Refugees in Power: Red Finns and the Making of Revolutionary Karelia

In 1918, the borderland territories of North Russia saw a massive influx of refugees from neighbouring Finland. This exodus was caused by the Finnish Civil War, in which the Finnish Reds, led by the Social Democratic Party, clashed with nationalist forces. The German military support secured the victory of the nationalist camp, and in April and May 1918, ca. 6,000 refugees – mostly Finnish Communists and their families – fled to Petrograd. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the nationalist Finnish government unleashed a campaign of terror against Communists and their supporters, and an additional 7,000 refugees crossed the Soviet-Finnish border in the next several years.

Initially, the Soviet government – which had its own Civil War to wage – employed Finnish refugees in the Red Army where they formed separate Finnish detachments. By 1920, however, the Russian Civil War was drawing to its end, and the victorious Bolsheviks faced a whole set of new problems related to the peacetime administration of the vast territories that they had inherited from the Russian Empire. In many respects, Bolshevik tactics after 1920 resembled methods of colonial administration, with the main difference that functions of colonial officials were performed by the Communist bureaucracy. Dark, illiterate, petty bourgeois, and sometimes openly counterrevolutionary post-Civil War Russia had to be colonized by new Soviet ideas, a new Soviet way of life, and new Soviet people who could be forged from “old” people but also come from elsewhere. In Soviet Karelia, a region in northern Russia with an ethnic Karelian population, these new people were Finnish Communist refugees. Educated and skilled, refugees from Finland were regarded by Soviet authorities as agents of revolutionary transformations who would modernize the political, economic and cultural life of the ethnic Karelian population. When in 1920 the Bolshevik government established Soviet Karelia as an autonomous region, it appointed Finnish Communists to the top-level positions in its administration.

This paper will use archival documents, memoirs, press accounts, and secondary literature to examine how and why the Soviet government appointed Finnish refugees as a quasi-colonial administration of Soviet Karelia, and how these refugees became active proponents and agents of socialist transformations in northern Russia in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Alexey Golubev