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**THE MEMOIRIST AND THE EDITOR: WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE  
RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR IN KARELIA**

**МЕМУАРИСТ И РЕДАКТОР: НАПИСАНИЕ ИСТОРИИ ГРАЖДАНСКОЙ ВОЙНЫ В  
КАРЕЛИИ**

**Аннотация:** В статье через анализ мемуаров Фёдора Акуловича Лесонена, служившего в годы Гражданской войны в Карельском легионе, и через изменения, внесенные в текст мемуаров редактором Полиной Павловной Нежелской при подготовке рукописи к печати, исследуется, каким образом отображалась в советской историографии роль этого национального воинского подразделения в Гражданской войне в Карелии, что при этом умалчивалось и почему.

**Keywords / Ключевые слова:** Memory, Soviet historiography, Russian Civil War, Karelian Detachment, Karelian Legion, Karelian Battalion, Karelian Regiment, Vienan Karjala, Venehjärvi, Kem' / Память, советская историография, Гражданская война в России, Карельский отряд, Карельский Легион, Карельский батальон, Карельский полк, Беломорская Карелия, Суднозеро, Кемь.

Russian Civil War in borderline Olonets and Arkhangelsk *gubernii* was a perplexing entanglement of domestic and international actors: the familiar standoff of Reds and Whites was complicated by the involvement of pro-Bolshevik Finnish immigrants and an anti-Bolshevik Finnish volunteer force, as well as British, French, American, Italian, and Serbian troops, which were deployed in Russia as part of Allied intervention.

The fate of the town of Kem, a White Sea port on the Murmansk Railroad, can serve as an illustration of the swift transfer of power from one administration to another. As early as the summer of 1917, Kem railway workers established a soviet, which completely replaced the city's *zemstvo* government in March of the following year.<sup>1</sup> Soon afterward, anti-Bolshevik Finnish volunteer troops (dubbed *belofinny* — White Finns — in Soviet historiography) crossed the Russo-Finnish border and moved eastward toward Kem in an attempt to annex territory they considered to rightfully belong to Finland. Kem Bolsheviks were able to successfully repel this attack, but lacked the manpower and weapons needed to drive Finns back across the border, and the latter remained stationed in frontier villages.<sup>2</sup> Several months

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai A. Korablev et al. (eds), *Istoriia Karelii s drevneishikh vremen do nashikh dnei* (Petrozavodsk: Periodika, 2001), 346, 366.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

later, in July 1918, Allied troops pushing south from Murmansk arrived in Kem. They shot the leaders of the Kem soviet and occupied the town.<sup>3</sup>

While many residents of Kem were ethnically Russian, the borderland territories of Olonets and Arkhangel'sk *gubernii* were populated by Karelians, members of the Finno-Ugric ethnic group, who spoke a language closely related to Finnish. Karelians employed by the Murmansk Railroad responded to political uncertainty and frequent transfers of power by establishing the so-called Karelian Detachment, and with the aid of British command and supplies undertook a successful campaign to expel Finnish troops from Russian territory. However, the lifespan of this ethnic military unit was short: when a year later Allies attempted to mobilize Karelian troops for battle against the Bolsheviks, they refused and deserted, returning to their villages.<sup>4</sup>

The Civil War and foreign intervention in the Russian Northwest has received much attention from Soviet historians, who have published multiple monographs on the topic, as well as collections of relevant documents, and memoirs by Civil War participants.<sup>5</sup> The National Archive of the Republic of Karelia preserves materials gathered by local historians for one such memoir collection, published in 1963.<sup>6</sup> These materials include memoirs by Fedor Lesonen, a soldier of the Karelian Detachment. The fifteen-page typed transcript of Lesonen's memoir is especially interesting because it includes corrections local historian Polina Nezhelskaia made in order to prepare it for publication. In this paper, I will analyze the original text of Lesonen's memoir together with Nezhelskaia's stylistic and political interventions, exploring the way in which the Karelian Detachment was incorporated into the official Soviet historical narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps as a reflection of this military unit's tentative status, it has variously been called "Karelian Battalion," "Karelian Detachment," "Karelian Regiment," and "Karelian Legion." According to Lesonen, it was titled "Karelian Detachment" (*karel'skii otriad*) until the spring of 1919, when it was renamed "Karelian Battalion." In this paper, I therefore use the former term as the unit's "original" title. For reasons discussed below, little historical research has been published on the Karelian Detachment. See Nick Baron, *The King of Karelia: Colonel P. J. Woods and the British Intervention in North Russia 1918–1919* (London: Francis and Taylor Publishers, 2007); Elena Iu. Dubrovskaja, "Karel'skii batal'on i ego vremia: iz istorii natsional'nykh vooruzhennykh formirovanii na Severe Rossii v gody Grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoii interventsii," in *Istoriia Narodov Rossii. Materialy 15 Mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii* (Moscow: RUDN, 2011), 161–7.

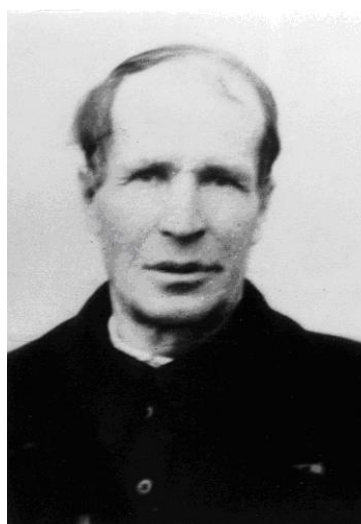
<sup>5</sup> For some examples, see Efim S. Gardin, *Razgrom belofinskoii avantiury (1921–1922 gg.)* (Petrozavodsk: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo Karelo-Finskoi SSR, 1947); Iakov A. Balagurov and Viktor I. Mashezerskii (eds), *Kareliia v period grazhdanskoi voiny i interventsii, 1918–1920. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Petrozavodsk: Karel'skoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1964); Mikhail I. Shumilov, *Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia na severe Rossii* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Viktor I. Mashezerskii (ed.), *Za sovetskuiu Kareliiu, 1918–1920. Vospominaniia o grazhdanskoi voine* (Petrozavodsk: Karel'skoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1963).

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In order to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Russian Civil War, Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Karelian branch planned to collect and publish memoirs of participants and eyewitnesses of the conflict in the Soviet Northwest. The Institute sent out calls for contributions to the collection to 125 respondents, and had by late 1958 collected a total of 79 memoirs.<sup>7</sup> Although the publication was originally planned for 1960, it did not come out until 1963 due to delays in collecting and editing the memoirs.<sup>8</sup>

Fedor Lesonen was one of these memoirists. He was born in 1900 in Sudnozero (known as Venehjärvi in Karelian), a small village located about thirty kilometers from the Finnish-Russian border. The son of a poor peasant, Lesonen began working at the age of nine, first employed as a farm hand (*batrak*) in his native village, then as a lumberjack in Finland. Between 1915 and 1917 he participated in the construction of the Murmansk Railroad. By the time his memoirs were recorded in 1958, he had spent most of his life working as a logging foreman.<sup>9</sup>



*Fedor Lesonen as a young man and in later years. Dates unknown. Source: Archive of the Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, R-O 1279.*

Along with employees of the Institute of History, a representative from the Karelian branch of the Institute of Party History was invited to participate in the project and charged with preparing Lesonen's memoir for publication.<sup>10</sup> This representative was Polina

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<sup>7</sup> Archive of the Karelian Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences (KarNTs RAN), fund (fond) 1, inventory (opis') 4, file (delo) 429, folio (list) 5.

<sup>8</sup> KarNTs RAN, f. 1, inv. 4, file 401, fol. 8—9; f. 1, inv. 44, file 10, fol. 15.

<sup>9</sup> National Archive of the Republic of Karelia (NA RK), f. R-3716 (Jaakko Rugojev's personal collection), inv. 1, file 853, fol. 16.

<sup>10</sup> KarNTs RAN, f. 1, inv. 4, file 413, fol. 12.

Nezhelskaia, who was, like Lesonen, an ethnic Karelian from a poor peasant family.<sup>11</sup> Born Pelageia Potapova in 1919, between 1921 and 1923 she lived in Finland with her parents.<sup>12</sup> After they died of an illness in 1928, she was placed in an orphanage. Having graduated from Petrozavodsk Teachers' College in 1938, she returned to north Karelia and worked in a small village school for a year, after which she began her successful Komsomol career: in 1944, the future General Secretary of the Communist Party Iurii Andropov, then the head of the Karelian Komsomol, praised her initiative and skill in organizing a national skiing competition in 1940, and partisan detachments deployed to the frontline a year later.<sup>13</sup> In December 1939, she went on her second trip to Finland, this time in fulfillment of a "special task from the Central Committee of the Communist Party."<sup>14</sup> After the war she attended the Karelo-Finnish State University (later Petrozavodsk State University), where she studied history and wrote her thesis on the Winter War. She then attended graduate school in Moscow, and in 1954 successfully defended her dissertation, entitled "Finnish Right-wing Social Democrats in Service of Finnish Reactionary Forces and American Imperialism (1944—52)."<sup>15</sup> After graduation, she held, among other jobs, the position of junior scholar first at the Karelian branch of the Institute of Party History, and then at the Institute of History of the Karelian Branch of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.<sup>16</sup> In this capacity she had participated in preparing three publications on the Civil War in Northwestern Russia.<sup>17</sup> Since 1969, she was employed at the Archive of the Karelian Regional Committee of the Communist Party, from which she retired in 1974.<sup>18</sup> A native speaker of Karelian and Finnish, Nezhelskaia translated Lesonen's memoirs from Finnish to Russian in 1958, and had completed all editorial corrections to the narrative by June 1959.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> NA RK, f. P-3, inv. 6, file 7509, fol. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 6. In the fall of 1921, inhabitants of several north Karelian villages, aided by Finnish volunteer troops, rebelled against Soviet power. As the Red Army suppressed the rebellion, many Karelians joined Finnish troops in their return to Finland in early 1922, some voluntarily and some not. When the Karelian government announced amnesty for such refugees, many, like Nezhelskaia's parents, returned to Soviet Karelia.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 5, 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 3, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 3. These publications were: Mashezerskii, *Za sovetskuiu Kareliu*, Efim S. Gardin (ed.), *V bor'be za vlast' Sovetov. Vospominaniia uchastnikov bor'by za ustanovlenie Sovetskoi vlasti v Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo Karel'skoi ASSR, 1957), and Viktor I. Mashezerskii and Naum F. Slavin (eds), *Bor'ba za ustanovlenie i uprochenie Sovetskoi vlasti v Karelii. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Petrozavodsk: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo Karel'skoi ASSR, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> NA RK, f. P-3, inv. 6, file 7509, fol. 1v, 40.

<sup>19</sup> NA RK, f. R-3716, inv. 1, file 853, fol. 74.



*Polina Nezhelskaia in 1950 and 1969. Source: NA RK, f. P-3, inv. 6, file. 7509, fol. 3, 6.*

Fedor Lesonen began his recollections by describing his native village, Sudnozero, located far away from any large population centres, whose inhabitants only found out about the 1917 revolutions from soldiers returning from battlefields of the Great War.<sup>20</sup> Lesonen then described the attack of Sudnozero from the west by Finnish forces in the spring of 1918.<sup>21</sup> After the invasion, Lesonen together with several other unmarried local young men decided to head east toward Kem in search of food and military aid to fight off the Finns.<sup>22</sup> Soon after reaching the railroad and finding employment there, Lesonen joined other Karelian peasants in the Karelian Detachment, which originally numbered only thirty men, but soon grew to several hundred and then thousand troops.<sup>23</sup> In early August of 1918, the Karelian Detachment began moving westward from Kem, pushing Finnish troops toward the border. Although two British officers and several soldiers initially joined the Karelians, they soon returned to Kem, and the Detachment continued to operate independently.<sup>24</sup> After successfully driving Finnish troops out of Soviet Russia while suffering only a few casualties, the Karelian Detachment remained on the border to guard it until March 1919, when it was recalled to Kem.<sup>25</sup> [http://nbsr.petrus.ru/article/add\\_step2.php?art\\_id=482 - ftn25](http://nbsr.petrus.ru/article/add_step2.php?art_id=482 - ftn25) There Karelian troops underwent further military training, but most deserted and returned to their villages upon finding out that the Detachment was to be redeployed to fight Bolshevik troops.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., fol. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., fol. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., fol. 2—3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., fol. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., fol. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., fol. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., fol. 9.

Two main themes figure prominently in Lesonen's narrative. The first one is perpetual food scarcity. Because of Karelia's harsh climate, peasants were never able to grow enough food to last them through the winter, and relied heavily on government support. Lesonen noted that the ability of a Soviet representative to supply Sudnozero with bread in 1918 was the decisive factor in winning peasants over to the side of the Soviet power.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, he pointed out that many Karelians joined the Allied-sponsored Karelian Detachment exactly because of the food rations that every enlisted soldier and his family received.<sup>28</sup> Allied officers were well aware of their power as sustenance-providers: Lesonen remembered that when demanding that Karelians fight against Bolshevik troops, a British officer demonstrated a piece of bread that was baked for cattle and said that that was the kind of bread Red Army soldiers were reduced to eating, implying that Karelians would starve if they switched over to the Bolshevik side.<sup>29</sup> Several times Lesonen mentioned that Karelians were reduced to eating "surrogate bread," which was baked from flour mixed with ground straw or tree bark. However, even though obtaining access to food was vitally important, Lesonen made a point to show that he did not live by bread alone: when describing his return home after deserting the Karelian Detachment, he noted that surrogate bread baked by his mother was much more palatable than British rations, which came at the cost of fighting the Red Army.<sup>30</sup>

The second pronounced motive running through Lesonen's memoir is his frequent and faithful retelling of Soviet narratives. Despite his acknowledgment of the Soviet power's almost nonexistent presence in his native village, he never questioned its legitimacy, and professed his opposition to its "enemies" — Finnish forces and Allied troops.<sup>31</sup> Lesonen's vivid if somewhat clumsy description of the tragic death of the Kem soviet representative to Sudnozero and other supporters of Soviet power at the hands of the Finns acquired the qualities of a heroic epic: "They were tortured and ordered to give up their fight for the power of the soviets... After they refused, [Finns] forced them to dig their own graves and shot them all. The last words of our heroes directed at White Finnish bandits were: 'You can murder us, but the ideas of Communism are eternal. Our deaths will be avenged by our comrades in arms, who will carry on the banner of Communism.'"<sup>32</sup>

When talking about Karelians who supported Finnish nationalists, Lesonen made sure to mention that they were rich *kulaks*, with poor peasants presumably standing behind the Red

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., fol. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., fol. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., fol. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., fol. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., fol. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., fol. 3.

Army.<sup>33</sup> In line with Soviet rhetoric, he dubbed Allied troops “ravenous imperialists” (*alchnye imperialisty*) pitted against “the young Soviet republic.”<sup>34</sup> And once the last White Finnish troops were expelled in the summer of 1920 and Soviet power established in Karelia, Lesonen blamed foreign spies and internal saboteurs for its failures, such as inability to provide adequate food for its population.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while he retold the events of the Civil War in Karelia as he remembered them, Lesonen made sense of these events through a Soviet ideological lens.

So what changes did a historian need to make to this account, which seems to already be so thoroughly ideologically “correct”? Some of Polina Nezhelskaia’s edits were purely stylistic — she supplied additional information about the people, places, and events that Lesonen mentioned, removed repetitions, and clarified sentence structure.

Her other changes were predictably political. She worked hard to remove the frequently mentioned confusion which the memoirist and his fellow Karelians experienced in the face of the multifaceted conflict that so unexpectedly engulfed their formerly isolated native region. Lesonen called himself a “dark, illiterate peasant,” and stated that during the 1917 revolutions most of his fellow villagers “had only a vague idea of the events which were taking place during these historic days.”<sup>36</sup> Lesonen’s emphasis on his supposed ignorance was strategic: he often used it to excuse his statements or behavior that ran counter to Soviet ideology. For example, he noted that one of the slogans of the Karelian Detachment was “Karelia for Karelians!” (*Kareliia dlia karel*), which implied administrative autonomy from both Finland and Soviet Russia, but immediately stated that at the time he and his comrades did not understand that it was a “narrowly nationalistic” rallying cry.<sup>37</sup>

Peasant confusion implied ideological wavering, and Nezhelskaia’s dark blue ink pen crossed out all Lesonen’s references to peasant “darkness.” She then proceeded to edit peasant consciousness into Lesonen’s narrative, sometimes in ways almost comical: for example, the memoirist recalled that during his trip from Sudnozero to Kem in 1918, he stopped in a neighboring village. While Lesonen noted that during the stopover he and his companions “discussed affairs” (*govorili o delakh*), after Nezhelskaia’s edits it turned out that the group “discussed [their] determination to fight the White Finns” (*govorili o nashei reshivosti borot’sia protiv belofinnov*).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., fol. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., fol. 2, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., fol. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., fol. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., fol. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., fol. 4.

When describing British efforts to train the Karelian Detachment to fight the Bolsheviks, Lesonen stated that “even then we did not understand who those Englishmen were and for what purpose they have come to the Russian land.”<sup>39</sup> In the final version of the narrative, Nezhelskaia reversed the meaning of this sentence completely, rewriting it as “We clearly understood that [through intensive military training] we were prepared [by the Allied command] for fighting against the Red Army and Soviet power.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite his firm profession of Soviet values throughout the memoir, Lesonen acknowledges that the Karelian Detachment lacked any definitive political program and pursued only the strategic goal of expelling Finnish troops from Karelian villages.<sup>41</sup> Needless to say, Nezhelskaia removed this admission, and ascribed to the Detachment “the readiness to fight for the rule by the people and for Karelians’ autonomy” (*vse my byli gotovy na bor’bu za narodnuiu vlast’ i za samostoiatel’nost’ Karelii*).<sup>42</sup> Similarly, she rewrote Lesonen’s phrase “[Karelian Detachment] came under the influence of [British troops]. Our undertaking fell into their hands, even though at the time we failed to understand it,” as “[Karelian Detachment] was disarmed [by British troops],” thus shifting the focus from the allure of Allied food supplies and ideology to the superiority of their weapons.<sup>43</sup>

Neither ideological nor pragmatic affinity of Karelian peasants with the many enemies of Soviet power made it past Nezhelskaia’s pen. Interestingly, Lesonen’s explanation of “anti-Soviet” acts through lack of proper consciousness echoes the prevalent interpretation of peasant behavior offered during the Civil War. For example, in November 1922, the leadership of the recently-founded Karelian Labor Commune proclaimed that Finnish troops which have again crossed the Russian-Finnish border were joined by the ignorant part of the local population (*k zagranichnym otriadam prisoeдинilas’ takzhe nesoznatel’naia chast’ mestnogo naseleniia*).<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in 1920 a Red Army brigadier reported that “thanks to the ignorance (*nesoznatel’nost’*) of the population and counter-revolutionary agitation, the [government of the Karelian Labor Commune]... has found no support among Karelians.”<sup>45</sup> At around the same time a member of the Karelian government and ethnic Karelian Fedor Pottov reported that some Karelians joined Finnish forces not because of “a conscious goal of fighting against the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., fol. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., fol. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., fol. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The Karelian Labor Commune (*Karel’skaia trudovaia kommuna*) was established on June 7, 1920, and united under its government territories of Olonets and Arkhangelsk *gubernii* populated by Karelians. Edvard Giulling, “Obraschenie k karel’skomu narodu,” *Kommuna*, November 22, 1921, 1.

<sup>45</sup> NA RK, f. R-550, inv. 1, file 1/13, fol. 29.



revolution, but just to have a piece of bread.”<sup>46</sup> In stark contrast to contemporary interpretations, forty years after the end of the Civil War, neither “lack of consciousness” nor hunger could still be used as an excuse for Karelian peasants’ anti-Soviet behavior.

Curiously, Lesonen’s narrative of peasant confusion is uncomfortably weaved with his clear emphasis of Karelians’ initiative and activism. In his original memoirs, Lesonen presented his fellow Karelians as often proactive and willing to organize in order to achieve their goals. For example, he noted that in the spring of 1918, peasants began gathering to discuss ways of liberating themselves from Finnish occupation without any guidance from the Bolshevik Party.<sup>47</sup> Along with most other references to peasant initiative, Nezhelskaia crossed out this sentence entirely, which resulted in a much weakened agency of the Karelian peasant.

At the same time as Nezhelskaia was removing both peasant initiative and their “darkness” from Lesonen’s text, she worked hard to write in the role that the Communist Party supposedly played in the events described in the memoir, often running counter to the original narrative. Lesonen mentioned on several occasions the weakness or even nonexistence of Soviet power in his village. For example, he stated that in 1918 “there was no Bolshevik organization in our *volost*, nor were there single Bolsheviks that could have guided us onto the correct path.” Nezhelskaia removed this sentence, substituting instead an entire paragraph describing the underground work of individual Bolsheviks in Karelia.<sup>48</sup> Lesonen wrote that even after the cessation of military activities in 1920, no true Communists were present in his village, which allowed for a renewed Finnish attack on Karelia in winter of 1921—22.<sup>49</sup> Nezhelskaia crossed out this critique as well.

Out of Lesonen’s memoir, Nezhelskaia attempted to create a narrative that left no room for either peasant confusion or independent leadership, ascribing to them a certain unequivocal Soviet consciousness not present in the original text. Her corrections brought Lesonen’s memoir in line with the general theme of the publication which she was preparing: the introduction to the 1963 memoir collection stated that “the memoirs published [in this collection]... demonstrate the leading role of the Communist Party in organizing the struggle against interventionists and the White Guards in Soviet Karelia,” and said nothing about the agency of individual workers and peasants.<sup>50</sup>

Karelian archives have preserved another version of Lesonen’s memoir, one that Nezhelskaia rewrote completely in preparation for publication. This time, she used archival

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<sup>46</sup> NA RK, f. R-550, inv. 1, file 1/12, fol. 96—96v.

<sup>47</sup> NA RK, f. R-3716, inv. 1, file 853, fol. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., fol. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Mashezerskii, *Za sovetskuiu Kareliiu*, 3.

sources and undertook an investigative trip to northern Karelia in order to provide more background information.<sup>51</sup> The Karelian Detachment, renamed “The Karelian Volunteer Detachment” and placed inside quotation marks, still figured prominently in the final draft of the memoir, although Nezhelskaia attempted to strengthen the role Kem soviet played in establishing it, and stressed the Detachment’s refusal to fight Bolshevik troops, which Karelians supposedly declared immediately after Allied command took over their unit.<sup>52</sup>

Nezhelskaia also brought in class consciousness to explain ideological blunders in Lesonen’s narrative. Lesonen mentioned that many of the men who deserted the Karelian Detachment and were therefore cut off from British food supplies, were reduced to serving the Finns, their former adversaries. Nezhelskaia revised this statement substantially, emphasizing that the number of such renegades was small, and used their class origins to interpret their behavior: according to her, these men were not from poor, but from middling peasant families (*iz seredniatskikh semei*), which presumably were less trustworthy to begin with.<sup>53</sup>

One significant and unexpected shift of emphasis that comes through in the final draft of the memoir is Nezhelskaia’s discussion of the role of women in the Karelian Detachment; a point that Lesonen made only in passing. The Detachment included a female unit, which numbered seventy people and was headed by Sofia Perttu, whom Lesonen described as a tall and strong woman who had worked as a farm hand (*batrachila*) her whole life.<sup>54</sup> Lesonen mentioned that this female detachment was trained along with the men to fight the Finns, and participated in battle.<sup>55</sup> Nezhelskaia, however, corrected him, writing that while the Karelian women have, indeed, undergone military training, they remained in Kem when the men headed eastward.<sup>56</sup> According to Nezhelskaia, while the idea of creating a female detachment originated with the Karelians, the British command refused to allow it to participate in battle and instead Karelian women were reduced to working as cleaners in hospitals and officers’ homes.<sup>57</sup> Nezhelskaia also emphasized that during the Detachment’s trip eastward, local Karelian women provided an invaluable service by rowing the troops and their supplies up the Kem River.<sup>58</sup>

Although most of Nezhelskaia’s edits can be separated into “stylistic” and “political,” at times such a distinction cannot be easily made. For example, for the final draft of the memoir,

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<sup>51</sup> NA RK, f. R-3716, inv. 1, file 853, fol. 74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 81.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 82.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 5—6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 6.

<sup>56</sup> I believe it likely that Lesonen simply did not know whether the women participated in battle or not.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 82.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

Nezhelskaia edits the history of the Karelian Detachment by removing much information about the battles that the unit had fought, emphasizing instead the support that Karelian troops received from the local population, and the comical cowardliness of both the British officers and the anti-Bolshevik Finnish soldiers.<sup>59</sup> It is, however, unclear whether she was attempting to downplay the role of the Karelian Detachment as an independent and effective military unit, or simply removed Lesonen's description of the unit's military exploits because it was fragmentary and too tedious for the publication's target audience.

Equally curious are the changes that Nezhelskaia had not made to Lesonen's narrative. Perhaps the most remarkable example is her treatment of the direct relationship Lesonen proclaimed between peasant support of Soviet power and the latter's ability to supply villages with provisions. Although it would seem likely that a Party worker like Nezhelskaia would emphasize the *ideological* attractiveness of Soviet power, she not only did not remove, but strengthened the claim that Soviet representative's ability to supply the village with provisions was the decisive factor in garnering peasant support for the regime.<sup>60</sup> While any reference to this relationship between Soviet power's ability to supply bread and its local support was eventually removed from the memoir, its retention in the second draft points to the inherent ambiguity present in memory, whose entire range of meanings cannot be immediately grasped even by the most careful of editors.<sup>61</sup>

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After Nezhelskaia's thorough reworking, Lesonen's memoir lost much of its singularity and began to read like any late-Soviet narrative. The opening description of Sudnozero in revolutionary times was replaced with the following generic passage:

It was a hard life for the people inhabiting Karelian villages on the Finnish border... before Soviet power was established there. Economic and political development of the region was progressing slowly... Local population – the peasants – underwent exploitation at the hands of Finnish timber salesmen and merchants, *kulaks* from their own villages, and churchmen and gendarmes, who were fulfilling the wishes of the tsar and the government of exploiters...<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., fol. 83.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., fol. 2.

<sup>61</sup> For the inherent multivalence of language and Soviet censors' attempts to anticipate it, see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Jan Plamper, "Abolishing Ambiguity: Soviet Censorship Practices in the 1930s," *Russian Review* 60 (2001): 526–44.

<sup>62</sup> "Тяжело жилось народу в пограничных с Финляндией карельских деревнях... до установления советской власти. Экономическое и политическое развитие края шло медленно... Местное население — крестьяне — подвергались эксплуатации лесопромышленников и торговцев Финляндии, кулаков... своих деревень,

Nezhelskaia even inserted verses from the epic poem *Kalevala* into the mouths of Karelian peasants, making Lesonen's memoir look like a script for a musical: poor peasants, supposedly, often "talked to their comrades about the dawn of a new life, about the fulfillment of Karelian people's dreams, about their hopes

For the better growth of forests,  
For the ripening of the barley,  
For the richness of the Northland,  
For the joy of *Kalevala*."<sup>63</sup>

Although this rewritten text echoes the original narrative, it is no longer Lesonen's own. Dissected by the editor's sharp pen, the complex memoir became a fairy tale where good and bad characters were clearly distinguishable, and no room was left for doubt and confusion.

The manuscript of the memoir collection was finally completed in 1960 and submitted for review, among others, to Mikhail Kiuru, a professor of history at Petrozavodsk State University. In his report, the reviewer acknowledged the "big and important task the Institute undertook in preparing for publication the memoirs of participants of the Civil War in Karelia."<sup>64</sup> Kiuru, however, was not in agreement with the selection of memoirs collected under the heading "Behind the Occupiers' Lines" (*V tylu u okkupantov*), which also included Lesonen's recollections. He deplored that ten recollections in the selection were not sufficient to give the full picture of "the heroic struggle of workers of Karelia in the enemy rear in 1918-1920, which they conducted under the direction of the Communist Party."<sup>65</sup> More significantly, Kiuru questioned the role of the Karelian Detachment, which figured prominently in these memoirs, especially the fact that it was commanded by British officers. Kiuru warned that without a detailed commentary by the editors, the recollections of members of the Karelian Detachment "could be misinterpreted by the readers" (*mogut byt' chitateliami poniaty nepravil'no*).<sup>66</sup>

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духовенства и жандармов, выполнявших волю царя и государства мироедов..." NA RK, f. R-3716, inv. 1, file 853, fol. 76.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., fol. 78. English translation is quoted from John M. Crawford (trans.), *The Kalevala: The Epic Poem of Finland* (New York: J.B. Alden, 1888). The original text runs as follows: "Мы [беднота]... с товарищами говорили о новой жизни, о том, что теперь сбудутся чаяния карельского народа, мечтавшего о том: "Чтоб поляны украшались,/ Чтоб леса здесь красовались,/ Чтоб взморье богатело,/ И весь край был полон хлебом." Nezhelskaia here is quoting a verse of *Kalevala* from Leonid P. Belskii, *Kalevala. Finskaia narodnaia epopeia* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia N.A. Lebedeva, 1888), p. 34.

<sup>64</sup> KarNTs RAN, f. 1, inv. 44, file 107, fol. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., fol. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., fol. 10.

The collection of memoirs was finally published in late 1963. However, the selection titled “Behind the Occupiers’ Lines,” which included memoirs by Fedor Lesonen and other soldiers of the Karelian Detachment, was omitted from the book. The resulting publication discussed the Karelians’ role in the Civil War only as soldiers within the framework of the Communist Party, never mentioning the Karelian Detachment, which was the focal point of Lesonen’s and others’ memoirs.

Frederick Corney has addressed the question of memory transfer in the Soviet context, showing how historians in service of the Bolshevik party have “edited” the narrative of the October revolution.<sup>67</sup> The history of the Karelian Detachment demonstrates that some narratives, no matter how sanitized, were found to be too seditious and were therefore deleted from the corpus of Soviet history. Although the memory of this military unit was preserved in the archives, it revealed too much ideological wavering and non-Party sanctioned initiative by the titular nationality of the Karelian Republic, and could not pass the bar of institutional censorship. The soldiers of the Karelian Detachment could transmit their memory of its role in the Civil War through oral narratives told to family and friends, but in the Soviet Union their recollections could not be published and thus reach a wider audience. Even though Soviet-era fictional accounts of the Civil War authored by ethnically Karelian writers occasionally described a Karelian peasant who did not comfortably fit into either the White or the Red camp, the ambiguous position of this people was not explored by historians until after 1991.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Frederick Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

<sup>68</sup> For examples of fictional treatment of the Karelians’ ambivalent position in a war between Reds and Whites, see Nikolai M. Iakkola, *Vodorazdel* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1985), which was originally published in three installments from 1949 to 1963, and Antti N. Timonen, *My karely* (Petrozavodsk: Kareliia, 1981), originally published in 1969. Another prominent Karelian writer, Jaakko Rugojev, originally wrote down Fedor Lesonen’s memoirs, which Polina Nezhelskaia later edited (see note in NA RK, f. R-3716, inv. 1, file 853, fol. 74). Rugojev collected other memoirs of the Civil War from Karelian legionnaires and civilians, although to my knowledge this issue was not reflected in his published works. For a post-Soviet treatment of the Karelian Legion by historians, see Dubrovskaja, “Karel’skii Batal’on,” and Marina A. Vitukhnovskaia-Kauppala, “Kareliia dlia kareli! Grazhdanskaia voina kak katalizator natsional’nego samosoznaniia,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2010): 245—82.

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