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The transformation of the identity of the Karelian Isthmus of Russia

Venäjäen Karjalankannaksen muuttuva identiteetti

I search for elements behind the current collective experience(s) of the population of the Karelian Isthmus in Russia. I examine the matter through the changes in the common collective identity or identities, and through continuity. Permanent features include the location of the area on a national and cultural boundary, and the nature of the Isthmus which the occupational life of people is built on. Industrial life on the Isthmus has recently gone through radical changes, but in keeping with the characteristics of the area. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the emphasis of the industrial life on the Karelian Isthmus has started to turn to tourism and recreational activities instead of agriculture. Furthermore, historically, the isthmus has been inhabited by Finno-Ugric and Slavic groups. The ethnicity of the isthmus has lately included new aspects from southern immigrants. The building of the new collective experience and new interpretations of history on the place of the old Soviet identity has also been impacted by the renaissance of religiousness in Russia, which has introduced Russian Orthodox features to the area. This is demonstrated by the numerous Orthodox churches constructed in the area recently.

Keywords: region, identity, Karelia, Russia

Introduction

Between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland there is a neck of land traversed by the waterways. Today, both Russians and Finns call it the Karelian Isthmus, although administratively it is part of the Leningrad oblast (see Balashov 1998: 8). After the Second World War, the Russian settlers started their life in the empty land and in the houses mostly constructed by Finns. The reason that region was left empty makes this an exceptional place to study a construction of we-ness there. This highlights a question what kinds of sources for this collective experiences are used in the Isthmus after the collapse of Communism. Who are people living in the contemporary Isthmus; are they Karelians? And what basis the collective identity of the population is constructed today?

I have searched for answers to these questions mostly in the village (county) of Melnikovo (formerly Räisälä), the town of Svetogorsk (formerly Enso) and to some extent also in the town of Priozersk (formerly Käkisalmi). In Melnikovo, I rented an apartment for a week, recorded eight interviews, talked to the locals and got acquainted with the everyday life in the village. The key interviews were open theme interviews with the active citizens in different spheres of life: a contemporary and a current mayors of Melnikovo, owners of small business enterprises, a worker in a library, a school headmaster and a researcher (see Hannula 2006:

5–6). I have visited also Svetogorsk approximately 30 times during the last one and half years in a project which studies the co-operation between the border towns Imatra and Svetogorsk and made tens of interviews about the co-operation between towns. I refer to some of these interviews here too.¹ I have also observed the other places of the Isthmus several times by a car and a bus.

The difference of local experiences in the Isthmus makes generalization on the basis of my empirical material difficult. It is still possible to draw some general lines. The Karelian Isthmus is well studied in terms of ethnic history during the pre-WWII era. The contemporary region and collective feelings of inhabitants there during the post-Soviet era is a new subject to study. This preliminary work tries to be one step to fill this lack. The work will be completed later in the future as the comprehensive analysis of the issue requires more analysis and empirical material.

Spatial and collective identity

The idea of borderlands has emerged in debates on identities that do not fit neatly into the master narratives of ethnicity or nation. The Karelian Isthmus is this kind of borderland in question. A regional identity has emerged as a popular category, yet it is often unclear what it means. The regional identity is one kind of spatial identity. Spatial identity refers to a bond between an individual and a certain socially constructed space. Spatial – global, national, regional or local – identity connects individuals together in a space constructed by people (Paasi 2003: 477).

Paasi makes visible key elements of regional transformation through the concept of institutionalization of regions. Institutionalization refers to the process during which specific territorial units emerge and become established and socio-spatial consciousness prevails in the context where society itself is transforming. This regional transformation includes stages such as: the constitution of territorial shape, the constitution of symbolic shape, the constitution of institutions and finally the establishment of the territorial unit in the regional structure and social consciousness. Paasi classifies social consciousness into regional identity, and identity of region (Paasi 1995: 33–37). This article highlights both the transformation of the identity of region and regional identity since the collapse of communism.

The identity of a region is an expression of a communal, collective experience based on which

the region is distinguished from other regions. It is more permanent than the regional identity: people today are more mobile and can identify themselves with more than one region. Only few people contribute to constructing regions and creating their identity, whereas a majority is responsible for recreating them. The life-span of the identities of the regions is long – longer than that of their creators. New people can contribute to the originality of a region and carry on the old identity (Paasi 1995).

I will elaborate the historical continuation and changes of the certain features of the identity in the Isthmus through the elements such as ethnicity, border, nature, and livelihood. These are only some features behind the formation of the regional collective experience. I refer both to the elements used in building the identity of region as well as to the individual processes of the building of regional identity. The subject is extensive and this article draws only some general lines which are behind the reasons for the contemporary regional identity in the Isthmus. Some of the issues are not analysed or I only mention them: e.g. the role of the cultural institutions and a re-writing of history.

Historical roots for a Finno-Ugrian and Russian Isthmus

Ethnicity is a crucial way to build a spatial identity and a bond between individual, collective and territory. The establishment of an ethnic group and the identification of people with each other is, at an individual level, a subjective and fluctuating process. People within one ethnic group may experience their group in many different ways. Understanding ethnicity constructively is based on acknowledging that the birth of ethnic groups is not a question of isolated groups and their cultural differences. In fact, ethnic groups are created through mutual contact. By observing the similarities within one group and the differences compared to others, and by creating them as a consequence of an observation process, concepts regarding ethnic groups, us and others, are formed. Therefore, ethnicity is not a characteristic and static phenomenon but a social relationship. The observed differences and classifications based on them do not always coincide with actual cultural differences (Barth 1969: 5–12).

Dividing people into ethnic groups based on language is a fairly new phenomenon, as is categorising groups into nations. Yet, people as social animals have a biological need to belong to a group. A nation, *natio*, and the history of its etymological

derivatives in European countries dates back to no further than the 16th century (Hobsbawn 1992: 23–29). In medieval communities, an individual was perceived through his or her family and clan community. Many people spoke the same language, but there was not necessarily much solidarity between them. Due to urbanisation and the development of industry and commerce, an individual's profession, guild or diocese started to play an important role in defining his or her identity. Karelians never formed their own modern state but were ruled by powers that later developed into modern nation-states. The Karelian identity and culture have been part of the development of the Swedish, Russian and first and foremost Finnish nation-state. Both Russia and Finland have claimed a right to Karelia and its culture and identity.

The reason behind the title Karelian Isthmus – and not the Russian Isthmus – is in the fact that ethnic groups, which are today called as Karelians have settled the area for a long period. This refers to the people living in the vicinity of the river Neva and Lake Ladoga, speaking Finno-Ugrian languages and practising trades and making a livelihood typical to them (see e.g. Kirkinen 1998: 38–54). In addition to Finno-Ugrians, the Karelian Isthmus has also been inhabited by groups speaking Slavic languages. After 1944, there have been more people speaking Slavic languages on the isthmus than perhaps ever in the past thousand years. Representatives of Slavic cultures settled around the Gulf of Finland already at the end of the first millennium when Novgorod developed into an important metropolis in Northern Russia. Their number started to increase in the Modern Times and especially after the Great Northern War when the entire Ingria was ceded to Russia (Hakamies 1992: 197–198; Nevalainen 1992: 159–160). The Russian minority was evacuated with the other minorities into Finland as they voted with their feet during the Second World War. The area ceded to Russia was completely evacuated in 1944 and in practice no people with family ties to Finland were left on the isthmus. (Tikka *et al.* 2002: 36). Therefore, the situation was different than that of Romania and Hungary or Russia and the Baltic States, where the state borders separate ethnic groups from their kin.

According to the 2002 census, the Leningrad oblast with a total population of approximately 1 500 000 is inhabited by 7930 self-designated Finns, 35 Finnish Ingrians, 2057 Karelians, 2019 Vepsians and 177 Izhorians. The Karelian Isthmus is only part of the Leningrad oblast, but the low

figures indicate that there are very few Finno-Ugrians in the area today. In most cases, even fewer master the Finno-Ugrian languages in question. Most of the current inhabitants of the Karelian Isthmus identified themselves in the census as Russians, and the number of those speaking Finno-Ugrian languages and cultures in this area is small. The population of the Leningrad oblast, which includes the Karelian Isthmus, is composed of 154 nationalities (Goskomstat 2002). In the census, a person may identify himself or herself as a member of only one ethnic group. These official statistics do not directly reflect the rich and multiple ethnic identification of individuals, but rather controls, limits and simplifies it. Most of these people identify themselves as Russians. A new, post-WWII phenomenon is the immigration of people who do not have a Christian background or speak an Indo-European or Fenno-Ugrian languages as their mother tongue: Muslims from the south.

Contemporary Isthmus of Russians, Muslims and “Karelians”

The most important symbol of the community is the name of the region, which usually gathers together its historical development (Paasi 1995: 35). After the Second World War, names of geographical locations were with some exceptions russified in the Isthmus. Finnish names were changed to Russian ones by 1949. As an exception, some villages with a railway station, important geographical places such as the Vuoksi river (Vuoksa) and the Karelian Isthmus (Karelsky Peresheyek) received a Finnish name. New names of the places were based e.g. on the family names for the Second World War Soviet soldiers fighting in the Isthmus and Leningrad. Historical nature of names was abolished (Balashov 1998: 55–56; Hakamies 2005: 94–95). The policy was different in the Republic of Karelia, which is northern to Leningrad region (*oblast*), where the names of villages and cities were kept in their Finnish form. Hakamies assumes that this was due to the fact that the region was by 1956 called as the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Republic (Hakamies 2005: 96).

In the Russian Federation, as in the Soviet Union, the republics were named after the ethnic groups in the area. The Republic of Karelia is an administrative district founded on ethnicity. Therefore, its inhabitants consider themselves as “Karelians” after the title of the region regardless of whether they have ethnic ties to the Karelian language and culture. In the beginning of 1990's

inhabitants of Karelian Isthmus voted against a re-naming of the local villages as Leningrad was re-named to St. Petersburg. Inhabitants of the countryside were not willing to return the old Finnish names of the villages. Yet, the unofficial title “Karelian Isthmus” has been a natural choice for the locals, derived from the geographic location and history of the area (summary of the interview in Priozersk 28.10.2005). Thus, the reference to “Karelian” does not stem from the contemporary ethnic situation but from the ethnic history of the territory which echoes the ethnic population used to live in the area as was mentioned above. So “Karelian” is a regional not ethnic term.

Association called as Karelija was established in 1993. It has been an active and important actor in creating new regional identity in the Isthmus. The activity of the association started in two different directions in the middle of the 1980’s. The first actor was the art school led by a teacher Evgenij Balashov in Leningrad. Their activity was based on the expeditions of the art school to the Isthmus, after the questions about the pre-WWII history of the Isthmus arose. The following acts included revealing the Finnish history of the Isthmus which was hidden in a formal Soviet history writing. Members of the club wrote former Finnish names of the places on the cliffs and stones and talked with locals. The second association behind the association Karelija was called the Club 105. This was a group of people which started to collect information and organize expeditions about the unknown Winter War, now when the political atmosphere was more liberal in 1980’s. Since 1998 Association Karelija, has published a collection of books about the history of the Isthmus written by Balashov. This collection is the most comprehensive presentation of the unknown pre-Soviet history of the Isthmus for the Russian readers (Smirnov 2002).

When I started my field work, I reflected on the possibilities to whom people in Isthmus would spatially identify themselves; with the Leningrad oblast, nationalities, citizens of Russia (*rossiyane*), their own towns or native districts. My interview questions were based on these assumptions. However, in the field, I soon realised that they often called the area they live in “the Karelian Isthmus” as well as mentioned in some connections that they were “Karelians”. People seemed to avoid the term *rossiyane* (citizen of Russia) and rather referred to patriotism (patriot) and fatherland. This was expressed very clearly (see also Stranius 2007). One can notice the difference between Finns and Russians as for Finns patriotism is not so evident

and strongly emphasized specially among the younger and middle age generation as it is in general in Russia. I did not notice that people in the area would identify strongly with the Leningrad region. However, people from elsewhere in Russia may label them as the inhabitants of the Leningrad oblast and in the encounters with people from the other parts of Russia this category may be relevant.

The Karelian Isthmus is divided between the administrative districts of Priozersk and Vyborg. However, I did not observe identification with the administrative districts, but due to the limited take I cannot say whether these administrative districts make some difference in terms of identification. Administrative division and regional identities of Finland is mostly based on local tribes: South and North Karelia, Lapland, Pohjanmaa, Tavastia and Varsinais-Suomi. In contemporary Karelian Isthmus, in turn, tribes make no role when people define who they are.

During the field work I found some new sources for identity among the inhabitants of Isthmus. A researcher in Priozersk said there is a boom to learn what happened in the Isthmus during the Finnish and Novgorod periods. He also says that personally he feels he is partly Finnish and Karelian as well as old-Novgorod due to the unique local history. An increasing interest of people to the local history seems to create a new source of local identification at least among intelligentsija who are the main creators of the regional identity.

River Vuoksi also has been a source of inspiration for some authors. The researchers of the Priozersk fortress museum have since the beginning of the 21st century published a Vuoksi journal to disseminate information on the local culture and history. Approximately 50 poems have been published on the Vuoksi river. These artists contribute to the identity of the region, which the rest of the population will echo. Inhabitants of the villages seem to be more conservative than intelligentsija in Priozersk when it comes to the reforms of the identity of region as voting against the returning the old Finnish names demonstrated.

New regional identity is formed sometimes experimental way. Near Vyborg three Russian men are building a “Viking village” Svengard for a year now. Their aim is to live as the Swedes did, according to the legends, on that place approximately 800 years ago. Tourists may visit their small village for a fee. They teach also children an ancient local history the way they think it was. For these men the ancient Scandinavian history is the most

beloved part of their collective identity. Obviously their enthusiasm has an influence, if their effort will last, for local people who form their self-identity.

Identity of new-comers with their previous localities seems to be true in some cases. After 1941 and 1944, the Karelian Isthmus was mostly inhabited by emigrants from Central Russia (Tikka *et al.* 2002: 38). In Melnikovo, kolkhozes were established based on where the emigrants originally came from: the Kirov kolkhoz, the Yaroslavl kolkhoz etc. In time, this principle was applied more loosely and people started to mix. In Svetogorsk, however, a certain tie to the place of origin has been maintained. Inhabitants have grouped together depending on where they or their parents came from. A middle-aged woman from Svetogorsk states as following: "Let us visit with each other: those from Vologodsk gather together with others from Vologodsk, those from Tver with others from Tver. Even streets are called by different names. There is Lesnaya and Sportivnaya, but people call them differently: that one belongs to those from Vologodsk, that one to those from Tver. This depends on where each group has set up their homes." Yet, I did not observe anything of this nature in Melnikovo. Instead people said that first kolkhozes were established according to where the people came from, then by the time people mixed (summary of interviews in Svetogorsk 2005 and in Melnikovo 24.–29.10.2005).

On the Karelian Isthmus people speak Russian, and in Svetogorsk and Melnikovo there are no cultural autonomies for different nationalities. In many respects, the isthmus is very Russian. This is mainly due to the fact that people migrated to the area from Russian, Ukrainian or Belorussian areas. In the United States which is a federation such as Russia the idea of the national policy used to be that people forget their previous nationalities and become Americans. Similarly, becoming Russian occurs often fast. In Melnikovo I met a man who had Polish parents. Despite of that he said to be pure Russian. This is not too rare in Russia especially among white, orthodox/atheist and Slavic people. Adaptation from one nationality to Russian and Rossiyanen can take place within one generation.

One division into "us" and "them" based on ethnicity was observed, and it can also be perceived elsewhere in Russia. This is the division based on religion and the related culture. The distinction is made between Muslims and non-Muslims. Consequently, everyone with darker skin is easily labelled as a Muslim. An interviewee from Svetogorsk stat-

ed the following: "Of course we are inhabitants of Svetogorsk. Simply Russian, that is all. Our special feature is, as I told you, that we have many different nationalities. But now we say: I am Russian. He is dark, non-Russian, someone else. This happens in any case, we always emphasise it." These people called "someone else" live in every corner of Russia. They are emigrants from the Russian Caucasus or the southern CIS countries which are also the most rapidly growing group in Russia. They settle in cities rather than in the countryside; in cities they already have social networks and better possibilities to adapt. This is also the case on the Karelian Isthmus. There are no statistics on the nationalities in cities and villages, but when asked, for instance Azerbaijanis are mentioned. They are mostly employed in commerce. When the combine was formed, many people moved to Svetogorsk, also from the south, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova.

When I talked with people in Melnikovo in 2005 some denied the existence of different nationalities in the town. Others said national differences exist but differ in no way from anyone else. A middle-aged woman from Melnikovo stated the following: "I do not think they stand out at all. No one hates them. Now many workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan come here and the local men are left unemployed, and everyone does not like it. I may soon say something inappropriate and be arrested (...)" The question of nationalities is a touchy subject and people do not want to reveal internal conflicts to outsiders. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims poses a problem in the state identity politics because in the construction of a rising Russia based on a strong Orthodox culture, Muslims represent the enemy to a united Russia.

An ambivalent border district identity

The proximity of the border is a permanent feature historically to all inhabitants of the Isthmus. The borders might move during the changes of history but they usually are settled in a new place somewhere in the Karelian Isthmus. As Hakkarainen analyses in her study, people in Melnikovo regretted, as a result of a devaluation of Soviet ideology, that they did not know "true history" that had been "concealed" from "ordinary people" during Soviet time (Hakkarainen 2005: 43). Today inhabitants of the Isthmus know that the area near the Finnish border is land conquered from another country in the Second World War. Living in a

conquered area provokes mixed feelings regarding the right to live there.

At the beginning of the 1990's, public discussion on returning Karelia to Finland was initiated and legitimated with moral and cultural reasons: Stalin's attack to Finland, which was immoral and Karelian culture in general was considered to be a part of Finnish nation-state culture. Finnish researchers, reporters and Karelian evacuees visiting the Karelian Isthmus keep reminding the current inhabitants of the area of its traumatic history. In Melnikovo, a woman I met burst into tears when I asked what she thought about Finns wanting Karelia back. She said that she did not want to leave, that this was her home. The truth about the Second World War – that Russia attacked Finland and not vice versa – was acknowledged in many sources in Russia only after the Soviet Union collapsed. A new school text book which has been written on the history of Priozersk district (an old Finnish name Käkisalmi) in 2004 tells a lot about the Finnish history of the Isthmus (Dmitriev 2004). The former publication on the subject was from the 1960's, but many facts were omitted from it. Now the text book is read not only by students, but anyone interested in the history of the area. New and old locals hungry for history visit the Ampiala (an old Finnish) estate and study information on the Novgorod era (summary of interviews in Priozersk 28.10.2005).

Since Association Karelija has acted on the Isthmus they have been accused for working on the behalf of Finns. The statement of Balashov on this issue is that the association Karelija is not a political but an actor interested in local history (*kraevedy*) and thus it is not their duty to take a stand on territorial question such as returning Karelija. Yet Balashov emphasises that the state policy should lie on a civilized ground not on the use of power and that the acts of the state should be ethically right acts, not just empty words (Balashov 2004). In Finland, the idea of returning Karelia is based on the assumption that the area belongs to Finland because Karelians are a part of a national idea of Finland. There is no information on how the historical population of the isthmus identified itself, except for the fact that the Orthodox religion of Karelians and other customs have in many ways been close to the Russian culture. Consequently, for instance state officials considered the Karelian-speaking Orthodox of the area in the 1600's as Russians (Katajala 2005: 48).

Finns are often not aware that also Russians consider that they have a moral right to the Kare-

lian Isthmus. During the past thousand years, the Karelian Isthmus has belonged to Novgorod, Moscow, Sweden, Finland, Soviet Union and Russia. Russians as well as Finns consider the borders that reach as far as possible the right ones. A middle-aged man describing himself as a native of the isthmus comments on the subject: "You do not hear us saying that you should give us back the land we lost in 1917, that Lenin was not right." The uncertainty related to living in an area ceded in the war lies in the background even though efforts towards cooperation are made: "What are we supposed to do, pack up and leave? This is also our homeland, so I say we compromise and develop the area." The inhabitants of the Karelian Isthmus want to cooperate with their neighbour, not give up their area. An elderly man in Melnikovo said the following: "I feel sorry for the original inhabitants of the area, the Finns. When they come here and I see tears in their eyes, I feel guilty because we could just as well have left the Karelian Isthmus to the Finns. Russia already had enough problems." The same person defines himself as a patriotic Russian, but criticises the history of his country: "Unfortunately, I often feel ashamed for my country even though I am very patriotic. When needed, I will do anything and give anything for Russia, but sometimes I am ashamed for the actions of the state. For instance, I am ashamed that we have taken over this area."

Many former inhabitants of Melnikovo (formerly Räisälä), now quite advanced in years, have since the beginning of the 1990's regularly visited their old home town. Russians call these people "nostalgia tourists". Despite the language barrier, and difficult issue, some have even befriended the new inhabitants of Melnikovo. In Priozersk, I witnessed a situation where two elderly Finnish sisters stood before the house they lived in before the war. The women had often come to see their old home and even visited inside in spite of the absence of a common language. The "new" owner of the house stepped outside to greet them.

In Finland many of these refugees of the Second World War still miss deeply to their old homes. The new-comers who are living in these houses in Isthmus, in turn, say that it was Stalin, not they who decided the ownership of these houses. It seems that in many cases, not in all, former and new owners of the houses can find mutual understanding. Some entrepreneurs have been able to earn a living through the interest showed in the area by the former inhabitants. An entrepreneur in the tourism industry near Äyräpäänjärvi has estab-

lished a restaurant on the location of an old barn, plays music dating back to the Second World War in Finnish and sells paraphernalia revolving around the idea that Karelia should be returned to the Finns.

To the Karelian Isthmus, today a part of Russia, the border signifies the presence of Western culture. With regard to the Russian or formerly Soviet state administration, this has easily turned into a border syndrome (Kauppala 2000: 28). Those living on the Karelian Isthmus have always lived under a certain suspicion. Under threat of war, the majority of the country's population and government authorities doubted the loyalties of the border district inhabitants. Under Stalin, the distrust in the inhabitants of the borderland led to genocides when ethnic groups on the state borders, such as the Ingrians, were killed or transferred to the inland. The suspicions of both government authorities and ordinary people were created by the fear that people living near the border would identify with the wrong country. They are suspected to turn into traitors in a difficult situation; this might explain why especially Orthodox Karelians were called in Finnish by the pejorative term *ryssä*; the idea that "you never know to which side they stay loyal". On the other hand, the doubts may be based on the fact that the identity of people in border districts actually contain traits from the neighbouring country. Cultural influences easily cross the border. In Svetogorsk the Finnish influence is obvious: you see Finnish texts in restaurants and shops, the houses in 1970's and 1980's were constructed by Finns, you hear Finnish everywhere. Imatra, in turn, which is located in the Finnish side of the border, not only seems Eastern to a visitor from the west coast, but the world beyond the border does, in fact, affect the city e.g. in terms of a large number of Russian-speaking newcomers.

Fall of the old and rise of the new industrial identity

If the border is considered a permanent factor in the regional identity, and identity of a region, so are waterways, the land and the sources of livelihood they produce. The Karelian Isthmus is situated between two large waters, Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland. The Vuoksi river, which rather reminds a lake system than an actual river, traverses the area. The natural conditions have traditionally created a framework for people's livelihood. The soil of the Vuoksi river valley has provided a good

foundation for agriculture. Agriculture has most likely been a permanent source of livelihood for the inhabitants of the Karelian Isthmus since the 13th century. This tradition was carried on after the Second World War in the rural villages on the isthmus – also in Melnikovo.

Melnikovo is one quite typical county in Karelian Isthmus what comes to its livelihoods. It is a rural village/county despite some of its urban characteristics: a school, post office and hospital/medical centre. The centre of the county is surrounded by the smaller villages. It is located approximately 150 kilometers from St. Petersburg. When the isthmus was ceded to Russia, people from Central Russia moved to the area voluntarily but as a result of agitation between the years 1945 and 1953. Melnikovo was inhabited especially by people from Yaroslavl, Vladimir and Tver. In some cases, an entire kolkhoz with its representatives and accountants moved to the town. 17 kolkhozes and one sovkhov were founded in Melnikovo, and villages from the former Rautu area were annexed to the town. In the 1950's, the politics changed and the state started to dismantle small kolkhozes. Buildings were literally torn down and activities were centralised with the help of students from Leningrad. In the 1960's, Krushchev's politics regarding "perspectiveless villages" led to the systematic destruction of kolkhozes and many old, small Finnish villages were depopulated. The river valley may have been used for fishing or camping with pioneers. Nevertheless, few buildings were constructed by the waterways, but people lived in town flats. The Soviet dream was completed with indoor plumbing including warm water and friends nearby (summary of interviews, Melnikovo 24.–29.10.2005).

An economic repression since the fall of the Soviet Union bound the inhabitants of Melnikovo and became a new aspect of the common experience among the citizens as it did all around Russia. After the fall of the Soviet empire also the sovkhov system collapsed. Sovkhozes became limited-liability companies. Melnikovo experienced the nightmare of moving over to a capitalist market economy. Many workers tried their luck as private farmers, but did not succeed. Only a few functioning private farms remained. Although there was no longer contact with the sovkhov, self-sustaining farming increased. During the economic crisis of the early 1990's, inhabitants of the municipality started to build their animal pens in the former Lutheran cemetery in the town centre. The municipal manager then ordered the pens

to be moved to the edge of town, and even today, the municipality is bordered by grey pig and chicken pens (summary of interviews, Melnikovo 24.–28.10.2005).

The industrial identity based on agriculture collapsed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The pride of Melnikovo, tractorists, were no longer needed after the economic reforms at the end of the Soviet Union. In 2005, the situation of the sovkhos has somewhat improved although the population is far from its glory days of 600 workers; the sovkhos employs now 200 workers. A new type of industry has gained momentum. In addition to failure stories, new kind of success stories emerged, as some were better equipped for the fall of the Soviet Union than others. A middle-aged man running a family store in Melnikovo said: “As a history teacher I saw where perestroika was leading the country. I could predict what would happen. I had to come up with something to provide for my family, and decided to become an entrepreneur. I did not want the standard of living of my family to drop, and decided to take action.” Entrepreneurship has become a major source of livelihood in Melnikovo. There were 29 businesses in the town in 2005. In a municipality with a population of 2000 – and 4000 – in summertime, there are five small grocery stores and a lumber market; one next to the other in the town centre. In addition, there will be a large hardware store. The current industrial identity of Melnikovo is multi-dimensional, although entrepreneurship plays an important role (summary of interviews, Melnikovo 24.–28.10.2005).

Nature-based industry and identity

The images and conceptions serving tourism are based on positive features related to the area. Tourism selects the most appropriate elements for its purposes and maintains and enforces them. Today the recreation-related industry with the roots in the history increases in importance in Isthmus as Russian tourists and the middle class of Saint Petersburg have discovered the Karelian Isthmus. Recreation-related industries developed in the 21st century have a long history on the Karelian Isthmus. In the early 18th century, the Isthmus was transferred from Sweden to the Russian Empire. To the inhabitants of the isthmus this meant the adoption of the feudal system. Large farms in the area were donated to Russian aristocracy. Citizens of Saint Petersburg started to build summer villas near these farms. In the 19th century, the Karelian

Isthmus was annexed to the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, which was part of Russia but depending on the czar had relatively extensive sovereignty. The late 1800's was a prosperous time on the Karelian Isthmus; especially Terijoki and Raivola became a famous holiday get-away for Russians. The Russian ownership increased in 19th century; as a result about 10 000 summer villas was owned by Russians by 1918 in Isthmus. This tradition fade away by the Finnish independence and conclusively by the Second World War (Hämäläinen 1983: 5–8; Hämynen 1998: 160–161, 169).

The beautiful nature of the Isthmus creates the same possibilities on livelihood as before. Today not only is the summer a popular holiday season on the Karelian Isthmus, but winters are an active time with skiing, sledding and ice-fishing. Or downhill skiing in one of the ski resorts on the isthmus. Construction on the Karelian Isthmus has boomed especially since 2003; secondary and leisure homes and recreational villages have been built. Five kilometres east of Melnikovo there is a holiday home village the name of which translates into Czar's Snowflake, one of the tens of businesses in the field. It offers high-quality log villas to tourists for 100 euros per day.

For the 50th anniversary of Melnikovo (1998), the municipal administration had commissioned commemorative glass mugs. “Melnikovo 50 years” was printed on the side along with grazing cows. Melnikovo no longer markets itself with cows in the 21st century. In fact, cows have become a rarer sight on the present-day Karelian Isthmus. Something else is required. The chief accountant of Czar's Snowflake has printed material of Räisälä's history on his desk. Tourists want to know about the past of the area. Also the locals want to know about the history concealed during the Soviet era: who used to own the Finnish houses they now live in.

The Russian Orthodox culture in the area is currently being re-established and strengthened. Three Orthodox chapels have been constructed in Melnikovo since the late 1990's. One extremely beautiful chapel is located in the tiny village of Vasilevo, near an underutilised sovkhos. It can be accessed by boat because it is located in the middle of the Vuoksi on a small island with room for nothing but the chapel. This picturesque Orthodox temple has also become a kind of new symbol of Melnikovo. A calendar has been printed with pictures of it for each month, and the municipal manager gives it to visitors as a gift. The second

tsasouna is in the centre of town. It is smaller than the Lutheran stone church, which today serves as a community centre and disco in the middle of Melnikovo.

During the Second World War, statues of the icons of the time – Lenin and Stalin – were built in Räisälä. Finnish soldiers tore them down when they reoccupied Räisälä in 1941. From 1956, a monument of the new patriotic war has stood in the garden of the beautiful *tsasouna*, built in 1990's. Fatherland and religion meet in this fenced-in garden by the Käkisalmi–Svetogorsk-road. The newly-built luxury houses and churches replacing the old Finnish architecture in countryside will change the regional identity. The Isthmus will be probably known in future for its high-class houses, not for the old Finnish farms and churches.²

Conclusions

Karelian Isthmus is a part of the Russian Federation with specific identity of a region. The framework for a life in the Isthmus has always been determined by the nature with the waterways and the location of the border and by the ruling government. On this basis people have built their regional identities: who are the neighbours and who are we ourselves.

In the 18th century, Lutheran and Orthodox religions determined the ethnic group boundaries of the Karelian Isthmus more than language. This was changed by the time. Still today, religion is a source of identity and a symbol of religion as well as it produces a regional identity. Now the newly-built Orthodox churches replace those old Finnish/Karelian Lutheran churches which some of them until now have been left as the centres of the villages in Karelian Isthmus. The identity of Muslims has no visible landmarks such as Mosque in the Isthmus, but the relationship of the Russian Muslims and non-Muslims involves the root for the loyalty dilemma.

The inhabitants of the Isthmus experienced an economic and cultural crisis in the beginning of 1990's. The Karelian Isthmus was a fading rural area long into the 1990's. Tourism-related business has become an important source of the livelihood in the area. This is not a completely new source of industry. During the 19th century the Isthmus was famous about its settlement of summer residences. New interpretations of history have contributed to the unique and original identity of the isthmus that stands apart from other Russian regions. Cultural institutions such as poets and scientists re-

produce old Novgorod and Finnish myths and so it will become a possible source of a new regional identity. At the same time the Karelian Isthmus contributes the construction of the national identity of the Russian Federation. The elements for the new identity of a region is based on the old roots: on the proximity of the western border and the historical connection with the western border areas, the captivating nature, the new rise of the Russian culture and the closeness of the great market area of Saint Petersburg and Moscow.

Notes

1. The interviews were conducted together with researcher Maija Hämäläinen-Abdessamad.
2. I thank Doctor Terttu Nupponen for her valuable comments.

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