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‘A dream come true’: Finns visiting the lands of socialism at the World Youth Festivals in the 1940s and 1950s

‘It was like a dream’.¹

This is the way Pekka Kanerva, a retired Finnish worker in his seventies, described a journey he had undertaken more than fifty years ago. The destination of his journey was Budapest, the location of the second World Festival of Youth and Students (henceforth the world youth festival) held in 1949. Taking part in a festival, whose endeavour included fostering world peace, represented one aspect of Pekka’s dream. Another was the chance to see the homeland of socialism, the Soviet Union, through which ran the route taken by the Finnish delegation to and from the Budapest festival. Like Pekka, thousands of young working-class Finns shared this two-fold dream and took part in the world youth festivals, a biennial communist sponsored youth rally that was first held in 1947. These festival trips, which young Finnish left-wing people made between 1949 and 1957 (which included festivals in Hungary, East Germany, Romania, Poland and the Soviet Union), are the focus of this article.²

The history of Finnish leftist youth may look like a marginal story in the wider cold war context, given that Finland’s geographical location was peripheral and its population small. In 1950, Finland had no more than four million inhabitants.³ In terms of the world youth festival, however, young Finns were by no means ‘marginal’. Especially in the 1950s, Finnish groups were among the largest national delegations, with as many delegates as more populous countries like Britain, France and Italy.⁴ In this sense, the Finnish activity finds no parallels in the history of the youth festival.

Finnish journeys to the world youth festivals are analysed through experiences articulated in personal narratives. As pointed out by several scholars, experiences are multidimensional and provide a far from a universal category of human existence. According to Joan Scott, 'experience is at once always an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted', and, as pointed out by Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, 'personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience'.⁵ Experience seems to be, above all, a process of living through and reflecting on one's life, which is narrated into a discourse. The processing of experiences is closely related to reminiscence; thus, the obvious sources for examining experiences are diaries, memoirs and interviews, which serve as the main body of evidence here. Personal narratives are highly subjective and we cannot read or listen to festival participants' stories merely as testimonies of what happened in the past. Reminiscence of the past is rather a process of giving meaning to one's personal history and reconstructing meaningful parts of one's life. As Alessandro Portelli put it: 'oral sources may not add much to what we know, but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs'.⁶

While diaries are usually written very close to the actual events, and so reflect the current climate, narratives produced during interviews are usually more processed. Temporal distance between a festival and when it is being recalled has usually shaped the memory and the festival story has found new forms and emphasises. Thus, as much as these stories tell about the experiences of the youth festivals, they also reconstruct one's relation to the festivals from today's perspective.

In addition to textual and oral narratives, 'visual memories', in this case photographs, add an interesting layer to the festival stories. An impressive 1,770 photographs provide a portal into a visually-preserved experience.⁷ These private photographs were taken first and foremost for the young participants themselves. Yet, taking a picture at a festival in a socialist country was not only an act of making a visual memory for oneself but a process of

documenting the experiences and the socialist societies in order to enhance the stories with visual testimonies. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that despite the documentary nature of photographs, they do not mirror past realities as such but, like written sources, they are subjective views chosen and framed by the photographer.⁸

The experiences emerging from the personal narratives are approached in four ways, which are intertwined in this analysis. First, being able to participate in a peace gathering formed the main part of the ‘youth festival dream’ for young Finns. The enthusiasm for the topic of peace can be linked with previous war experiences – either at the front or at home – which induced young people to work for peace. Second, for a number of devoted communists, a festival journey to a socialist country appeared as a pilgrimage. Third, for most young Finns a festival journey was the first trip abroad or even the first organised trip to anywhere; and last, being part of a multinational youth gathering took the experiences of internationality and internationalism to a new level.

Another concept employed in the examination of festival experiences is that of the performance. According to Richard Schechner ‘any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance’.⁹ The idea of a performance aptly fits the youth festivals, which were indeed framed in a particular way to present and highlight certain ideas. Jeffrey Brooks has analysed Stalin’s Soviet Union as a society based on a performative culture – a never-ending Stalinist political theatre, where the role of citizens was to support the great leader and the magnificent society that he had created.¹⁰ The theatrical representation of socialism and its values with numerous rituals, slogans and special visual vocabulary was applied also when the Soviet system was on international display, like at the world youth festivals, which to some extent followed the pattern of Soviet official culture, although the festival cannot be considered entirely a Soviet construction.

Drawing on the interpretation of the youth festival as a performance, the socialism and socialist society that festival participants met at differed from the kind of socialism the inhabitants of those countries led in their everyday lives. Any festival as a celebration is a sort of a detachment from everyday life and, therefore, ‘experiencing socialism’ during the world youth festivals was in fact watching and participating in the socialist celebration traditions. Even more so, the festivals served as a forum to promote the socialist system and its development by showcasing the capitals of the people’s democracies. For the two weeks that a festival usually lasted, the whole society was turned into a propagandist spectacle of the local communists, who pursued their efforts to present the best of their socialist society – a kind of ‘wished reality’. Thus, each festival held in a socialist country can be viewed also as the performance of a socialist society produced by the festival organisers, that is to say the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY)¹¹, the local communist party, the youth league and the socialist state. The world youth festival, however, created a particular frame for experiencing each socialist society, which makes it possible and plausible to compare Finns’ perceptions at different festivals. In fact, the festival-organising bodies kept young communists busy also in between the festivals, which created continuity between the youth festivals organised at different times and in different geographical and cultural contexts.

Finland, Finns and the World Youth Festivals

Right after world war two, Finland’s position in the WFDY was weak. As an enemy country who had lost the war, it was treated as a second-class member. Its Nordic neighbours – Denmark, Norway and Sweden – received much wider attention from the Soviet Communist Youth League (Komsomol).¹² This was, however, soon to change. Toward the 1950s, Komsomol and party authorities dealing with foreign youth organisations started to give more weight on Finland. While this was partly due to the active involvement of the Finnish

democratic youth league officials in WFDY affairs, the Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance treaty (FCMA) signed between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1948 also made Finland an easier place for the Soviet Komsomol to operate in comparison with other Nordic countries. The FCMA treaty meant, in fact, that although Finland neither suffered from Soviet occupation nor became a people’s democracy, and it enjoyed the basic political and economic freedoms, it still came under pressure to please the Soviet Union in order to maintain good relations.¹³

The most important and well-known festival among Finns was the eighth world youth festival, hosted by *Suomen demokraattisen nuorison liitto* (the Democratic Youth League of Finland or SDNL) in Helsinki in 1962. Organising the festival in Finland sparked considerable antagonism and anti-festival activity among non-communist parts of the population.¹⁴ The Finnish presence at the other festivals was no less significant, since the Finnish delegations usually ranked among the largest, varying from ten delegates at the Prague festival in 1947 to 2,400 attendees in Bucharest in 1953. Like France and Italy, Finland had a fairly popular and large communist movement, whose tight relations with the Communist Party of Soviet Union facilitated Finnish participation in the youth festivals both financially and in terms of being able to form large delegations.¹⁵

Table 1. World Festivals of Youth and Students (1947–2010)¹⁶

Location	Year	Countries	Participants Finns	
Prague, Czechoslovakia	1947	71	17,000	10
Budapest, Hungary	1949	82	10,400	150
Berlin, East Germany	1951	104	26,000	1,300
Bucharest, Romania	1953	111	30,000	2,400
Warsaw, Poland	1955	115	30,000	2,000
Moscow, Soviet Union	1957	131	34,000	2,100
Vienna, Austria	1959	112	18,000	459
Helsinki, Finland	1962	137	13,140	2,259
Sofia, Bulgaria	1968	138	20,000	600
Berlin, East Germany	1973	140	30,000	800
Havana, Cuba	1978	145	18,500	350

Moscow, Soviet Union	1985	157	20,000	1,500
Pyongyang, North Korea	1989	162	15,000	150
Havana, Cuba	1997	136	12,325	30
Algiers, Algeria	2001	151	7,127	10
Caracas, Venezuela	2005	144	17,000	12
Tshwane, South-Africa	2010	126	15,000	2

In the 1940s and 1950s, Finnish delegations represented almost the entire leftist working class, including communists and socialists, but not social democrats. Most of them were young workers aged roughly between sixteen and thirty. The majority belonged to the SDNL or to leftist sport or interest clubs, such as a youth choir, to which some of the interviewees belonged. In the 1951 Berlin festival, around 67 per cent of the Finnish delegates belonged to the SDNL and, at the 1957 Moscow festival, 53 per cent of the delegates were members of either the SDNL or *Suomen kommunistinen puolue* (the Communist Party of Finland or SKP).¹⁷

Commitment to ‘peace and friendship’ – the official slogan of the world youth festival – served as an underlying impetus for Finnish attendees to the 1940s and 1950s festivals. This generation, born in the 1920s–30s, had personally gone through the war and felt a strong desire to preserve peace, which seemed to be threatened from time to time during the early cold war years. Attending a peace festival contributed to this aim in a tangible way; as one of the informants put it: ‘peace was the focal matter of the youth festivals’.¹⁸ In fact, attending the festivals became such a significant part of the political and organisational activity of these young people that historian Joni Krekola has called them ‘the festival generation’.¹⁹ After the apogee of the youth festival, the 1950s, the participation of Finns fell drastically, yet, the political spectrum widened. From the late 1960s onwards, young Finns from all the youth organisations of Finnish politics attended the youth rallies, including the social democratic, agrarian and Coalition Party youth.²⁰

Another significant point in terms of Finnish participation was the opportunity to freely support communism, which was not, despite Finland's good relations with the Soviet Union, something obvious in the Finnish society. The line between communists and other political parties and youth organisations was neat. Communists and their organisations were excluded from the political and cultural life of the country.²¹ Because of its communist character, the world youth festival aroused wide opposition. For example, *Aamulehti*, a newspaper of the Conservative Party published in the region of Tampere, almost entirely ignored the Finnish participation in the youth festivals and concentrated on publishing the shortcomings of the gathering. During the 1951 Berlin festival, which was one of the most tense due to the location and its timing, *Aamulehti* wrote that the festival was suffering from an epidemic of typhus and that local festival people were not given enough food.²²

Cold attitudes toward the festival and the participants were brought up, directly or indirectly, during the interviews. One informant, a young teacher at the time of the 1957 Moscow festival, told that while picking up a document which was necessary for travelling from his military district, an official started to preach about how the Finnish delegation was travelling to Moscow to make propaganda on government money.²³ Many interviewees considered that losing their job sometime after a festival trip must have had something to do with participating in a communist festival – even though the employers did not say so directly.²⁴ Still after decades, the line between communists and non-communists seems to be very neat. One informant underlined several times that although he took part in the 1957 Moscow festival, he was *not* a communist.²⁵

At the world youth festivals, communist and other working-class youths could escape the anti-communist mindset and spend two weeks among like-minded people without being named or shamed because of what they believed in; and, moreover, being able to see if not the Soviet Union then at least a country where society was set up in accordance with the

ideology that communist and working-class young people supported. In this respect, in addition to peace work and celebrations, the festivals opened a window to ‘the dream world’. As Anni Mikkola, a participant in the 1951 Berlin festival, wrote in her diary: ‘I felt like being in a democratic country, which creates the new society in the middle of ruins’.²⁶

As much as the cause of peace led to participation in youth festivals, another of the most common pulling factors was tourism. For most young people of working-class origin, travelling was something new and a communist-subsidised youth festival offered a unique chance to do this with relatively low costs. In the 1950s, before the rise of mass tourism, travelling was expensive and possible for only a few. One of the interviewees recalls that ‘a young person from the working class could not believe in, nor hope to be able to travel abroad in those days. There was no kind of financial resources for that’. Another one added that ‘it was a time when we did not travel abroad. One had not been even to Sweden, if not as a war child’.²⁷ In the 1950s, tourism was still in its infancy and only a few Finns could travel abroad. A rare exception was formed by the clubs of international contacts, such as the scouts, who regularly participated in international camps, the jamborees.²⁸

While Soviet and other Eastern European delegates went through a meticulous selection process, where the most suitable individuals were chosen to represent their fatherland, in Finland nearly anyone who was interested in the festival was free to join. In principle, to be entitled to take part in a world youth festival one needed to contribute to the cause of peace, for example, by selling a volume of the youth league magazine *Terä* (Blade), through active work in the festival preparations, or by recruiting a new member to the youth league. A circular letter sent to the prospective delegates to the Bucharest festival in 1953 explained that after a true contribution to world peace one could travel to the festival with a clear conscience. It reminded that:

at the festival, you will be asked many times what you have done for the cause of peace ... And if you have nothing to show then, it puts you in a very embarrassing situation and all the joy of the festival is swept away.²⁹

Appealing to one's conscience worked with some, yet participating in a festival was still possible without much real effort, as was the case with one of the interviewees. He had purchased the minimum amount of scarves with the festival emblem, thereby 'earning' the festival ticket.³⁰ The great difference in the selection process of the festival delegates was perhaps due to the focal disparity between the communist youth leagues acting in socialist and capitalist systems. Collective discipline did not work as effectively in a free democratic society like Finland, where the youth league constantly struggled to get new members and therefore did not want to drive them away with too strict rules, whereas in the Soviet Union 'rebels' could always be replaced by someone who met the expectations for a perfect communist.

Like a fairytale

The festival journeys of Finns usually started once they had crossed the border between Finland and the Soviet Union, through which they often travelled to a festival destination in Eastern Europe. During the journey, trains stopped at multiple stations, where cheering crowds of Soviet citizens greeted young Finns like special guests with small orchestras, folk dancing groups and flower bouquets. This was unusual for the young people of the working class who lived under the deprivation of the post-war reconstruction years in the poor and agrarian country that Finland was in the 1950s.

A delegate to the Budapest festival in 1949 recalls that in the Soviet train on which they travelled to Hungary, the Finns had a car all of their own and even their own chef. 'We lived like masters', he recalls.³¹ If the train trip had been something extraordinary, the

accommodation at the festivals was indeed luxurious. Rooms were beautiful, beds soft, the room service took care of laundry and shoes, and the food was tasty. 'We lived like rich'.³² Martta Peuhkuri, a delegate to the 1951 Berlin festival, devoted an astonishing amount of space in her diary to describing the dishes served during her two weeks.³³ Nor did the almost ceaseless appetite of the Finns pass unobserved by the authorities. A Soviet report on Finns during their journey through the Soviet Union remarked that the Finnish were seemingly pleased with the service they received, and in particular, they enjoyed the food, for 'nothing remains on the plates'.³⁴

The incredibly vast and multifaceted programme of the world youth festival, with its demonstrations, concerts, meetings, cultural and sport competitions, exhibitions and mass rallies, demonstrated diverse aspects of the socialist societies. In addition to celebrations, the hosts took their guests to local schools, factories, *kolkhozes*, museums, memorials and other significant places testifying to the development of each socialist society. This performance was repeated in each of the festivals, flavoured with local traditions. Participation in socialist voluntary working camps before and after the festivals, especially in Budapest in 1949, gave a different perspective on socialism, though still in the framework of the official performance. Pekka Kanerva, who attended the Budapest and Berlin gatherings, took part in building a sports stadium in Budapest.³⁵ Visits to factories, schools and agricultural farms fascinated young Finns. Diaries mention favourable working conditions compared with home and the political activism of workers, especially for the cause of international peace. Stories of hero workers were repeated in the pages of diaries, like the one told by Anni Mikkola about an ex-driver of a factory who, after much intensive studying, ascended to the position of an engineer.³⁶ Heroes embodied an ideal socialist person with all the needed virtues. From the perspective of Finnish participants, socialist heroes and socialist delegates showed both how developed the socialist system was and made one realise the poverty of his or her own delegation.

In comparison with the Soviet or other socialist delegations, which often featured their best artists and athletes wearing uniforms and looking very determined to their cause, the Finns, with their relatively shabby delegations, felt like visitors from another world. Anni, for example, wrote: ‘We were ashamed of our group. We had nothing. We were the representatives of a capitalist country’.³⁷ The imbalance between the teams from socialist and capitalist countries was clear to anyone present at the festival, but it was not a surprise: socialist states put so much effort into forming as powerful and impressive a delegation as they could, whereas delegations from capitalist countries were on their own, often suffering from hostile measures enacted by their states and non-communists. The feeling of being shamed by one’s delegation applied to other nationalities, too. Sally Belfrage, a citizen of both the US and the UK, who had chosen the American delegation because it provided the possibility of seeing China after the festival, bemoaned the pitiful American delegation. ‘In terms of other delegations, anyway, they [Americans] were a flop: everyone else sent musicians and dancers, good artists, actors, sportsmen and so on, while we had to make up for our utter lack of the professional touch with spirit, and that was pretty faltering some of the time’.³⁸ Paradoxically, those who lived in ‘the dream world’ might look at the situation completely differently. For many of them, the Western delegates looked very different from what they were supposed to be like according to the state propaganda, which told about the poor living conditions of working-class young people under capitalism.³⁹

However inspiring it was to see any of the socialist countries, one was appreciated more than any other. Seeing the Soviet Union was a dream of a different kind. This dream was fulfilled in 1957, when for the first time a festival took place on Soviet soil. As a result, some 2,000 lucky Finns saw the Soviet Union for more than just a glimpse through a train window or whilst stopped at a station. At the 1953 Bucharest festival, the Soviet Komsomol officially invited Finnish delegates to visit Moscow and Leningrad on the way back home. As many

interviewees proudly mentioned, this group had had the privilege of being the first Finnish tourists in the country.⁴⁰ Officially, tourism between Finland and Soviet Union began in 1954, so this notion might not in fact be true.⁴¹ Despite the wide enthusiasm and great expectations of 1957, many afterwards admitted that the Moscow festival had been a little bit too much. Compared, for example, with the 1955 Warsaw festival, the Moscow celebration reached unimaginable heights and was even too spectacular, too glorious.⁴² Young Finns of working-class background were not used to such extravagance.

Time and distance have brought new dimensions to the festival stories and many who previously had no suspicions about Soviet hospitality now look back more critically. Some of the interviewees mentioned that their way of seeing socialism had probably been naive, especially in so far as they reacted to the glorious settings of the festivals and the good service they received. One of them recalled that he simply did not have enough information and ability to question the spectacle. 'Then it all was just unbelievably nice'.⁴³

Helping Finns with transportation to the world youth festivals and offering free holidays in Soviet cities can be seen as a part of a Soviet policy aimed at increasing its influence in Finland through cultural means.⁴⁴ The 'luxury trips' young working-class Finns enjoyed worked as advertisements for the Soviet system, but they also introduced the Soviet Union as a tourist resort for Finns. For example, during the extra visit to Moscow and Leningrad in 1953, the schedule of the Finnish group followed the basic route of a tourist trip organised by the Soviet agency *Intourist*, including the usual tourist attractions, school and factory visits, concerts and museums. These trips were a sort of test for the Soviet tourist industry before mass tourism started in the early 1960s and laid the foundation for Finnish tourism to the Soviet Union. Eventually, Soviet efforts succeeded since Finns became the largest group of foreign visitors. While the majority of Finns entertained themselves with the cultural attractions of

Leningrad, a small percentage of visitors, known as vodka tourists, were tempted by cheap spirits.⁴⁵

What did socialism look like?

Despite the relatively low standards of living in Finland during the 1940s and 1950s, working-class people could afford to purchase cameras; thus, in addition to written accounts, the Finns' festival experiences can be examined through photographs. According to interviews with Soviet people, cameras were available for them too, but were beyond the financial reach of ordinary Bulgarians – even in 1968.⁴⁶ The photographs taken by festival-goers tell first and foremost the interests of young people and what they regarded as important enough to be remembered and recorded. Themes within the pictures often follow a similar pattern, chronologically going through a festival trip. The typical picture cavalcade starts at the departure with group poses, continues with the arrival at railway stations, finally ending up on the festival venue with the usual subjects, such as the opening ceremony, demonstrations and folk dancing performances, replete with joyful people and lots of smiling faces.

The significance of the photographs taken by festival participants lies in their value as a visual record of Soviet society. Communist and leftist youth represented rare eyewitnesses of socialism, which made them a natural target of myriad questions about the socialist countries. A small but very interesting number of pictures depict various vehicles and technical constructions, such as airplanes, cars, ships, locomotives as well as bridges. Soviet officers noted this habit of the Finns with concern, seeing it as possible espionage. A more plausible explanation would be the more general interest in technology during the 1950s, when technology was widely appreciated as the future saviour of human kind. Pictures of technology among other things demonstrated the capabilities of the socialist system, which working-class youths had to prove to their non- and anti-communist peers. By showing photos depicting the

latest achievements of Soviet technology to the people back home, festival-goers attempted to provide evidence that the Soviet Union was indeed proceeding. Many mentioned that what they saw at the festival was something beyond the belief of people back home, so photographic sources served as extra testimony.

Photographs may show us things about the past that we perhaps would not otherwise realise. As Peter Burke has noted, pictures capture the surrounding world in a different way than texts and oral histories do, and thus, pictures may help a historian to imagine the period in a new way and get new ideas as to what to ask from the written sources.⁴⁷ Also, the visual narrative of the youth festivals differs to some extent from the textual and oral narratives, so allowing a broader interpretation of the festival experience.

A further point, made in both textual and oral narratives but more vividly evident in the photographs, relates to the most frequent type of a picture taken by the festival goers. Almost every collection of festival photos includes a shot of young a Finn or Finns posing with other young foreigners in front of the camera. This type of photo may be called ‘my new international friends and I’, since these ‘friends’ (whose names and countries people easily recalled) seemed to evoke warm feelings during the interviews held some decades after. What is surprising is that despite the great admiration toward the Soviet Union and the Soviet delegation, endlessly repeated in speeches, reports and the communist press, there is not a single photograph of Soviet delegates posing with Finns among nearly 2,000 shots. The appearance of Soviet people in photographs resembles their depictions in other sources. Young Soviet people were the servants of the festival performance: welcoming festival guests at railway stations with happy, smiling faces, dancing in folk costumes on stages or marching to the stadium as a part of the Soviet delegation. They followed the rules of the performances, which did not include mingling freely with other guests. For Finns, distant and formal Soviet delegations came as a disappointment.

Instead of Soviet and other socialist representatives, Finns appeared more likely to socialise with young people from the ‘third world’. Thus, the photos show Finns posing with Africans, Asians and Latin Americans. An explanation for this may be found in sponsoring activity. Most European countries contributed to the international festival fund, which assisted young people from the developing countries to cover travelling costs. For example, Finns collected funds for Senegalese youth, which induced them to meet.⁴⁸ This is, nevertheless, a far from satisfactory interpretation, since Finns met with numerous other delegations around the world, also from Europe.

Presumably, the ‘exotic’ appearance of Africans, Latin Americans and Asians attracted more attention than the more familiar looking Europeans. Seeing people from so far away was a new experience for most Finns, some of whom may not previously have seen a foreigner during their entire life. At the 1953 Bucharest celebration, a Finnish girl even ventured to touch the curly hair of a Cuban delegate, so exotic did it look to her.⁴⁹ In this respect, Finns resembled those Soviet people who, during the 1957 Moscow festival, were reportedly overwhelmed by the multinational crowd of exotic looking people.⁵⁰ For Finns, however, this stemmed not from the fact theirs was a society closed to foreigners, as was the case with the Soviet Union prior to Khrushchev’s thaw. Rather, it was the peripheral geographical location and the low number of immigrants and foreign tourists that kept Finland homogeneous in terms of ethnic diversity. Still, at the time of the Helsinki festival in 1962, even the non-communist Finns poured into the capital precisely because they wished to catch a glimpse of exotic foreigners.⁵¹

Another aspect that the photographs reveal more readily than oral histories is the processing of the negative sides of the dream countries. Typically, friendly welcomes and luxurious venues eclipsed the negative aspects of the socialist countries. Few interviewees, more than 50 years after, mentioned ruins, poor living conditions or the lack of freedom of

speech and religion, or other topics fairly often brought up, for example, by British, American and Polish visitors to the 1957 Moscow festival.⁵² One informant told how the extraordinarily friendly and joyful atmosphere at the festival easily swept away any inconvenient aspects. Realising that the dream country was not paradise after all was a very difficult moment. As one interviewee pointed out it was a shock to see beggars on the streets of Bucharest in 1953. Nevertheless, she and her fellow delegates did not talk about the obvious flaws of the socialist country, and she had no way of making this experience understandable for herself at the time.⁵³

For the Finnish festival travellers, the obvious context for understanding the world youth festivals and socialist countries was provided by the SDNL via its activities (meetings, events, gatherings) and printed material (newspapers, magazines, leaflets). However, the context of Finnish society also influenced the way festival participants filtered what they saw and heard. Although festival-goers strongly identified with the political left and preferred the socialist system to the capitalist one, they still lived in a capitalist market economy, enjoyed basic democratic freedoms, and were free to practice their political convictions – the rights that paradoxically were not available for their peers in the countries of their dreams. However vigorously Finnish festival visitors might have opposed the values of ‘the bourgeois Finland’, they could not totally avoid its impact on their thinking. Against this background, seeing things that appeared worse than at home was probably a very painful and difficult experience. After all, communists and their sympathisers were supposed to support socialism, not criticise it.

Negative experiences and unpleasant surprises in the ‘dream countries’ could be so disappointing that it was impossible to describe them later. Photographs taken by the participants were, in this respect, more straightforward and ‘honest’, illustrating those aspects that could not be expressed in words. For example, ruins appeared often in Finns’ photographs, especially in the case of the 1951 Berlin festival, organised six years after the end of the war. The short temporal distance from the war is reflected by the presence of soldiers in many

pictures. The existence of ruins could be explained by the closeness of the war or the repercussions of de-Nazification. Anti-fascism, a concept that was originally used as a reaction to the Nazi system and all that it represented, formed an important dimension of the Soviet dominated peace-work and provided a prominent part of the world youth festival message.

Beyond the performance of ‘peace and friendship’

Hardly any performance proceeds exactly according to the script. In similar fashion, the world youth festivals, albeit meticulously designed and coordinated, met unforeseeable setbacks as thousands of teenagers and young adults enjoyed the performance of ‘peace and friendship’ and sometimes dared to lift the curtain to take a peep behind the scenes, to see a glimpse of socialism ‘without a mask’. Young people, far away from home, often have a taste for adventure. This applied to Finnish festival delegates, many of whom in one way or another transgressed expected behaviour and stepped aside of the official performance. Finns crossed the line particularly with intimate relationships, trading and consuming alcohol.

In comparison with delegates from other non-communist countries, Finns appeared rather passive in their political criticism of the socialist countries. Personal narratives, but also archival records, indicate that Finns’ political activism was either limited or well hidden. The obvious explanation originates from their background: the most devoted adherents to socialism/communism could not criticise the socialist system in public. Even if they saw elements that did not fit with the picture they had developed on socialist societies before, they kept silent or talked about such matters only amongst their most loyal, trusted companions.

A difficulty for having political debates with foreigners was the lack of language skills. This made establishing deeper contacts, if not impossible, at least much more difficult than, for example, guests who knew English, French, Russian or any other widely spoken language. For example, Italians and French guests actively communicated with local people

during the Bucharest festival because they all spoke Romanic languages.⁵⁴ Similarly, Finns actively communicated with Soviet Karelians and Estonians during the 1957 Moscow festival. Some of the Finns had studied one or more foreign languages but most of them had left school at the elementary level. Thus, the main communicative tools for Finns appeared to be gesture, interpreters or ‘body language’.

In addition to mime, one of the communicative tools used among those who did not speak foreign languages was singing. Many labour and peace movement songs were translated into different languages and were known where the communist and socialist parties had gained some ground. Furthermore, local folk songs and *schlagers* became familiar among the festival guests, like the song ‘Moscow Nights’ (*Pod Moskovnye vechera*, composition by Solovev, lyrics by Sedoi) during the Moscow festival, which became very popular in the Finnish translation in the 1960s.

Singing fulfilled at least three functions. First, singing and dancing together in a multinational crowd enhanced the feeling of working-class solidarity. Second, singing served as a way to fill the gap of inadequate language knowledge. The third function was that of communication. For example, in the short romances between young people from different countries without a common language, singing was a vehicle to express feelings, like with a young Latin American who sang to a Finnish girl *Bésame mucho* (a Mexican song written by Consuelo Velazquez) several times during one night.⁵⁵

In fact, the lack of a common language did not seem to be an insurmountable problem for Finns. Naturally, it had a strong influence on what kind of interactions people could get into, yet long-lasting relationships were not on the agenda for most participants. As one of the interviewees commented, ‘one could survive fairly well without any language skills, yet of course, one could get more out of the trip if s/he knew foreign languages’.⁵⁶ Many were simply pleased to enjoy the international atmosphere, a new experience as such, managing to exchange

a pin, a scarf or any other item marked with the festival emblem with a festival attendee from another country.

While almost all interviewees told about having witnessed romances at the festival, only one spoke openly about his affairs. This young man, a delegate to the Moscow festival, even boasted about having had intimate contacts with several Russian women and a more serious relationship with one of them. After years struggling with authorities, unwilling to let the Russian girl travel to Finland even for a short visit, the couple lost the faith and the Finn found another woman to marry.⁵⁷ Another case relating to sex and the youth festivals was found in the archives. One of the reports by Komsomol officials asserted that during the journey to Bucharest, a Finnish female delegate had approached a Komsomol official, who was hosting her train car. The report stated that the girl, who apparently could speak Russian, had sent the Komsomol guy a short note expressing that she wanted to sleep with him (*'prikhodi riadom so mnoiu spat'*).⁵⁸ The document does not reveal what actually happened. Most probably her message was left unanswered and no further consequences followed. The case, however, illustrates that 'physical communication' also belonged to the repertoire of young people, though it ran against the moral codes and guidelines set by their respective communist parties. Festival participants talked about it to some extent, yet it was almost always 'somebody else' who had been involved.

Similarly, fairly few admitted to having consumed alcohol at the festival. This may relate to the fact that drinking wine with food was not a Finnish tradition in 1950s. Even so, youth league and Soviet authority reports do mention this activity with regard to Finns, though in contrast to international relationships or marriages, the authorities did not take any actions to influence Finnish drinking habits. They only remarked on it.⁵⁹

Another activity that did not please the Soviet authorities (and probably not the authorities in other socialist countries) but did not lead to any action was trading. In addition to

exchanging small gifts (pins, postcards, souvenirs from the homeland) foreigners actually sold various goods that they brought with them. Anything from nylon stockings to watches could be sold unofficially on the black market. A Finnish delegate to the Moscow festival described how he had sold trousers that were part of the official uniform of the Finnish delegation. ‘The Soviet customers paid well’, he rejoiced.⁶⁰ None of the interviewees ever mentioned that selling things was illegal or in any way inappropriate, whereas reports by Soviet authorities with regard to the Moscow festival do tell of the arrest of Soviet citizens trading with foreigners. According to a report by the Soviet Ministry of the Interior, Finns bought vodka, guitars and balalaikas, which, it suggested, were much cheaper than in Finland.⁶¹ Trading consumer goods that for Finns were part of their normal lives but for Soviet people a luxury grew as mass-tourism between the countries exploded in the 1960s. The model of Finnish festival attendees paved the way for ordinary tourists to the East, who in the 1970s already knew how to equip themselves with nylon stockings, chocolate and extra clothes.⁶²

‘The last performance’

As with the arrival in the socialist world, so the departure was celebrated in spectacular style, with orchestras, folk dance performances and hundreds of smiling locals. Many left the socialist wonderlands in tears. A delegate to the Bucharest festival, Pentti Riekkola, writes in his diary that the departure was the most difficult part of the journey. After the last handshakes with weeping local youngsters through the train windows, ‘even a Finn was moved to tears, thinking about all that [we had experienced]. It was all over’.⁶³ Tears, or the lack of them, belonged to the basic rituals of the festival performance. By crying whilst friends were leaving, one expressed their deepest feelings and thereby strengthened their bonds of friendship. A lack of tears indicated the opposite attitude, as revealed in the report of a Soviet official on the Finnish delegation returning from the Bucharest festival. In addition to other suspicions, an officer

wrote of a girl who did not cry (unlike the other girls) when the train crossed the border between Russia and Finland. In the officer's view, this behaviour showed that she was not a friend of the Soviet Union. Instead, she was reading a book in English; furthermore, she had asked a lot of questions about the Soviet Union but had not believed what she was told about the country.⁶⁴

As Joni Krekola has shown, attending the world youth festivals provoked myriad feelings; crying for joy among others. It is fair to say that tears constituted part of the performance, during which both the local and foreign young people expressed their comradeship and demonstrated how strong the emotions evoked by international efforts for peace and friendship were.⁶⁵ Solidarity with other festival guests, hospitality as never experienced before, and the warm relations formed provided such a contrast with what communist Finns experienced at home that they generated feelings strong enough to ensure that some of those reminiscing decades later felt the need to wipe the corners of their eyes.⁶⁶

Crying, if analysed as a performance, seemed to work in three ways. First, the extraordinary festival journey with the new experiences, new people, fantastic events and friendly attitude was in such a huge contrast with normal everyday life that when people realised it was ending, they started to cry. Second, crying at the border crossing conveyed the message to Soviet or other socialist hosts that their efforts had paid off. This was a way through which Finns actually took part in the Soviet performance. Third, crying was a way to show Finnish border guards that they were leaving a country that accepted them as they were. According to one informant, a border guards had asked why they were crying and had added in a jeering voice: 'don't bawl, you can get back to your dream land whenever you like'.⁶⁷

Conclusions

The visits of young leftist Finns to the lands of socialism during the world youth festivals fulfilled several functions. The festival trips embodied the ideological commitment to peace

work. Seeing socialist countries was a sort of pilgrimage for some people; concurrently, these journeys were often the first contact with internationality, both in the form of tourism abroad and attending a multinational gathering. The travels to socialist countries were indeed rich in content, but were the expectations of the young Finns met by the countries of their dreams? Evaluating on the basis of a wide range of materials, a festival trip seems to have been ‘a dream come true’ for Finnish festival attendees in various respects. In the 1940s and 1950s, socialism seemed to offer what was absent in the capitalist homeland: the feeling of collective solidarity, quickly advancing technical development, huge building projects, strong belief in a better future and, especially, concrete measures for making the socialist dream come true.

The overwhelming hospitality in socialist countries, in comparison with poor living conditions at home, showed socialism in a very good light. Finnish delegates were not able to and probably not willing to question their treatment – they expected socialist countries to be better than their homeland and their experiences tended to confirm, or even to overcome, that. In fact, young Finns were inclined to believe in what they saw and heard because of the domestic atmosphere in Finland. Young communists and socialists who were obliged to endure disparagement and disdain felt ideologically at home in socialist countries where their political convictions were embraced. Moreover, Finnish festival delegates might have felt a pressure to convince themselves and especially anti-communists about the ‘true’ nature of the country, which led them to ignore any unpleasant experiences.

In their youthful idealism, many devoted to the communist cause did not see or did not want to see through the ‘performance of socialism’. A fascination with socialism and its achievements led people to easily neglect or belittle any drawbacks they might have seen during their visits to the people’s democracies. Young people enjoyed the performance of peace and friendship and were not ready to destroy their dream by taking a look behind the scenes, even though it would have been possible.

Interviews conducted decades after that the festivals had taken place showed a wider range of reactions to socialism and socialist countries. While the contemporary accounts of young people mentioned only the presence of Western propaganda against the festivals, the interviewees fifty or more years later acknowledged the propagandist nature of the youth festivals. The collapse of the socialist system in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989–91, had turned many away from the idea that socialism would solve the problems of the world and provide a better future. The hope in socialism may be gone but what these people had not lost was a strong faith in what they thought was the primary aim of the world youth festival: peace and friendship. Talking about the experiences at the youth festivals evoked feelings of deep nostalgia toward the peace project, crystallised by one of the interviewees, who told in a melancholic voice that unfortunately their efforts had been wasted, as the world (at the time of the interview in 2006) was more insecure and unstable than ever before. And if not the stories of the interviewees, then at least the spontaneous singing of the march of the WFDY (melody by Novikov, lyrics by Oshanin) during one of the group interviews confirmed that the ‘peace festivals’ had had a deep impact on this festival generation, who seemed truly to believe that changing the world would be only possible through peace and friendship.

¹ P. Kanerva’s unpublished memoir given to the author in May 2006.

² Most of the academic literature on the Finnish participation in the World Youth Festivals is in Finnish. The most detailed study, Reijo Viitanen’s monograph *SDNL 50 vuotta* [50 years of the SDNL] discusses the festival history besides the general development of the Democratic youth league of Finland. Joni Krekola’s forthcoming monograph, *Maailma kylässä 1962. Helsingin nuorisofestivaali* [World visiting us in 1962. The Helsinki Youth Festival], Helsinki: Like 2012, examines the social consequences of the Helsinki youth festival for the Finnish society.

³ ‘Population development in independent Finland – greying baby boomers’, in *Statistics Finland* http://www.stat.fi/tup/suomi90/joulukuu_en.html (Accessed 30 July 2011).

⁴ Sizes of the delegations from Britain, France and Italy in the World Youth Festivals of the 1950s varied between 500 and 4.000.

⁵ J. Scott, ‘The evidence of experience’, in *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 4, 1991, pp773–97; E. Ochs, L. Capps, ‘Narrating self’, in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 25, 1996, p20.

⁶ A. Portelli, ‘What makes oral history different’, in R. Perkins, A. Thomson. (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, p67.

⁷ The photographs employed for this article were collected in the process of preparing an exhibition on the history of the World Youth Festival at the Lenin museum in Tampere in 2006. The author is grateful to the

museum for the right to use the photographs and particularly to archivist Mia Heinimaa for her valuable help with the material.

⁸ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence*, London: Reaction Books, 2001, pp22–3.

⁹ R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2006, p2.

¹⁰ J. Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pxvi.

¹¹ For the early history of WFDY and IUS, the World youth festival hosts, see J. Kotek, *Students and the Cold War*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.

¹² Russian state archive of socio-political history, Moscow, Russia (henceforth RGASPI), f17, op128, d731. The whole file, but especially pp110–14.

¹³ K. Rentola, 'From half-adversary to half-ally: Finland in Soviet policy (1953–58)', in *Cold War History*, 1, 1, 2000, pp75–102. On Finland in the Cold War politics and economy in English see e.g. A. Kähönen, *The Soviet Union, Finland and the Cold War: The Finnish Card in the Soviet Foreign Policy (1956–59)*, Helsinki: SKS, 2006; S. Autio-Sarasmo, K. Miklóssy, *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, London: Routledge, 2011, J. Nevakivi, 'Finland and the Cold War', in *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 3, 1985, pp211–24.

¹⁴ On the Helsinki youth festival see J. Krekola, *Maailma kylässä 1962*; J. Krekola, S. Mikkonen, 'Backlash of the Free World. The US Presence at the World Youth Festival in Helsinki, 1962', in *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 36, 2, 2011, pp231–56.

¹⁵ 'Suomen nuorisovaltuuskunnan kuljettaminen maailman nuorisofestivaaleihin Varsovaan' (A document on transportation of the Finnish delegation to the World Youth Festival in Warsaw), in *NKP ja Suomi: Keskuskomitean salaisia dokumentteja (1955–1968)* [CPSU and Finland. Secret documents of the Central Committee 1955–68], Helsinki: Tammi, 1992, p30.

¹⁶ J. Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita ja kylmää sotaa nuorisofestivaaleilla', in E. Katainen, P. Kotila (eds.), *Työväki ja tunteet*, Turku: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 2002, p253. The official website of the World Federation of Democratic Youth [www.wfdy.org/festivals] [Accessed 20 July 2011].

¹⁷ Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', p259; RGASPI, f3-m, op15, d200, 11, report on the Finnish delegation at the Moscow 1957 festival.

¹⁸ Group interview with Finnish participants, 16 March 2006, Tampere, Finland; E. Alenius, *Salatut tiet. Muistelmat*, Helsinki: Painatuskeskus, 1995, p108.

¹⁹ Krekola, *Maailma kylässä 1962*; Viitanen, *SDNL 50 vuotta*, p218, see also note 28 p578.

²⁰ Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', p255.

²¹ M. Hyvärinen, J. Paastela, 'Failed attempts at modernisation. The Finnish Communist Party', in Michael Waller, Meindert Fennema (eds.), *Communist Parties in Western Europe*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p115; Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', p255. See also K. Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot? Suomalainen kommunismi ja sota (1937–1945)*, Helsinki: WSOY, 1994 and *Niin kylmää että polttaa: Kommunistit, Kekkonen ja Kreml (1947–1958)*, Helsinki: Otava, 1997.

²² *Aamulehti*, 8 August 1951, p1; 9 August 1951, p1.

²³ Interview with a Finnish delegate to the Moscow 1957 festival, born in 1933, 25 July 2008, Oulu, Finland.

²⁴ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.

²⁵ Interview with a Finnish delegate to the Moscow 1957 festival, born in 1934, 30 March 2009.

²⁶ People's archive, Helsinki, Finland (Henceforth KA), Anni Mikkola's collection, Anni Mikkola's diary of the Berlin 1951 festival; Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', p262.

²⁷ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006. The term 'war children' refers to Finnish children, who were evacuated to Sweden and Denmark during World War Two. See e.g. A. Korppi-Tommola, 'War and children in Finland during the Second World War', in *Paedagogica Historica*, 44, 4, 2008, pp445–55. On tourism and the World Youth Festivals see P. Koivunen, 'Overcoming Cold War boundaries at the World Youth Festivals', in S. Autio-Sarasmo, K. Miklóssy (eds.), *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, London: Routledge, 2011, pp175–192.

²⁸ In the 1940s and 1950s, the size of Finnish teams to Jamborees varied from 30 to 320 people. O. Vesikansa, *Suomalainen partioliike (1910–60)*, Porvoo: WSOY, 1960, p43.

²⁹ KA, Pentti Riekkola's collection, 'Nuorisoliittolaisille, jotka aikovat festivaaleille', (a circular of the SDNL addressed to the youth league members willing to participate in the Bucharest festival in 1953).

³⁰ Interview with a Finnish delegate, 30 March 2009.

³¹ Group interview 16 March 2006.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ KA, Martta Peuhkuri's collection, Martta Peuhkuri's diary on the Berlin 1951 Festival.

³⁴ RGASPI, f4-m, op1, d1688, 119. Tov. Ablovoi P.T. 3–27 July 1953.

³⁵ P. Kanerva's memoir.

³⁶ A. Mikkola's diary.

³⁷ A. Mikkola's diary; Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', p264.

³⁸ S. Belfrage, *A Room in Moscow*, London: Pan Books LTD, 1959, p11.

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- ³⁹ Koivunen, 'Overcoming Cold War Boundaries', p186.
- ⁴⁰ RGASPI, f4-m, op1, d1688, 1106. Sekretariiu Zaluzhnomu V.I., 1.9.53, G. Vazhenin, I. Sychenikov.
- ⁴¹ Rentola, 'From half-adversary to half-ally', p82.
- ⁴² Interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.
- ⁴³ Interview with a Finnish delegate, 25 July 2008.
- ⁴⁴ Rentola, 'From half-adversary to half-ally', p78.
- ⁴⁵ A. Kostiainen, 'The vodka trail: Finnish travellers' motivation to visit the former Soviet Union', in Janne Ahtola, Timo Toivonen (eds.), *Travel Patterns: Past and Present*, Savonlinna: University of Joensuu, 1999, pp33–48. For Soviet and East European Tourism see A. E. Gorsuch and D. P. Koenker (eds), *Turizm. The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2006 and A. E. Gorsuch, *All this is your world. Soviet tourism at home and abroad after Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- ⁴⁶ K. Taylor, 'Socialist orchestration of youth: the Sofia youth festival and encounters on the fringe', in *Ethnologia Balkanica*, 7, 2003, p10.
- ⁴⁷ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, pp13, 14.
- ⁴⁸ Viitanen, *SDNL 50 vuotta*, p308.
- ⁴⁹ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.
- ⁵⁰ K. Roth-Ey, "'Loose girls" on the loose? Sex, propaganda and the 1957 Youth Festival', in M. Ilic, S. E. Reid, L. Attwood (eds.), *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp75–95.
- ⁵¹ Krekola, *Maailma kylässä 1962*.
- ⁵² P. Koivunen, 'The Moscow 1957 youth festival: propagating a new, peaceful image of the Soviet Union', in M. Ilic, J. Smith (eds), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, London: Routledge, 2009, p59.
- ⁵³ Group interview 16 March 2006.
- ⁵⁴ L. Goretti, 'Snapshots of real socialism: Italian young communists at the East European World Youth Festival (1947–1957)', draft paper presented at the European summer school on Cold War history, Bertinoro, in September 2010.
- ⁵⁵ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.
- ⁵⁶ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.
- ⁵⁷ Interview with a Finnish delegate, 30 March 2009.
- ⁵⁸ RGASPI, f4-m, op1, d1688, 171. Sekretariu TsK VLKSM, tov. Zaluzhnomu 2.9.1953.
- ⁵⁹ State archive of Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia (henceforth GARF), fR-9401, op2, d491, 1393.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with a Finnish delegate, 30 March 2009.
- ⁶¹ GARF, fR-9401, op2, d491, ll387, 393, 404.
- ⁶² Kostiainen, 'The vodka trail', pp33–48.
- ⁶³ KA, Pentti Riekkola's collection, Pentti Riekkola's travellingogue of the Bucharest 1953 Festival.
- ⁶⁴ RGASPI, f4-m, op1, d1688, 132. Otchet o rabote o gruppovoi delegatsii finskoi molodezhi, Zam. sekretaria komiteta VLKSM Moskovskogo ekonomicheskogo instituta V. Shkatov.
- ⁶⁵ Compare with Krekola, 'Kuumia tunteita', pp267–9.
- ⁶⁶ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006; Group interview with Finns, 17 May 2006, Tampere, Finland.
- ⁶⁷ Group interview with Finns, 16 March 2006.