

From the Misery of War to the “Comfort” of Imprisonment – Soviet Prisoners of War as Finnish Workforce

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The purpose of this text is to complement the main article by explaining the historical context of Finland that led to a situation in which the Soviet POWs were allowed to come and go freely enough to make romantic relationships between POWs and Finnish women possible eventually leading to binational children – children of war.

We captured them, what now?

During the Winter War, many Soviet soldiers were captured by Finnish Defence Forces and taken to prison camps. Most of the Finnish men were sent to war and thus, there was not enough labour force in the rural areas. To avoid losing a significant share of the crop and sorely-needed rations, Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) were deployed to serve in forced labour on Finnish farms. The captured soldiers were taken from one farm to the next in larger groups at first, finishing the harvest in one location before heading for the next. This method was later found to be relatively inefficient and a new solution was put into action: farmers could request a Soviet prisoner from the army to serve as a farmhand on the farm for a certain period of time.

Due to the immense area the USSR covered, Red Army soldiers came from different corners of Europe and Asia. Some of them spoke Finnish or were linguistically gifted enough to learn the language during their imprisonment. As a result, they lived relatively well on the Finnish farms. According to the material gathered by Lars Westerlund for his article “Finnish Women Who Consorted With Soviet Prisoners of War and Their Children”, many of these prisoners lived under better conditions than one could presume based on their position. The farmers were grateful for the help the POWs provided them – Soviet prisoners were often described as hard-working and diligent – and felt compelled to reward them with certain liberties and commodities, e.g. the farmhands could roam relatively freely on the estate.

True love knows no boundaries

Surprisingly, other alleviations to these conditions came from the female Finnish population in direct contact with the prisoners. Before and during the war there was a strong negative atmosphere towards the Russians in Finland due to centuries of being occupied by Russians, culminating in anti-Soviet propaganda in the 20s and 30s. However, with the men fighting on the eastern border, there was a considerable lack of potential grooms, especially in the rural areas. Although a relationship of any kind with

the POWs was considered an act of treason punishable by imprisonment because it was feared local women would help the prisoners escape, love eventually flourished between the local women and the Soviet soldiers. There were numerous men in Finnish prison camps but accessing these camps as a civilian was at least in theory impossible. The prisoners working as farmhands, however, spend several months at a time in close contact with Finnish women. These everyday encounters created suitable circumstances for romances to take place. The prisoners were often Soviet officers with the advantages of academic education and well-mannered appearance, naturally arousing the interest of local women. The women who had a sexual relationship with these prisoners have often described their contemporary partners to be handsome, polite and intelligent.

These relationships differ from those in Austria and Belgium, for example. In the aforementioned countries it was the local female population that had to survive with very limited rations of food and other necessities. These women would sometimes resort to consorting with the occupying soldiers from Allied countries in hopes of gaining certain advantages and additional food. The situation was the opposite in Finland – the Soviet POWs were kept deliberately malnourished in order to ensure their dependence on the rations the army provided them with, at times resulting in romantic relationships with Finnish women with access to foodstuffs the prisoners sorely needed. Some prisoners would deliberately break their shoes and rip their clothes to appear more miserable than they actually were and so gain sympathy from the locals. Local women were often touched by the seemingly poor conditions the prisoners lived in and therefore gave soldiers gifts of mercy and symbols of their admiration, e.g. food, tobacco, alcohol and bicycles.

The morning after – on the topic of fatherlessness

Partially due to lacking proper methods of contraception, some of the women engaged in a sexual relationship with the Soviet POWs became pregnant and gave birth. The atmosphere towards Finnish-Soviet relationships was already condemnatory before the war, and the attitudes towards men or women who ‘consorted with the enemy’ certainly did not improve during the course of WW2. Most of the women in question tried to hide their relationships with varied success – some managed to keep it a secret for their whole lives, other were caught in action and punished either illegally by townsfolk or legally by the local court. The illegal punishments were usually head-shavings or social alienation, whereas the court sentenced mostly one to six months of imprisonment. Although families somewhat understood their daughters’ relationships with the POWs and even took care of their children, adultery committed by married women while their husbands were serving in the army often met cruel fates; some were even fatal.

According to Westerlund’s statistics, there are 38 confirmed children born from a relationship between POWs and Finnish women, although he estimated the total number of children born to be around two hundred. In most cases, the mother tried to protect her child as well as herself with secrecy, in other words by concealing the father’s

identity, alas often to no avail. Keeping secrets in a small village community was extremely challenging, and although the mothers usually chose not to tell their children of their Russian heritage, in almost all cases the child heard the truth from some neighbour or relative before adulthood. Even though many of them desired to learn more about their father, very few succeeded and even fewer met their father. Apart from name-calling and occasional taunting, the children of POWs faced relatively little discrimination and alienation comparing to occupation children in Austria or Nazi children in Finland.

Source: Westerlund, Lars: *Saksalaisten ja neuvostosotilaiden lapset Suomessa, Norjassa, Tanskassa, Itävallassa, Puolassa ja Itä-Karjalassa*. Kansallisarkisto, Riksarkivet, 2011. ISBN 9515333504, 9789515333506.