

Vyborgians on the Move - Diversifying and Broadening Notions about the Karelian Diaspora

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Terhi Pietiläinen 2025. *Monipaikkainen Viipuri. Muistitietotutkimus siirtoväen kaupunkilaisesta karjalaisuudesta*. [Multilocal Vyborg – An Oral History Study of the Urban Karelian Identity of the Evacuees]. Kansatieteellinen Arkisto 66. Helsinki: Suomen Muinaismuistoyhdistys [Finnish Antiquarian Society]. 359 pp. ISBN 978-952-84-0765-2 (print). ISBN 978-952-84-0766-9 (PDF). ISSN: 0355-1830.

In her doctoral dissertation in ethnology, Terhi Pietiläinen studies the oral histories of Vyborg residents, a group that has received little attention in previous studies on displaced Karelians. Before World War II, Vyborg was a cosmopolitan city known for its vibrant cultural life and diverse population representing all social classes. Pietiläinen is particularly interested in how the experiences and memories of Vyborg residents relate to the dominant narrative about the experiences of displaced Karelians. This hegemonic narrative—based largely on the experiences of Karelians who lived in rural areas—includes the sudden evacuation of the Karelians, the long journey full of hardships across Finland, and the cold reception at their new settlements. Later on, the hegemonic narrative also includes themes such as a lifelong longing for the lost homeland, a distinct displaced Karelian identity, and strong family ties. On the national level, the dominant narrative is somewhat different. This version tells of the nation’s survival during the war years, as well as the successful resettlement and adaptation of evacuees after the war.

This dominant narrative is familiar to most Finns regardless of whether they have roots in Karelia or not. The narrative has been told time and again in movies, TV series, documentaries, novels, memoirs, national holidays, and other public commemorative events. A concrete example is the national evacuee monument unveiled in Lahti in 2021. Although the monument was erected “for all” evacuees from 1939–1944, the figures portrayed resemble rural evacuees in their clothing more than urban ones—not to mention evacuees from Lapland, whose displacement only began after the Continuation War ended in 1944.

Pietiläinen’s dissertation is based on interviews conducted during the *Karjalaisista siirtokarjalaisiksi* (From Karelians to Displaced Karelians) project, a collaboration between the Finnish Karelian League—a cultural and advocacy organization for displaced Karelians—and the University of Helsinki’s Depart-

ment of Ethnology in the early 2000s. Pietiläinen, who at the time was a new doctoral researcher, was involved in the project from the beginning as coordinator, planner, and interviewer. The project was initiated by the displaced Karelians themselves, with the goal of producing material for a documentary series—which was indeed realized. The ten-part documentary series *Muistojeni Karjala* (My memories of Karelia) was first broadcast on Finnish national television (Yle) in 2005.

In total, 316 interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2002 with former residents of the ceded Karelian territories. At the time, video-recording interviews were a novel and still relatively rare method in oral history research in Finland. From this extensive dataset, Pietiläinen selected 40 interviews with individuals who identified as being from Vyborg. Though all interviewees shared a Vyborg background, they differed in socioeconomic status and place of residence, meaning they did not form a homogeneous group, and their experiences varied widely.

Pietiläinen's active role in the project has allowed her to reflect deeply and critically on her research material and its production process. She has watched, listened to, and read through the interviews, uncovering various layers in the narratives. Her analysis is careful and detailed, paying attention even to contradictions, anomalies, and silences. Although she does not explicitly name her method, her approach can be seen as a combination of close reading and thematic analysis. In her analysis, she considers the social context of the interviews' creation, as well as the project's objectives, from the formulation of the research questions to the execution of the interviews. She carefully reflects on factors that influenced her interpretations, including fieldwork she later conducted among Karelians living in Lahti. It is also clear that more recent studies, films, other cultural history products, and changes in the global political landscape over the past 20+ years have influenced her interpretation of the interviews, which she well acknowledges.

Overall, Pietiläinen demonstrates a deep understanding of the process by which oral histories and memory narratives are formed and used as research material. The study includes a comprehensive bibliography and makes extensive use of background materials such as the Finnish Karelian League documents, newspapers, magazines, organizational publications, and memoirs, commemorative books, local histories, and historical accounts written by displaced Karelians themselves. The emphasis in the scholarly literature is understandably on Finnish research, given the subject matter. The study also engages with Finnish oral history research and, to a lesser extent, international research on oral history and cultural memory.

In terms of international scholarship, Pietiläinen relies on well-established and relevant works, such as Alessandro Portelli's and Lynn Abrams's key texts

on theoretical and methodological issues in oral history, as well as Astrid Erll's writings on cultural memory. However, the study does not significantly engage with international oral history research focusing on key themes like multi-locality, displacement, or migration, even though these are central to the dissertation. Additionally, some key concepts, such as Alistair Thomson's *moving stories* (concerning migrants' mobility and emotional movement) and Astrid Erll's *travelling memories* (how memories migrate into new contexts), are only partially defined and applied.

When studying the reminiscence narratives of displaced Karelians, the influence of cultural memory cannot be overlooked, as it has significantly shaped public understanding of displacement. The aim of this study is not to uncover the "original and authentic experiences" of Vyborg residents, but rather to understand why people remember things the way they do—an approach that aligns with the principles of oral history. Pietiläinen's research questions are clearly framed within the context of the *From Karelians to Displaced Karelians* project. The study skillfully addresses how cultural memory has influenced both the interview questions and the information produced in those interviews.

Pietiläinen's research shows that the urban Karelian experiences of displacement diverged from the dominant hegemonic narrative. Vyborg residents did not form a unified group, so individual variation within the group was greater than among the evacuees from rural areas.

While the dissertation does not introduce theoretical or methodological innovations in the study of memory narratives, it does broaden and diversify the picture of displaced Karelian identity. The thorough and reflective analysis of the research process provides an excellent example of the many factors that influence interview-based data, from the formulation of questions to their interpretation in changing contexts.

Although the experiences of displaced Karelians have been widely studied, earlier research has mainly focused on rural populations, and the war and evacuation experiences of Vyborg residents have received less attention. However, this is starting to change, and new research on the experiences of Vyborg residents during and after the Winter and Continuation Wars has been published in recent years. Pietiläinen's dissertation is a welcome addition to this growing body of research.

AUTHOR

Anne Heimo, Professor of Folkloristics at the University of Turku, acted as the opponent of the dissertation.