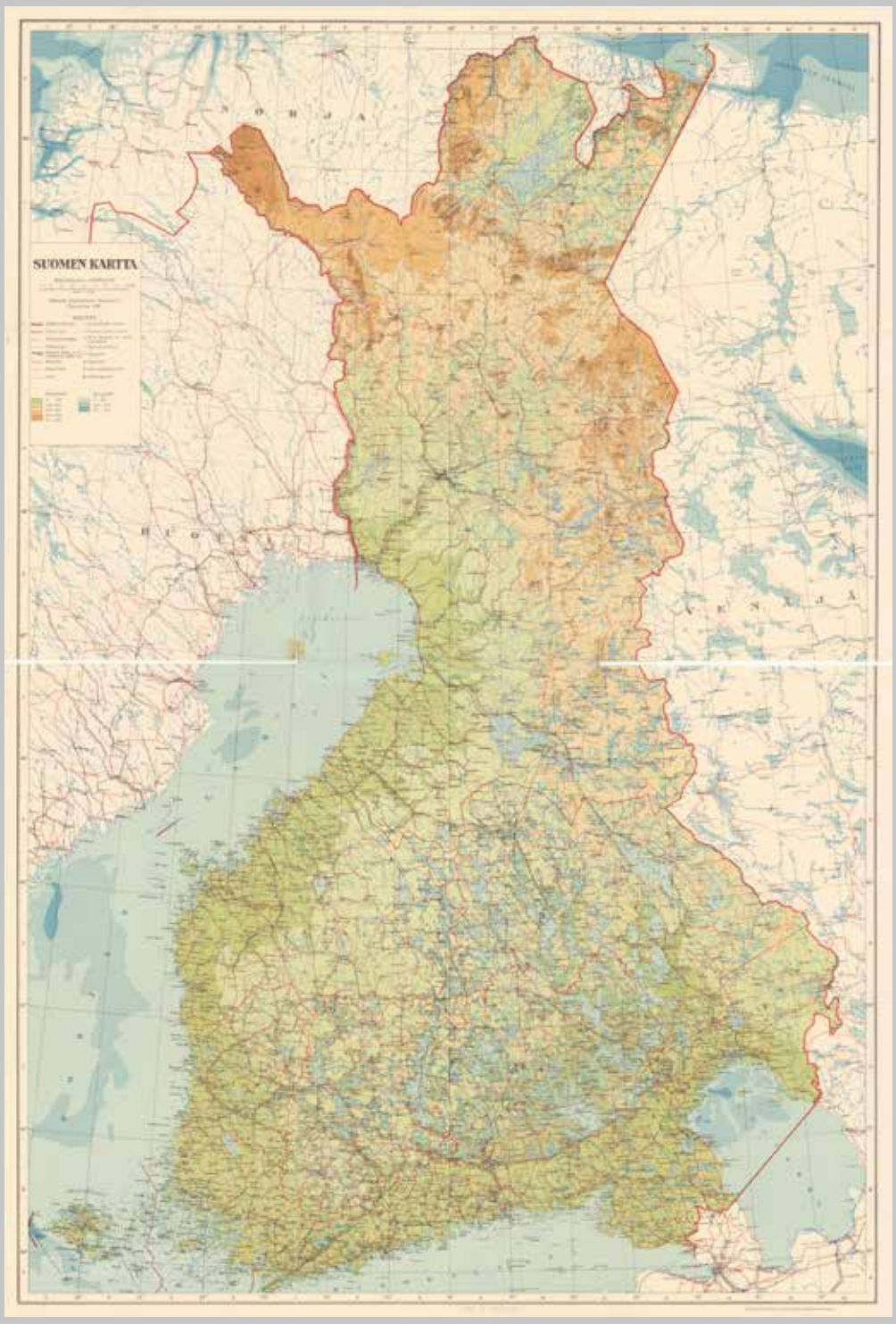

Map of Finnland, 1933. National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

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SOVIET PRISONERS OF WAR IN FINLAND AND FINNISH PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE SOVIET UNION DURING THE SOVIET-FINNISH WAR OF 1941–1944

Abstract
The mortality among the Soviet prisoners of war in Finland and the Finnish POWs in the Soviet Union during the Soviet-Finnish War of 1941–1944 was equally high. One third of the prisoners perished on both sides of the front. Thanks to the studies carried out recently in Finland, the situation of the Russian POWs and civilian detainees is fairly well known. Some Russian historians and official quarters have, however, begun politicizing the subject. It will hardly contribute to improving our knowledge and assessment of the Soviet-Finnish war of 1941–1944.

Keywords: Finland, Soviet Union, prisoners of war, Soviet-Finnish War 1941–1945

The Soviet-Finnish War began on 25 June 1941 and ended in September 1944. It is known in Finland as the Continuation War (i.e., continuation of the Winter War of 1939–1940). Finland waged the war of 1941–1944 as an unofficial ally of Hitler's Germany (Vehviläinen 2002). In the course of the war, Finnish armed forces took approximately 65 thousand Soviet prisoners of war, and Soviet armed forces – approximately 3 thousand Finnish POWs. Such a strong difference in the absolute numbers of prisoners of war is explained by different warfare methods used by the belligerent parties. A small country like Finland was not able to use its human resources as mercilessly as the Soviet Union, Germany and Japan during the Second World War. Almost all Soviet POWs were taken by Finnish forces in 1941–1942, when Finland was on the attacking side.

According to the Regulations of the IV Hague Convention of 1907 Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, the government of the state which took prisoners was obliged to maintain them and ensure their safety. The Convention forbids to kill or harm the military of the hostile country who had surrendered or laid down the arms (Durand 1978). Finland had adhered to the Hague Convention. However, during the Continuation War, the Finnish General Headquarters decided that since the Soviet Union had not signed the Convention, its provisions were not binding for Finland. The General Staff guaranteed only some basic rights to the Soviet prisoners of war; however, in practice, the international conventions were binding in Finland, at least in terms of customary law. Moreover, some postwar sentences for war crimes deemed that the Hague Convention had remained in force during the war. It should be noted that Finland did not ratify the Geneva Convention of 1929, because some chapters of the Finnish Military Penal Code were deemed to be in conflict with its stipulations.

As a matter of fact, the Soviet Union informed Germany through Swedish diplomatic channels in June 1941 that it pledges to fulfil the stipulations of the IV Hague Convention of 1907, if Germany did the same. The Soviet Union was not willing to apply the Geneva Convention of 1929 with regard to the exchange of information concerning prisoners of war, because – experiencing almost a pathological fear of espionage – it did not wish to allow foreign inspections in its prisoner camps. Finland did not receive this announcement. Nevertheless Germany rejected the Soviet proposal, because it planned to destroy the entire "Jewish-Bolshevist" nation, rendering the question of the treatment of the prisoners of war irrelevant (on the German policy with regard to the Soviet prisoners of war and the "Commissar Order"

Soviet POWs led by a Finnish soldier, Karelia, August 1941. German press photo. National Digital Archives, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1591

stipulating the extermination of the Bolshevist commissars and the Communist intelligentsia, see Streit 1978; Streim 1981). As a result, the opportunity to confirm and improve the status of POWs according to the IV Hague Convention during the Soviet-Finnish war was lost. It is, however, reasonable to doubt if the Soviet Union would have respected the stipulations of the Hague Convention. In the real circumstances of 1941–1944, the Soviet Union did not comply with them.

All the prisoners of war were to be registered by the Finnish Red Cross. Finland sought to exchange information on the POWs with the Soviet Union through the International Red Cross but the exchange never materialized. Every prisoner had a Red Cross card where his personal whereabouts and transfers were recorded and updated. The cause of death was usually established by someone with no medical education. The information recorded in these cards is often incomplete in many other respects too but there is no evidence whatsoever of a large-scale forgery. The registration of prisoners often lagged by months after the start of their captivity. The International Red Cross monitored the prison camps occasionally and brought about some improvements. The most important reason for the slight improvement

in the treatment of prisoners, however, was the fact that in 1942 the Headquarters and the government realized that Germany would not win the war.

The number of registered Soviet prisoners of war, who died in Finnish captivity in 1941–1944, was 19 thousand, but according to my estimation, an additional ca. 3 thousand POWs died before they had been registered (Kujala 2008, 228–229, 307–311 [my study on the mortality, illegal killings and incomplete registration of Soviet POWs is based on the files of the Finnish Army, the Finnish Red Cross and court materials in the National Archives, and the database of the deceased Soviet prisoners of war produced by the National Archives]).

Altogether, one third of the 65 thousand Soviet prisoners of war in Finnish captivity died – a majority of them due to diseases caused by malnutrition. Diseases, malnutrition and hard physical labour contributed to the high death toll (Kujala 2008, 24–25, 151–156, 228–229, 268–269, 307–311; on the mortality of the Soviet POWs and the inaction of the authorities, see Danielsbacka 2016). During the Pacific war of 1941–1944 "only" one fourth (27%) of the American and other Western prisoners of war died in Japanese captivity (Sturma 2020, p. 514); and yet the Japanese became infamous because of their cruel treatment of the POWs.

Nevertheless the mortality rate of the German prisoners of war in Soviet camps and the Soviet POWs in German camps was even higher (Streit 1978, 105, 136, 244–246; Streim 1981, 208; Streim 1982, 174–178; Otto, Keller and Nagel 2008; MacKenzie 1994, 511). The catastrophic situation that emerged in Finnish camps was caused by the general food shortage during the winter of 1941–1942, the authorities' unpreparedness for receiving such a large number of prisoners, and sheer indifference to their fate. During the Second World War, Finland remained a democratic country, although the civic and political rights were restricted as was the case in other Western combatant states. The Finnish authorities (i.e. the government or the General Headquarters) did not pursue a policy of extermination similar to the German policy towards Soviet prisoners of war. Nevertheless, from the humanitarian point of view, the fate of Soviet POWs in Finland was horrifying. Many Finns hated and despised the Russians (Luostarinen 1986). Soviet prisoners were held responsible for the fact that their government unleashed war against Finland in 1939, and again threatened its independence in the Continuation War. The Finnish government successfully concealed the fact that in June 1941 Finland was the actual aggressor, bound by its informal alliance

with Germany (Jokipii 1988). The Soviets commenced hostilities against Finland on June 25, 1941, knowing that Finland had joined the German camp and that the Finnish army would soon join in Hitler's invasion of Russia launched on 22 June. This allowed the Finnish government to claim that Finland was fighting a separate and defensive war provoked by the Soviet air attack on 25 June. After the end of the Winter War, the Soviet government had, in fact, constantly pressured and bullied Finland. Until the German-Finnish talks in the first half of 1941, the Finnish government felt that the country was left utterly at the mercy of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin adopted a softer approach in the spring of 1941, but by then it was too late.

1200 Soviet prisoners of war were shot by Finnish forces. This amounts to 5.5% of the overall number of deceased Soviet prisoners, and on the international scale it was quite high. The majority of these 1200 were killed illegally (Kujala 2008, pp. 268–269 and *passim*).

The Hague Convention provided only mild punishments for disciplinary infringements committed by prisoners. The guards of the camps sometimes shot one or several (never more than ca. ten POWs at the same time), to set an example for the others and to intimidate them. These prisoners had not obeyed the orders or had been caught after a failed escape attempt. The guards would report to the camp commander that POWs had failed to stop despite a warning shot being fired in the air, or because they had offered violent resistance. Under such circumstances, it was legal to shoot a prisoner. Nevertheless, the majority of similar cases were illegal punishments for disobedience. The guard would tell the prisoner to walk ahead of him and shoot him in the back. Their immediate superiors turned a blind eye on this practice and pretended to believe the reports.

The Commander of the Army Corps facing Leningrad ordered his subordinates to "immediately execute disobedient prisoners at the place of work" and "eradicate politruks without mercy", regardless of the orders of the General Headquarters. According to Finnish law, only the courts of law were entitled to sentence people to death. As a result of the order, over 100 prisoners of war were shot from November 1941 to June 1942. The General Headquarters investigated the case already in 1942–1944 but no charges were brought before the end of the war (Kujala 2008, pp. 166–220). The case was unique. The other Army Corps issued no similar orders.

Even today the majority of Finns do not know much about the horrific conditions to which Soviet POWs were subjected in the prison camps during the Continuation War. People tend to believe only

that they were treated humanely in Finnish farms. In 1943-1944, thousands of well-behaved POWs were sent to work in the farms, and no serious problems emerged concerning their nutrition and health, nor their employers' safety. Had the authorities had enough courage and understanding to send obedient prisoners to farm labour already during the first winter of the war, the mass mortality resulting from malnutrition and diseases in the prisoner camps could have been avoided. Finnish political and military leaders were the prisoners of their own extremely negative view of the enemy – which prevented them from averting the worst possible scenario (Danielsbacka 2016).

The letter of Soviet laws and regulations concerning the treatment of the enemy POWs, mirrored the highest international standards; the practice, however, was completely different. The treatment of Finnish soldiers captured by the Soviet forces was hardly better than that of their imprisoned combatants on the other side of the front. The high mortality rate resulting from malnutrition, diseases and hard labour was a normal situation in Russian prisoner camps.

The majority of the Finnish prisoners of war were captured in the summer of 1944, and they survived only thanks to the fact that they were imprisoned in the Soviet Union for several months only, until the late autumn of 1944. By contrast, longer imprisonment was usually deadly for the Finns captured in 1941–1942. In the autumn of 1944, diseases were spreading rapidly in the Soviet POW camps. Many of the POWs who were allowed to return to Finland managed to do so – literally at the last minute. Of the Finnish soldiers captured by the Soviet forces during the Continuation War, no less than one third died. The mortality rate was thus identical on both sides of the front. In absolute numbers the situation was worse on the Finnish side, where 22,000 of Soviet prisoners of war perished – in comparison to 1,000 (or slightly more) deceased Finnish POWs. Sanitary and living conditions the prisoners were confined to were completely insufficient on both sides (on the Finnish POWs in the Soviet Union in 1941–1945, see Frolov 2004).

In Soviet prisoner camps, Finnish POWs encountered violent interrogations and political discrimination, in addition to the cruelty typical of all prisoner and concentration camps regardless of political system. The Soviet authorities sought to brainwash the prisoners with their propaganda and to recruit spies among them to be used after their repatriation. All prisoners were put under the authority of the *Glavnoye upravleniye po delam voennoplennykh i internirovannykh* (*Главное управление по делам военнопленных и интернированных*,

Head Directorate for the Affairs of the Prisoners of War and Internees, GUPVI), an unit of the infamous NKVD. In Finland, the POWs were subordinated to the army, which was internationally a standard practice. Some of the Finnish prisoners of war in the Soviet Union were shot or punished without due legal proceedings or judgement, in violation of international law. Finns were not subjected to mass executions like the Polish officers in 1940, however (Frolov 2004).

We should not forget that in 1941 Finnish soldiers shot some surrendering Soviet soldiers – in many cases on order of their commanding officers. The German and Finnish successes evoked an impression that the Soviet Union was facing imminent and complete defeat, and therefore there was no need to treat the enemy humanely. Nevertheless, the majority of the Finnish rank and file considered the killing of defenceless prisoners a disgrace. In this regard the attitude prevailing in the Finnish army was entirely different from that of the German Wehrmacht (see Kujala 2008 and 2009).

The Continuation War ended in September 1944 with the signing of the armistice and the retreat of the Finnish army beyond the frontier of 1940. The Finnish Army suffered a number of defeats in 1944, but was not crushed (the last major battle of the war, that of Ilomantsi in August, was actually a Finnish victory; Stalin was more interested in conquering Berlin than Helsinki). Finland neither surrendered nor was occupied (the hostilities could be ended in 1944 after the Soviets withdrew their demand that Finland should surrender; many Anglo-American history books on World War II, however, claim that Finland capitulated in September 1944). All these circumstances contributed to the low number of the Finnish prisoners of war. It also deserves to be mentioned that not only the defeated party, i.e. Finland, but also the winner, the Soviet Union, agreed to repatriate the prisoners of war after the ceasefire – the Finnish POWs following the repatriation of the Soviet prisoners from Finland (Vehviläinen 2002).

Many German and Japanese prisoners of war were forced to stay in the Soviet Union for several years after the end of the war. Only a few Finnish POWs were repatriated by Soviet authorities much later than the spring of 1945. The last prisoners returned to Finland in 1955. The fate of some Finnish POWs remains unknown. Apparently, they shared the fate of the three thousand Soviet prisoners who died before they were registered by the Finnish authorities.

The soldiers of the Soviet Army were forbidden to retreat or surrender under any circumstances whatsoever. The repatriated Soviet prisoners of war were sent to the "filtration camps", where the

"spies" and "cowards" were "detected", and subjected to punishments as "traitors of Motherland". The POWs repatriated from Finland at the end of 1944 were the first Soviet prisoners of war who returned from captivity, and therefore they were treated more harshly than their comrades in misery freed in Germany in 1945. Some of the soldiers repatriated from Finland were sent to the penal battalions on the German front, where they could "exonerate themselves" from the allegations of treason. Other repatriated prisoners, also charged with high treason, were sentenced to imprisonment in labour camps. Some of those who had been collaborating with the enemy were sentenced to death (Merridale 2006).

After the war Finland managed to maintain parliamentary democracy with market economy and political freedoms, but it was obliged to consider the foreign policy interests of its Eastern neighbour, which emerged after the Second World War as one of the two superpowers. According to the terms of the Finnish-Soviet armistice signed in September 1944, Finland – but not the Soviet Union – was obliged to bring to justice its citizens who had committed war crimes. Their cases were examined by military and civil courts of justice in conformity with Finnish laws (Kujala 2008). After the last trials and sentences in 1949, the question of the war crimes committed by Finnish soldiers sank into oblivion. Historians from many countries, however, have recently begun to pay attention to the "wrongdoings" committed by their own governments and soldiers during the Second World War. In 2004-2008, the Finnish National Archives carried out a research project "Finland, Prisoners of War and Displaced Persons 1939–1955" (see i.a. *POW Deaths* 2008; Westerlund 2009). Some studies referenced in this article were conducted under the auspices of this project. The project also produced databases on the deceased Soviet POWs and civilians mentioned below (see *NARC Databases*).

At the beginning of the Continuation War, the military administration in the occupied Soviet (Eastern) Karelia deemed that the victory of Germany and the defeat of the Soviet Union were unavoidable and imminent and began the preparations for the annexation of this territory (Soviet or Russian Karelia must not be confused with the former Finnish Karelia, which was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940, recovered by the Finnish Army in 1941, and again annexed by the Soviets in 1944). Soviet Karelians and Vepsians (Finnic peoples) were to become Finnish citizens, and at the same time Russians and all other "non-national elements" remaining in the occupied territory were to be deported to Russia

after the end of the war. Many of them were sent to concentration or internment camps established in the occupied territory. Finnish internment camps differed from German concentration camps. The extermination of detained individuals was not their purpose, but the living conditions there were often inhumane. Altogether, 25,000 people were imprisoned in Finnish internment camps, and 4,300 of them died (17%) (see Laine 1982).

During the Continuation War, the Finnish military authorities handed 2,900 Soviet prisoners of war over to the Germans, and received 2,800 Soviet prisoners from them. In addition to "*Volksdeutsche*" (Soviet Germans), the German authorities were interested in Baltic and Caucasian nationals, as they intended to use them as labour in the territories occupied by Germany. Meanwhile, the Finnish authorities were interested in Soviet prisoners of Finnish, Ingrian, Karelian and Vepsian descent, intending to settle them in the occupied territories or enlist them in the army. Finland and Germany exchanged Soviet prisoners intended to be used as workforce or to obtain military intelligence from them. Of the approximately 400 Jews who were captured by the Finnish troops, 54 were handed over to the Germans. 52 of them were killed by their new hosts and only two were returned to the Finnish authorities and then repatriated to the Soviet Union in 1944.

In 1941-1942, the Military Counterintelligence of the Finnish General Headquarters handed over to the Germans 520 political prisoners of war (commissars and other politically undesirable people), to be liquidated by them, obviously because the Finns were unwilling to do it themselves. 328 of those were Russians, 67 Ukrainians and 48 the above-mentioned Jews (the Jews were handed over primarily because of their alleged political activity but a tinge of antisemitism cannot be excluded). This operation was conducted in secrecy and outside the scope of the normal exchange of prisoners between Finland and Germany. It was a clear violation of Finnish laws and international conventions concerning the prisoners of war. In November 1942, the Finnish state police handed over to the Germans eight Jewish civilian refugees who found themselves at its disposal. When considering the participation of Finland in the Holocaust, the fate of the ca. 50 Jewish prisoners of war must also be remembered (on the exchange of Soviet POWs between Finland and Germany and the fate of political POWs, see Suolahti 2017; on the POW administration and disciplining of the German army in Finnish Lapland, see Silvennoinen 2008; Otto 2008; on Finland and the Holocaust, see Muir and Worthen 2013). At the same time, Finnish citizens of Jewish descent were not subjected

to any kind of discrimination during the Second World War. Some Jewish officers had to cooperate with Wehrmacht officers stationed in Finland (the Wehrmacht was responsible for the front in Lapland, a place unsuitable to German soldiers).

Sandarmokh in Russian Karelia is the burial ground and graveyard for thousands of Russians, Finns and individuals of other nationalities who were secretly executed there in the late 1930s by the NKVD. A couple of Petrozavodsk historians, Sergei Verigin and Iurii Kilin, have recently proposed a "scientific hypothesis" according to which, some of the victims of Stalin's mass murders buried in Sandarmokh were, in fact, the Soviet prisoners of war shot by the Finnish army. The number of the victims of the Finnish army is, allegedly, counted in hundreds or even in thousands. The two Petrozavodsk historians seem to believe that hundreds or even thousands of prisoners of war were sent to Sandarmokh to face the firing squad. As a matter of fact, there was no prison camp there, and the majority of the POWs had been transferred to Finland or the reconquered Finnish Karelia. The closest POW camp was situated in Medvezh'egorsk approximately ten kilometres away from Sandarmokh. The Russian Military History Association based in Moscow and endorsed by the Kremlin has carried out excavations in Sandarmokh, most likely to find evidence to support the "scientific hypothesis". The *Memorial* is the organization recording the Soviet Union's totalitarian past and monitoring human rights in contemporary Russia. Two of its active members in Russian Karelia have been arrested and one of them, Iurii Dmitriev, has been sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment. His sentence seems to be merely politically motivated. The aim of these operations is most likely to partially whitewash Stalin and the NKVD, and to belittle their crimes, to intimidate and silence the people active in the *Memorial*.

The "scientific hypothesis" was discussed in an English paper published in an online journal in Russia (Kujala 2019), and there is no need to repeat its argumentation. The "scientific hypothesis" is groundless. While the Finnish army did not indeed have a clean record with regard to the Soviet POWs, the attempt to burden it partially with the guilt for Stalin's crimes is a flagrant distortion of facts. Every nation should face the dark aspects of its own history without trying to whitewash them by arguing that others have sinned too.

In April 2020, an inquiry committee of the Russian Federation announced that it would begin to investigate what it referred to as "the destruction of the Soviet prisoners of war and members of the Slavic civilian population in concentration camps set up in Karelia by the

Finnish occupation authorities". According to the announcement, the crime was classified as genocide. The maltreatment of Soviet POWs, civilian ethnic Russians and other "non-national elements" in Soviet Karelia in 1941-1944 is an undeniable fact. It does not, however, amount to a genocide. Allegations about Finnish gas chambers do not increase the credibility of the genocide charge. It should be remembered that the death toll among the German POWs in Soviet prison camps, both proportionally and in absolute numbers, was higher than that of the Soviet POWs in Finnish captivity (MacKenzie 1994, 511; Streit 1978, 105, 136, 244–246). The current regime in Moscow bolsters its support among the population by claiming that foreign countries and foreigners constantly threaten Russia and that its neighbours deserve no confidence. The charges of alleged genocide and also the "scientific hypothesis" concerning Sandarmokh serve this political aim.

Furthermore, it appears that the inquiry committee and the two Petrozavodsk historians place trust only in the wartime NKVD records (if I am not mistaken, the restrictions on access to these were lifted in 2012), and seem to have an almost blind faith in those, while dismissing all the other sources as simply untrue. In fact, one should never take any document whatsoever at its face value. Historical research has methods to establish the relative veracity of documents. The NKVD and *Smersh* (the counterintelligence agency of the Soviet Army) gathered materials in 1944 to be used against the wartime government in Finland. Some materials of the *Smersh* have been available since the war, and they are tendentious. One of the *Smersh* cases I examined was not invented but it was strongly exaggerated (*Chudovishchnye zlodeianiia finsko-fashistkikh zakhvatchikov* 1945, 221–222, 236–238; cf. Kujala 2008, 126–134). Many statements of witnesses or defendants in Finnish court materials pertinent to war crimes are also tendentious and some of them are entirely false, and they cannot be taken at their face value either. Documents are the starting point of historical research, not its final conclusion.

One last observation: The content and propagandistic spirit of the wartime documents of the NKVD and *Smersh* reflect the situation when Finland was still considered an enemy, i.e. up to 1944. This situation prevailed until the end of the Second World War, that is, until the spring of 1945. Must we conclude that official Russia has, at least in part, returned to circumstances that prevailed before the armistice of September 1944 and the surrender of Germany and Japan in 1945? Have people considered sufficiently how wise it is to be led by 77-year old war propaganda?

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