, with the two largest lakes in Europe, Ladoga and Onega.

Capital: Petrozavodsk on the western shore of Onega. 280,000 inhabitants. Head of the Republic: Artur Parfenchikov

Population: 643,548 (census of 2010), 622,484 (2018 estimate)

Density: 3.7 per km²

Urban: 78%

Nationalities: Russians: 82%

Karelians: 7.4% (45,570)

Belarusians: 3.8% (23,345)

Ukrainians: 2% (12,677)

Finns: 1.4% (8,577)

Vepsians: 0.5% (3,423)

Official language: Russian. Since 2004, Karelian, Veps and Finnish have also been recognized.



Monument to Otto Willy Kuusinen (1881–1964) in Petrozavodsk, erected in 1973.

PHOTO: ANDREW ZORIN

Indeed, Karelia has also become a mainstay of Russian history and culture. Its official name is *The Republic of Karelia*, not *The Karelian Republic* – thus, it is an administrative rather than an ethnic marker. The capital of Petrozavodsk was founded as a Russian factory site in 1703 in honor of Peter the Great and is now totally dominated by Russians. The Orthodox sanctuaries of Kizhi and Valaam are considered to be a part of Russian cultural heritage and receive federal support. Not only Kalevala but also Russian folk tales

(*byliny*) were recorded here, and Karelia plays a cherished role in Russian and Soviet war history, as will be shown. Karelian lakes and forests have been popular among Russian tourists for decades.

Changing borders and the Finnish factor

The current ethnic composition and political status of Karelia is primarily a result of wars, changing borders and political repression in a historical process in which Finland and the Finns have also

played a prominent role. The Karelians as a people were first mentioned in 11th century bark chronicles.⁹ When Finland was an integral part of Sweden up until 1809, several wars were fought with Russia and its predecessor states over Karelia. In the Treaty of Stolbovo of 1617, large parts of East Karelia were ceded to Sweden. In order to escape the Lutheran Swedes and Finns, thousands of Karelians fled to the Tver region, where some still remain to this day.¹⁰ However, in the 18th century, Sweden lost parts of East Karelia in two wars with Russia. When Russia conquered the whole of Finland in 1809, it was made a Grand Duchy under the Tsar but regained the Stolbovo border and retained Swedish legislation. In the 19th century, national consciousness arose, and in northern Karelia the Finnish ethnographer Elias Lönnrot compiled folk songs and poetry and created Kalevala, the national epos of both Finns and Karelians.

AFTER THE RUSSIAN Revolution and the declaration of independence, a fierce civil war broke out in Finland in January 1918 between revolutionary Red Guards backed by lingering Russian army units and the bourgeois government. It was won by the latter with German support, and around 20,000 Red Finns escaped to Soviet Russia, of which 2,000 escaped to Soviet Karelia. During the Russian Civil War in 1919, Finnish troops, with discreet official support, intervened in Russian Karelia in order to annex the Olonets (Aunus) region. An independent republic was proclaimed in Uhtua (now Kalevala) and recognized by Finland. However, these schemes were soon crushed by the Red Army, which had gathered strength. In October 1920, the Peace of Tartu (Dorpat) was concluded.

It restored the Finnish border of Stolbovo (plus Petsamo) including a Soviet promise to grant East Karelia a high degree of autonomy. Still, even after the peace treaty had been signed, Finnish volunteers unsuccessfully intervened in support of an uprising in East Karelia.¹¹

Instead, in 1920, the Communists formed the so-called Karelian Workers' Commune which, in 1923, was transformed into the first Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (ASSR) of the Russian part of the Soviet Union (RSFSR), and was granted the same economic rights as the Soviet republics, though no constitution.¹² Edvard Gylling, who had been Commissar for Finance in the Red government in Finland and fled to Karelia, became head of the government there until 1935.

Finns dominated the political and cultural landscape, and most books published in Karelia were written in Finnish. Contrary to the Peace Treaty of Tartu, Finnish, not Karelian, became the second official language after Russian. As a result of the Great Depression and unemployment in

Finland and North America in the early 1930s, many Finns and the so-called Kiruna Swedes moved to Russia and Karelia, enticed by the promise of work. The number of Finns in Karelia rose to at least 12,000, not counting illegal migrants.¹³

On the other hand, in the 1920s, large Russian-speaking areas were added to Karelia, and with Stalin's five-year plans and the industrialization process, more Russians migrated to Karelia. Their share of the population rose from 55% (112,000) in 1920 to 63% (297,000) in 1939, whereas the Karelian share decreased from 42.7% to 23.2%.

When the big purges started in the 1930s, and a broad forbidden border zone was created, Finns and other minority groups and foreigners were deported suspected of being unreliable. They were

mostly sent to Gulag camps in Karelia or remote parts of the Soviet Union. Thousands of people were executed, for example at Sandarmokh, including Finnish leaders like Gylling and almost all Finnish members of the Communist Party, as well as hundreds of Swedish workers. In 1938, it was forbidden to speak Finnish in Karelia and an effort was made to develop a Karelian literary language, while Russian became compulsory in schools.¹⁴

IN ACCORDANCE with the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact, in November 1939 the Soviet Union launched the so-called Winter War against Finland and proclaimed a Finnish "democratic" republic in Terijoki (the present-day Zelenogorsk) headed by Otto Willy Kuusinen, former member of

the Red government in Finland who had fled to Moscow and become a top-ranking Soviet official. This indicated a desire to take control of Finland, as was happening with the three Baltic states. However, the plan was abandoned due to strong Finnish resistance. In

the Moscow Peace Treaty of March 1940, Finland still had to cede parts of East Karelia, as well as Hangö (Hanko) and the Karelian Isthmus including Viborg (Viipuri), Finland's second largest city at the time. Over 400,000 people fled to Finland. Karelia was then upgraded from an autonomous status to the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Republic, with Kuusinen at its helm, and Finnish again became the official language.

DURING THE SO-CALLED Continuation War, in 1941–1944, Finland, in partnership with Hitler's Germany reconquered the lost areas and most of the refugees returned.¹⁵ A military administration was established beyond the former border up to the White Sea Canal in order to prepare for the annexation, and the process started of fenni-

cizing the Karelians and expelling the Slav population.¹⁶ Six concentration camps were set up, including civilian camps, in which children, old people and Russians in particular perished, mostly from illness and cold.¹⁷ In 1944, when the fortunes of war changed, the Soviet Union reclaimed Karelia and added more Finnish areas, notably Petsamo. The Finnish population fled once again, this time for good. In 1946, the Karelian Isthmus was transferred to the Leningrad *oblast*, probably for military reasons and, in 1956, Karelia was again demoted to autonomy status.¹⁸

When the Soviet Union fell apart and became the Russian Federation, Karelia, like many other parts of the USSR, declared itself a sovereign state and acquired republican status again, with its own foreign ministry.¹⁹ A national Karelian movement arose and demanded a national territorial area and a special chamber in the regional parliament for the native Finno-Ugric peoples with a veto right over certain issues or quotas of seats. Some radicals called for unification with Finland and maintained contact with like-minded radicals in Finland.²⁰ However, Karelia was not granted a power-sharing agreement with the federal center, unlike several other republics in the 1990s, and when Putin became president, federal power was strengthened at the expense of the republics.²¹ Together with the dominance of the ethnic Russians, this has ensured that Karelia has become tightly integrated into the Russian Federation. However, there are also economic factors.

Forestry, Gulag and economic development

Russian Karelia is covered by up to 85% of forest. Thus, the economy is dominated by wood and wood processing industries, which currently produce 25% of the paper in Russia, but Russian Karelia also has various mineral and related industries, hydro power and fish production.

The production and export of wood has played a key role in Karelia's economic development ever since Tsarist times. When Karelia became an autonomous Soviet republic and during the NEP period, when private enterprise was permitted, it

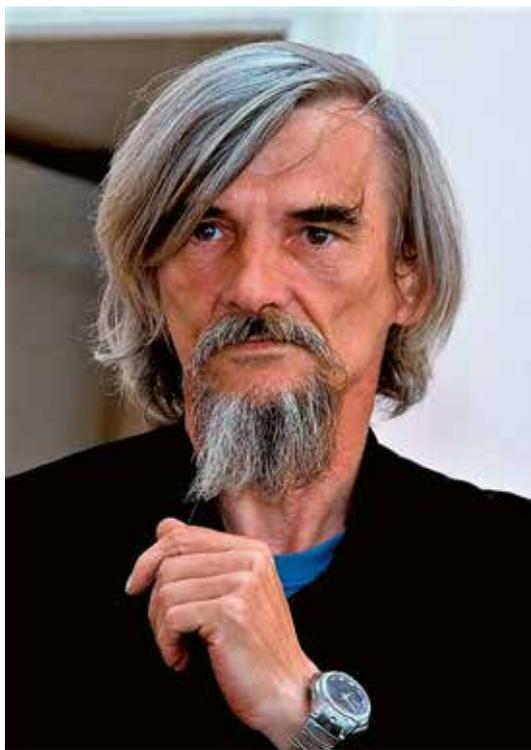
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had a “ministry” of economy, the right to levy taxes and to carry out foreign trade, and the republic could use its revenues for the benefit of the peasantry, which constituted around one half of the population. The first serious setback came in 1926, when Karelia’s budget was subjected to negotiations with the RSFSR and Union commissariats, and large Moscow-based companies and trusts were given a free hand to operate in Karelia and maximize production.

As preparations for the first five-year plan for industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture then started, and sources of funding for the necessary import of machinery were sought, focus fell on forestry products, which were the USSR’s third most important export items after grain and oil. The Karelian Forest Trust (Kareles), which had paid 60–80% of all tax revenues, had to transfer its entire production to the all-Union forest export company. The final blow was the Soviet tax reform of 1930–1931, which transferred Karelia’s tax revenues to the RSFSR budget.²²

FURTHER, COLLECTIVIZATION became a means of providing cheap labor for the ambitious plans of expanding forestry (besides leading to a collapse in food production). There were not enough local lumberjacks and bringing in seasonal workers from outside was too expensive. Thus, workers from the *kolkhozes*, who received half the salary of “free” workers, were increasingly recruited by the forestry companies, reaching two-thirds in 1933. Moreover, the state started to extensively use forced labor, especially in remote locations with harsh climates.²³ Already in the 1920s, the security police (OGPU, later NKVD) had established a prison camp on the Solovki Islands in the White Sea, which soon became the model of forced labor for the entire Gulag system.

The Gulag administration was also allowed to take over vast forest areas (one third of Karelia’s resources in 1933), as well as construction jobs. The Karelian authorities initially protested that its companies and their workers had lost jobs and that the Gulag administration



Yurii Dmitriev.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

paid no taxes and followed no rules. However, their protests were in vain. Many thousands died as a result of executions, hard labor, cold, starvation and diseases. A hideous example is the construction of the White Sea Canal to Lake Onega in 1931–1933, where it is estimated that 25 000 out of 170 000 prisoners perished.²⁴ This project soon became a model for Stalin’s other canal projects. Ultimately, it transpired that the Gulag system had been unprofitable from the start. Solovki was closed in 1939 due to the war, and the White Sea Canal was of limited use since it was only three meters deep. After Stalin’s death, the entire Gulag system was dismantled.

MOVING FORWARD to the 1990s, the Soviet-planned economic system was replaced by a difficult transition to a market economy. However, the reliance on forestry persisted in Karelia. As in the 1920s, Karelia was once again allowed to engage in foreign trade, specifically with Finland and Sweden. Exports accounted for more than 40% of total production in 1998,

which was dominated by raw materials, mainly unfinished wood (rounded timber),²⁵ and Finland became the single most important market. Finnish and Swedish companies invested in the Karelian pulp and paper industry and started large-scale logging. Karelia further benefitted from cooperation with aid projects from Finland and the EU in the framework of the EU’s Northern Dimension. It was included as a member of the Barents Regional Council and became the cross-border Euregio Karelia with three Finnish regions. A good deal of the aid went to building new border stations, as well as roads and railways going in the Finnish direction in order to facilitate trade and tourism.²⁶ Tourism increased in both directions, thanks to relaxed visa rules.²⁷

Karelia was hit hard by a federal decision to raise cus-

tom duties on timber exports by 300% in 1999 so as to promote the processing industry and, even though this was soon revised, the export of roundwood gradually shrank considerably, while the processing industry grew.

Another problem was that the logging industry was extensive and dug into protected areas with old forests, evoking protests from environmental groups in both Karelia and abroad. Further, Western companies were afraid of making major investments due to the volatile judicial climate, widespread corruption and the unclear division of labor with the federal center, so many of them withdrew from Karelia.²⁸ This was followed by Western sanctions against Russia on account of its aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the Russian counter-sanctions on Western exports of foodstuffs, the fall of the world market oil price and the depreciation of the ruble, as well as a policy of import substitution. Consequently, Karelia became ever more dependent on Moscow.

It is true that in 2018 the republic re-

corded industrial growth that was slightly higher than average, particularly in the processing industry, increasing tax revenue, and growing exports (12%), which were six times higher than imports. Tourism increased, for example to Solovki. Business contacts were established with China. However, the budget was unbalanced and incurred debts to the Federation. Thus, a federal target program was adopted for the development of Karelia until 2020, including investment in the mining and forest industries and in logistics.²⁹ Karelia was included in the list of regions with the most difficult economic and social situation and received five billion rubles for the program.³⁰ Some roads leading to the Finnish border were transferred to the Federation, which thereby assumed responsibility for their maintenance.³¹ The airport in Petrozavodsk is being modernized and flight connections with Moscow improved. In September 2019, additional federal funding was allocated for improving the heating supply for the coming winter.³²

NEVERTHELESS, despite sanctions, Karelia continued to be interested in economic cooperation with the EU. An economy minister claimed that the republic was a pilot region for Russia, offering one of the most flexible and attractive investment systems. Cooperation in the Northern Dimension and with the Finnish border regions, including the Euregio Karelia, continued.³³ A regular air connection with Helsinki was to commence in spring 2020. A Karelian minister was interested in the Finnish experience of handling garbage and expressed the hope that the introduction of Russian electronic visas for EU countries, valid for 16 days without invitation, would substantially increase the tourist flows to Karelia. For Karelia, this was scheduled to start in 2021.³⁴

However, in 2019, Finland, which had long applied the Schengen rules for Russia more liberally than other EU countries, decided to tighten its rules by demanding proof of residence and travel tickets.³⁵ In March 2020 the Corona virus also hit Finland, Russia and Karelia, causing borders to close and a reduction in

travel, thereby exacerbating the already tough economic situation.

Political control and repression

Karelia's economy and foreign relations are closely intertwined with its political development. In the 1990s, the republic was first headed by the Communist Viktor Stepanov, a former member of the Karelian Supreme Soviet and Karelian by origin. In the local election in 1996, he was defeated by Sergei Katanandov, the incumbent mayor of Petrozavodsk and also a Karelian by origin. Katanandov was one of the first leaders to join the Fatherland movement in 1998, which was designed to help Moscow mayor Sergei Luzhkov become the next president after the ageing Boris Yeltsin, and concluded a cooperation with Moscow, evidently hoping to get assistance from there. He also criticized the federal power in Moscow and wanted more power for the regions.

HOWEVER, WHEN Prime Minister Putin's *Unity* party won the State Duma election in Russia and Karelia in December 1999, Katanandov, like most other regional leaders, swung his support to Putin and his candidacy for president. He went further than others by proposing to extend the presidential term from four to seven years and "even for life if he has the support of the people /and/ is a normal, authoritarian leader capable of lifting the country out of a crisis." In the 2000 presidential election, Putin obtained above-average votes (64%) in Karelia and he particularly thanked Katanandov for this. Katanandov accepted Putin's strengthening of vertical power over the republics, including transferring more taxes to the Federation. On the same day as the presidential election, Katanandov held and won a referendum

in Karelia on changing the constitution, which boosted the executive power over the legislature by making him 'Head of the Republic' (not president or governor), instead of prime minister.³⁶ He then remained in power until 2010.

When Putin returned to power in 2012 after Dmitrii Medvedev's four years as president, the reins were tightened, for example, by a law obliging political NGOs that received foreign money to register as 'foreign agents'. Katanandov's successor, Andrei Nelidov, was fired in May 2012, and later sentenced to eight years in jail for accepting bribes. Also, an advisor of his was sentenced to 29 years for pedophilia, a charge that was to be repeated. It is likely that the real reason was that Putin's *United Russia* party had scored badly in the 2011 Duma election and lost control of the Karelian parliament and that support for Putin in the 2012 presidential election was below average (53% vs. 63%) in Karelia. In turn, one reason for this was that the liberal party *Yabloko* had retained some influence in Karelia, while it had lost all its seats in the Federal State Duma. Its leader in Karelia, the businessman Vasili Popov, was speaker in the Petrozavodsk City

Council (Petrosovet) and, in 2013, Galina Shirshina, a young psychology professor, was elected mayor of Petrozavodsk, later called the last independent mayor in Russia.

In order to boost control, in 2012, Putin appointed Aleksandr Khudilainen, a Russian from St. Petersburg and a friend of the State Duma speaker, Sergei Naryshkin, as new head of Karelia,

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and he brought in his own protégés from St. Petersburg. When protests against Khudilainen broke out even among Communists in March 2015, the chairman of the Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, who had been Minister of Security in Karelia and succeeded Putin as head of

the FSB in 1999, came to his rescue. Patrushev declared that following the growing anti-Russian rhetoric in the West, nationalist and revanchist organizations in Finland had been activated and increased their influence in Karelia with the help of domestic NGOs. Shirshina retorted that Petrozavodsk's relations with its twin city, Joensuu, were mainly in the cultural field.

A Yabloko parliamentarian explained that Finland did not want any territories to be returned, because it could not afford to support them, and that the number of Finns and Karelians was too small to be relied upon. Actually, the number of Karelian separatists is totally negligible.³⁷

THE END OF THE STORY was that several female Yabloko politicians were arrested on economic charges and Popov was driven into Finnish exile as a result of criminal charges. In late 2015, the Petrosovet voted to remove Shirshina,³⁸ from office and – like other cities – to cancel mayoral elections by the people in favor of the regional legislatures. In the 2016 city council election, Yabloko's party list was disqualified because of improper paperwork. Thus, the party has no seats there any more.³⁹

Nevertheless, in early 2017, probably due to economic problems and subsequent popular protests, Khudilainen was prematurely replaced by Artur Parfenchikov, who was then confirmed as head of the republic in a local election (turnout 29%).⁴⁰ Parfenchikov had previously served as a prosecutor in Karelia and was until then director of the federal bailiff service in Moscow. He apparently had good connections with Patrushev who, in 2019, revisited Petrozavodsk in preparation for the republic's centenary, praising its economic achievements for “allowing

us to increase *our* own budget revenues” (author's italics).⁴¹

Such is the context of the Dmitriev affair. Initially he enjoyed official support. He got access to NKVD archives, which allowed him to record the names of thousands of victims as well as of their NKVD henchmen. Soldiers and volunteers participated in Dmitriev's excavations, and the Russian Orthodox Church held services at Sandarmokh. However, in December 2016, Dmitriev was arrested, accused of possessing child pornography and an illegal weapon. He was acquitted of the pornography charge in April 2018 but was soon arrested again on a charge of pedophilia.⁴² In 2019, Dmitriev's colleague Sergei Koltyrin, head of a Gulag museum at Medvezhegorsk, and his assistant, Evgenii Nosov, were sentenced to serve nine and eleven years, respectively, on a similar charge as Dmitriev. Koltyrin died in prison from cancer shortly afterwards.⁴³

The trial against Dmitriev was repeatedly postponed, Dmitriev was held in isolation in bad conditions, and the official media kept silent about him. Nevertheless, he received strong support from the families of the victims, Russian and Western intellectuals, artists and human rights organizations. In July 2020, Dmitriev was

finally sentenced by Petrozavodsk City Court to three and a half years imprisonment for pedophilia and sexual abuse of a minor, and was expected to be released in November 2020.⁴⁴ However, both sides appealed the verdict and 245 Russian cultural figures called for the trial to be transferred to another region. In September 2020, Karelia's Supreme Court sentenced Dmitriev to 13 years in prison for acts of sexual violence against his adopted child, an unprecedented prolongation which, considering that Dmitriev was 64 years of age and in bad health, may mean be a

death sentence. The other charges of creating child pornography and possession of illegal weapons were sent back for retrial. Dmitriev was not allowed to attend the trial, his defense lawyer was ill, and the latter's stand-in only had a few days to prepare his case. The prosecution witnesses were anonymous. After the trial, the Russian mass media branded Dmitriev a sexual felon and a state TV channel showed a photo of the naked girl, which had been leaked from the trial. The whole trial must be regarded as FSB/NKVD's revenge on Dmitriev for his revelations and as yet another scandal in Russia's judicial system.⁴⁵

Further, members of the Military Historical Society at Petrozavodsk University started publicly contradicting Dmitriev by claiming that the mass graves at Sandarmokh contained victims of the Finnish occupation army, and they started their own excavations to prove it.⁴⁶ Sergei Verigin, head of the History Department, argued that the numbers of victims of NKVD atrocities had been vastly exaggerated by so-called democratic forces, who wanted to politicize history and obscure the crimes of Russia's enemies during the war.⁴⁷ Finnish historians were able to rebut that the Finnish Army had not even reached Sandarmokh.

WHEN KARELIA and all of Russia prepared for the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory in May 2020, this internal historical issue was transformed into a foreign policy issue. On the basis of formerly secret NKVD material with testimonies about crimes by “Finnish fascists against peaceful Soviet citizens”,⁴⁸ the Federal Investigation Committee (FIC) for the first time charged Finland with genocide. It was claimed that Finland had built 14 concentration camps housing 24,000 inmates, of whom 8,000 had perished. Over 7,000 inmates had been buried alive, killed in gas chambers or shot.⁴⁹ The Finnish Foreign Ministry responded by stating that the legal issues of the war had been resolved already in the Paris Peace Treaty and resolutely called for access to all NKVD archive material as Finland had already granted access to its archives, and for continued cooperation through the

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existing channels.⁵⁰ Thus, the campaign against Dmitriev and his revelations was allowed to disturb Russia's official relations with Finland, relations which had otherwise been better than with most other democratic countries. The FSB's role in this is clearly visible.

In fact, the charge against Finland was soon removed from the FIC's website. The Russian historian, Anatolii Razumov, described it as counter-propaganda intended to divert attention from Stalin's own genocide policy.⁵¹ Throughout 2020, Karelia, like all of Russia in 2020, was preoccupied with the celebration of the war victory, as well as of the republic's centenary.⁵²

Some comparative conclusions

As shown above, Karelia exhibits both specific and general features among the regions of Russia. Specifically, it is one of the border regions and has the longest border with a Western country. Moreover, it has an ethnic minority that is shared with Finland. This has led to security concerns on both sides, particularly in Moscow, and has resulted in three wars and several changes of border. Furthermore, Karelia is one of the ethnically based constituent parts of Russia and Finns, closely related to Karelians, played a special role during its first decades.

However, like many other republics of the Russian Federation, Karelia has become thoroughly Russified through transfers of territory, the emigration of Karelians and Finns to Finland, the immigration of Russians and other Slavs and the suppression of its national culture. Today, Karelian culture is mainly a folkloristic façade for the benefit of the tourist industry.

Economically, Karelia is a northern Russian region which, since Tsarist times, has been dominated by its vast forests and related industries. Wood exports played an important role in financing Stalin's industrialization project. When the Soviet

Union became Russia and Karelia was allowed to engage in foreign trade, the export of forest products to and investments from Finland and Sweden, for example, increased, as well as the number of border crossings. This made it stand out among the Russian regions.

However, when Putin became president, Karelia, like all other republics, lost

control of its economy and foreign trade and became totally dependent on budget transfers and subsidies from Moscow. With the Western imposition of sanctions as a consequence of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2014, Russia's turn to self-reliance and its persistent problems with corruption and legal insecurity hampered foreign trade even more.

IN THE POLITICAL REALM, Karelian efforts in the 1920s to achieve economic autonomy were crushed by Stalin's dictatorship and forced industrialization. Karelia became home to Gulag projects which were soon emulated throughout the Soviet Union, and the NKVD had a dominating influence, partly because it was a border region that had minorities suspected of foreign ties. The result was terror, followed by war.

After the Soviet Union fell apart and during the turbulent 1990s, Karelia witnessed a national reawakening and, as a border region, was in a good position to open up to the West and establish not only economic but also political and cultural ties, particularly with its Nordic neighbors.

Yet, when Putin, a former KGB officer, became president and reasserted federal control, Karelia quickly fell into line, like all the other republics. True, liberal groups still persisted during Medvedev's four years as president, but when Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 with a distinctly authoritarian and patriotic agenda, persons loyal to Moscow were appointed to lead Karelia. All political opposition was wiped out and intellectuals such as Dmitriev, who were fighting for human rights and against the rehabilitation of Stalin, were persecuted in every way possible. The FSB clearly played a key role in this, apparently following a tradition going back to at least the 1930s.⁵³ However, this is not a unique but rather a typical example of how the Russian political and judicial system currently works.

This is also true for the virulent Russian accusations against Finland in connection with the celebration of the Great Victory. The celebration involves asserting that Stalin's non-aggression pact with Hitler was justified, thereby setting Russia up against all those states that had suffered from its consequences. Not only Finland but also Poland, the first victim of the war, has been exposed to outrageous accusations, such as colluding with Hitler and unleashing the war. Karelia is thus a pawn in the Great Game, well reflecting Russia's official view of its history and its role in the world. ✖

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references

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- 2 For a comparative analysis of Karelia with further references, see Ingmar Oldberg & Jakob Hedenskog, *In Dire Straits: Russia's Western regions between Moscow and the West*, (Swedish Defence Research Establishment, FOA: Stockholm, 2000).
- 3 There are a total of 73,000 ethnic Karelians, of whom 60,000 live in Russia, 10,000 in Finland and 5,000 speak the language, according to "Karelians: Life on the border between cultures" *Russia beyond the headlines*. Available at www.rbth.com/2016/10/17/karelians-life-on-the-border-between-cultures-639555.
- 4 "Russia: Republic of Karelia", in *Population*. Available at www.citypopulation.de/en/russia/karelija.
- 5 In the 1926 census, Russians made up 57.2%, Karelians 37.4% and Vepsians 3.2% (*Ibidem*). See also Raimo Raag & Ingvar Svanberg, "Karelen", in Sven Gustavsson & Ingvar Svanberg, *Gamla folk och nya stater* [Old People and New States], (Gidlunds: Stockholm, 1992), 60–65.
- 6 Raag & Svanberg, 63 f; *Barentsinfo.org*, "Veps and Karelians"; www.barentsinfo.org/Contents/Indigenous-people/Veps
- 7 *Ofitsialnyi internet-portal Respubliki Kareliia*, "Kareliia gotovitsia k IX sezdu karelov" www.gov.karelia.ru/news/tqgs=250,1133.
- 8 Viktor Rezunkov, "Kareliia burlit", *Radio Svoboda*, April 11, 2015, 7. Available at www.svoboda.org/a26949564.html. In 2013 the Faculty of Baltic-Finnish Philology was merged with the Faculty of Philology, due to a four-fold decrease in students since the start. See Elena Belousova, "Fakultet Pribaltiisko-finskoi filologii Petrozavodskogo universiteta ne dozhil do iubileia" *Vesti*, March 18, 2013. Available at <https://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=1058293>
- 9 *Russia beyond the headlines*, "Karelians: Life on the border between cultures". Available at www.rbth.com/2016/10/17/karelians-life-on-the-border-between-cultures-639555; Raag & Svanberg, 59.
- 10 According to the 1926 census, 140,000, that is more than in Karelia. There is a theory that President Putin has such roots. (*Ibidem*).
- 11 Tobias Berglund & Niklas Sennerteg, *Finska inbördeskriget* [The Finnish Civil War], (Natur & kultur: Stockholm, 2017), 446–448.
- 12 Markku Kangaspuro, "Stalinism as a structural choice of Soviet society and its lost alternatives", in Markku Kangaspuro and Vesa Oittinen, *Discussing Stalinism. Problems and Approaches* (Aleksanteri Institute: Helsinki 2015), 80–86.
- 13 Raab & Svanberg, 60; Auvo Kostiaainen, "Genocide in Soviet Karelia: Stalin's terror and the Finns of Soviet Karelia, www.genealogia.fi/emi/art/articles255e.htm, 2–3. However, only 10% of the Finns lived in Karelia, and most of them in the Leningrad area.
- 14 Kostiaainen, 3–8. He estimates that a total of 15,000 Finns perished under Stalin, about one half of them in Karelia. An even worse fate befell the Izhorians, another Finno-Ugric people, as well as Finns living in Ingria (Ingermanland), a region roughly equivalent to the present-day Leningrad oblast. Many of the Ingermanland Finns (140,000 in 1917) were deported to Karelia to work as lumberjacks in 1929–31 and amounted to 13 000 in 1935. During the war, 63,000 Ingrian Finns and Izhorians fled to Finland. However, after the war, they were demanded by Stalin to return since they were Soviet citizens. Some 7,000–8,000 managed to escape to Sweden and beyond. In 1989, only 829 Izhorians remained in the entire Soviet Union. In 1991, around 30 000 Ingrian Finns were permitted to emigrate to Finland. See Raab & Svanberg, 62 f; Otto Kurs, "Ingria: The broken landbridge between Estonia and Finland", *GeoJournal*, 107–113.
- 15 The Swedish journalist Henrik Arnstad claims that Finland became Hitler's "most important European ally" during the long war years because it could fight, and that Finland craved *Lebensraum*, at most up to the Urals. He does not mention the Terijoki government, sees no Soviet threats against Finland, and omits mentioning that Finland ultimately turned against Hitler. (Henrik Arnstad, *Skuldigt till skuld. En europeisk resa i Nazitysklands skugga* [Guilty. An European Journey in the Shadow of Nazi-Germany], (Norstedts: Stockholm, 2009), 22 ff.)
- 16 Stig Jägerskiöld, *Gustaf Mannerheim 1867–1951*, (Schildts: Helsingfors, 1998), 219–231, Olli Vehviläinen, *Finland in the Second World War: between Germany and Russia*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 105. Finland did not take part in the German siege of Leningrad.
- 17 According to the Finnish National Archive, around 30,000 civilians were interned, of whom 4,600 died. See Anna-Lena Laurén; "Ryssland anklagar Finland för folkmord under andra världskriget" [Russia accuses Finland of Genocide during World War II] *Dagens Nyheter* [Daily News], June 20, 2020. According to Arnstad almost 30% of prisoners of war (19,000) and 18% of civilians died, He sees similarities with Nazi German ghettos for Jews and cites talk of "unwanted races" but rejects using the term *genocide* for the Finnish policy.
- 18 Raab & Svanberg, 61.
- 19 Pertti Joenniemi, "Ways of managing border disputes in present-day Europe: The Karelian question", *Slavic Research Center*, (Sapporo, 1997). Available at www.src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/symposium/96summer/joenniemi/613515.
- 20 Muzaev, T.M., *Etmicheskii separatizm v Rossii* (Moskva; Izd. Panorama), 149 ff.
- 21 Oldberg & Hedenskog, 12 f.
- 22 Kangaspuro, 80–84.
- 23 *Ibidem*, 88–90.
- 24 Anne Applebaum, *GULAG. De sovjetiska lägrens historia* [GULAG. The story of the Soviet Camps], (Norstedts: Stockholm, 2005), 70–76, 98–111.
- 25 80% of forest production went on exports, providing 60% of Karelia's tax income.
- 26 Oldberg & Hedenskog, 29 f; Joenniemi, 241–242, 249. There are also several projects with Sweden, for example, the "Swedish-Karelian Business and Information Center in Petrozavodsk" (<http://skbic.ru/en/4544>), formed in 1995 and supported by SIDA.
- 27 800,000 persons passed the Karelian border in 1996. (Heikki Eskelinen & Merja Kokkonen, "Getting into line with the European regime – Programmes of transborder cooperation on the Finnish-Russian border", pp. 3–7, in Eskelinen et al., *The Emergence of Foreign Economic Activity in Russian Karelia*, (Karelian Institute: Joensuu, 1998). Available at www.geo.ut.ee/abc/papaer/eskelinen_kokkonen.htm
- 28 Oldberg & Hedenskog, 30; Sari Karvinen et al, *Northwest Russian Forest Sector in a Nutshell*, Finnish Forest Research Institute, (Joensuu: 2011). researchgate.net/publication/282605948. Rain Forest Rescue, "Success: Ikea halts deforestation in Karelia", February 18, 2014, www.rainforest-rescue.org/achievements/5722/.
- 29 "Doklad glavny Respubliki Karelia", *The Official Web Portal of the Republic of Karelia*, April 19, 2019 goda, 20–29, at www.gov.karelia.ru/power/execute/leader/reports/1543, "Artur Parfenchikov prinial delegatstsiu kitaiskoi provintsii Futsian – budushchego pobratima Respubliki Karelii" Available at gov.karelia.ru/news/07-03-2020.
- 30 "Karelia will receive funding to complete the construction of the federal target programs facilities", www.karelia.ru/news/16_05_2020/karelia-poluchit.
- 31 By 2020, 34% of regional roads were to be brought up to standard. See *The Official Web Portal of the Republic of Karelia*, "The Prime Minister of Russia held a working meeting with the Head of Karelia, A. Parfenchikov", September 5, 2019. Available at www.gov.karelia.ru/news/?tags=.
- 32 *Ibidem*, "Karelia will receive 1 billion rubles from the reserve fund of the Government of Russia", www.gov.karelia.ru/news/13-09-2019.

- 33 *Ibidem*, “Programma sotrudnichestva Rossijskaja Kareliabudet prodolzhenia posle 2020”, September 23, 2019, gov.karelia.ru/news, Euregio Karelia, *Main Directions of Euregio Karelia 2020*, <https://www.pohjois-karjala.fi/documents/78299/173745/>
- 34 *Ibidem*, “Karelia zainteresovana v rasshirenii sotrudnichestva s regionami Finliandii”, August 23, 2019, www.gov.karelia.ru/news; “Karelia gotovitsia k vnedreniiu elektronnykh viz”, www.gov.karelia.ru/news/27-08-2020.
- 35 Thomas Nilsen, “Finland tightens visa rules for Russians” *Barents International Observer*, August 2, 2019, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/borders/2019/08/finland-tightens-visa-rules-russians>.
- 36 Oldberg & Hedenskog, 41–42.
- 37 Rezunkov, 1–4; Paul Goble, “Moscow’s Russification policies not Finnish revanchism behind anger in Karelia”, *Interpreter*, 13 April 2015, www.interpretermag.com/moscows-russification; Paul Goble, “Separatism in Karelia more serious than many think”, December 17, 2014, *Window on Eurasia – New Series*.
- 38 Shirshina was blamed for the bad management of waste collection and city streets even though the city did not receive its share of the republican road fund.
- 39 Alexandra Garmazhapova, “Russia’s last independent mayor is going down fighting”, *Open Democracy*, July 7, 2015, www.OpenDemocracy.net., Asya Fouks, “Karelia: a story of autocracy and resistance”, November 16, 2017, www.OpenDemocracy.net.
- 40 Vadim Shtepa, “Russian Karelia: Further repressions instead of European integration?”, September 28, 2017, *Commentaries*. The Jamestown Foundation, <https://jamestown.org>.
- 41 “Nikolay Patrushev noted production growth”, *The Official Web Portal of the Republic of Karelia*, December 13, 2019. www.gov.karelia.ru. Curiously, Patrushev’s nephew Aleksei Patrushev was involved in a Karelian timber export company that was sentenced for tax evasion. (Roman Anin, “Rodovye skrepy”, *Novaia gazeta*, April 29, 2015, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/04/29/64023-rodovye-skrepy>).
- 42 Dmitriev had taken naked photos of his underaged adopted daughter in order to check her weight. Anna-Lena Laurén, “Rysk historiker friad från anklagelser om barnpornografi” [Russian Historian Freed from Accusation for Child Pornography], *Dagens Nyheter*, April 5, 2020.
- 43 Halya Coynash, “Historian of the Soviet terror dies in prison”, April 3, 2020, *Human Rights in Ukraine*, khp.org. Karelia is known for harsh prison conditions, including torture. Anastasiya Zotova, “This is Karelia: tortured voices from Russia’s prison system”, *Open Democracy*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/tagged/russia>.
- 44 Kaa Eneberg, “Jurij Dmitriev döms till 3,5 års straffläger” [Jurij Dmitriev Convicted to 3,5 years of Penal Camp], *Frivärld*, July 23, 2020, www.sakerhetsradet@frivarld.se.
- 45 Anna-Lena Laurén, “Stalinforskarens straff skärps – döms till 13 år” [Harsher punishment for Stalin researcher – convicted to 13 years], *Dagens Nyheter*, September 30 and October 1, 2020; “Court adds almost 10 years to historian Yuri Dmitriev’s prison sentence”, *Meduza*, 29 September 29, 2020.
- 46 See for instance Olof Kleberg, “Hög tid för Umeå att ansluta sig till protesterna” [Time for Umeå to Join the Protests], *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, March 17, 2020, Jonas Sjöstedt, “Gravarna i Sandarmoch” [The Tombs in Sandarmoch], *Ny tid* (Finland), March 13, 2020.
- 47 Andrew Higgins, “He found one of Stalin’s mass graves. Now he is in prison”, *New York Times*, April 27, 2020.
- 48 The Committee enclosed an NKVD interrogation protocol dated 12 June 1944 that included a Russian whose name had been redacted.
- 49 Sledstvennyi komitet Rossijskoi Federatsii, April 23, 2020 <http://sledcom.ru/news/item/1457585>. Cp. footnotes 15 and 17 above.
- 50 RIA Novosti, “Finliandiia posle publikatsii o kontslageriakh poprosila dostup k arkhivam FSB”, April 21, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200421/1570334938>; Patrik Oksanen, “När Ryssland hittar på om finska gaskamrar i Karelen” [When Russia invents existence of Finnish Gas Chambers in Karelia], *Frivärld*, April 25, 2020, <https://frivarld.se/sv/sakerhetsradet>.
- 51 Anna-Lena Laurén, “Ryssland anklagar Finland” [Russia Accuses Finland], *Dagens Nyheter*, June 20, 2020.
- 52 “In the year of the 75th anniversary of the Victory, an expensive program of cultural events is being prepared in Karelia”, *The Official Web Portal of the Republic of Karelia*, www.gov.karelia.ru/news/04-02-2020/v-god-75-letiya.
- 53 Curiously, not only Patrushev, FSB head from 1999 to 2008, has old connections with Karelia but also Yurii Andropov, head of the KGB from 1967 to 1982 and General Secretary of the USSR in 1982–1983. Andropov was First Secretary of the Karelian Komsomol in 1940–1944, studied at Petrozavodsk University in 1946–1951 and was Second Secretary of the Karelian Central Committee in 1947–1951.