1. Power of symbols

Political symbolism is known to have three major functions – nominative, informative and communicative. In this sense a symbol in political life plays one of the key roles in structuring society, organising interrelations within the community and between people and the various institutions of state.

Specialists in the field of semiotics note that in times of social and political crises, at the stage of ideological and moral disintegration, some forms of the most archaic kinds of political symbolism reactivate in what is called the archaic syndrome. This notion is used, for example, to evaluate the situation in pre- and post-revolutionary (1917) Russia, as well as

Karelia

Karelia is a border area between Finland and Russia. Majority of its territory belongs to Russian Republic of Karelia, with a capital in Petrozavodsk. The Soviet Union gained the marked area from Finland as the outcome of war 1944. Karelia can be compared with similar border areas in the Baltic Region, like Schleswig-Holstein, Oppeln (Opole) Silesia in Poland, Kaliningrad region in Russia. Probably the best known case of such an area in Europe is Alsace-Lorraine.

Map 13. Karelia. Ill.: Radosław Przebitkowski

The Soviet semiotics

When trying to understand historical and cultural developments in the Russian/Soviet/Post-Soviet spatial area, especially in terms of Centre-Peripheries and Break-Continuity paradigms, one can easily notice the semioticity of the Soviet system, starting with its ideology. New communist rites and rituals, as well as symbols, were destined to oppose the old religious ones associated with the Tsarist regime. While religious rituals were intended to prove, above all, the existence of a sacral community, the Christian church, the main assignment of Communist rituals was to prove the existence of a principally new sacral construction, the State, which, under the Communist Party’s leadership, was building Communism. Some scholars believe this semioticity, where almost everything seems to carry a message, to be an old Russian tradition.
the fall of the Soviet Union and its aftermath. Among the main features of this phenomenon are its irrationality, insensibility to obvious contradictions, and the mythologisation of the abilities of the charismatic leaders. Thus, symbols and political myths are used as instruments of governing and manipulation by exploiting irrational spheres of human mentality.

2. Karelian perspective

Firstly, we must stress the fact that Karelia was (and actually still remains) a border territory with a very complicated ethnic composition. The latter ranges from Vepsians and Karelians, who had lived there for centuries, to the Finns who came there from Finland proper, from the historical province of Ingria as well as from America who settled there mostly in the 20th century, and to post-war Belarussian settlers. Actually the very Finno-Ugric nature of Soviet Karelia’s statehood could also be perceived as one of numerous mystifications and myths of Soviet times, since so-called national fractions of its population, i.e. Karelians, Finns and Vepsians, created a majority only in 1920, the year of the Karelian Labour commune foundation, and after that Russians (or non-nationals) have always created clear majority in this nominally Finno-Ugric administrative formation. Taking into consideration this specificity of the Karelian Republic, we can trace not only ways of adopting so-called ‘all-union’ symbols, but also of creating own local micro-symbols and micro-cults.

Map 14. Finno-Ugric People in the Baltic Region. (1) Finns and (2) Estonians. The area where these are in majority do not overlap precisely with the country borders of Finland and Estonia. The more than 300.000 Finns that live as immigrants in Sweden are not indicated. (3) Izhors and (4) Votes together with Finns are found in former Ingria in the St Petersburg area. (5) Karelians and (6) Veps live mostly in the Karelian Republic in the Russian Federation. (7) Livonians in Latvia. (8) Saami peoples. Darker colour indicate Finno-Ugrians in majority. Hatched line is the water divide. Ill.: Karin Hallgren

Table 3. Population of Finno-Ugrians in the Russian Baltic Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People/Year</th>
<th>1913</th>
<th>1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Ingria</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Karelia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rest of Russia</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izhors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Ingria</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Votes</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karelians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Karelia</td>
<td>160,000</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Tver oblast</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>240,000</td>
<td>130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vepsians</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>12,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Borders

The symbol and the icon of ‘the Border’ should be outlined first. From the end of the 1920s and onwards the word ‘Border’ was usually linked with the motto ‘The border is locked up!’ with the emphasis on the strong need to safeguard the achievements of the Great October Socialist revolution from constantly existing external threats.

In the case of Finland, its relations with the eastern neighbour have been an essential constituent in the creation of Finnishness, and in many cases the boundary between the two states has been regarded as an icon of these relations. The concept of “natural boundaries” was getting more and more popular in the political lexicon due to the much publicised views of the German scientist Friedrich Ratzel, the founder of modern political geography and politology. During the same period there appeared translated into many languages investigations of the Swedish politologist Rudolf Kjellén who introduced the term “geopolitics” into scientific language as early as in the 1910s.

Due to the dominating pro-German orientation which had consolidated in Finland before 1917, the publicity of Ratzel’s and Kjellén’s ideas had not only scientific but political foundation as well. From that time onwards the concept of a “natural boundary” would be used in academic works by Finnish geographers as the scientific basis of the idea of the Greater Finland whose new boundaries should correspond to the natural ones and thereby stretch eastwards (as well as westwards) much farther than the borders did. In other words, the solution of the Karelian question began to be linked directly to the idea of the Greater Finland. Among the factors that determined the geographical position of “natural boundaries”, there were listed not only the physical-geographical ones (seas, rivers, lakes, watersheds and highlands), but also the ethnocultural reasons – national, linguistic and religious. Thus the results of purely scientific geographical researches had transformed into argumentation for political and territorial claims.

A special resonance to pondering the nature and role of boundaries was given by the foundation in 1919 of so called “buffer zones” in the framework of the Versailles system. This, in its turn, became the implementation of the earlier formulated geopolitical idea of the “medial tier” between Germany and Russia. “Buffer states” as viewed in particular by Lord Curzon after his successful activity on the border demarcation in India, were relatively independent states whose sovereignty was guaranteed by the third party countries. To old “buffer states” – Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland – the new ones were added, those of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania.

4. External Menace

The related symbol of the external enemy beyond the boundary might be described as an integral part of the Russian mentality, playing a key role within the paradigm of eastern paternalism by providing a necessary justification for the system of relations between the Leader/the Father and the People. It can be argued that one can hardly find a stronger mental succession in people’s behaviour, before and after the Bolsheviks’ socialist revolution of 1917, than the implicit faith in the power of the Word and in the constant existence of an Enemy. Throughout the history of the Russian State, the latter concept has been repeatedly deployed, both to mobilise against actual external danger and to justify the struggle against a putative inner enemy, often a phantom. One can easily find examples illustrating this thesis in Russian history from its very beginnings to the present day.

The fate of the so-called Red Finns in Soviet Karelia, i.e. Finnish communists who fled from Finland to Soviet Union after the
unsuccessful revolution attempt in 1918, serves as but one illustration of this thesis. Perhaps the most prominent among them was PhD Edvard Gylling. Most of the top-level Red Finns, as well as great number of other groups of Finns in the USSR, suffered during the Stalin’s purges in 1930s. Symbols of Border and Enemy, both being either external or internal, are closely linked to each other and, in Karelian’s case, have a much wider spatio-temporal orientation.

External threat in the North-West borderlands has an extended record of resemblance with the situation on the eastern frontiers of Russia. In the early 1930s, after the occupation of Manchuria by the Japanese an almost hysterical fear of intervention gripped the Soviet Union, and this, above all, was used as grounds for a purge both against officers of Finnish origin in Karelia and in border regions where Karelians lived.

For the second time, after World War II and during the Korean war, Stalin, not being satisfied by the events in Korea, seems to have been stricken by a kind of war panic. Serious signs of war preparations were discerned by the Soviets even in Finland, and that was the last case when Otto Wille Kuusinen, one of the few prominent Red Finns who survived, was summoned to Stalin’s cabinet.

And, finally, these issues have once again been connected together in public debates on the Karelian question during the perestroika and post-perestroika periods. Some Finns’ approach towards the fate of lost Karelia was then compared to Japan’s official approach towards disputed territories of the Kurile islands. Generally speaking, all these cases evoke latent appeals to the patriotic idea of inviolability of Russian borders and to the image of an external enemy.

For Russians, Karelia had always been and remained Russian territory, and any doubts on this score were perceived as representing an assault on the indivisibility and majesty of the State, be it the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. The only change after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was that the idea of the Communist Motherland gradually replacing the Great Russian Orthodox idea. The image of An Enemy /A Stranger / The Other remained practically unchanged. At the beginning of the 20th century the defenders of the Great Russian idea blamed the Finns for trying to expand Lutheran influence in Russian Karelia. Instruments chosen to resist this danger were not only ideological, but also economical ones. For example, one of the purposes of the construction of the Murmansk railroad, the first plans were elaborated long before World War I, was to strengthen Russian influence among not only Karelians, but also Finns in the border regions. In the 1930s the Finns were once again blamed for so-called bourgeois nationalism, a conspiracy in the attempt to join Karelia to Finland.

Soviet Karelian newspapers have played their role in creating such an image of Finland (and Finns), which was a priori aggressive towards Russia (and the Russians). This process culminated in late 1920s – early 1930s, when image of Finland was already presented as “part and parcel” of Fascism and a source of war threat. During 1920s and 1930s, media propaganda reproduced methods of propagandistic campaign against so called Panfennistic activities in Orthodox Karelia in the beginning of the 20th century, before the Russian revolution.

Russians viewed the orientation within Panfennism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries towards mostly Orthodox Karelia as a manifestation of Finnish imperialism, and, conversely, with no foundation whatsoever, the Finns suspected Russia of imperialistic ambitions when its central authorities proposed unification initiatives regarding Finland, culminating, in 1914, in the odious programme of Russification of the Grand Duchy of Finland.

Finnish enthusiasm about the fate of their Karelian brothers during the first two decades of the 20th century was labelled as Finnish irredenta, appealing both to the idea of natural boundaries for the Greater Finland and to the Finno-Ugric tribal brotherhood pathetics.

In the 1930s external threats were linked together once again with the threat of nationalism in Karelia. This, being a reflection of a much more general shift towards national Bolshevism in 1934, as defined by Gerhard Simon, in its turn was connected with the phantom notion of the Red Greater Finland and reflected a fight for power both at the central and peripheral levels.
5. Cults and Myths

If we return back to the symbolic world of Soviet reality, let us mention the motto of ‘the United Family of Free Peoples’, a symbol that correlates, above all, to the fate of Karelia. The correlation is obvious, as the unity was stressed more and more strongly whilst real autonomy, real freedom was becoming more and more nominal. This process culminated in the late 1920s.

We can therefore come to the conclusion that there is clear evidence of continuity in the instrumentality of national policy conducted in Russia towards non-Russian border regions before and after the Bolshevik revolution in an attempt to avoid the danger of disintegration of the State.

One of the most specific features is the Finno-Ugric nature of Soviet Karelia’s autonomy, once again, real and nominal. During the period of Communist Fennicization of Soviet Karelia it was usually stressed by the advocates and initiators of the campaign that they were building a new Karelia (new schools, new engineering, new poetry, etc.). This sign of novelty should not be considered as a totally specifically local one. The hymn of the Soviet Union later pronounced that ‘we will build our new world’. Local specificity becomes apparent in the Finno-Ugric involvement in the process of building something new.

As far as the role of a charismatic leader is concerned, it should be noted that the cult of Vladimir Lenin and later Josif Stalin was immediately reproduced at the local level, constituting a sort of hierarchy. As early as in the mid 1920s we can already trace back the existence of a local cult of prominent leaders, Gylling and Rovio. One of its most peculiar features was that these leaders were so-called Red Finns, representing by nationality the narrowest stratum of the Karelian population, and they were often perceived by the majority as strangers.

The famous Finnish epic compilation Kalevala offered good ideas to be used, among them Sampo, the mill of happiness (respectively, the Red Sampo), the traditional music instrument Kantele (respectively, the Red Kantele), etc. Needed scientific grounds for Kalevala’s images involvement in propaganda have been carefully provided by Soviet scholars in order to draw a line separating bourgeois understanding of old Karelian mythology and the new Marxist, and, thus, the only lawful, one.

The so-called Red Finns have played their prominent role in the history of the region, and this is also considered as a specificity. Soviet Karelia as a case study area gives a wide range of material for the discourse on the correlation of Soviet internationalism and patriotism as a legacy of disputes between Zapadniks and Slavophils.

The Centre needed to maintain the State as united, strong, and indivisible. However, after the Bolshevik revolution, the idea of strong statehood could not be supported any more by the Orthodox idea, a new set of symbols and myths had to be invented. This was actually done during the first decades of the Soviet rule.

The symbolic world of Soviet Russianness seems finally to be moulded after World War II, more familiar to a ‘rank-and-file’ Soviet citizen than the Great Patriotic War, with, once again, strong emphasis on the notions of Border, Enemy and Fatherland. Within the Centre-Peripheries paradigm, this process had created a construction with much stronger and effective control from the Centre and much more emasculate and formal self-dependence at the local level. Under these circumstances, the real content of national, Finno-Ugric, specificity of Soviet Karelia was doomed to be demolished. Whilst formal attention to national culture and related symbols was constantly stressed, the very Finnishness of Soviet Karelia/Karelian Republic, as far as the second half of the 20th century is concerned, could be argued to shift its real meaning step by step towards a symbol per se.


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