



*A scene from Kaukola in Karelia, P.A.Kruskopf.
From the book "Finland framstäldt i teckningar", 1845.*

Under two sceptres

European history provides several examples of border areas which have been a constant bone of contention between neighbours on opposite sides of the border, and whose ownership has fluctuated back and forth from one side to the other. One such area is Karelia, a territory which straddles the present-day border between Finland and Russia.

By the beginning of the 9th century there was already permanent settlement in Karelia, and the Karelians themselves had become established as one of the tribes of Finland. The golden age of the as yet undivided Karelia and its people lasted through to the early 14th century. At that time the Karelians lived scattered across a broad area stretching from the southeast corner of present-day Finland eastwards to the Karelian isthmus, and in the north from the northern edge of Lake Ladoga to Lake Onega and on to the shores of the White Sea.

*In the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, Sweden prevented the westward expansion of Novgorod Russia.
Detail from Olaus Magnus's Carta marina, printed in Venice in 1539.*

Karelia had become a battlefield between Eastern and Western Christendom by the 12th century at the latest. Its people officially became the subjects of their competing neighbours for the first time in 1323, when their homeland was divided between Sweden and Novgorod. Over the succeeding centuries, the political border dividing Karelia has shifted this way and that a total of nine times. The border between the newly independent Finland and Soviet Russia was confirmed for the first time in the Peace of Tartu in 1920. The border agreed at Tartu was the same as that which had run between the Russia and its autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland between 1809 and 1917, except that Finland now gained new territory in the north at Petsamo, on the shores of the Barents Sea. The last change to date was confirmed in the Treaty of Paris in 1947, which gave the official international seal of approval to the new frontier drawn up between Finland and the Soviet Union at the end of the Continuation War in autumn 1944.

Understandably, the border has always loomed large in discussions of Karelia, a territory which it has split in two. Indeed, it is reasonable to speak in terms of a Finnish Karelia and a Russian Karelia. Under the competing influences of East and West, the people of Karelia began centuries ago to split as it were into two distinct peoples. This bifurcation has been visible across the areas of language, culture and religion — Orthodox in the east and Lutheran in the west.

During the period of the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, the economic life of Finnish Karelia was largely oriented towards St Petersburg, the economy of the isthmus in particular being effectively dependent on the Russian capital. Finland's main exports to St Petersburg were foodstuffs and firewood, although all imaginable fruits of nature which Finland had to offer also found their way across the border. Actually, Finnish exports met only a small fraction of the demand in the Russian metropolis. The population of the isthmus were also able to get extra work and supplement their income from the Russians who came to spend their summer holidays in the area. At their height during the First World War there were around 100,000 such visitors on the isthmus. Approximately 30-40 per cent of Finnish industrial output in the 19th century was destined for the Russian market; towards the end of the century exports of paper went almost entirely to Russia.

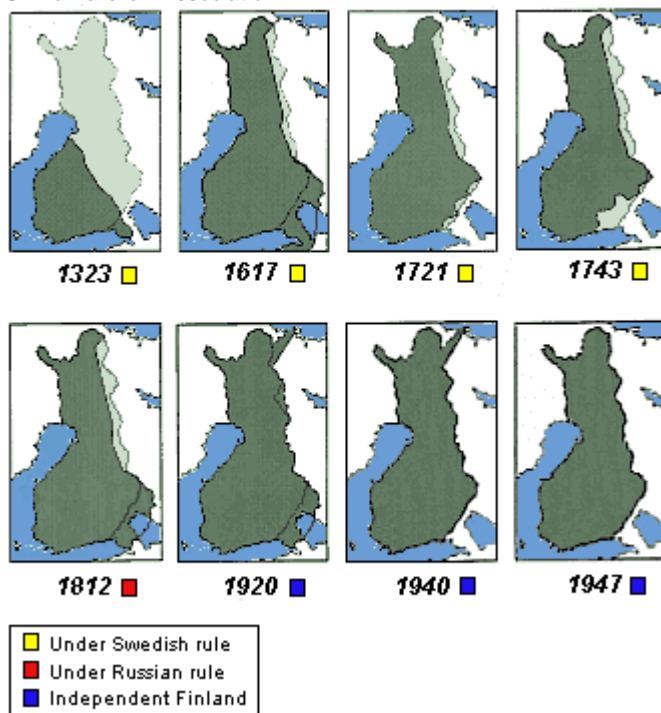
Karelia holds an important place in Finnish cultural history. The material for the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, and numerous other collections of folk poetry were gathered mainly in the northern parts of Finnish and Russian Karelia. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Karelia provided the inspiration for many of Finland's leading artists, composers and writers and played an important role in the 19th century national awakening and the development of a Finnish national identity. On the isthmus, the port city of Viipuri grew in the 19th century to become a notable educational centre and a cradle of culture and the arts.

[Pictures](#) from the ceded parts of Finnish Karelia.

The loss of Karelia and the problem of the evacuees

The Winter War (1939-40) and the Continuation War (1941-44) were both followed by the loss in 1940 and 1944 of large parts of Karelia to the Soviet Union. The ceded areas included the Karelian isthmus, Ladoga Karelia and Border Karelia, and in the north the areas of Kuolajärvi and Petsamo.

© The Karelian Association



Finland's eastern border 1323 - 1947

The lost areas of Karelia amounted to almost seven per cent of the total territory of Finland in 1939. Including bodies of water, the surface area of the country was reduced by around 27,000 square kilometres. The loss also constituted a considerable body blow to Finland's economy, as Karelia had experienced rapid industrialization since Finnish independence in 1917. Almost 17 per cent of the country's hydroelectric capacity and a tenth of the arable land was lost. The further loss of a quarter of the country's cellulose output and 20 per cent of sawn timber production illustrates the extent of the blow to the nation's industrial capacity.

The loss of Karelia to the Soviet Union marked the end of over a thousand years of Finnish settlement in the area, as the inhabitants of the ceded areas — approximately 407,000 souls — were evacuated further west during the fighting in the Winter War. Although around 70 per cent subsequently returned to their homes after the recovery of the lost territory and the Finnish occupation of parts of Soviet Karelia further to the east during the Continuation War, they had to be evacuated all over again in the summer of 1944. The resettlement and compensation of the Karelian evacuees after the war required a considerable effort on a national scale.

The events of the war years gave birth to the concepts of lost Karelia and its displaced population, the Karelian evacuees. These concepts are common currency in Finland and refer to the ceded portions of Karelia and the

population evacuated from there to other parts of the country. Thus, viewed historically, they are very recent coinages.

Finnish Karelia today

On the return of peace, Finland was left in possession of the western fringes of Karelia lying along over 400 kilometres of the country's eastern and southeastern border with the Soviet Union. This present-day Finnish Karelia encompasses the administrative regions of South Karelia and North Karelia. In terms of economic catchment areas one could also speak of the regions of Lappeenranta-Imatra in the south and Joensuu in the north.

Photo: Matti Tirri



Lappeenranta harbour

North Karelia belonged to the province of Kuopio until the creation of a separate province of North Karelia in 1960. In the provincial reform of 1997 it was reconstituted as a region of the new larger province of Eastern Finland. The predominantly agricultural and forestry-based economy of North Karelia went through dramatic restructuring in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, and the region suffered a considerable drain of population to the urban centres in the south of the country and across the Gulf of Bothnia in Sweden. Despite growing industrialization and the development of the service sector, North Karelia was in the 1990s still one of the poorest parts of the country.

South Karelia comprises that part of the old province of Viipuri which remained on the Finnish side of the border in 1944; unlike its northern neighbour it has never formed a province of its own. It was incorporated into the new province of Kymi which was created in 1945 and in its turn incorporated in the province of Southern Finland in the reform of 1997. South Karelia has long been home to one of the most important concentrations of heavy industry in the whole of Finland.

Both North and South Karelia have found it difficult to develop a sense of regional identity and what it actually means in practice to be a Karelian. This is entirely understandable considering that both regions are situated on the western fringes of the historical area of Karelian settlement, in a zone which has served as the meeting place for many different population groups. Over the centuries there has been a major influx of settlers from more westerly parts of Finland, and particularly from the historical province of Savo to the north. The original Karelian population has with time become intermixed with these incomers.

There has certainly been no lack of will to raise the profile of the Karelian regions, and their current position on the eastern border of the European Union has given increased incentive to stress their distinctive features. North Karelian attempts to strengthen the sense of a Karelian identity have drawn on the Orthodox faith and the traditions of Border Karelia just across the border to the east, while South Karelia has seen itself as heir to the economic and cultural heritage of Viipuri and its hinterland.

Russian Karelia

Karelian settlement in pre-revolutionary Russian Karelia was divided between the provinces of Archangel in the north and Olonets in the south.

It was clearly difficult for the Karelians in Czarist Russia to conceive of themselves as a coherent and distinct people. Their language comprised three main dialects which differed greatly from each other on their outer fringes. The influence of Russia and the Russians could be seen in both the language and all other areas of life the more strongly the further south you went.

Apart from the very early post-revolutionary years, the Soviet political structures in Russian Karelia extended beyond the traditional area of Karelian settlement. In both the north and the east, the Soviet Republic of Karelia encompassed areas of purely Russian population. Its most important territorial acquisition came in 1944 with the incorporation of the northern parts of the Karelian territory ceded by Finland.

In the early years of Soviet rule, Russian Karelia was highly undeveloped economically; there was little industry, and agriculture was a worthwhile undertaking only in the most southerly parts of Olonets. The Soviet era ushered in a vigorous programme of industrialization particularly in the wood-processing sector, and Soviet Karelia was in the end to make a considerable contribution to the overall Soviet economy, especially as a producer of paper. However, the industrial transformation undermined traditional means of livelihood and led after the Second World War to the relentless depopulation of the countryside.

Soviet Karelia experienced considerable population growth beginning in the 1930s. This was due mainly to the movement of industrial labour into the area from other parts of the Soviet Union, a process which was to gather momentum once again after the Second World War. As a result, the Karelians themselves ended up a minority in their own country, trampled underfoot by this massive influx of Russians and other nationalities. In the population census of 1989, the approximately 79,000 Karelians accounted for a mere tenth of the population of Soviet Karelia. After the war, the Russification of the remaining Karelians accelerated, especially among the young.

On the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 the Soviet Republic of Karelia remained part of the Russian Federation, now as simply the Republic of Karelia. The collapse of the Communist empire gave the Karelians an opportunity to revive and preserve their language and cultural heritage. There were a considerable number of initiatives in this area, but the severe economic problems in Russia, internecine disputes and ethnic tensions have made it difficult to achieve anything.

There have also been pockets of Karelian settlement in other parts of northwest Russia: in and around Novgorod, Tikhvin, Valday and Tver. These settlements date back mainly to the 17th century when thousands of Orthodox Karelian refugees fled to Russia to escape the incessant wars and Swedish attempts at enforced conversion to Lutheranism in their home areas, mainly in what is nowadays the Finnish region of North Karelia.

Historically the most significant of these more far-flung pockets of Karelian settlement lies in the present-day Tver Oblast around 200 kilometres northwest of Moscow. The others have long since been totally assimilated into the surrounding Russian population. At their height in the early 1930s there were almost 155,000 Karelians in Tver, but this peak was soon followed by a rapid process of Russification in the midst of the subsequent upheavals and tribulations of the Soviet Union. By the 1989 census there were only 23,000 people in Tver officially registered as Karelians, although in reality there were probably at least 85,000 Karelians in the region. The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new period of national awakening for the Karelians of Tver, although they find themselves facing the same sorts of difficulties as their northern cousins in the Republic of Karelia.

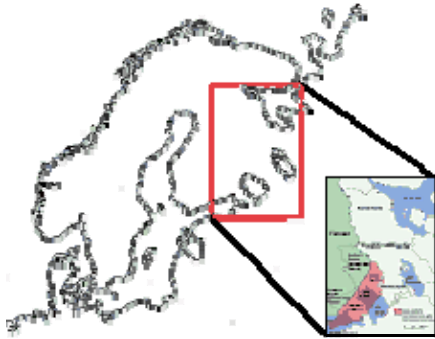
The ceded areas after the Second World War

The areas of Finnish Karelia ceded to the Soviet Union were allocated to two different administrative areas. The southern part was incorporated into the Leningrad Oblast, while the northern parts, from the latitude of the most westerly corner of Lake Ladoga, were attached to the Soviet Republic of Karelia.

The industrial and hydroelectric plants of the ceded territory were quickly harnessed to serve the Soviet economy. However, large areas were left unoccupied for military reasons, especially along the border. The factories in the ceded areas made a major contribution to the industrial output of Soviet Karelia, while the hydroelectric plants made a similar contribution to the energy needs of Leningrad. Starting in the 1950s, agriculture was progressively collectivized to serve the needs of Leningrad.

In the parts of Finnish Karelia incorporated into the Leningrad Oblast the historical links with the recent past were almost completely obliterated even at the level of local place names. The existing Finnish names were replaced with new Russian ones in the late 1940s, while a new history was created for Viipuri, which was now claimed to

have been a Russian town since early times. Further north, in the areas included within Soviet Karelia, the old place names were retained.



Map of the different Karelias (click on the colored map).

The ceded areas were repopulated with a mixture of people from different parts of the Soviet Union. There was also a transfer of population into Border and Ladoga Karelia from other parts of Soviet Karelia, some moving on their own and some being moved as a result of official policy. By 1989 the population of the ceded areas consisted of some 383,000 civilians, in addition to which there were an unspecified number of military personnel.

The ceded territories formed a peripheral area within the Soviet Union, and little effort was devoted to its development. The decline has escalated further since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The debate in Finland over the return of Karelia

In the aftermath of the Continuation War, the resettled Karelians in Finland longed for home and hoped that Karelia would not be lost for ever. Finnish leaders also hoped it would be possible to review the new borders. Repeated overtures were made to the Soviet leadership proposing the return of the ceded areas, and the question was also raised at the peace conference in Paris in 1946. However, the Soviet Union rejected the proposal, and the new border remained unchanged.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the question of even a partial return of Karelia was an unofficial topic of conversation at meetings between President Urho Kekkonen and the Soviet leaders. The issue was raised for the last time in 1972. No progress was made, and during the period of Soviet stagnation under Brezhnev the whole question was buried. Public debate on the matter, frowned on by Moscow, also died out in Finland in the 1970s.

However, on the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s Karelia once again returned to the newspaper headlines and public debate in Finland. Those hoping for the return of the ceded areas expressed the view that Finland had a moral right to the return of parts of the country which had after all been taken by force, and that Russia no longer really needed these areas. Opinion surveys in 1998 suggested that a good one third of Finns would like to see the return of Karelia, while over half are opposed. The most common reason given by opponents of a return was the inordinate cost of restoring the fabric of the ceded areas were they to be returned.

In the 1990s, the leaders of Finland and Russia have repeatedly stated that there are no outstanding border disputes or territorial claims between the two countries. Russian President Boris Yeltsin nevertheless commented at a meeting with Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari in Moscow in 1994 that the seizure of these areas of Finnish territory was an example of Stalin's totalitarian and aggressive politics, and as such was unacceptable. At this point President Ahtisaari cautiously suggested that it would perhaps be an appropriate moment to open discussions on the possible return of Karelia, if the Russians were genuinely interested in the issue. However, at the end of 1997 Yeltsin indicated that as far as Russia was concerned the matter was now closed, and he advised the Finnish media to end their consideration of the issue. Yeltsin was apparently reacting to Russian press coverage quoting comments made by President Ahtisaari during an interview on the bitter experience the cession of territory had been for Finland, and in general to the unprecedented openness with which the Russian press was now discussing the whole question. Following Yeltsin's statement, Ahtisaari indicated that Karelia could not be allowed to become an obstacle to relations between Finland and Russia, but that it was unrealistic to expect an end to discussion of the question in Finland so long as people born in the ceded territories were still alive. Indeed, after a quieter interlude of a few years, debate on the issue picked up again in Finland in 1998.

At government level there has been no progress on the possible return of Karelia, and no preparatory work has been carried out. Public discussion of the question has nevertheless become possible in both countries, and there are no longer any official attempts to dampen it down.

The many faces of Karelia

Viewed from a Finnish perspective the question of Karelia and the Karelians can be summed up in five points:

1. Part of the historical territory of Finnish Karelia still lies in Finland in the regions of South and North Karelia. In the late 1990s there were around 315,000 people living in these two regions.
2. The ceded areas under Russian control comprise the Karelian isthmus, Ladoga Karelia and Border Karelia.
3. Karelian evacuees and their descendants live in different communities in various parts of Finland. In 1997, there were still around 140,500 people living in Finland who were born in the ceded areas of Karelia.
4. Russian Karelia, also known as Eastern Karelia.
5. The Karelians in other parts of Russia, mainly in and around Tver. In the 1989 Soviet population census, a total of 131,400 persons described themselves as Karelian.

History has been hard on Karelia and the Karelians. They have had to follow many divergent paths which have finally ended in disintegration and dispersal. There exist many different conceptions of Karelia, while the experience of being Karelian and the strands of Karelian identity are also open to a number of interpretations.

Published November 2001