

Austin, Paul. 2009. *The Karelian Phoenix*. Studies in Languages. 45. Joensuu: Faculty of Humanities, University of Joensuu. 121 pages. ISBN: 9789522192196.

I shall start by sketching in some background which will serve to set the scene for Austin's *The Karelian Phoenix* (henceforth: *Phoenix*).

To most people in the West, Karelia does not conjure up much. If they have heard of it at all, it is probably in connection with Sibelius's *Karelian Suite* or Lönnrot's epic of Finnish literature, the *Kalevala*. This, of course, would lead one to think that Karelia is part of Finland, but it is not. To be sure, one of the Finnish provinces is called Northern Karelia, but this is not to be confused with Karelia *sensu largo*. In fact, most of Karelia is part of Russia and has been for many centuries. After the Winter War of 1939-1940 between Finland and the Soviet Union, Finland was forced to cede about 9% of its Karelian territory. However, from 1941 to 1944 most of Karelia was under Finnish occupation as a result of Finnish victories in the so-called Continuation War, another war fought between Finland and the Soviet Union. At the close of World War II, the Russians had retaken all of Karelia and had annexed a further one seventh of Finland proper, including Finland's second largest city, Viipuri (in English Vyborg). So, Karelia, today officially known as the Republic of Karelia, lies in the far north-west corner of the Russian Federation, hard on the Finnish border, covering an area of 172,400 sq. km., roughly twice the size of Portugal. Most of the people currently living in Karelia are ethnic Russians, speaking, naturally, Russian. Just some 10% of the population call themselves Karelians, nearly all of whom speak Russian and just some, in addition, a form of a language which might be labelled "Karelian." Importantly, nearly all of these Karelians, like their Russian neighbours, are Orthodox Christians in contradistinction to the Finns, fully 95% of whom are, nominally, Lutherans, with a mere 1% being Orthodox Christians. Why the hesitation in labelling "Karelian" a language? Well, there never has been a codified Karelian language, there being rather a number of Karelian dialects, which divide, broadly speaking, into two groups, northern (usually labelled Karelian Proper) and southern (usually labelled Livvi), with many more speakers of Livvi than Karelian Proper. Bewilderingly, alongside Russian, the second official language of the Republic of Karelia is Finnish. How has such a jumbled situation come about? What sort of future awaits the Karelian people? Are there any realistic chances that one unified standard Karelian language might still arise? These are the main questions Austin addresses in *Phoenix*.

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In North America Austin is uniquely qualified to write about Karelia, both about its people and its putative language. As a long-serving professor of Russian at McGill University, he can of course handle all Russian sources and, crucially, his long love affair with Finland and the Finnish language gives him the rare capability (for a non-Finn) of examining Finnish sources in the original. In addition, Austin has, for many years, been a scholar of the “Karelian Question,” being able to read Karelian sources, no matter what dialect they are written in. Furthermore, Austin's being a rank outsider when it comes to Karelian politics gives him, in my opinion, a massive advantage over Finnish and Russian scholars on this topic, for he can take a truly dispassionate view of this complicated question, which stokes both Finnish and Russian passions alike. In *Phoenix* Austin shows himself, refreshingly, to be the honest broker, having no axe to grind.

*Phoenix* is divided up into five sections, viz. “Karelia Incognita,” “Karelia Irredenta,” “Karelia Sovietica,” “Karelia Independens,” and “Karelia Futura.” The first two sections deal with Karelia up to its incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1923. For most of this long stretch of time Karelia found itself in a constant tug-of-war between the Swedes and the Russians. For centuries both Finland and much of Karelia formed part of the Swedish Empire, in fact right up until 1809, when Russia conclusively defeated Sweden in one of the many wars between the two nations. As a result of this victory, by the Treaty of Fredrikshamn, Russia annexed both Finland and most of Karelia. Later, in 1917 Finland would, for the very first time, gain its independence, but practically all the Karelian lands have remained firmly under Russian control since 1809. At Finnish independence in 1917 a small part of Karelian territory became part of Finland, i.e. the area known as Northern Karelia (Pohjois-Karjala in Finnish). To put it bluntly, Karelia as an entity only received recognition of its own when the Karelian Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union (ASSR) came into being in 1923. For a brief period, between 1940-1956, the Soviets upgraded Karelia to the status of a full Republic of the Soviet Union, but in 1956 it was “demoted” to its original status of an Autonomous Republic and finally at the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 it became known as the Republic of Karelia, albeit firmly within the borders of the Russian Federation.

Running throughout *Phoenix* is the question of the Karelian language. Is there, has there ever been, will there ever be such a thing? It is this thorny problem which Austin keeps coming back to in every section of his book. That there are people who consider themselves Karelians is beyond doubt. That many of these people can speak a language, which is neither Finnish nor Russian, is also beyond doubt. That this language spoken by people who look upon themselves as Karelians is a Finno-Ugric tongue, related to Finnish, is also beyond doubt. Yet, the fact remains that there is no standard, codified Karelian language. Austin describes in great detail (*passim*) the many attempts to create a national language

for the Karelians, some of these on-going. And yet somehow the goal remains elusive, out of reach, while the number of Karelian speakers continues to decline alarmingly. (There are today so few speakers of any form of Karelian, just a few thousand, that Karelian is now officially deemed an endangered language!) Wisely, Austin does not apportion blame for the failed attempts to create a common Karelian language. To be sure, the big divide between Karelian Proper (the northern dialect, which has much in common with Finnish) and Livvi (the southern dialect, much further removed from Finnish) presents an obstacle, but not, in Austin's opinion, an insurmountable obstacle. Perhaps all standard languages are compromises between competing dialects and often the dialects involved are much further apart than Karelian Proper and Livvi, e.g. the chasm that exists between the Bavarian and Low German dialects of German. Certainly, the establishment of Finnish as an official language alongside Russian in the Karelian ASSR in 1923 did not ease the way for the formation of a Karelian standard language. Here again, Austin describes and does not apportion blame. In fact, the author's handling of the vital part played by the so-called "Red Finns" (those Finns defeated by Mannerheim in the Finnish Civil War and who subsequently sought refuge in Soviet Karelia) is fairness personified.

In summing up, Austin says this:

There are, it would seem, two interlinked issues: the creation of a single common language and the survival of the Karelian people. It may be that the first is easier than the second.

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I would not agree with the author here. Despite all the efforts to create a common Karelian language, and I single out the ongoing valiant undertakings of Pekka Zaikov in Joensuu and Liudmila Markianova in Petrozavodsk in Russian Karelia for special mention, I see no real progress on the ground. Sad to say, I am of the opinion that there never will be a common Karelian language spoken by all Karelian people. Yet, I am quite sure the Karelian people will survive with a culture distinct from both Finnish and Russian cultures, but these Karelians will speak Russian as their native language.

*Phoenix* is an excellent piece of scholarship, whose author wishes not only the Karelian people well but the Finnish and Russian peoples too. Austin's book will become required reading for anybody seriously interested in the "Karelian Question."

I note one typo, on p. 115, under the bibliographical entry for Pöllänen, Eila: for "Ilman kielä . . .," read "Ilman kieltä,"

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASSR: Autonomous Republic of the Soviet Union