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The National Question in Finnish Communism: Leninist-Stalinist-Kuusinenist Theory and the Finland-Swedish Minority in the Inter-War Period

Everything changes. . . . Social life changes, and with it the "national question" changes, too. At different periods different classes enter the arena, and each class has its own view of the "national question." Consequently, in different periods the "national question" serves *different interests* and assumes different shades, according to *which* class raises it, and *when*.¹

– J.V. Stalin 1904

The contradiction between socialism and nationalism is arguably the most studied ideological opposition in the history of modern European political thought. Ever since the inception of the socialist labour movement in the mid nineteenth-century, enormous amounts of ink have been spilled on attempts to either transcend or reinforce the apparent contradiction between international working class solidarity and nationalist sentiment. Every classical socialist thinker has wrestled with the question – from Marx, Engels and Kautsky to Luxemburg, Bauer, Lenin and Stalin – and all self-respecting communist parties during the twentieth-century had a specific policy on the so-called national question. After the collapse of communism, a great number of studies have aimed to describe and explain the ways in which ruling European communist parties in general, and Soviet international organizations in particular, tried to harness the power of nationalism for communist causes in Europe and liberation movements in the colonies. As a result, contemporary scholarship agrees that nationalism was a central, yet historically variant, ingredient in the policies of communist movements throughout the 20th century. Consequently, the supposed incompatibility of the opposing ideologies of nationalism and internationalist communism is a myth decidedly busted by post-Cold War scholarship.²

Despite the wide-ranging political and scholarly interest in the topic, the role of nationalism for communist movements in Western liberal-democratic states, especially states with significant ethnonational minorities, remains neglected by scholars. The main aim of this chapter is to investigate this historical phenomenon by way of a particular empirical case study; namely, the communist movement in the binational state of Finland in the inter-war period. Here Leninist-Stalinist nationality

¹ J.V. Stalin, "The Social-Democratic View on the National Question," Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1904/09/01.htm>. Italics in the original

² John Schwarzmantel, "Nationalism and Socialist Internationalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Beuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 635–655.

theory was put to work both in relation to the bourgeois dominated Finland-Swedish minority and in relation to the rise of fascism in Finland.

We argue that contemporary research has been dominated by a depersonalized 'clash of discourses' paradigm in which the main task for the historian is to describe how the agents managed to combine two contradictory political ideologies. This perspective tends to reduce the role of nationalism in communist political movements to instances of deviation, while, simultaneously, equating the question of nationalism with loyalty to the state, an issue that, albeit important, only partially elucidates the relationship between communism and nationalism. In contrast, we use a contextualist perspective for understanding the ways in which national questions were an integral element in the communist movement that went beyond issues of state loyalty.

The Leninist-Stalinist Theory of the Nation

Lenin and Stalin considered the national question to be absolutely crucial for communist revolutions both at home and abroad. Consequently, both Lenin and Stalin wrote several articles explicitly on the national question, and the position they developed was subsequently adopted as the official policy of the Soviet Union and the international communist organizations under its control. The most significant ideological innovation of Lenin and Stalin was, undoubtedly, their fruitful incorporation of nationalism in the Marxist view of the development of capitalism. National claims were no longer derided as merely 'false consciousness', but supported as a legitimate stage in the historical development towards communism. This was based on the supposition that consciousness of nationhood and consciousness of class traveled together. After all, nationalism, they believed, must rely on the identification and construction of an indigenous people (the nation) in opposition to the largely cosmopolitan ruling classes of Europe. Accordingly, Lenin proclaimed that "the struggle [of the masses] against all oppression, for the sovereignty of the people, or the nation [is] progressive."³

The question resonated deeply within the Marxist tradition; Marx himself had stated, on the topic of the conflict between Irish and English workers, that any nation that oppressed another forged its own chains.⁴ The idea was that the bourgeois hegemony in each nation would be strengthened when

³ Quoted in Andrea Graziosi, "Communism, Nations and Nationalism", in *The Cambridge History of Communism. Volume 1: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917–1941*, eds. Silvio Pons & Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 456.

⁴ Karl Marx in a confidential communication to German socialist leaders that was later to become famous, regarding the British rule in Ireland. See Ian Fraser & Lawrence Wilde, *The Marx Dictionary* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 147.

workers from different nations were agitated to act against one another. In other words, the question of national self-determination was a decisive part in the global communist revolution, even if Marx, and particularly Engels, made a sharp distinction between progressive historical nations and reactionary peoples without history; only the former had the necessary conditions for – and a right to – sovereignty.⁵

However, Lenin's and Stalin's ideological innovation translated in principle into support for the right of every nation to self-determination, even up to the point of separation and the formation of independent states. In the early years of the Bolshevik regime, this right was also exercised by former members of the Russian Empire, such as Finland and Ukraine among others. Nonetheless, the period in which succession from Bolshevik-ruled Russia was a practical possibility was very short, and most minority areas had been brought back under Soviet control within a few years, with the exception of Finland, the Baltic States and parts of Poland. The *de facto* right of national self-determination ended with the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922. However, more significant for Western European communism is the fact that the right to self-determination remained central to the Soviet constitution, even if devoid of meaning within the union. The constitutions of 1924, 1936 and 1977 all declared that the republics of the federation were sovereign and possessed the right to secede at will from the Soviet Union. As Walker Connor has argued, this symbolic paragraph played a very important role in Comintern propaganda about the Soviet Union as the supporter of oppressed peoples both in the colonies and in multinational states.⁶

Until Khrushchev's so called secret speech about the cult of personality surrounding Stalin and the deplorable consequences thereof at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, Stalin was an unassailable ideological authority, both within Finnish and international communism. Stalin's specialty as a Marxist theoretician was the question of nationality, within which he made a name for himself in 1913 with one of his most important works, *Marxism and the National Question*, originally published under the title *The National Question and Social-Democracy* in issues 3–5 of the Bolshevik journal *Prosveshchenye* ("Enlightenment").⁷ After the October Revolution of 1917, Stalin was named People's Commissar for Nationalities in the first Soviet government, a seat he held until 1923. Even before he emerged victorious from the struggle for power following Lenin's

⁵ Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52–59.

⁷ Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 64.

death in 1924, Stalin was an expert in questions of nationality – both in his own eyes and in those of others.⁸

Stalin wrote *Marxism and the National Question* primarily as an indictment of the Austrian Social Democrat Otto Bauer. Bauer was a leading Austro-Marxist ideologue and social democratic politician whose first work, *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie* (1907), elevated him as a theoretician within the international workers' movement.⁹ In addition to having his sights set on Austrian social democracy and its national program, which he considered flawed, the General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia (the Bund) was also in Stalin's ideological aim. The combination of socialism and Jewish minority nationalism within the Bund was heavily influenced by the Austro-Marxist idea of national cultural autonomy as a non-territorial principle of governance for a multinational democratic state.¹⁰

According to Stalin, policies of cultural autonomy relied on a faulty theoretical footing. The most egregious false conclusion was that the idea of cultural autonomy spiritualized the concept of the nation by differentiating the national character of a people and the material conditions for their life in a way that Stalin considered un-Marxist. What Bauer called national character was, for Stalin, merely "a reflection of the conditions of life, a coagulation of impressions derived from [the] environment".¹¹ According to Stalin, it was the soil, the territory, that was the basis of the nation and, therefore, also the starting point for a Marxist policy of nationality: "How can one [like Bauer] limit the matter to national character alone, isolating and divorcing it from the soil that gave rise to it?"¹² Stalin accused Bauer of mystification and brought up the Jews as an example of how the Bauerian principle of national character failed to correspond to material and political realities:

Bauer's point of view, which identifies a nation with its national character, divorces the nation from its soil and converts it into an invisible, self-contained force. The result is not a living and active nation, but something mystical, intangible and supernatural. For, I repeat, what sort of nation, for instance, is a Jewish nation that consists of Georgian, Daghestanian, Russian, American and other Jews, the members of which do not understand each other (since they speak different languages), inhabit different parts of

⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 35.

⁹ Michael Forman, *Nationalism and the International Labor Movement: The Idea of the Nation in Socialist and Anarchist Theory* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 95–96.

¹⁰ Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *The Great Challenge: Nationalities and the Bolshevik State, 1917–1930* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1992), 28.

¹¹ Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1945), 14.

¹² *Ibid.*

the globe, will never see each other, will never act together, whether in time of peace or in time of war?¹³

In Stalin's view, Bauer had misunderstood the very idea of a nation. In order to correct this both unscientific and politically detrimental misapprehension, Stalin presented his own definition of a nation, a definition of a concept that, three decades later, would have a great ideological importance for Finnish communism in general and Finland-Swedish communism in particular:

A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.

It goes without saying that a nation, like every other historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end.

It must be emphasized that none of the above characteristics is by itself sufficient to define a nation. On the other hand, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be absent and the nation ceases to be a nation.¹⁴

Even if Stalin considered the four criteria constituting a nation (a common language, territory, economic life, and mentality) to be equal parts, he was of the opinion that the basis of nationhood was, primarily, a "large and stable stratum connected with the land" that serves to "naturally rivet the nation together", i.e., a resident agrarian population.¹⁵

Importantly, Stalin had a clear answer to the question: "[w]hat must be our attitude towards [minority] nations which for one reason or another will prefer to remain within the general frame-work [i.e. a democratized state]?"¹⁶ – an issue that would later be relevant for the Finland-Swedes. According to Stalin, in a state with "complete democracy"¹⁷, there was no longer a need for the majority nationality to oppress national minorities (i.e., minority groups that constituted a nationality in accordance with the four prerequisites), nor for the national minorities to create culturally autonomous alliances over state borders, since their demands would be met:

A minority is discontented not because there is no national union but because it does not enjoy the right to use its native language. Permit it to use its native language and the discontent will pass of itself.

A minority is discontented not because there is no artificial union but because it does not possess its own schools. Give it its own schools and all ground for discontent will disappear.

¹³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11. Italics in the original.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70.

A minority is discontented not because there is no national union, but because it does not enjoy liberty of conscience, liberty of movement, etc. Give it these liberties and it will cease to be discontented.

Thus, *national equality in all forms (language, schools, etc.) is an essential element* in the solution of the national question. A state law based on complete democracy in the country is required, prohibiting all national privileges without exception and all kinds of disabilities and restrictions on the rights of national minorities.¹⁸

Stalin's four prerequisites for nationality became a Leninist-Stalinist guideline to determine which groups could legitimately claim to constitute a nation, with the associated right to self-determination. These Bolshevik tenets of national self-determination legitimized, among other things, its recognition of Finland's independence on 31 December 1917¹⁹, and the Bolshevik solution to the national question became a matter of practical policy in the Soviet Union, which was formally a federation. According to Russian-American historian Yuri Slezkine, the first five-year period (1928–1932) of the Soviet Union was “the most extravagant celebration of ethnic diversity that any state had ever financed”.²⁰ Until 1936, all nationalities had, in principle, a right to secede from the state.²¹ Nations were recognized on both a personal and a territorial basis, despite the fact that the former could be interpreted as an expression of Austro-Marxist cultural autonomy.²²

The Binational Setting of Finnish Communism

Swedish was until the turn of the 20th century the main educational and administrative language in the Grand Duchy of Finland, which had been an autonomous part of the Russian Empire since the Kingdom of Sweden lost its eastern part to Russia in 1809. The elite of Finland spoke Swedish, but Swedish was also the language of peasants, fishers and workers in the coastal regions of southern and western Finland. The large majority of Swedish-speakers in Finland belonged to the latter social groups. Many municipalities were monolingually Swedish as around 14 percent of the population of Finland was Swedish speaking in 1880. As a response to the rise of majoritarian Finnish ethno-nationalism in the latter part of the 19th century, the Swedish-speakers consolidated and mobilized as a minority nation on the ideological basis that the Swedes in Finland were not Finns nor Swedish-speaking Finns but rather a Swedish nationality in Finland. According to this minority nationalist theory, the Swedish nationality of Finland was distinctly separate from but equal to the Finnish nationality of Finland, i.e.,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 72–73. Italics in the original.

¹⁹ Not only Lenin, but also Stalin and Trotsky were signatories for the recognition of Finland's independence by the Council of People's Commissars.

²⁰ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism”, *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414.

²¹ Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*, 192.

²² According to the Austro-Marxist principle of personality, a nation consists of individuals who share a national character, regardless of where they are.

the ethnic Finns. Together these two main nationalities (ethnoses) of Finland formed the (political) binational people of Finland, Finland's demos. Finland-Swede, a self-descriptive ethnonym for the Swedish-speakers, was introduced in the early 20th century to emphasise ethnic distinctiveness and domicile in Finland.²³

In 1906, a minority nationalist party called the Swedish People's Party (SPP) was formed due to democratisation in Finland in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Although the SPP was basically a bourgeois party, it managed to gather the majority of the Swedish-speaking vote in the first democratic parliamentary elections of Finland in 1907 with 12.6 percent of the total vote. The Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) received 37 percent of the vote and won the election.²⁴

The downfall of the Russian Empire due to the upheavals of the First World War paved the way for Finland's independence, which was declared on December 6, 1917. At the beginning of 1918, Finland fell into civil war between revolutionary Reds and bourgeois Whites. The war ended in victory for the Whites in the spring of 1918. Most of the leaders of the Reds escaped to Soviet Russia, where they founded the Communist Party of Finland (the CPF) in August 1918. The CPF was illegal in Finland and until 1944 its leadership and key organisations operated out of the Soviet Union. The SDP quickly reformed after the war, but the new non-revolutionary line of the party prompted many members to leave the Social Democrats and turn to communism. In May 1920, the Socialist Workers' Party of Finland (Suomen sosialistinen työväenpuolue; SSTP) was formed as a domestic branch of what historian Tauno Saarela for simplicity's sake has called Finnish communism.²⁵ Finnish communism was, however, neither a monolingual nor a mononational phenomenon as the republic of Finland was both officially bilingual and de facto binational.

The question of nationality was of ideological and strategic importance for the Finnish communists, particularly the Finland-Swedish communists. The socialist Finnish society they were working towards would liberate the working majority of Finland-Swedes from capitalist exploitation and bourgeois oppression. The oppression directed towards Finland-Swedish workers was also considered more severe, since the kind of workers' education that had been practiced among the Finnish-speaking working class rarely reached Swedish-speaking workers. In the minds of the Finland-Swedish communists, it was also crucial that the workers should participate in class struggle *without* compromising their Finland-Swedish national identity. In fact, the transition to socialism was intended to strengthen the vital necessities of the Finland-Swedish *nationality* and secure its future in Finland.

²³ Max Engman, *Språkfrågan: Finlandssvenskhetens uppkomst 1812–1922* (Helsingfors: SLS, 2016).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Tauno Saarela, *Suomalaisen kommunismin synty 1918–1923* (Helsinki: Kansan Sivistystyön Liitto, 1996), 16–17.

As we will show, this communist vision of a future for the Finland-Swedes was grounded in Marxist-Leninist theory, and particularly in Joseph Stalin's premier contribution to this theoretical construct prior to the Russian revolution: *Marxism and the National Question* (1913).²⁶

The Finland-Swedish communists were active in a political field that was constituted along minority nationalist lines. It was therefore of utmost strategic importance for the communists to develop a unique minority nationalist standpoint and to communicate it to the Finland-Swedish people whom they considered to be oppressed. Simultaneously, leading Finland-Swedish communists believed that the party's future success among the voting public hinged on a believable policy for protecting Swedishness in Finland. The democratization of Finland that they were talking about, establishing a socialist society under communist rule, was therefore to be combined with the liberation of the Finland-Swedish minority.

Finnish Communism and the Nationality Question until the Crackdown on Communism in 1930

The Communist Party of Finland (CPF) was constituted in Moscow in August 1918 and had two native countries – the Soviet Union and Finland. The party leadership resided in the Soviet Union and the party's policies were drafted there in accordance with the Soviet model.²⁷ For the Swedish-speaking population of Finland this meant that the CPF, following an orthodox interpretation of Soviet doctrine, took a clear stand with regard to Finland-Swedish self-determination in the 1920s:

Even the most far-reaching goals of autonomy of the Swedish population and the complete independence of the Ålanders [the people of the Åland Islands in the Baltic Sea], their secession from the Finnish state, must be courageously and consistently supported. It must be understood that the basis of the national question is the question of the farmers, and thus that the farmers and fishermen are the driving force of the Swedish national movement. It must be brought to their attention that the communists of Finland unwaveringly support their right to national self-determination, not just in words but also in deeds, up to secession from the state.²⁸

The peasant question as a basis for the question of nationality followed one of Stalin's primary claims in *Marxism and the National Question*; that nationhood was bound to the soil and to those who tilled it. The Finland-Swedish farmers and fishermen were nationally minded and thus supported the bourgeois Swedish National Movement, which in terms of party politics was the Swedish People's Party (SPP), in the belief that it was the only entity that could safeguard their national interests. In contrast

²⁶ Theodore R. Weeks, "Separatist Nationalism in the Romanov and Soviet Empires", in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed. John Breuilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207.

²⁷ Tauno Saarela, *Finnish communism visited* (Helsinki: The Finnish Society for Labour History, 2015).

²⁸ Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue, *Puoluekokousten, konferenssien ja Keskuskomitean plenumien päätöksiä. Ensimmäinen kokoelma* (Leningrad: Valtion Kustannusliike Kirja, 1935), 96. See also p. 201–202, 261–262 and 361 in the same title.

to the SPP, the Finnish communists argued that the Swedish population of Finland not only had a right to autonomy within the Finnish state, but also to secede entirely from that state. By outdoing the SPP in the nationality question, the CPF tried to gain a breakthrough among the Finland-Swedes. If the Finland-Swedes truly gained national self-determination, their opportunities for democratization would also increase thanks to a class-bound normalization of the political realities within the group. According to Stalin's theory, national autonomy moved the focus of the workers from struggles between nations to their own class struggle within the nation.²⁹ In an autonomous or independent ethno-territory, the Finland-Swedish bourgeoisie would lose its entrenched position as the self-evident defenders of the Swedish nation against Finnish ethno-nationalism (*aitosuomalaisuus*, True Finnishness), and the true class dynamics of the group would turn the matter in favor of the working class.

Nya Folkbladet (1926–1930), the only Finland-Swedish communist newspaper, featured articles on the nationality question and unsurprisingly propagated for the right to self-determination of Finland-Swedes. The main thrust of *Nya Folkbladet* in the nationality question were attacks on the capitalist SPP and the SDP. The SPP was accused of deceiving the Finland-Swedish majority with phony minority nationalism and of always prioritizing the interest of the Swedish-speaking upper class over the interests of the Swedish nationality, i.e., the mass of Swedish-speakers in Finland, even if it meant allying with Finnish Fascists. The SDP, in turn, was said to be infested with True Finnish chauvinism and had turned away from the principles of Marxist and international socialism in the nationality question (as well as most other questions).³⁰ Neither the SPP nor the SDP cared if Swedish-Finland was fennicised and the Finland-Swedes robbed of their rights as long the bourgeois masters in both parties could continue to “bathe in sunlight” and to be well fed at the top of a Finnish Finland.³¹

The communist message of national self-determination for the Swedish nationality in Finland was also featured in the 1927 parliamentary election campaign of the Socialist Workers and Small Croppers Electoral Organisation (STPV), a public branch of Finnish communism. The STPV connected fascism with the nationality question and warned of “extreme fascist elements” inspired by international examples (i.e., Italy) that strived to enact a coup d'état in Finland and establish a complete fascist dictatorship. According to the STPV, one of the forms of Finnish fascism was True Finnishness, which at the moment primarily pursued the oppression of the rights of the Swedish minority nationality in Finland. The STPV took an opposite position: the calls for an expansion of self-determination by the Swedish “common people” should be settled in accordance the will of the “common people”. The

²⁹ Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, 73–74.

³⁰ See e.g. *Nya Folkbladet* 18.02.1927; 27.05.1927; 03.05.1929

³¹ *Nya Folkbladet* 24.06.1927.

SPTV's 18-point list of demands also included a point on the Swedish minority: the principle of national self-determination should be applied to the Swedish minority nationality and "the Swedish people [in Finland]" must be allowed to govern over the regions in which they lived.³² Importantly, this demand was premised on the fundamental territorial condition of the Leninist-Stalinist theory of nationhood; namely, that the Swedish nationality was not merely a specific cultural identity, but a people in possession of their own territory for implementing national self-government.

The STPV's unconditional support for Finland-Swedish self-determination was continued in the 1929 parliamentary elections, where it also opposed the oppression of Finland's "minority nationalities" in general.³³ Which minority nationalities the SPTV referred to in addition to the named Swedish minority is unclear and falls outside the scope of the study, but presumably at least the Saami minority as it could be defined as a nation according to Stalin's conditions.

The STPV was outlawed in the summer of 1930 as a part of a general crackdown on communism brought about by the fascistoid and flourishing Lapua Movement. Even though the Lapua Movement imploded in a disastrous coup attempt in 1932, hard-line anti-communism continued as state policy. In the mid-1930s, the accelerating growth of fascist power and the (belated) response of the Comintern in the form of the anti-fascist Popular Front called new attention to the national question in Finland.

[Otto Ville Kuusinen's Stalinist Defence of the Swedish Nationality in Finland and the national question in the CPF's popular front-strategy](#)

In May of 1935, the Sweden-based communist newspaper *Ny Dag*³⁴ published a four-part series of articles³⁵ by Otto Ville Kuusinen, a prominent figure in the Comintern and the undeniable leader of the CPF.³⁶ The article series was a translation of Kuusinen's manuscript *Kansallisuuskysymyksestä Suomessa (On the National Question in Finland)*, in which he theoretically developed the stance of the CPF regarding the Finnish national question.

Kuusinen criticized the "Finnish chauvinist theory of nationality" for its faulty and confused use of concepts. According to Kuusinen, the Finnish chauvinist theory of nationality – which the Finnish bourgeoisie had adopted – defined the Swedes in Finland as belonging to "the Finnish nationality".

³² *Työväenjärjestöjen Tiedonantaja* 25.05.1927.

³³ *Työväenjärjestöjen Tiedonantaja* 07.06.1929.

³⁴ The so-called Communist Laws of 1930 banned communist press in Finland, a ban that the CPF tried to circumvent through its office in Stockholm, among other means.

³⁵ *Ny Dag*, 09.05.1935; 14.05.1935; 15.05.1935; 17.05.1935.

³⁶ Kimmo Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot? Suomalainen kommunismi ja sota 1937–1945* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1994), 25–30.

Kuusinen was of the opinion that the Finnish bourgeoisie thereby denied the national existence of the Finland-Swedes and forced a foreign nationality upon them. This denial of the Finland-Swedish claim to a nationality was grounded in an intentional mixing of the concepts of a people and a homeland with the concept of nationality. Kuusinen stated that a people was the population of a state, and that a homeland was the same as a state. However, the fact that Finland-Swedes were a part of the population (people) and the state (homeland) of Finland did not mean “that there is not more than one nationality or nation in Finland”. According to Kuusinen, a “ruling majority nation” was, of course, not “the only existing nation” in a multinational state such as Finland. He remarked that not even the Polish majority nationalists claimed that the people of Poland consisted solely of Poles, since a significant number of the population of the country consisted of other nationalities. Kuusinen also brought up Switzerland – a people that was primarily made up of three nationalities – as an example.³⁷

In Kuusinen’s view, “Finnish chauvinism” used the invalid theoretical conclusion mentioned above as a basis for claiming that there was only a Swedish “‘language group’ within the Finnish nation” and that there was no national question in Finland, but merely “a ‘question of language’”. To claim otherwise was also, in the minds of these chauvinists, “nothing less than ‘treason against the homeland’”, as Kuusinen put it. Kuusinen admonished those Finland-Swedes who, lacking “inner clarity” in the national question, did not completely reject the Finnish chauvinist theory of nationality, but instead teetered “hither and yon”, which played into the hands of Finnish chauvinism.³⁸

According to Kuusinen, “comrade Stalin” had answered the question of what a nation or a nationality was “already in 1913”, i.e., in *Marxism and the National Question*. Based on Stalin’s definition, Kuusinen answered the question of whether the Swedish population of Finland constituted a nationality or a nation, which he claimed to be “one and the same thing in this context”³⁹:

First, the community of language is indubitably a clear fact; second, excepting Åland, the territorial community of the Swedes is a reality in two areas of the country, in the coastal regions of southern Finland and Ostrobothnia, even if both of these Swedish areas of settlement are separated from one another; additionally, Swedish-speaking groups are found here and there, interspersed in the cities of the interior of the country (these are, as a matter of fact, merely “language groups”); third, economic community is also a fact in the Swedish area, even though the economic life of the Swedish and Finnish populations is naturally intertwined in many ways; fourth, the Swedish culture in Finland presents its own national character, separate from the Finnish national character, although both of these national cultures have influenced each other greatly. Therefore, the Swedish population of southern Finland and Ostrobothnia should self-evidently be considered a separate nationality, nationally related to the people of Sweden, but not of

³⁷ *Ny Dag*, 09.05.1935; 14.05.1935; 15.05.1935; 17.05.1935.

³⁸ Otto Ville Kuusinen, “Kansallisuuskysymys Suomessa” (unpublished manuscript, 1935).

³⁹ *Ibid.*

the same nationality. The Swedes of Finland, the Ålanders excepted, share only a community of language and a closeness of culture with the people of Sweden, but not enduring cultural community, not to mention territorial or economic community.⁴⁰

Considering the modest number of the Swedish-speaking minority (around 10 per cent) in relation to the Finnish-speaking majority (around 90 per cent) at the time, it is relevant to ask why the position and status of the Finland-Swedish minority was at all relevant for the communist leader Kuusinen. The explanation lies mainly in the Leninist-Stalinist theory of revolution. Accordingly, Kuusinen argued that the social democrats underestimated the importance of the question of nationality for the question of revolution.⁴¹ The question of nationality was not only a question of the fate and well-being of Finland-Swedes – it was decisive for Finnish class struggle as a whole. For Kuusinen, the national question in Finland was one of the primary tools that Finnish fascism used to agitate the nationalities of Finland against one another and thus splinter the working class.⁴² According to Kuusinen, the Finland-Swedes fulfilled the same purpose in the agitation of the Finnish fascists as the Jews did for their German counterparts.⁴³

Kuusinen claimed that it was a duty and an honour for the class-conscious Finnish worker to fight in the forefront for the position of the Swedish nationality in Finland. For him, the defense of the Finland-Swedish nation was even a prerequisite for the Finnish class struggle itself; if the Finnish working class did not defend the Finland-Swedes, it would also not be able to free itself from the class oppression of the bourgeoisie, an oppression that misled it into attacking its brothers in the working class. In addition to this external relation, i.e., that national conflicts tend to overshadow class struggle, Kuusinen was also of the opinion that there was an internal link between class consciousness and an understanding of the interests of one's own nationality. Kuusinen claimed that the Finland-Swedish worker who had yet to awaken their proletarian class-consciousness was also indifferent to the struggle to defend their own nationality against foreign oppression.⁴⁴ Class-consciousness and consciousness of the question of nationality were two sides of the same coin: the worker who understood their class position understood simultaneously that they belonged to a nationality that was being oppressed by the owning class, and that the latter only spoke of the interests of the nationality when these coincided with its own interests.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² That struggles of nationality distracted the workers from class struggle is also a central theme in Stalin's *Marxism and the National Question*, see for example p. 73–74.

⁴³ Kuusinen, "Kansallisuuskysymyksestä Suomessa".

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Kuusinen's tenets on the intertwinement of the class struggle and the national question in Finland were also incorporated in the Popular Front strategy that the CPF adopted in the wake of the strategical turn of the Comintern in 1935. According to the CPF, chauvinism was the most dangerous weapon of the fascists, and in Finland it was used to turn the Finnish population against "the Swedes", i.e., the Finland-Swedes. This state of affairs had to be made clear to the Swedish population of Finland: if they wanted to defend themselves effectively, then they had to join the Popular Front together with the other opponents of fascism. They also had sharply to separate themselves from "the Swedish fascists", i.e., Finland-Swedish fascists (many high-profile fascists in Finland were Swedish-speaking). The Finnish working class was, in turn, duty-bound to defend the equality and right to self-determination of the Swedish minority nationality in Finland.⁴⁵ The Finnish communists had, however, neither the means nor the manpower to carry out their Popular Front strategy in Finland, and in 1937–1938 Finnish communism in the Soviet Union was severely decimated in Stalin's Great Terror. The wily Otto Ville Kuusinen survived the purges, but the puppet regime (the Terijoki government) Kuusinen headed during the Soviet invasion of Finland 1939–1940 (the Winter War), was rejected by many communists in Finland, several of which also fought against the Red Army in the war.⁴⁶ Nationalism trumped Stalinist imperialism.

The legacy of the Leninist-Stalinist-Kuusinenist conception of the national question in Finland

After the legalization of communism in Finland in 1944, the Terijoki government was basically memory-holed by the party and both Stalin and Kuusinen, who outlived the former by many years, functioned as grand ideological authorities and idols in Finnish communism.⁴⁷ This state of affairs suited the Finland-Swedish communists, who in the early post-war period could lean on the pre-war writings on the national question of both leaders to champion their brand of communist minority nationalism, which in many aspects was much more radical than the policies of the SPP.⁴⁸ The latest hurrah of Leninist-Stalinist-Kuusinenist nationality theory among Finland-Swedes occurred in the 1970s, when the so-called Hurrare-movement in Ostrobothnia drew on both communist tradition as well as the black movements in the USA and the so-called ethnic revival in Europe. The name of the movement

⁴⁵ Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue, *Yhteiseen taisteluun pääoman hyökkäystä vastaan: SKP:n VI puoluekokouksen päätökset* (1935), 25–26, <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/175702>.

⁴⁶ Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot?*

⁴⁷ Saarela, *Finnish communism visited*.

⁴⁸ Mats Wickström & Jonas Ahlskog, "Stalin och det svenska i Finland", *Historiska och litteraturhistoriska studier* 93 (2018): 152–159; Mats Wickström & Jonas Ahlskog, "'Vi lever och kommer att leva': Kommunisten och bildningsborgaren Harri Edgrens kulturkamp för finlandssvenskarnas fortlevnad", *Historiska och litteraturhistoriska studier* 93 (2019): 103–133.

was an attempt to reclaim “hurri”, a Finnish ethnic slur for Finland-Swedes.⁴⁹ Many of the international sources of inspiration for the Hurrare-movement were also influenced by communist thought in their combination of nationalism and socialism. Today the Finland-Swedish minority, which has shrunk to 5 percent of the population, would no longer meet Stalin’s criterion for constituting a nation (perhaps with the exception of parts of Ostrobothnia) and almost no one would today remember that the communists were once the champions of Finland-Swedish national self-determination.

Despite the collapse of communism, the historical dynamics of the national question is still very much part of the European political landscape. Arguably, the complex issue of what constitutes a nation, and especially what kinds of political rights nationhood involves, is one of the most pressing social concerns in relation to the rise of new nationalisms, identity politics and reparation movements in post-cold war Europe. The enduring relevance of the national question – although very few would use that title today – stems from a feature of nationalism that has been exemplified and explained in the present study; namely, the capability of nationalist ideology to seamlessly intermix with political movements that, at least at a doctrinal level, appear to be its very opposite. However, as our study shows, the apparent contradiction between nationalism and socialism was in no way an impediment on the endorsement of nationalist policies among Finnish communist agents and institutions during the interwar period. On the contrary, the recognition of nationhood for the Finland-Swedes was considered an integral part of the class-struggle. This historically revealed, fluid and shape-shifting dimension of nationalism will be an interesting element for future historians to explore among self-confessedly non-nationalist social and political movements in the present.

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⁴⁹ Victor Wilson & Mats Wickström, ”I minoritetsnationens tjänst. John Gardberg och det lokalt förankrade försvaret av Svenskfinland i Karis, ca 1930–1970”, *Historisk tidskrift för Finland* 105, no. 1 (2020): 33.

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