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Future Citizens or Useful Workforce? Finnish Immigrants and the Communist Party of Finland in *Svirstroi*, 1931-1934

Introduction

The construction of the hydroelectric power plant of Lower *Svir* (*Nizhnesvirskaja GES*), which was the first plant in the work site of *Svirstroi*, began in 1927 and was completed in December 1933.[1] The main purpose of *Svirstroi* was to fulfil the growing need for energy for the city of Leningrad. *Svirstroi*'s roots can be found in Lenin's slogan "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" and in the GOELRO (State Commission for the Electrification of Russia) plan. Conversations about hydroelectric dams on the *Volkhov* and *Svir* had already begun during the Civil War.[2] Even though the first plant was finished in 1933, construction work in *Svirstroi* continued for some years.

Svirstroi transformed into an example of Stalin's industrialization drive famous for its "megaprojects". These industrial projects signalled the rule and power of communism over capitalism, modernity over "backwardness", and science over nature. Therefore, *Svirstroi* was more than just a power plant complex: it was depicted as an ideological beacon, constructed through socialist labour, to evidence the electrified triumph of communism, even over Nazism.[3]

[1] "Svirstroi," *Vapaus*, No. 47/1927; "Nizhne-Svirskaja GES," accessed October 10, 2021, http://www.hydropower.ru/stations/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2626.
[2] Jonathan Coopersmith, *The Electrification of Russia, 1880-1926* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 3, 147–149, 151–152, 180.
[3] "Svirstroi," *Rintama,* No. 7/1933; "Sähköistäminen, Svirstroi," *Sosialistinen kalenteri* (Leningrad: Kirja, 1933); Lea Helo (Topias Huttari), *Jokea voittamassa* (Leningrad: Kirja, 1933). In this fictional novel, two Finnish boys witness the construction site's battle and victory over the river *Svir*.

With the consolidation of power, Stalin and the politburo began to change Soviet society and the economy through conscious state planning. To fulfil the main goal of the plan—overtaking the advanced capitalist countries—the country needed to modernise its economy.[4] In order to achieve this, it needed both economic and human resources and, thus, forced labour became an essential part of the process.

During the global economic depression of the early 1930s, approximately 15,000 Finns crossed the Soviet border illegally in hope for a brighter future based on Soviet propaganda.[5] Illegal Finnish immigrants[6] were often young men from the eastern parts of Finland, the provinces of Viipuri and Oulu.[7] These regions had a high concentration of sawmills and a timber industry which had suffered from the economic crisis. Some men took their wives and families with them to the Soviet Union, but most often the plan was to unite the families once the men would receive work and a place to live.[8] Those who did not take their families with them were planning to send money back home.

Finnish illegal immigrants believed that Stalin's five-year plan and its vast construction projects would provide work for them. Yet, entering the country illegally placed them under the control of

[4] Robert William Davies et al., eds., *The economic transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 136–151.
[5] The estimated number of illegal Finnish immigrants has varied between 12,000 to 18,000. See studies on illegal Finnish immigration: Auvo Kostiainen, *Loikkarit: suuren lamakauden laiton siirtolaisuus Neuvostoliittoon* (Helsinki: Kustannusosakeyhtiö Otava, 1987); Auvo Kostiainen, "Illegal Emigration to the USSR during the Great Depression," *Siirtolaisuus-Migration* 13.3 (1986): 9–14; Jukka Rislakki and Eila Lahti-Argutina, *Meillä ei kotia täällä: suomalaisten loikkarien joukkotuho Uralilla 1938* (Helsinki: Otava, 1997); Taneli Urmas "'Siellä on työmieskin vapaa ja ihminen': lamakauden laiton muuttoliike Suomesta Neuvostoliittoon siirtolaisilmiönä" (MA thesis, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, 2018).
[6] This article uses the term "illegal immigrant" as a translation for the Finnish word *loikkari*. Literally, the word refers to "defecting" and was used, at the time, especially by the Finnish state police. The meaning of illegality, in this case, is defined from the perspective of the state, both Finland and the Soviet Union, as the immigrants crossed the border illegally. This is also a way to separate the immigrants from other groups, such as the American Finns, who migrated to the Soviet Union in the 1930s.
[7] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit*, 71. Appendix A of the same book shows that out of the total 2,666 people, according to Kostianen's information, 863 came from the Vyborg province which included Kotka, Kymi and Suojärvi regions.
[8] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit,* 77.

the state police (OGPU) and its army of forced labour. Approximately 2,000 illegal Finnish immigrants were sent to the construction site of *Svirstroi*.

Svirstroi was a construction site of both free and un-free workers who were guided by the principles of socialist construction and control. The Soviet officials were forced to deal with thousands of illegal Finnish immigrants who did not know Russian nor the customs of the country, but who had great expectations for their new lives. The gap between the reality of the Finnish immigrants and the official ideology, socialist realism, had to be filled with propaganda to explain their situation and to depict an image of the socialist horizon yet to come. Much of this work amongst the Finns was orchestrated by the Communist Party of Finland (SKP)[9].

Svirstroi employed party members and officials from the OGPU, the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) (VKP(b)), the Communist Party of Finland, and various other organisations. The main role in the immigrants' daily lives in *Svirstroi* was played by the SKP which operated as the vanguard of Finnish communities in Soviet Russia. Finnish communists played an important role especially in the Karelian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (KASSR) and amongst the Ingrian Finns living in the Leningrad region.

The Communist Party of Finland, founded mainly by Finnish Social Democrats who fled to Russia in 1918, turned to the VKP(b) and followed them in ideology and practice from the beginning[10], but the red Finns also had their own interests in creating a communist state, Soviet Finland. The SKP had to work in two directions; on one hand, it tried to affect the internal politics of Finland by supporting underground activities due to its own illegal status in the country, while, on the other, the party was responsible for handling the affairs of Finnish-speaking communities in the Soviet

[9] The party (*Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue*) changed its name from the Finnish Communist Party (*Suomalainen Kommunistinen Puolue*) in 1920.
[10] Tauno Saarela, *Suomalaisen kommunismin synty 1918–1923* (Tampere: Kansan Sivistystyön Liitto KSL ry, 1996), 33.

Union. Cultural-educational work amongst the illegal Finnish immigrants, known as "economic refugees" within party circles, was conducted by sending employees to different work sites, such as *Svirstroi*, organising speeches and lectures and delivering newspapers, magazines, and literature to the immigrant communities.[11]

The SKP viewed the Finnish immigrants in a negative light and called them "deserters" who had thrown away their means of class struggle in Finland to enjoy the "fruits" of the Soviet Union. The SKP tried to restrain the flow of immigration but the letters, newspapers, propaganda, and radio programmes from the Soviet Union, ironically often operated by Finnish communists themselves, had appealed to Finns looking for work across the border.[12]

Previous studies on the illegal Finnish immigrants of the 1930s have concentrated on the immigrants' journey from the border crossing to the years of Stalin's terror 1937-1938, when a significant number of them were executed.[13] Meanwhile, the first two decades of the Communist Party of Finland have been studied thoroughly by Finnish researchers.[14] These studies often focus on the party itself and its activities towards Finland rather than the Finnish groups living in the Soviet Union.[15]

[11] Report on the state of SKP's cadres, 8.5.1934. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fond (f.) 516, opis (op.) 3, delo (d.) 199, list (l.) 40.
[12] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit*, 45, 54–55.
[13] See footnote no. 5.
[14] See, for example, Saarela, *Suomalaisen kommunismin synty*; Tauno Saarela, *Suomalainen kommunismi ja vallankumous 1923–1930* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2008); Kimmo Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot? Suomalainen kommunismi ja sota 1937–1945* (Porvoo, Helsinki & Juva: WSOY, 1994); Jukka Paastela, *Finnish Communism under Soviet Totalitarianism* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2003).
[15] Exceptionally, Hannu Rautkallio's book *Suuri Viha* focuses more on the SKP's role in the imprisonment of Finnish immigrants and in Stalin's terror but without paying attention to the context of the Gulag. Hannu Rautkallio, *Suuri viha. Stalinin suomalaiset uhrit 1930-luvulla* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1995). Various studies have been made, however, on Finns in Stalin's terror and the Gulag. These studies often focus on later periods. See Irina Takala, "Bol'shoj terror v Karelii," *Al'manah severoevropejskih i baltijskih issledovanij* 3 (2018): 143–207; Erkki Vettenniemi, *Surviving the Soviet Meat Grinder: The Politics of Finnish Gulag Memoirs* (Helsinki: Kikimora Publications, 2001).

The role of the OGPU as the work force main provider for the Stalinist industrialization projects is well known. The Gulag system, which started to take shape by the early 1930s, included different camps and special settlements that were sometimes located in the same area.[16] Camps and construction sites were established in Karelia, the Urals, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and other places to utilize the natural resources of the regions.[17] The evolution of these camps led to the enlargement of existing camps and the creation of new ones as, for example, *Solovki*, located on the *Solovetsky* monastery island as the first camp of the Gulag system, expanded to the shores of river *Svir* and became part of the construction project of the White Sea–Baltic Canal. A corrective labour camp (*ispravitel'no trudovoi lager'*), *Svirlag*, was part of this new set of labour camps.[18] Most of the illegal Finnish immigrants who were sentenced to forced labour lived outside this camp in the construction site of *Svirstroi* but were, nevertheless, part of the same Gulag system of forced labour.

Traditionally, Gulag research has discussed the Gulag's structure and victims. In recent years, discussion of the Gulag system has broadened to include special settlements and to explore the boundaries of the Gulag in Soviet society through specific camps, regions, or actors.[19] In his study

[16] Oleg Khlevniuk, Robert Conquest and Vadim A. Staklo, *The History of the Gulag: from Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 17-25; O. V. Khlevniuk, "Economics of the OGPU-NKVD-MVD USSR in 1930–1953: scale, structure, development trends," in *Gulag: The Economy of Forced Labor (*Moscow, 2008); Lynne Viola, "Historicising the Gulag," in *Global Convict Labour* (Brill, 2015), 362-364.

[17] See, for example, Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *The history of the Gulag: from collectivization to the great terror* (Yale University Press 2004); Michael Jakobson, *Origins of the gulag: The Soviet prison camp system, 1917-1934* (University Press of Kentucky 2014); David R. Shearer, "The Soviet Gulag—an Archipelago?," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16.3 (2015): 711-724; J. Arch Getty, Gabor T. Rittersporn, and Viktor N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet penal system in the pre-war years: a first approach on the basis of archival evidence," in *The Soviet Union* (Routledge, 2018), 153-185; Stephen G. Wheatcroft, "Victims of Stalinism and the Soviet secret police: The comparability and reliability of the archival data-not the last word," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51.2 (1999): 315-345.

[18] Ja. A. Zhdanova, *Svirlag 1931–1937* (Sankt-Peterburg: Renome, 2021), 7–8.

[19] See, for example, Alan Barenberg, *Gulag Town, Company Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Roman Val'erevich Iurchhenkov, "Gulag i penitentsiarnaia sistema v SSSR v 1930-h – pervoi polovine 1980 godov (na prieme Temlaga-Dubravlaga)" (PhD diss., Chuvash State University, Cheboksary, 2013); Steven Barnes, *Death and Redemption* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Nick Baron, "Production and terror: The operation of the Karelian Gulag, 1933-1939," *Cahiers du monde russe. Russie-Empire russe-Union soviétique et États indépendants* 43.43/1 (2002); V.

on the *Karlag* camp in Kazakhstan, Stephen Barnes analysed the role of the Cultural Educational Sections (the KVChs). The task of the KVChs was to improve the Gulag prisoners' labour productivity through political re-education which included political lecturing, newspapers, and organising different events and leisure activities.[20] In *Svirstroi*, however, the same task was partly addressed to the SKP, and this study seeks to understand the specificities of the Finnish political education and its reception among the Finns who were sentenced to *Svirstroi*.

Based on Finnish and Russian archival materials, this paper explores the different aspects of life and administration in *Svirstroi* in the years 1931–1934. The research materials include letters[21] which the Finnish immigrant workers wrote from *Svirstroi*, as well as reports that the party officials sent to their superiors. Life in *Svirstroi* was monitored remotely by the Finnish state police, *Etsivä keskuspoliisi* (EK), through mail surveillance and the Soviet media, while it also interviewed immigrants who managed to return to Finland. The correspondence of the SKP, on the other hand, reveals an interesting side of the party's relations with the immigrants and Soviet organisations.

By analysing the interactions between the SKP's political workers and the illegal Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi*, this article aims to increase understanding on the role of cultural-political education within the Gulag system. This is conducted by focusing on national and ethnic aspects of this activity through the example of Finnish immigrants and party officials in *Svirstroi.* Furthermore, the article explores the different aspects of everyday life and the perceptions of work and freedom in *Svirstroi* and attempts to understand the various horizons of expectation of the Finnish actors. What was the future of the immigrants from their own perspective, and what

M. Kirillov, *Istorija repressij v Nizhnetagil'skom regione Urala. 1920-e – nachalo 1950-h gg. V 2-h ch. Ch. 1* (Nizhnij Tagil: Ural. gos. ped. un-t, Nizhnetagil'skij gos. ped. in-t, 1996).

[20] Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 57-68.

[21] The letters are from a collection written by Finnish immigrants and sent from the Soviet Union to the Suojärvi region. This collection includes 1,200 letters which were written between 1930 and 1939. National Archives of Finland (KA) Etsivä Keskuspoliisi–Valtiollinen Poliisi (EK-VALPO), kotelo 31.

did the party officials expect would happen to these immigrants? An important question of this study is the role of propaganda and how the political workers and the Finnish illegal immigrants perceived it. Moreover, this study highlights the role of the Communist Party, especially the SKP, as a mediator between the immigrant workers and the OGPU/NKVD and illuminates how the prisoners and their guardians understood political education, work, and freedom in the Gulag system of the early 1930s.

Finnish party officials and immigrants in *Svirstroi*

After the immigrants illegally crossed the Finnish-Soviet border, the OGPU detained them and sent them to prisons in Leningrad or Petrozavodsk depending on where they entered the country. The illegal immigrants expected that after interrogations they would be released to live and work freely in the Soviet Union just like the earlier Civil War refugees from Finland. The Soviet Union's immigration policy, however, had changed from being rather liberal to more controlled during the 1920s.[22] The Finns were sentenced for illegal border crossing according to the 1926 Soviet Criminal Code which charged them with one to three years of forced labour.[23]

The OGPU sent the immigrants to different construction sites[24] which were often located in the Karelian ASSR or in the Leningrad region. Large groups of Finns were moved to *Svirstroi* especially in the late summer and early autumn of 1932 as, by mid-September, around 800 new immigrants had arrived in the work site.[25] At the time, "several thousand Finnish refugees" were reportedly

[22] Yuri Felshtinsky, "The legal foundations of the immigration and emigration policy of the USSR, 1917–27", *Soviet Studies* 34.3 (1982): 327-348.
[23] Elena Aleksandrovna Skobina, "Ugolovnaja otvetstvennost' za nezakonnoe peresechenie gosudarstvennoj granicy v istorii otechestvennogo ugolovnogo zakonodatel'stva", *Vestnik Omskogo universiteta. Serija «Pravo»* 2 (55) (2018): 34.
[24] "Po voprosu o finskih perebezhshtshikah", letter to the Komintern, 27.2.1934. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1402, l. 74.
[25] Viljo Hulkko's letter to J. K. Lehtinen. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 37. Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39.

living in *Svirstroi*.[26] On the 27th of September 1932, according to an eyewitness Tuomas Kauppinen, "three thousand" Finns arrived in *Svirstroi*.[27]

The Finnish immigrant population of *Svirstroi* was highly diverse and included, among some ex-party members "bootleggers, strike-breakers, and work site toadies"[28] and, most of all, workers looking for income and a brighter future. Antti Kuvaja, a Finnish immigrant, wrote back home saying that *Svirstroi* was a place "where there was work, but the circumstances were not as good as people were saying, but not as bad as people were 'criticising' for those who worked regularly, while slackers (*rokuloitsijat*) were not tolerated".[29]

The Finns who sought a better life across the border were not alone; illegal immigration of the early 1930s also included other nationalities, such as Poles.[30] The high flow of illegal immigrants surprised the Soviet authorities and, although the OGPU was the main authority responsible for the illegal immigrants, the organisation of work was delegated on a local level. Since the illegal Finnish immigrants rarely spoke Russian, the role of the SKP became increasingly important in organising work and living conditions for the Finns of *Svirstroi*.

Various party members and candidates worked within the Finnish community of *Svirstroi*. To organise the political work and Finnish propaganda for the immigrants, the SKP's Leningrad section sent Aarne Kuusela, a former student of the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West (KUMNZ), to *Svirstroi* as its first Finnish party official soon followed by two

[26] Aarne Kuusela's letter from Svirstroi, 13.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 50. In early 1933, around 800 Finns were working solely at the actual power plant. Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 4.2.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 129.
[27] Tuomas Kauppinen's letter to Juho Turunen, 27.9.1932. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 133.
[28] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39.
[29] Antti Kuvaja's letter to A. K., 19.2.1933. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 196.
[30] Rislakki and Lahti-Argutina, *Meillä ei kotia täällä*, 48.

more Finns, Viljo Hulkko and Alviina Heikkinen, on the 1st of May 1932.[31] Hulkko and Heikkinen were, most likely, working for the VKP(b).[32]

When assigned to *Svirstroi*, Aarne Kuusela was only 21 years old. Despite his young age, Kuusela had an active and militant history in youth and workers' organisations in Finland in the city of Vyborg, where he was briefly arrested, before becoming a member of the SKP and moving to the Soviet Union in 1930. This is when he received his new party name Aarne Kuusela, as his real name was Hugo Valtonen.[33] By December 1932, *Svirstroi* already employed 20 Finnish or Finnish-speaking employees. Most of them had a background in the KUMNZ in Leningrad and ended up teaching at the Finnish school of *Svirstroi*, but there were also Finns working directly for the SKP and the OGPU or as trade union organisers, interpreters, journalists, and bookstore salespersons.[34]

In general, there was a shortage of bilingual political workers and interpreters amongst the Finns of *Svirstroi*, while Russian-speaking officials, such as Hulkko and Heikkinen, were also working with other minorities like Germans, Ukrainians, and Tatars.[35] Even though Finnish employees were sent to *Svirstroi* to work within the Finnish population, the SKP's official stance on the nationality question was that all work amongst the immigrants should be carried out "in cooperation with Russian party comrades".[36]

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[31] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39.
[32] Rautkallio claims that the two were "men of the OGPU" (Rautkallio, *Suuri viha*, 67). Kuusela states, that Hulkko was leading the party work while Heikkinen was working with trade unions. As they are nowhere to be found in the SKP's lists of members, they probably worked for the VKP(b). Hulkko was later replaced by Voronov from Northern Ingria. Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39. Characteristics on Svirstroi's Finnish employees written by Aarne Kuusela, 11.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 121.
[33] Aarne Kuusela's autobiography in his personal folder for the VKP(b). RGASPI, f. 17, op. 98, d. 9868, l. 1. Hugo Valtonen's personal folder. KA, EK-VALPO, folder No. 2019.
[34] Characteristics on Svirstroi's Finnish employees written by Aarne Kuusela, 11.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 121.
[35] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932, RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39. Aarne Kuusela's letter from Svirstroi, 13.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 50.
[36] J. K. Lehtinen's letter to Kuusela, Elo and Holopainen, 5.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 106.

However, differing views were present between the SKP and the VKP(b). The VKP(b) linked the question of illegal immigration to "counterrevolutionary moods", while the SKP believed the immigrants could be of use in constructing socialism. The SKP was to intensify cooperation with the OGPU in relation to the immigrants, while the Regional Committee of the VKP(b) in Karelia also played an important role in allocating immigrant resources.[37] The SKP wanted the VKP(b) to organise work for the immigrants in Karelia and the Leningrad region. However, the SKP stressed the need for expertise in relation to Finland and, therefore, the Leningrad and Petrozavodsk sections of the SKP's Foreign Bureau were ordered to support the VKP(b) in providing party officials. For these reasons, work among the Finnish immigrants was to be organised between the two parties.[38]

SKP's Aarne Kuusela was a subordinate to Rudolf Holopainen, a Finnish OGPU supervisor of the Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi*.[39] In fact, some of Kuusela's reports were sent both to the SKP and the OGPU. The interests of the SKP and the OGPU were along the same lines, at least rhetorically, while some fractures can be seen in Kuusela's reports. The common goal of the two was to finish constructing the power plant and to "politically raise" the Finnish immigrants but while the party officials focused on propaganda and meeting production standards, the OGPU and its Finnish officers concentrated on "cleansing and uprooting class enemies" within the immigrants. Kuusela's problem was that "some people" saw the entire Finnish immigrant population as one group, labelled as class enemies—this attitude, according to his view, was harmful for propaganda work.[40]

[37] Rautkallio, *Suuri viha*, 54-57.
[38] "The question on economic refugees," resolution by the Foreign Bureau of the SKP's Central Committee, 29.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 73.
[39] Rislakki and Lahti-Argutina, *Meillä ei kotia täällä*, 40.
[40] Aarne Kuusela's letter to the SKP's Foreign Bureau, 2.4.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1330, l. 28.

This division between the economic, political, and educational goals was typical for the Gulag system. As Steven Barnes has pointed out, part of the Gulag population was to be sent back to Soviet society and, to accomplish this, the population had to be educated to understand their crimes and share the goals of the Soviet regime. In addition, the cultural-educational activities further distinguished prisoner groups from one another.[41]

It seems that at least some of the Finnish communists saw the immigrant population as a future workforce for the Soviet Finland they attempted to create. Aarne Kuusela thought *Svirstroi*'s Finnish newspapers were to enlighten the immigrants about the SKP and its achievements because the immigrants were, and would be, in "close contact with Finland".[42] Kuusela also thought that the Finns of *Svirstroi* needed a leader who knew the SKP and the mindset of the Finnish immigrants, but also someone who was familiar with the SKP's work in Finland. Therefore, he criticised the two VKP(b) party workers, Hulkko and Heikkinen, who were both from "this side of the border".[43] The connection to Finland was also seen in the propaganda work and *stengazeta* (wall newspaper) which focused almost completely on the affairs of Finland—this was a regular phenomenon in the writings of Finnish communists.[44]

The gap between expectations and realities

When the Finns arrived in *Svirstroi*, they received special treatment for the first three days: they were given money, food, and a place to live. This experience was in a sharp contrast to what they

[41] Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 58.
[42] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39.
[43] Aarne Kuusela's letter from Svirstroi, 13.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 50.
[44] Eemeli Lehtokivi's report about his journey to Svirstroi, 5.5.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 194.

had seen during the interrogations, and it made them believe that their difficult times were over and that everything would turn out for the better.

Many Finnish immigrants had earlier worked in the industrial and forestry work sites of Finland which had provided housing and food for their workers.[45] During the economic crisis, when the immigrants lost their jobs, they were also left without food and a place to live. Therefore, *Svirstroi* seemed to offer them housing, work, and various other benefits, similar to what the Finnish companies had offered to their workers.

In *Svirstroi*, the illegal immigrants had the right to write letters which revealed their thoughts and opinions about their situation. The immigrants wrote that they lived in a "place that was not a city" of 20,000 people, including many Finns, and those who came from the eastern parts of Finland wrote that *Svirstroi* inhabited many friends and relatives from the same village.

Housing was organised through a system of barracks that sometimes accommodated up to 50 people in one room. A Finnish worker, Martta Botska, described that the barrack where they lived had four rooms, accommodating more than 30 people in one room, and that the beds and linen were "provided by the house".[46] Some barracks also had separate rooms for families, but these rooms often accommodated more than one family.

One central topic in the letters was food. Many immigrants stated that they ate at the canteen at a cost of two roubles per day or with a coupon, while those who succeeded in fulfilling their working norms received a special menu. Stina Ronkainen, whose husband was a shock worker, wrote that

[45] Pauli Kettunen, *Työväenkysymyksestä henkilöstöpolitiikkaan* (Helsinki: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 2018), 59. The Finnish paper mill and timber industry owners were active in building housing for their workers, together with new mills, especially in the Häme and Viipuri provinces. See Johanna Björkman's PhD thesis *Metsäteollisuuden menestyksen jälki arkkitehtuurissa* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2019), 51–57; Tapio Hämynen, ed., *Omal mual, vierahal mual* (Saarijärvi: Suojärven pitäjäseura, 2011), 143–152. In 1928, the new law required the industry to provide housing also for the logging sites. Hämynen, *Omal mual*, 181.
[46] Martta Botska's letter, 20.10.1932. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 120.

"the food for the shock workers is better and they have three different kinds of soups, potato soup and meatballs or cabbage soup and kissel".[47]

The quality of food in the canteens, however, was a disappointment for the Finns. Sanni Reima wrote that "all food was rationed, there was no coffee or tea and there was only a little sugar and few buns".[48] The most important shortage, according to the Finns, was milk, and this led to their children getting sick and made working men weak. When Nikolai Palpatsu begged for his family to return him back to Finland, he described that "many Finnish children were dying, and now there are tens of them sick because of the lack of food".[49] The general health problems, and the especially high deathrate of children amongst the Finns, was frequently reported also by the SKP.[50]

Although many letters written by the immigrants expressed happiness about their difficult journey being finally over, these letters contained observations about the problems of everyday life, such as shortages and high costs of food and clothing. They also revealed that writing letters from *Svirstroi* involved many problems. Firstly, there was not enough paper or envelopes, and the Finns constantly complained that this prevented them from writing back home. Moreover, even though the immigrants had the right to send letters, being under control of the OGPU meant that writing a letter was restricted and controlled, at least in the beginning. The SKP believed that the immigrants' letters had a political meaning and were harmful to the party by creating "a fuss" among party members and leftists in Finland.[51] According to Aarne Kuusela, the immigrants' writings about

[47] Stina Ronkainen's letter to Armas Ronkainen, 22.11.1932. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 163.
[48] Sanni Reima's letter to Outi Reima, 22.10.1932. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 147.
[49] Nikolai Palpatsu's letter to Aleksi Palpatsu, 21.12.32. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 174.
[50] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 17.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 55. Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 4.2.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 129.
[51] Report on the state of SKP's cadres, 8.5.1934. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 3, d. 199, ll. 40-41.

Svirstroi's conditions were "not a fun phenomenon", while Kuusela himself was struggling with frustration and mental health issues.[52]

Finnish men worked as bricklayers, electricians, carpenters, and lumberjacks, whereas women were assigned to work also in the kitchens and other places of service. Still, many women worked outside with the men. When the immigrants arrived at the site, they were given a job which was often organised by the local authorities and with the help of the SKP's workers.[53] Finnish immigrant Matti Reima wrote: "It is nice to be here when you do not have to seek a job, since they will fix it for you".[54]

According to the SKP's archival sources, the party was responsible for organising jobs, propaganda work, and free-time activities among the Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi*. This work was conducted together with various other Soviet authorities which often led to confusion, as the immigrants themselves thought there were "too many commanders to know what to do or who to follow", causing problems between the workers and the leaders of the worksite.[55]

Most of the Finns earned around 4-5 roubles a day, but when the deductions for housing, food and other possible expenses were made, what was left for the next month was close to nothing. This, combined with the poor housing conditions and quality of food, raised questions about the nature of Soviet society and its promises to the workers of the world.

The task of the SKP's political workers was to explain the gap between Soviet utopia and reality. When the Finnish immigrants arrived in *Svirstroi* in the early 1930s, *korenizatsiya*, an active policy to "indigenize" Soviet minority nationalities, was still an ongoing official policy only to be enforced

[52] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 17.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 55. Aarne Kuusela's personal letter to J. K. Lehtinen, 24.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 59.
[53] Resolution of the Foreign Bureau of SKP's Central Committee, 29.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1251, l. 150.
[54] Matti and Sanni Reima to Outi Reima, 22.10.32. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 147.
[55] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 4.2.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 129.

by Stalin's cultural revolution. In practice, the immigrants rarely understood Russian and, therefore, the SKP was leading a separate community of its own in *Svirstroi* with propaganda materials printed in Finnish. The Finnish communists also had their own publishing company, *Kirja*, which published and sold Soviet newspapers and literature in Finnish. Outside the city, the company had six regional stores in the Leningrad *oblast* of which one was located in *Svirstroi*.[56]

The party was responsible for educating the immigrants in communist theory and practice to become, at least to an extent, Soviet citizens. Each of the Finnish barracks of *Svirstroi* had their own organisational cells, red corners, and a *stengazeta* board. Finnish propaganda was conducted, among other forms, through theatre, singing groups for girls and boys, a drama group, a brass band, an orchestra, and a mixed choir.[57]

Each of the barracks had their own "cultural committees" which organised the political work and leisure activities of their dwellers. This included plays, lectures about hygiene and, importantly, the publication of the *stengazeta*. The most important newspaper for the Finns was *Svirstroi*, published twice a week in Finnish.[58] The first edition of *Svirstroi* was published on the 25th of December 1932 to commemorate the 1918 revolution of Finland.[59] A commemoration ceremony was organised even in the memory of Finnish communists who had been shot by the opposition in Petrograd in 1920.[60] Later, a Finnish radio newsletter was edited six times a month in *Svirstroi*'s radio centre, and listening sessions were organised collectively in each barrack.[61]

[56] "Perepiska s Karkomatami AKSSR". The Archives of President Urho Kekkonen, Kustaa Vilkuna's archive of Äänislinna, mf. I 3C.
[57] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39. "Juhla," *Rintama*, No. 21/1932.
[58] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit*, 148–149.
[59] Characteristics on Svirstroi's Finnish employees written by Aarne Kuusela, 11.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 121.
[60] "Tuhatlukuiset joukot kokouksissa Elokuun kommunaardien muistopäivänä," *Vapaus*, No. 203/1932.
[61] Kalle Lepola's report to the SKP's Foreign Buro, Leningrad 7.1.1934. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1402, l. 15.

This was the core of the so-called "mass work" (*joukkotyö*) which was fully in place by spring 1933 and operated by Finnish party workers. As Ida Laukkanen, a young activist, described in a letter to her friend in May that she was spending her time "in a singing choir, in gymnastics practice, and in other useful activities". However, when she was talking about the 1st of May activities, in which she had participated in a parade and a play at the club, she stated that it was "nothing special" and, instead, she was interested to know whether the 1st of May festivities were fun back home in Suojärvi.[62]

It seems that many immigrants participated in the activities organised by political workers because they were either forced to do so or felt that it was necessary to avoid problems, or even because participation was a way to escape work. More often, when the Finnish immigrants discussed their leisure time, they wrote about dancing and alcohol consumption. A Finnish immigrant woman, Sanni Koksu wrote: "We are here. We are working and the work will not finish even if one works hard. We came here to get work and bread. This is what we got—nothing else is worth mentioning. There is a lot of booze, maybe I will become a boozer, too."[63] Alcohol truly seemed to be a problem, as a group of Finns had reportedly participated in a "spirit orgy" on New Year's Eve after which those involved lost their jobs and food cards.[64]

Organisations and Soviet propaganda in *Svirstroi*

Because of the large number of actors in *Svirstroi*, the work targeted towards the Finns was also rather diverse. For example, trade union membership was a contradictory question for the Finns.

[62] Ida Laukkanen's letter to Onni Martikainen, 14.5.1933. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 221.
[63] Sanni Koksu to Juho Hirvonen, 5.4.1933. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31.
[64] Proceedings of the follow-up concerning the spirit orgy, 1.1.1933, barrack no. 767. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 126.

At first, the Finnish immigrants were not allowed to join the unions due to being noncitizens of the Soviet Union.[65] According to J. K. Lehtinen from the SKP, this issue should have been solved by the regional committee as the immigrants should not be left "in the status in which they are right now". He reminded the Finnish party officials of *Svirstroi* that the trade union was going to be "a school of communism" for the Finnish immigrants.[66] These trade unions exercised propaganda work among the Finns despite their status and later, in the spring of 1934, Finnish immigrants of *Svirstroi* were reportedly joining trade unions under a special resolution of the Central Council of Trade Unions.[67]

Finnish immigrants were also drawn into the activities of the *Osoaviakhim*, a national defence organisation which organised reading groups, ambulatory libraries, and lotteries in *Svirstroi*. As in the case of trade unions, it remains unclear whether noncitizen immigrants could have been members of the *Osoaviakhim*, even if it did organise activities within the immigrant population. Aarne Kuusela, responsible for the SKP's propaganda work, reported that 1,100 Finns took part in the October celebrations of 1932 claiming that almost all of them had joined the *Osoaviakhim*.[68]

It is likely that the Finnish immigrants were actively involved in the activities of these different organisations, while their involvement was not completely voluntary. Those left outside these organisations might have faced pressure, labelling, or even removal to an inferior barrack.[69] The Finns of *Svirstroi* were also used as a positive example in Finnish communist propaganda. For example, a Finnish plumbing brigade, praised for its achievements in socialist competition, announced that its workers were "100 % members of OSO, MOPR and the League of Militant

[65] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 17.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 55.
[66] J. K. Lehtinen's letter to Kuusela, Elo and Holopainen, 5.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 106.
[67] Kostiainen, *Loikkarit*, 152–153.
[68] Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 17.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 55. Kostiainen, *Loikkarit*, 154–156.
[69] Rislakki and Lahti-Argutina, *Meillä ei kotia täällä*, 39.

Atheists".[70] Meanwhile, the Finnish Theatre of Leningrad, which also visited *Svirstroi* on its tour, later came up with a play called "*Oustroi*" depicting the socialist construction work of the "world's largest power plant".[71]

The Finns were also quick learners of speaking Bolshevik which, according to Stephen Kotkin and Steven Barnes, meant that Soviet citizens and Gulag prisoners learned how to express themselves by using Bolshevik vocabulary while maintaining their other identities and personal opinions.[72] In this sense, the Finns of *Svirstroi* used the language that they had learned from Finnish propaganda. For example, when a Finnish immigrant Aku wrote to his brother to inform that they had lost their child in *Svirstroi*, he added that those who belonged to the church "do not want to participate in this enormous socialist construction work, which is being made for the first time in the world, but they are lost in these details. They forget that the world's best people have sacrificed their lives in the barricades. Even for the Soviet Union, which is the model for shock work for the whole world, since the working proletariat all over the world creates a spark of hope for Soviet power in its battle against the class that has tried to smash it (*murskaajaluokka*)."[73]

Whether this was a way to make sure that the letter passed the censorship or a way to handle his personal losses, it was a typical letter from *Svirstroi*. All the difficulties that the Finns experienced were, for many, a sacrifice for the better life for all in the Soviet Union.

Deliberations on freedom, future & forced labour

[70] Declaration by Svirstroi's plumbing brigade of Alenius. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 195.
[71] "Huomio! Huomio!" *Vapaus*, No. 252/1932. "Oustroi," *Vapaus*, No. 275/1932.
[72] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 208-209; Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 65-66.
[73] Aku's letter to Hannes, 10.4.1933. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31, letter 221.

The most important aspect of control was, of course, the fact that the Finnish immigrants were not able to leave *Svirstroi* without permission from the OGPU. The Gulag system included different types of labour colonies, special settlements, and restrictions to stay in a certain territory while still having to pay administrative costs to the OGPU/NKVD.[74] Yet, as Stephen Kotkin has described in his book on Magnitogorsk[75], all these different forms could exist in one place and the organisation of work in *Svirstroi* was similar to the system in Magnitogorsk.

The Gulag system, which was an essential part of Soviet penal practices, was based on the ideas of isolating socially harmful elements and through labour "rehabilitating" those inmates who were possibly considered to be returned to Soviet society.[76] The Finns who had received a sentence of forced labour from one to three years, perceived this time as a period of trial after which they would receive full citizen rights and the freedom to choose a place of work and residence.

The Finns recognised that they were not completely free, and that coercion to work existed alongside control of foodstuff. Fulfilling the norms, or even better to exceed them, secured a better quality of food, while absence from work resulted in the loss of ration cards. Moreover, their nominal salaries were usually so low that when all the deductions for food, housing and memberships were made, the immigrants were left with almost no money for the next month. With no money and documents, they were forced to stay in *Svirstroi* – as EK's report on *Svirstroi* quoted a letter stating: "All Finns are prisoners here".[77]

In Finland, it was widely known that Soviet forest industry utilized forced labour. Therefore, Finland accused the Soviet Union of price dumping and the use of forced labour, while Finnish

[74] Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 17.
[75] Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 133-135.
[76] Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 16.
[77] Joensuun edust. til.kats No 5 toukokuulta, 6.6.1933. KA, EK-VALPO, KD 171/522-33.

newspapers published stories about forced labour camps.[78] It seems that most of the Finns who emigrated to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s did not believe these stories and treated them as anti-Soviet propaganda.

In their letters, the Finns of *Svirstroi* avoided describing their working conditions and, in most cases, they simply discussed their profession, salary, and the cost of food. However, they warned their friends and relatives that if they were still planning to emigrate to the Soviet Union, it would be better if they left with a Finnish passport and a permission to enter the country. In avoiding the topic of forced labour, numerous letters used similar phrasing to state that there was no need to worry and that their work would be finished no matter how hard they had to work.

Forced labour had many different aspects in the Soviet Union. Since there were many other restrictions for Soviet citizens, the boundaries between the free and the un-free, and between Gulag and non-Gulag, were often blurred.[79] According to Alessandro Stanziani, who has studied the early forms of forced labour in Imperial Russia, many believed that the main difference between free and forced labour was in the legal status of people.[80] The situation in the Soviet Union was, in many cases, not that much different, as the legal status of the illegal Finnish immigrants differed from the free workers in *Svirstroi* while the work itself was similar; the illegal jobseekers found work, but lost their freedom. Senni Kainulainen's sister wrote:

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[78] "Ennen kuolo kuin neuvostohelvetti," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 08.11.1929, s. 4 https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/sanomalehti/binding/1533855?page=4, Kansalliskirjaston digitaaliset aineistot. "Neuvostovenäläinen riistotyö," *Uusi Suomi*, 25.11.1930, s. 4 https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/sanomalehti/binding/1806377?page=4, Kansalliskirjaston digitaaliset aineistot.

[79] Oleg Khlevniuk and Simon Belokowsky, "The Gulag and the non-Gulag as one interrelated whole," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 16.3 (2015): 479-498.

[80] Alessandro Stanziani, "Free Labor—Forced Labor: An Uncertain Boundary? The Circulation of Economic Ideas between Russia and Europe from the 18th to the Mid-19th Century," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9.1 (2008): 40.

"Those who want to leave, their relatives need to apply, or they themselves need to apply from Moscow. Many have applied, because in this place the climate is deadly and many Finns have died, and many have got ill with tuberculosis. I have always been afraid of it but, so far, I have been safe and so has Antti. But I worry about our Pirkko, if only we could take her to some other place but we don't know when we will get the passports to move freely from one place to another. Pekkonen has applied to get there, we will see how it turns out. It is so, that you there have one thing [freedom] but lacking the other [work], and we here have that but not the first thing."[81]

Oleg Khlevniuk has noted that the definition of freedom in Soviet society between the years 1930 and 1952 is in many ways problematic. The Soviet justice system and penal practices forced people with minor offences into corrective labour conducted outside camps and colonies. In many cases, these partially free people were in a difficult position not knowing exactly how long their sentences would last or what kind of rights they had.[82] In the case of illegal Finnish immigrants, the question of status was one of the most acute.

The SKP's leadership was aware of the Finnish immigrant situation already in the autumn of 1931 before the largest waves of immigration. Tyyne Tokoi, leader of the Leningrad section of the SKP's Foreign Bureau, wrote about the problems these immigrants were facing. According to Tokoi, the OGPU insisted on creating a quarantine for the Finnish immigrant families—possibly in Leningrad's *Kivisaari* [Kamenny Islands] or in the form of an agricultural commune in Siberia. Tokoi herself thought that the plan for Siberia was better as the immigrants had only seen the rough side of the Soviet Union, having to "travel from jail to jail and finally being deported, possibly to deportation areas with disloyal materials, thieves, and bandits".[83]

[81] A sister's letter to Senni Kainulainen, 15.2.1934. KA, EK-VALPO, kotelo 31.
[82] Khlevniuk, "The Gulag and non-Gulag", 482-483.
[83] Tyyne Tokoi's letter to Kullervo Manner, 18.10.1931. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1196, l. 39.

At the end of November 1932, the leadership of the SKP defined the party's stance towards the illegal immigrants: these "economic refugees" were deserters but, in the near future, they were to be drawn in for building the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was necessary to arrange "special work" for the immigrants so they could be turned into "decent workers for socialist construction". Those immigrants who were members of the SKP lost their membership due to crossing the border without permission, and therefore could not be allowed to join the VKP(b) either. However, the SKP was ready to help restore these memberships on the condition that the ex-members would return to Finland for party work.[84]

After this statement, a group of ex-party members from *Svirstroi* addressed the SKP by letter—they were ready to correct their mistakes (crossing the border illegally) under the conditions set up by "the Party".[85] These former party members wrote they regretted their "crimes against the party and the working class" and wanted to join the party again and return to Finland, but only if seen necessary by the SKP.[86] These immigrants saw their future doing party work back home, but it is also possible that life in *Svirstroi* made them long for Finland. Not to generalise, the illegal immigrants had different expectations depending on their backgrounds and experience. Some probably thought *Svirstroi* was just a short, temporary stop before a brighter future in the Soviet Union. Aino Vaisanen, a young girl working at *Svirstroi*'s labour school, was asking whether it was possible to apply for party school and a candidate membership of the Komsomol already during the "quarantine period".[87]

[84] "The question on economic refugees," resolution by the Foreign Buro of the SKP's Central Committee, 29.11.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 73. In fact, some single, trusted, and often ex-member immigrants were drawn in for paid party work in *Svirstroi*. Aarne Kuusela's report from Svirstroi, 11.9.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 39.
[85] Characteristics on Svirstroi's immigrants. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 3, d. 194, l. 14.
[86] Letters from Svirstroi's immigrants to the SKP. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 3, d. 194, ll. 15–23.
[87] Aino Vaisanen's letter to [Antti] Pylsy, 11.1.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 127.

Aarne Kuusela claimed that the immigrants "have seen our socialist construction work a little too one-sidedly: in prisons, forest cabins, or *Svirstroi*". For this reason, Kuusela thought the immigrants who would be returned to Finland needed to practice their "political consciousness" also outside *Svirstroi*.[88] In December 1932, J. K. Lehtinen from the Leningrad section prohibited any ideas of sending ex-party members from *Svirstroi* to Finland en mass: "This is something which we will not give any further reasons for." However, he did allow a conditional return of party memberships to those who could pass the "first test" of socialist construction and "personal coaching"—only then would a return to Finland be considered.[89]

In November 1932, Kuusela wrote that the Finnish workers were informed about their time in *Svirstroi* to be "unlimited", and that the OGPU was going to report when it would be possible for them to apply for Soviet citizenship.[90] Kuusela's reports to the SKP about the living conditions of Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi* provoked an inquiry by the Leningrad Regional Committee of the VKP(b). The Foreign Bureau of the SKP insisted on clarifying, how long the Finnish immigrants were forced to stay in *Svirstroi* and other places "in internment with special status", and when they would "enjoy the rights of a Soviet citizen". The Bureau wrote: "According to our information, most of the immigrants are of decent proletarian material, which can be useful in constructing socialism and from which we should try obtain healthy material for the needs and tasks of Finland's proletarian revolution."[91] The revolution in Finland was, however, looming further in the future than everyday life in *Svirstroi*.

[88] Undated and anonymous letter (likely Kuusela's). RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 58.
[89] J. K. Lehtinen's letter to Kuusela, Elo and Holopainen, 5.12.1932. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 106.
[90] Kuusela's report to Moscow to the Party's Foreign Buro and to Leningrad to the OGPU. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, l. 56.
[91] Letter from the Foreign Bureau of the SKP to the Leningrad Regional Committee of the VKP(b). RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1250, ll. 76–77.

The harsh conditions and hunger during the winter of 1932-1933, experienced all over the Soviet Union, can be read between the lines of party reports. In the spring of 1933, Finnish immigrants were skipping work duties, applying to return to Finland, and even threatened a party official with violence. Those who criticized the deserting Finns were met with counterarguments, such as "You are also starving," or "There is nothing but water to put in the stew," and "The stuff confiscated by the GPU is not stolen, it has just vanished." Kuusela suggested that the OGPU should remove the rest of this clique, the "class enemies", for whom the party's message was simple: there was no going back to Finland, with or without permission, but when the Finns would return it would be "with rifles in our hands" and class enemies would be sent to Siberia and, finally, to Soviet Finland where similar power plants will be built just like in *Svirstroi*.[92]

Many of the illegal immigrants managed to return to Finland, although not much research has been done about these returnees, while others were sent further eastwards and, indeed, ended up in Siberia and other peripheral areas.[93] As a minority, the Finns of the Soviet Union, and especially the illegal immigrants, faced accusations, sentences and executions in the years of Stalin's Great Terror.[94] After working with the Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi* and Magnitogorsk, Aarne Kuusela was apparently sent to a collective fishery for party work in Murmansk where he was first arrested in January 1938 and then executed in Karelia on the 6th of March.[95]

[92] Aarne Kuusela's letter to the SKP's Foreign Buro, 2.4.1933. RGASPI, f. 516, op. 2, d. 1330, l. 28.
[93] The research project *Finns in Russia 1917-1964* of the National Archives of Finland collects a database on Finns who lived in the Soviet Union: https://kansallisarkisto.fi/en/the-national-archives-2/projects-2/finns-in-russia-19171964.
[94] According to general estimations, at least 70 per cent of all accused Finnish citizens were sentenced to death during the years of the Great Terror 1937-1938, while others were often sentenced to labour camps. According to the information of the *Finns in Russia* -project, a total of 647 Finns working in *Svirstroi* can be identified. Not all of them shared the same fate during the Great Terror, since many managed to return to Finland the same way as they entered to the Soviet Union, crossing the border illegally.
[95] Eila Lahti-Argutina, *Olimme joukko vieras vaan: Venäjänsuomalaiset vainouhrit Neuvostoliitossa 1930-luvun alusta 1950-luvun alkuun* (Turku: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2001), 259. Hugo Valtonen's personal folder. KA, EK-VALPO, folder No. 2019.

Conclusions

The history of the illegal Finnish immigrants in *Svirstroi* presents an interesting path for studying the Gulag system of the early 1930s, especially its cultural-political education role in the context of ethnicity and nationality. Unlike most nationalities in the Gulag, many Finns did not speak Russian and were unaware of the legal and administrative practices of the country. Despite the immigrants' atypical cases, their history reveals many aspects of cultural-political education, institutional practices, and everyday life in the Gulag.

The illegal Finnish immigrants juxtaposed their experiences in *Svirstroi* with the living standards and civil rights back in Finland. Although the global recession and political situation in Finland made some of the features in *Svirstroi*, such as organised work, housing, and food seem like an improvement, the quality of these features did not meet the expectations of the immigrants and led to disappointment expressed in their letters. Due to censorship, and perhaps because the immigrants still hoped their situation would improve, they did not write about forced labour or their legal status directly. Instead, they used periphrases such as "the work will not end" or "a time of trial", highlighting the role of work in their life, while many adopted the Bolshevik vocabulary.

The sentenced Finns were also a target of political education which was, in *Svirstroi*'s case, organised by the Finnish party officials. *Svirstroi*'s Finnish population had not only their own newspapers, literature, and activities in Finnish, but also a Finnish-speaking cadre. The SKP was also an unusual actor within the Gulag and, in comparison with the OGPU and the VKP(b), it had its own expectations about the nature of party work and propaganda within *Svirstroi*. Further research on other national communist parties would be required to understand their positions

within the Gulag and their relationship with the OGPU and the VKP(b), as the roles of all these authorities often wavered.

The SKP first treated the immigrants as "defectors" of the class struggle, and the party was not prepared to receive such a high flow of immigration from Finland. Nevertheless, the OGPU delegated the political and cultural education as well as part of the organisation of work to the SKP whose understanding of the illegal immigrants and their situation differed from the other authorities. By recognizing the immigrants as part of the working class, the party officials were searching for ways to re-educate the Finns through labour and transform them into full members of Soviet society. By doing this, the political workers were drawn into conflict with other party officials and OGPU officers in *Svirstroi*.

The SKP had close ties to Finland and its history and, therefore, the future of Soviet Finland was closely linked to the question of illegal immigration. Ultimately, the SKP brought the Soviet society to the immigrants from outside the Gulag, just as the KVChs did elsewhere in the Gulag with their labour campaigns and propaganda to increase production and to re-educate prisoners for Soviet society[96], but it was equally the SKP's own version of Soviet propaganda. Not all Finnish immigrants were to be seen as "defectors" because some of them could be used for the party's own purposes.

Differing views were present not only within the party workers and officials, as the whole Finnish immigrant population of *Svirstroi*'s was diverse and included people with various backgrounds—ex-party members were treated differently, while some immigrants had higher hopes than others regarding their lives in the Soviet Union. The expectations of both the immigrants and the Finnish

[96] Barnes, *Death and Redemption*, 58-64.

party officials were far from what would eventually happen to them in the late 1930s when many became victims of Stalin's terror.

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