

Global Postsocialism on a Local Scale: The Soviet Migrants at Karelia and Their Past¹

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Introduction

The question “what is *postsocialism*?” has remained vital and becomes more intriguing as the USSR – the emblem of Socialism – recedes into the past. Yet what we still have in hand is confidence in the fact that something once happened having global effects on international relations as well as on the ordinary people whose daily lives have changed.

Caroline Humphrey argued that the category “postsocialism” rests on three general assumptions: there can never be a sudden and total emptying of all social phenomena and their replacement by other ways of life; ‘actually existing socialism’ was a deeply pervasive phenomenon, existing not only as practices but also as public and covert ideologies and contestations; and, ‘actually existing socialism’ had a certain foundational unity, derived in its public ideology from Marx and in its dominant political practice from Lenin (Hann 2002:12). Hence the term *postsocialism* serves as an explanatory category that allows for conceptualizing the aspects of contemporary social reality in diachronic terms, as the aftermath of the past. The parallels with postcolonial studies that Katherine Verdery emphasized (Hann 2002:12–21) are founded on this argument as well. Grasping a Bakhtinian concept, Olga Sosnina and Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov point out this way of using the term and treat *postsocialism* as a “chronotope” that defines space in temporal terms (Sosnina and Ssorin-Chaikov 2009:209). It is from this point of view that the areas from Eastern Europe to Vladivostok as well as China, Cuba and other societies that experienced socialism in their past or even present can be enveloped as “the basic unity of the field of investigation” (Hann 2002:12).

Yet the comparison of all these postsocialist societies is limited. A certain foundational unity of vernacular socialisms and even some degree of unity of their practices and veiled ideologies does not ensure the unity of the contexts in which they fell away across these societies, as well as the particular reasons that called forth those falls. Even less so does it imply the unity of the vernacular postsocialisms that no longer are formally tied either by a common ideology or by a common legislative model. It is evident enough that neither transformed completely all at once. But the discussion of “postsocialism” still makes sense if we assume rather radical and rapid change in all the former socialist societies.

Moreover, the popular debates about the degree to which today’s Russia is far from the Soviet model in terms of its policy and economy imply that “postsocialism” as a fact of social imagination is not equal to “postsocialism” as a certain regime. It seems very effective to divide

both understandings. In the first case we deal with the concept that arose in a particular time and within a particular milieu for interpretation of the visible transformations. It was used both by politicians and journalists, scholars and to some extent by “ordinary people” in response to changes in their lifestyles as well as public discourses about those lifestyles. In the second case the term “postsocialism” refers to a particular social order, and a political and economic regime which is “already not socialism,” which no longer relies on Marxist ideology, certain forms of power relations, and an economy of “centralized planning.” In other words it is not socialism as we understand it. Following this division we could ask the question about the extent to which postsocialism in all the former socialist societies is actually postsocialism; that is, whether the regime and social relationship after the declared fall of socialism are already not socialistic.

The “imagined postsocialism” is about the change (no matter in what direction) as it was noticed by the people. The “actual postsocialism” is about the results of the alterations in the socialist societies. In this paper I am focusing on the first case. I am addressing the question of the tangibility of *postsocialism* for ordinary people: in what spheres of life did people experience the transformations?

Materials in this paper originate from a tiny region that entered the USSR only in the 1940s. Most of the present-day locals of this region moved here in the post-war years from different parts of the Soviet Union. They were mostly rural people – *kolkhozniki* (kolkhoz workers/farmers), partly – workers at local industry, or employees at local administration, schools, and human services.

Historical background

As a consequence of the Winter War of 1939-40 and of the Continuation War of 1941-44 between Finland and the Soviet Union, Finland eventually ceded areas in Karelia to the USSR: the territory of the Karelian Isthmus containing the city of Viipuri (Vyborg) and the Gulf of Viipuri; the Northern and Western Ladoga coasts containing the cities of Kakkisalmi/Kegsgolm (Priozersk), Sortavala, and Suojarvi; and some other territories as well. Under the terms of the armistices, all the Finnish inhabitants had to leave the territory, leaving all the constructions undamaged. The Finnish population of this area – about 410,000 people – was almost entirely evacuated into Finland (Komulainen 2003; Laine 2005:25-27) and the Department of Migration of the Council of Ministers of the USSR initiated a recruiting campaign in order to settle the new lands.² The majority of the former Finnish districts were included in the Karelian Autonomous Republic, whose administrative status was simultaneously changed into a Union one. From 1944 till 1956 it functioned as the Karelo-Finskaia SSR.³ Only the territories most closely situated to Leningrad entered the Leningrad district of RSFSR. This paper focuses on materials dealing with the events that took place in the Karelian Republic.

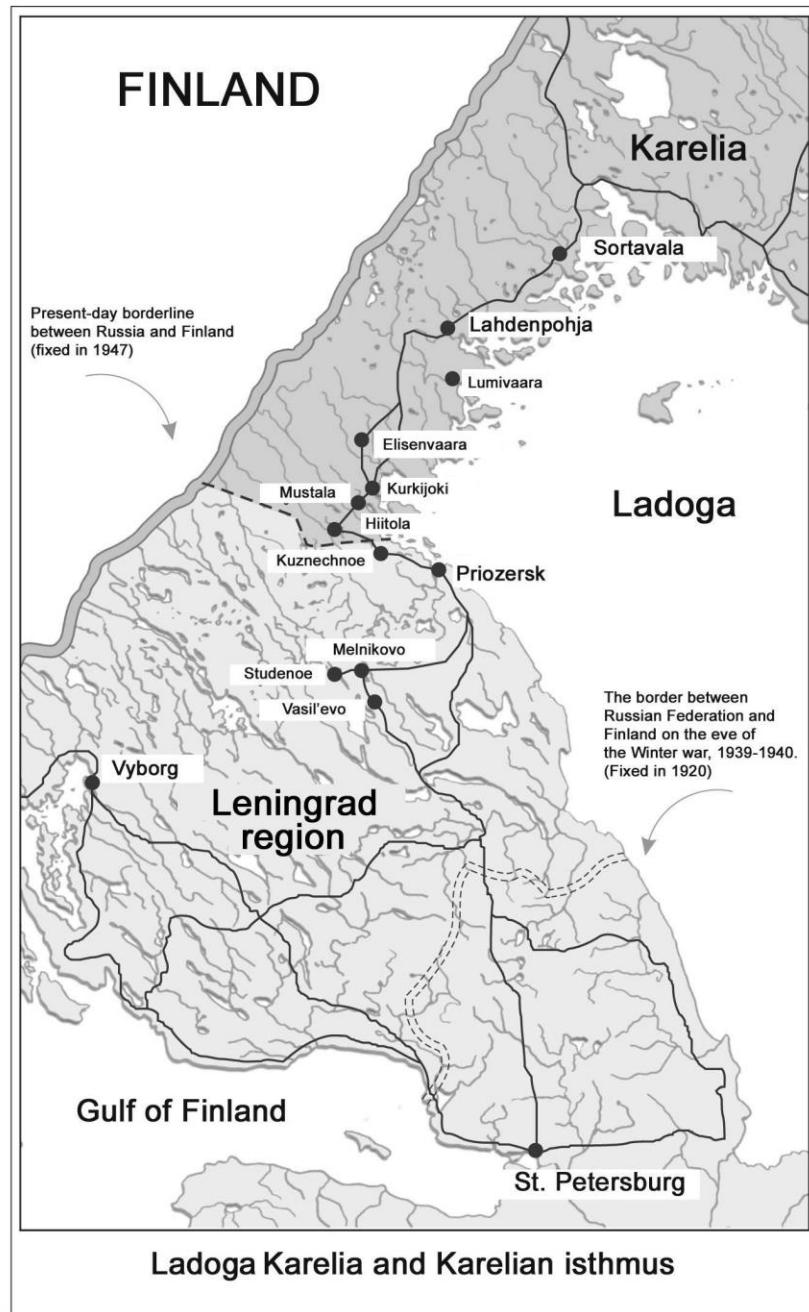


Figure 1: Ladoga Karelia and Karelian Isthmus

The official recruiting plans in Karelia were fully realized neither in 1940 nor in the post-war years. The number of people returning home during the first year after arrival was extremely high and accounted for more than 50 percent of all the migrants. In August 1945 the total population in the former Finnish Karelia was 27,645 people, 15,288 of whom were rural people formed into collective farms (Laine 2005:35). They came from the Byelorussian and the Ukrainian republics, the Chuvash and the Mordovian autonomous republics, and from about ten

other regions of Russia. Those who moved to this area and did not leave at a later time form the category on which this paper focuses further.

The migrants who moved to the former Finnish Karelia were of different genders, ages, places of origin, social statuses, and professions. They spoke different languages and had different levels of literacy. These were mostly young families with children. Russian was not the native language for those who came from Ukraine, Belarus, the Mordovian and Chuvash autonomous republics, and the Ingrian villages of the Leningrad district. Even in 1951 the inspectors of the People's Commissariat of Popular Education pointed out that children in the new districts experienced difficulties in school due to their poor knowledge of Russian (Narkompros KFSSR 1951a:8, 1951b: 3, 5).

Migrants had little in common; they usually came under their own volition rather than as part of the whole village or collective farm. After arrival they were taken to different places. As a rule the local administration brought people from the same regions to the same *kolkhoz*. This way, collective farms like "Red Chuvashia" or "Byelorussian" became the constructed, institutionalized fact of the local landscape. Even if the origin of the dwellers was not evident from the place-name, the migrants were clearly aware of the "chuvasian", "mordovian", "ukrainian", "vologodskii" or other regional affiliation of local collective farms (Melnikova 2005:71–74, 2007).

This method of settling the region served as the first instrument in making order out of the chaos of new relations in new places. The migrants utilized the division between the people from the same area who inhabited particular spaces in Karelian districts as a tool to accommodate the very new landscape and to define their own place within it. The nicknames of compatriots were supplemented with a set of stereotypes concerning behavior, speech, rituals, and appearance.⁴

"Having little in common" was another uniting idea for all the migrants. Though all post-war Karelia became the target of a huge migration influx, this was only a former Finnish area where no autochthonous population remained.⁵ Nobody was "local" and nobody could call the region her or his fatherland. The dwellers were different and the awareness of that fact provided migrants with the frontiers of their community in Karelia.

Post-war situation: Information available

The act of annexation of the Karelian territories did not receive any official interpretation. The events of the 1940s were treated in the newspapers and historical books not as a war but rather as the successful fight of the *Karelo-Finskii narod* (Karelian-Finnish people) for *natsionalnaia gosudarstvennost* (the national state status). This rhetoric obscured the interaction of the two states for the land, as it portrayed only one actor—the Karelian-Finnish people who entered the "powerful and happy family of the peoples of the Soviet Union".⁶ The term "Karelian-Finnish people" was constructed at the same time as the creation of the Karelian-

Finnish Union Republic in 1940, and disappeared with its re-organization into the Karelian Autonomous Republic in 1956.

Formally the new districts were part of the Karelian republic. This meant that all the local schools used the same formal rulings, educational instructions, programs and schoolbooks as all over Karelia. In the beginning of the 1950s, regional education was partly assigned to regional institutions. Such freedom is evident in the programs of literature but not those of history. All the history textbooks that were in use in Karelian schools until the middle of the 1960s were prepared in Moscow. This was primarily the case of the “History of the USSR” by Pankratova and of a similar text by Shestakov, but there were other editions as well. As early as 1965, the first history school textbook dealing with Karelia was published (Afanasieva et al. 1965). But even in that edition the information concerning the history of the new districts was very limited. On page 138 it reads:

The governments of imperialistic states decided to try the strength and power of our country. With such a goal they set Finland against the Soviet Union, they supported and encouraged the plans of the Finnish fascists to occupy the Northern-Western regions of the USSR. In 1939 the imperialists succeeded in unleashing the war against the Soviet Union [Afanasieva et al. 1965:138].

This interpretation is far from the actual facts of the region’s local history. Those who studied at post-war schools could not receive information concerning the area they lived in. In spite of the fact that even during the 1940s and the 1950s the government formally supported *kraevedenie* (the practice of local history), its development was entirely cut off by the repression of local historians and centralization of the activity of the museums (Berdinskikh 2003:509-510; Sobolev 2000).

This paper pays attention to the distribution of official information concerning the history of the region in order to make the post-war situation in the area more clear. People who arrived in Karelia knew little about the local history. But traces of the former inhabitants would have been evident. Those fleeing for Finland left behind houses and other buildings, utensils, clothes, and furniture. The Finnish population had little time to evacuate (Laine 2005:24-26) and a lot of belongings were left behind. According to the reports of the NKVD officers in 1941, a high number of the Finnish books and newspapers were found in Sortavala district and were in use among the Soviet migrants.⁷ Finnish inscriptions on the walls and fences were also described in the report (Raikom KP(b) 1941:15). It is safe to assert that the new settlers must have exhibited some curiosity concerning the former inhabitants of the region. The official sources such as newspapers, books and school classes could not provide the migrants with relevant information.

The frontier guards who were quartered in the area should have fulfilled the principal role in the distribution of knowledge about the land. The territory of the former Finnish Karelia almost entirely was within the official *frontier zone*. This implied the prohibition for any person to enter the territory without special permission from the NKVD. Frontier officers actively

participated in the daily life of migrants. They gave lectures in village reading rooms (Raikom KP(b) 1946:50), spoke to school children, and took some schools under their patronage (Izotov 2008:56).

The lifestyle of the migrants to the former Finnish lands was also heavily affected by the heroic literature about frontier guards (Ilukha 2008). This was seen most prominently in the textbooks of Karelia, as this was a bordering republic. The regional schools stressed the development of a sense of every-day vigilance and “protective-defensive reflexes” (Ilukha 2008:208).

Taking into account an active role of the frontier soldiers in the instruction of the migrants I argue that the migrants took general information concerning the land from the stories of the soldiers rather from any other sources. That information entered the space of local rumors and hearsay - it was distributed orally through daily talks between the neighbors and relatives.

Rumors

The only data currently available concerning the rumors among the migrants are contemporary interviews with local people. Such data was collected at the beginning of the 2000s and certainly cannot be interpreted as evidence of the rumors circulating in the middle of the 20th century. Yet it is evidence of the narrative experiences of the migrants. Through analysis of these interviews we can define common topics and principal rhetorical strategies. Among them are various descriptions of the communication with the Finns in the first post-war years. And even if the design and intentions of such tales could be repeatedly reformulated during the last decades and are dependent on the context of the interview, the common motives are unlikely to have been formulated recently. They obviously are not the immediate outcomes of the conversation since they are repeated from person to person.

The stories about the Finns are some of the favorite topics of discussion engaged by the migrants. Almost all of the locals, regardless of gender, age and social status, tell a story featuring a Finn who secretly crosses the border after the war. There is a group of stories whose main intention is to present the fear of the first post-war years: people were afraid of Finns who could come back, burn the houses, kill new dwellers, etc. “The Finns even slaughtered entire families at *hutora*.⁸ They came here. Well, to the *hutora* in sovkhozy. And you know, one house is far from another house there. They would come to their houses, they would sit and slaughter in the night – and that’s all, and went away” (*Granitsa i ludi*:229).

All the interviewees acknowledge the existence of such rumors in the past. Some of them tend to illustrate the fear of those who moved to the region with examples of “real incidents;” others only refer to such cases, while still other people are convinced that such the stories are lies and confess they were not afraid of the Finns. The last strategy demonstrates the general conclusion: rumors about the “dangerous Finns” were widespread among the Soviet dwellers.

When telling about the first years after their arrival, people usually reiterate that they came to the “others’ territory” and anticipated the return of the Finns. They connect their own anxieties with the awareness of potential Finnish claims to the land.

Certainly we were afraid. Well, she [the mother] said that... “Is it worth it to develop the soil?” And the Finns had the soil – just sand... And there were no fences, nothing. And she said: “Well, maybe we’ll live here one year and the Finns will come, will turn us out.” And somehow lived in such a... felt that suddenly, that suddenly they will turn us out [*Granitsa i ludi*:221].

Another common idea across such recollections is about the former owners who missed their fatherland and came to their houses just to catch a glimpse of it. One of the narratives is about the Finn who crossed the border, came to his old house and showed the hidden food and other things to a new owner. The topic is also related to a very popular story about the treasures hidden by the Finns before the evacuation. One of the most dramatic variations on the topic is about the Finn who came to his former house to die there: he spoke to the Russian owner letting her know that he was going to die by morning, went to the shed and was found dead at dawn (*Granitsa i ludi*:241–243).

The reality of such incidents is hardly verifiable. The available materials concerning the violation of the frontiers are limited. The cases of illegal crossing of the border could have happened during the 1940-50s but all the examples known from the formal documents concern the 1950s and involve either Finns who came to the Soviet Karelia escaping from some penalties in Finland, or “Red Finns” who were in search of work in the USSR (Makurov 1999:228–232, 255–262). No case of arrest of a former Karelian inhabitant was indicated. The territory was very close to the border and after the war it was heavily guarded. It is obvious that the violation of the border could not have occurred on a mass scale. Yet the frontier soldiers could provide such rumors through special instructions and daily communication with arriving people.

The fears and rumors about the Finns who secretly visited their houses could be very probable during the 1940-50s. They also were likely to become the “common knowledge” of the migrants – the knowledge that was shared by the migrants and was sufficiently local to distinguish them from the other Karelian population. The hearsay about the Finns – either dangerous or missing their homeland – served for marking the landscape as “Finnish,” providing it with some historical “depth” in the view of new dwellers. It became the primary source of the information about the past of the land.

What comes next?

The advent of postsocialism in this region was much more evident than elsewhere in provincial Russia. As it made up a territorial borderland, almost all the former Finnish lands were closed for foreigners during the Soviet time. The Federal law No. 4730-I from April 4, 1993

reduced the frontier zone to only five kilometers;⁹ this measure has made visiting the area de facto possible. After the borders were “opened,” the multitude of the former Finnish dwellers, their descendants and relatives had the opportunity to visit their fatherland. The pilgrimage to the region was of a substantial scale during the 1990s and decreased only recently.¹⁰ During the same years it became a significant resource for those who had been living on the territory since the 1940s; “nostalgia tourism” provided locals with some opportunities for home business and cross-border cooperation.

Those who had cars served as taxi-drivers and local guides; they met the buses from Finland and took the tourists around the area looking for their old houses or just searching for the places where those houses were once located. Many such migrants¹¹ were still living in the Finnish buildings and this led to communication between the new and the former owners. The visits became regular and the cross-border relations entered the sphere of the family life of the migrants. The Finns took some presents with them and invited their new friends to be their guests in Finland. The migrants also did their best to be cordial hosts. Cross-border marriages have also become more frequent in the era of postsocialism.

The Finnish presence is also apparent in the religious revival at the beginning of the 1990s. The protestant communes that were supported mostly by Finnish organizations started their activity in Karelia as early as the end of the 1980s. The majority of the old generation locals visited religious meetings in the chapels.

Joint Russian-Finnish activity also played a significant role in the sphere of the local economy, cultural affairs, and other areas of community life. During the 1990s, the region reoriented itself toward multiple forms of cooperation with Finland. The orientation of the bordering region to the neighboring state is a conspicuous phenomenon. In the case of the former Finnish Karelia it was the past of the landscape that was used as the primary background for all the joint initiatives. The creation of ties between the families of the former and the new dwellers was based on a form of “co-ownership” of the old wooden houses. Local historians consulted Finnish colleagues concerning the development of the region (*Granitsa i ludi*:400). Regional administrations initiated joint projects in the sphere of culture in order to emphasize the Finnish and Karelian past of the land.

The intensification of the cross-border relations created a new framework for folklore about the Finns that was likely to be spread much earlier than 1990s. Compassion towards those who had to leave their houses because of the war, as well as the stories about contacts with the Finns who secretly crossed the border – all tales which occupy a central role in the memories of the migrants, became part of a broader tendency to incorporate the “Finnish history” into the local history of the community and the life histories of its members.

Local cemeteries illustrate how the uses of the “Finnish past” are transformed in a new context. Migrants to the region used the Finnish graveyards, entirely covering them with new tombs. The old graves often seemed ownerless and old memorials were thrown off. At least since the beginning of 2000s, however, the tendency to incorporate the Finnish graves into the commemorating practices of the migrants has become visible. Locals look after the old Finnish

tombs in the same way as they usually do with the burial places of their relatives and familiars: they stop at the grave, strew cereal grains, and say traditional memorial words. At the time of observation I found several cases when the family burial places of the migrants include Finnish gravestones.



Figure 2: The burial place of a migrant family. The gravestone in the foreground and the white cross were erected by Soviet-era residents. Two gravestones in the background are old Finnish tombstones.

Photo by Pekka Hakamies.¹²

Contemporary memorials erected during the 1990s and afterwards also emphasize the connection between the former and new locals: the monuments to the Soviet and Finnish victims of the latest wars stand side by side. They sometimes bear bilingual inscriptions addressed to both Finnish and Russian-speaking people.

The inclusion of the Finnish past of the land into the local and into residents' life histories is evident in the way the migrants keep and present the "reliquae" (relics) left over from the pre-war inhabitants. Plates and dishes found in the abandoned houses, books, post-cards and the very houses, tiled stoves, etc. are carefully kept and displayed prominently. All these objects are demonstrated to the visitors as traces of the past and also as evidence of the proper care of it.¹³



Figure 3: A monument in Melnikovo, Leningrad region (former Raisala), to the memory of the local people who died here in 1939-1940 and 1941-1944. It was erected in 1992 on the territory of the former Finnish cemetery. The inscription in Finnish on the left side of the memorial reads: “The old cemetery of Raisala parish. The place, where you stand, is holy.” Photo by Pekka Hakamies.



Figure 4: The same monument in Melnikovo (Raisala). The inscription in Russian also reads: “The place, where you stand, is holy.” Photo by Pekka Hakamies.

The changes that were generated by the opening of the borders not only provided migrants with material and symbolic resources, but also revived the complex issue of the acquisition of the territory, an issue that remained important for them. Through the accommodation of the “Finnish past” as a part of the migrants’ own past, migrants tend to interpret the land as a “heritage” and even as a “gift” of the former hosts into the hands of the new ones. They consider themselves the keepers of Finnish heritage rather than its actual owners. In their encounters with tourists from Finland they personally meet those whose heritage they keep and have the opportunity to present the remnants of the patrimony they cared for.

The history of the country-house designed by Lars Sonk is a picturesque example. At the beginning of 20th century it was constructed according to the plan of the famous Finnish architect Lars Sonk for his cousin in Kurkijoki. At the beginning of the 21st century one of the local families received the ruins of the house to use it for firewood. Instead of doing that, they started the reconstruction and finally the house received official status of cultural and historical heritage and its owner was officially registered as *khranitel* (Rus. keeper). Now the house is one of the most popular places of “nostalgia pilgrimage” and also serves as a hotel.

Conclusions

The lifestyles of local people in the territory of the former Finnish Karelia have changed since the mid 1990s. The tiny region on the border of Russia was touched by the global postsocialist processes and the transformations in the area came along with a broader change in state policy. The degree to which the situation that came after the fall of the Soviet Union was actually postsocialist, that is, “already not socialist,” remains in question. But the reality of the “postsocialism” as a new era for local dwellers is beyond doubt. The shift from the past to the present is marked for them by new relations with the Finnish neighbors who suddenly became relatives and predecessors.

The multitude of legal changes from the end of the 1980s until the end of the 1990s could be interpreted as key acts in transforming the former Soviet society into a postsocialist one. It is evident that the Federal law from April 4, 1993, which reduced the frontier zone and opened it for the Finnish tourists, would not have such far-reaching consequences if the other fields of social life had not changed. But the changes in the other spheres of life were not nearly as visible for locals as compared to this one.

Notes

¹ The paper is prepared within the project supported by Kone Foundation. It is based on the materials of two projects: “Building New Russia? Something Old, Something New and Something Borrowed” (2001-2003) and my individual project on “Accommodating an Alien Past: the Soviet Migrants at the Territory of the Former Finnish Karelia” (2008-2009). In addition to archival and published materials, the projects draw on interviews with the Soviet migrants, collected in 2001-2003 and in 2008. The results of these research projects were initially published in the volume *Granitsa i ludi* (2005).

² For more details on the history of the settlement and development of the “new districts” in Karelia see: Balashov 1998; Laine 2005; Smirnova 2006; Stepakov and Balashov 2001; Verigin 2005.

³ This formal detail is picturesque in terms of the ethnic politics of the Soviet government in the 1940-50s. The appearance of the term “Finskaia” in the name of the republic was motivated by the joining of the former Finnish districts. Yet the lands entered the USSR without people - neither Finns nor anybody else. The first part of the Republic’s name – *Karelo-* (Karelian) was far from reality already on the eve of the war. By the data of the census of 1939 only 23.1 percent of the population in KASSR named themselves as Karels (Verigin 2005:180). Thus the creation of Karelo-Finskaia SSR broke one of the official rules compiled by Stalin: the Union republic was to have more than 50 percent population of so-called *titulnaia natsia* (the title nation). Another broken rule referred to the population figures, which in KFSSR was twice less than required. Regardless of all these deviations, the new Union republic was created in order to objectify the results of the Winter war.

⁴ For more details see: Melnikova 2007.

⁵ The Finnish population of this area was evacuated almost totally. Nearly 3,000 people fell under Soviet occupation but all of them with relatively few exceptions used their opportunity in the peace treaty to move to Finland after the war (Laine 2005: 27).

⁶ See for example the report of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Karelo-Finskaia SSR Valdemar Virolainen in 1947 (Prizyv 1947:2).

⁷ The last remark seems strange if we take into account that the incomers did not speak Finnish. Yet some Karelians who resettled from other regions of Karelia could supposedly read Finnish.

⁸ “Hutora” is a specific system of settlements that was spread among the Finnish population. Hutor consisted of one or a few houses, often far remote one from another. Such a lifestyle was entirely different from that usual to the majority of the migrants who came from the Southern parts of Russia, Ukraine or Belarus where this system had never been in use.

⁹ The terms of the Federal law were later confirmed by the decree of the President of the Republic of Karelia (the decree No. 238 from October 10, 2001).

¹⁰ The significance of this type of tourism is also evident from the fact that the general-lieutenant A. Zabrodin gave a special interview to Helsingin Sanomat – one of Finland’s central newspapers – concerning the changes of the rules of the frontier zone which was mostly focused on the effects of new regulations on the so-called “nostalgia tourism” (Helsingin Sanomat 2007, January 16).

¹¹ I continue to use this term to make sense between old and new dwellers. Yet it is certainly not the most appropriate one for those who came to Karelia in 1940-50s, who buried their relatives in local cemeteries, brought up children and grandchildren here and refer to this locale as their homeland.

¹² I would like to acknowledge Dr. Pekka Hakamies for the photographs and the opportunity to use the materials of the project “Building New Russia? Something Old, Something New and Something Borrowed.”

¹³ See also: Melnikova 2009.

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