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Santeri Nuorteva and the Embassy of the International Revolution

Europe smokes and throws away the butts. America picks up the butts, but out of them, something magnificent is growing.
–Sergei Esenin, 1923

In the spring of 1918, the propaganda agency of the United States scored a major coup. Edgar Sisson, the Committee on Public Information representative in Petrograd, obtained 68 documents that established, beyond any doubt, that the Bolsheviks were paid agents of the Germans. That is, beyond any doubt of Sisson's – a multitude of voices in left-leaning press and political circles cried foul, citing an array of technical, linguistic and factual inconsistencies that suggested forgery.¹ Among these voices was Santeri Nuorteva, representative to the United States from the Red Finnish government, which was by then in exile in Russia. In a forceful rebuttal sent to the *New York Evening Post* – one of many papers to uncritically publish Sisson's story – Nuorteva enumerated the documents' many weaknesses and castigated the paper for its "journalistic adventures," demanding a retraction or at least an acknowledgment of uncertainty.²

Alerted to Nuorteva's schemes, the CPI made a forceful defense of the documents – with help from military intelligence and the Justice Department, they had Nuorteva arrested without a warrant and subjected him to hours of improvised cross-examination. In retelling the story to an associate, Nuorteva describes a procession of "broad-jawed, sturdy looking secret service agents," frantic Justice Department officers and CPI officials running between him and multiple ringing telephones, demanding to know about his activities in the United States and, specifically, why a Finn should care about Russia.³ The ensuing arguments displayed, at least to Nuorteva, "a profound ignorance about things in Russia," and grew more heated when the *Evening Post* ran Nuorteva's piece that same night. Nuorteva was jailed for two days without access to counsel or even silverware with which to eat, evidently to obviate the risk of suicide. With mocking irony,

¹ George F. Kennan, "The Sisson Documents," *The Journal of Modern History* 28, no. 2 (June 1956). Though published long after the fact, Kennan's debunking of the documents is the most definitive. Many of his suspicions, however, were expressed at the time the documents first emerged.

² Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919, George Halonen Miscellaneous Papers, Hoover Institution Archives. All documents are in English unless otherwise noted. [= Halonen Papers]

³ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919.

Nuorteva assured his friend he had no such intention, “being not yet altogether devoid of hope... in spite of the methods of [CPI head] Mr. Creel and his associates.” After one final round of interrogation at the Justice Department by Edgar Sisson himself, Nuorteva was released without explanation and returned to his Massachusetts home.

Before the world divided in two, the Bolsheviks conceived of themselves as the vanguard of an international revolution, one that recognized no borders and spoke all tongues. Assured of its own world-historic importance, this revolution rallied supporters around the globe to help fuel it or, where possible, to replicate it. Below is the story of Santeri Nuorteva, one of the revolution’s most recognizable promoters to the American public, as well as one of its unrecognized ambassadors to the American government.⁴ His work in the unofficial Red Finnish, then Soviet Russian, embassies coincided with the period after the October Revolution until the Bolsheviks turned the revolution inward, roughly from late 1917 until the end of the Allied intervention in Russia in 1920. In these formative days, the United States occupied a peculiar place in the Bolsheviks’ world – it was capitalist but untainted by Europe, of the old system but young at heart.⁵ It was also, unlike the European powers, not presumed to be on the brink of popular revolution itself.⁶ If the Bolsheviks sought to deal with the United States, they were prepared to deal with its government, as Nuorteva attempted to do. The period saw probing from both sides to determine the contours of the relationship, and the Bolsheviks, keenly aware of their weaker position, were usually the first to extend their hand.⁷

This is not to say, however, that these gestures were purely tactical – the Bolsheviks from the beginning showed a capacity to separate ideology from foreign policy, and when Lenin urged “moderation and diplomacy” in dealing with the United States, he was being moderate, not simply diplomatic.⁸ The Bolsheviks’ economic interests in the U.S. are well documented, and indeed

⁴ Auvo Kostianen, “Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations,” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 15 (n.d.): 7.

⁵ David W. McFadden, *Alternative Paths: Soviets and Americans, 1917-1920*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25-26. This book represents likely the best English-language research on Nuorteva’s time at the bureaus.

⁶ V.I. Lenin, “Letter to the American Workingman.” *Pravda*, August 22, 1918, No. 178 edition.

⁷ McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, ch. 1.

⁸ For Bolshevik pragmatism in general, see Adam B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-73*. (2d ed. New York: Praeger, 1974), ch. 3. For moderation and diplomacy, see McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, ch. 3.

underlaid the Soviet Russian embassy project described below, but these should not eclipse the genuine admiration, and even ideological sympathy, that the Bolsheviks had for the United States in this period.⁹ This was a time before Wilson vs. Lenin, when Wilson waited to see where Russia was headed, and Lenin could look to America for direction. The Bolsheviks strove for American efficiency and scientific management (Russian revolutionary sweep + American efficiency = Leninism, in Stalin's formulation), and one vision for their utopia was essentially America sans exploitation.¹⁰ But in a broader sense, they recognized the United States as an alternative to decaying Old Europe among the capitalist powers, less inclined towards the imperialism and secret alliances that had inflicted such great suffering during the war. More than once Lenin praised the radical democratic roots of the United States, and in his *Letter to the American Workingman*, the revolutionary tradition of its people and the "world-historic and progressive" significance of the American Revolution and Civil War.¹¹ When, in *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, he criticized American imperialism in the Philippines, he notably did so with Lincoln's own words.¹² Capital was everywhere the same, but Americans were different.

These mixed sentiments took a concrete form in the Russian Soviet Government Bureau, the revolution's unrecognized embassy in New York City. With the endorsement of the party and, at least initially, funding from the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (*Narkomindel*) and the Supreme Soviet on the National Economy (VSNKh), the Martens bureau (so named after its chief, the Russian-born German socialist Ludwig Martens) made extensive outreach efforts to American business and to the government in Washington. Nuorteva was, from the bureau's inception, its secretary, its political representative to Washington, and its public face. In its actions

The actual phrase can be found in Halonen Papers, introduction from George Halonen.

⁹ The most thorough survey of Bolshevik economic interests in the US between the revolution and official recognition in 1933 is Katherine A. Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy: The Evolution of Soviet-American Relations, 1919-1933*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996). This book, along with McFadden's *Alternative Paths*, are the best English-language sources on Nuorteva's time at the bureaus, though the two overlap significantly and often use the same sources, including the few translated papers by Auvo Kostiaainen (see note 15).

¹⁰ Hughes 250-251. Stalin's laid out this vision of Leninism in 1924, but it was by no means a new idea.

¹¹ V.I. Lenin, "Letter to the American Workingman." For more on Lenin's use of American imagery, see Hans Rogger's "How the Soviets See Us," in Mark Garrison and Abbott Gleason, ed. *Shared Destiny: Fifty Years of Soviet-American Relations*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

¹² V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Vol. 1, Lenin's Selected Works, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1963), ch. 9, "Critique of Imperialism."

and rhetoric the bureau's leadership was moderate, eschewing propaganda and agitation in pursuit of constructive and mutually beneficial relations.¹³ In this respect, the bureau reflected the will of the center.

The Bolsheviks' language differed from that of the Americans, but they saw potential for mutual comprehension. Was the revolution not, after all, international and multilingual? At this point, it was certainly not Russian – its loudest voices spoke from the Empire's borderlands, in Finland and Latvia, the Pale of Settlement and the Caucasus, with brief shouts heard from as far as Hungary and Bavaria. It was fitting that a German and a Finn were running the nominally Russian embassy in America – the revolution believed that its language was universal, if only it could be communicated well. And it could have had no greater interpreter in the United States than Santeri Nuorteva, who, for two frenzied years, dedicated his formidable energies and his singular voice to finding a common language. But the revolution frequently misjudged the international arena, and Nuorteva, a man of great linguistic ability, fundamentally misunderstood the United States. Though true that revolution was embedded deep in the American idiom, it was by this point a vestige, obscure in its meaning and distant in time.

Who was Santeri Nuorteva?

When Edgar Sisson cross-examined Nuorteva following his brief detention, the first aim was to solve a longstanding mystery. Why *did* Nuorteva, a Finn, care about Russia? It did not take long to unmask the truth – Sisson discovered that Nuorteva had a Russian mother. Though this discovery appears to have satisfied Sisson, it was, perhaps, an oversimplification.¹⁴

Born in Viipuri (Vyborg) in 1881 to a Russian-Jewish mother and a Swedish-Finnish father, Santeri Nuorteva (also Alexander Nyberg and Aleksandr Fedorovich Nuorteva) hailed from no one nation. His background surely contributed to his linguistic abilities (he was said to speak as many

¹³ For Bolshevik funding to Narkomindel, see Kevin McDermott, *The Comintern: a History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 11. For Narkomindel's relationship to the Martens bureau and for its outreach efforts to business, as well as Martens's moderate approach, see Katherine Siegel, *Loans and Legitimacy*, ch. 1.

¹⁴ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. This folder contains Nuorteva's retelling of his arrest to an unknown associate.

as ten languages), and his charisma ensured his influence in socialist circles both in Tsarist Finland and the United States.¹⁵ Like many prominent socialists of the period, he was not of working class origins, though alongside his distinctly bourgeois vocations in Finland (journalist, language instructor, dictionary editor) he did work as a traveling laborer, boilermaker, and sailor in the Tsarist merchant fleet before his formal entry into politics after 1906.¹⁶ Following the revolution of the previous year, he won a seat as a socialist in Finland's first democratically elected parliament, though his efforts were always divided between politics and the socialist press. He assumed a moderate position in both and rarely committed himself exclusively to either in this period, but made powerful enemies nonetheless. After years of harassment by Tsarist authorities, Nuorteva emigrated from Finland to the United States in 1911.¹⁷

First in Astoria, Oregon, then in Fitchburg, Massachusetts (both hubs for émigré Finns), he rapidly attained prominence in socialist circles as a promoter of Finns within the larger American labor movement, and most important to his later work, as the editor of various Finnish socialist newspapers.¹⁸ In these roles he traveled widely and gained an intimate knowledge of his adopted homeland, as well as an enthusiasm for its revolutionary tradition. In his own words, from a letter addressed to American liberals in 1919,

“I have lived in America long enough to become an admirer of your tremendous resourcefulness, your ability of initiative, your youthful social vigor, unhampered by centuries of feudal tradition, and I have dreamed . . . that America, because of these her assets, will be able to bring common sense into the world.”¹⁹

Much had changed in the world since Nuorteva had left Finland. Shortly after the October

¹⁵ Auvo Kostiainen, *Santeri Nuorteva: Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, (Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 120. Helsinki: SHS, 1983), 16-21. This is, to my knowledge, the only monograph written about Nuorteva. That it requires a reading knowledge of Finnish is but one of its shortcomings. While the book contains a wealth of biographical material and an outline of Nuorteva's entire life, its gaps and lack of analysis leave much room for further research. It has been translated into Swedish and contains a seven-page English-language summary. Before the book's publication, a few sections were translated into English and published; see works cited for these.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-34

¹⁷ Kostiainen, *Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, ch. 2 for background with Finnish socialists, 34-41 and 60-62 for his terms in the Finnish parliament. On his leaving for America, see 71.

¹⁸ Auvo Kostiainen, *Santeri Nuorteva: Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, (Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 120. Helsinki: SHS, 1983), 74-89 for Nuorteva's work in America before 1917.

¹⁹ Santeri Nuorteva, “An Open Letter to American Liberals,” *The Socialist Publication Society*. New York, NY, September 1918.

Revolution in Russia, the Finnish parliament declared the country's independence, which was in turn recognized by the Bolsheviks in late December of 1917. A month later, pro-Bolshevik Social Democrats, speaking from the Soviets in Finland's industrial south, declared a workers' state. Though Nuorteva had been distinctly moderate in his politics prior to these events, his admiration for the October Revolution and his support for the Comintern separated him from some in his Finnish-American and American socialist milieu, aligning him more closely with less familiar communists in Finland and Russia.²⁰ As the revolutionary government sought to establish a presence abroad, it quickly recognized Nuorteva's sympathy and his unique place in the American political landscape. On account of his charisma, his large network of contacts and his familiarity with his host country, the foreign minister of the Finnish Soviet government nominated him as ambassador to the U.S., a role he embraced immediately and energetically.²¹ He would serve in this post, unrecognized by his host government, for the whole five months of the Finnish Socialist Workers' Republic's rocky existence, until it was crushed by the Finnish Whites in collaboration with the German army. Thenceforth, Nuorteva was an ambassador without credentials, representing a government in exile, but his work continued apace.

When he came to represent the Finnish, then Russian, revolutions, his foes in the U.S. State Department's Russian section acknowledged his "shrewd political instincts" and "unusual ability," and understood him to be "the brains of the Martens bureau," to be handled with great care.²² Perhaps more charitably, a Justice Department memo regarding his bureau's financing called him "sincere and high-minded," if politically questionable.²³ He was, in short, a natural interpreter for the international revolution – an eloquent communicator, cosmopolitan, and diplomatic by nature, and conversant in the politics of Russia, Finland, and the United States. Though he had never seen the revolution with his own eyes, he eagerly volunteered to be its voice abroad.

Still, Edgar Sisson's question remains unanswered. How did Nuorteva, who had previously

²⁰ Kostiainen, "Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations," 4.

²¹ See McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 288 for Nuorteva's considerable political network in Washington. Kostiainen, *Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, ch. 4 details his associations within the American socialist movement.

²² McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 287.

²³ Halonen Papers, Miscellaneous, unlabeled letter beginning "Mr. Santeri Nuorteva has consulted me in reference to a fund..."

not identified as a Bolshevik, eventually become a leader of their embassy and commit so wholeheartedly to their cause?²⁴ The answer reveals deep connections between the Finnish and Russian revolutions, and the international nature of both. It seems that, although ideological sympathy was a significant factor, circumstances guided Nuorteva's embrace of Bolshevism. Thus Nuorteva's conversion also reveals – though he would have likely denied this – the extent to which Bolshevism chose him.

Becoming a Bolshevik

A war-induced famine gripped Finland at the time of the revolution, and, as ambassador to the United States, Nuorteva's sole charge was to secure and deliver food aid.²⁵ But securing such aid required that Nuorteva forge at least a semi-official diplomatic relationship with the United States, so that he could coordinate with authorities on behalf of the Finnish government. Recognition, though, depended on the good will and sympathy of the American public, as the government was in no rush to embrace the Soviets of its own accord. A dearth of information, along with widespread anti-socialist sentiment in the U.S. press, hampered attempts to build good will, and Nuorteva set out to inform the public about the severity of the famine and the scale of White atrocities.²⁶ These twin needs led to the establishment of the Finnish Information Bureau in New York City on March 30, 1918.²⁷ The bureau, staffed by sympathizers and associates of Nuorteva, would strive both to contact the U.S. government as an embassy and battle the press as a news agency. Nuorteva soon found his workload so heavy that he abandoned all other engagements in journalism and American

²⁴ One example is in Santeri Nuorteva, "The Soviet Republic." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 84 (July 1919): 108–113. Here, Nuorteva calls himself a 'Bolshevist,' but not a Bolshevik, if such a distinction can be made. The article is an unusually forceful defense of the entire Bolshevik project and, importantly, was written late in his time in the US. By this point, Nuorteva had assumed a more defensive posture, for reasons explained below. In other writings he does claim to be a Bolshevik, but this is relatively rare, and no evidence suggests he was one before the Russian Revolution.

²⁵ This entire trajectory is assembled from a timeline constructed from the archival material taken as a whole, with some sections stated explicitly by Nuorteva in Halonen Papers, letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918.

²⁶ The Finnish Civil War was marked by atrocities on both sides, though it was far from symmetrical – thousands more were executed by the Whites than the Reds, and most infamously, the Whites oversaw more than ten thousand deaths in their POW camps. There was no parallel on the Red side. The Finnish National Archives keep records of war dead, which are available at <http://vesta.narc.fi/cgi-bin/db2www/sotasurmaetusivu/main?lang=fi>, accessed December 12, 2012. The site is in Finnish, but has a brief English section.

²⁷ Kostainen, *Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, 90.

socialist politics, dedicating himself solely to informing the American public and government on the Finnish question.²⁸ In this he succeeded – he garnered some sympathy for Soviet Finland among Finnish-Americans and the broader public, made contacts throughout Washington, and was even in dialogue with Edward House, President Wilson’s foreign policy advisor.²⁹

The Reds were faring worse, however, in the Finnish Civil War. By mid-March of 1918, shortly before the bureau’s establishment, defeat at the Battle of Tampere and the intervention of the German army had turned the war against them. By the middle of May, the defeated Red government had fled to Petrograd. The famine persisted, paired now with widespread White reprisals, and Nuorteva’s bureau continued its work. But with the Reds’ defeat, its focus had shifted eastward – the new aim was to ship food aid to the Russian Arctic coast, and transport it to Finland via Petrograd. Such a plan, of course, required a working relationship between the United States and the Soviet government of Russia.³⁰

Nuorteva had been a vocal defender of the Bolsheviks before this turn of events, particularly after the American outrage over the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of that year. Ideologically it was clear whose side he would take in the Russian Civil War, though he himself, importantly, had previously been far more moderate than his Russian Bolshevik comrades. Still, after the Finnish Reds’ defeat, ensuring a Bolshevik victory became his primary cause. His Finnish Information Bureau looked increasingly like a Russian Information Bureau, and in time, would acknowledge this shift formally. For the Russian Soviets were also in dire need of economic assistance, their economy wrecked by the previous war and not improving in the current one. In January of 1919, the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy (VSNKh) established the Russian Soviet Government Bureau, the Martens Bureau, with a task not unlike its Finnish predecessor’s. It was to be a conduit for trade agreements with American businesses, a public relations office, and an official embassy if and when the American government recognized it as such.³¹ It was established at 299 Broadway

²⁸ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. This is from a letter to George Halonen.

²⁹ McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 271.

³⁰ Halonen Papers, letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918.

³¹ Kostainen, *Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, 97.

in New York – the office of Nuorteva’s bureau. The bureau would be run by largely the same staff, and Nuorteva would serve as its secretary, running its political and media operations, while Martens sought contracts with American businesses.³² The two bureaus merged literally and in Nuorteva’s conception, and will often be treated here as identical. There were differences – the Russian bureau received part of its funding from Moscow and had limited direction from the Soviet of People’s Commissars (*Sovnarkom*) – but Nuorteva’s role was essentially unchanged. Martens’ trade activities, likewise, were distinct, and have received more attention from historians. But ultimately, Martens’ limited successes speak less about the period than Nuorteva’s failures.³³ And to Nuorteva, the Finnish cause and the Russian cause were now inseparable – this is the answer that escaped Edgar Sisson. After the founding of the Russian bureau, Nuorteva never lost sight of Finland and continued to plead for food aid and shed light on the White terror. But he dedicated himself with equal vigor to the cause of the Russians, when he distinguished between the two at all.

The bureau was stateless, literally and in its functions. It was also multi-lingual – its German and Finnish leaders spoke and wrote publicly in English, but documents and letters were sometimes exchanged in Russian, French and Finnish (less often the latter, in the interest of transparency).³⁴ Nuorteva’s half of the operation would attempt, in part, to interpret in real time for the United States government and for the American public, translating the international revolution into distinctly American language.

Nuorteva at the Bureaus

Santeri Nuorteva believed that the problem he faced was one of communication, and

³² McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 287.

³³ Ludwig Martens sought and succeeded in making business contacts in the United States, but the blockade largely prevented the exchanges he arranged. Thus, alongside this first task, advocating for the blockade’s end consumed much of his time. For more on Martens’s efforts, see Todd J. Pfannestiel, *Rethinking the Red Scare: The Lusk Committee and New York’s Crusade Against Radicalism, 1919-1923*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture. (New York: Routledge, 2003), ch. 3. As stated above, Siegel’s *Loans and Legitimacy* and McFadden’s *Alternative Paths* are both good resources on the bureau, its precursors (McFadden, 271 in particular), and on Martens himself.

³⁴ Halonen Papers, letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918. In closing this letter, Nuorteva instructs Sirola (the Soviet Finnish Commissar of Foreign Affairs) to respond in English, French or Russian, as Finnish presents “certain inconveniences of translation.” I have confirmed this independently.

initiating a dialogue between the sides was a more pressing concern than gaining formal diplomatic recognition for either bureau. This dialogue would take on quite different tones depending on Nuorteva's interlocutor. As befitting a man of his politics, he viewed America in two distinct camps: the press was the capitalist class, sparing no measure to sabotage the mass democratic uprisings in Europe. The public, and to a surprising extent, the government, were to him essentially good, in line with lofty American – and Soviet – ideals. His speeches and writings reflect hope for the people and contempt for the press in equal measure. This pitch changes somewhat in the late summer of 1918, following both Nuorteva's arrest and the US decision to intervene in the Russian Civil War. Thereafter he retains hope, but it is paired with greater doubts, bitterness and occasional despair. However, this time also marks a great redoubling of his efforts, both in his energetic outreach to the government and the people and in his derision of his opponents in journalism. The scale of his efforts is astounding. Hundreds of letters, articles, and cables have reached us today, and they hint at constant travel up and down the East Coast, meetings with public officials, rallies and public speeches, not to mention long personal correspondences. Shortly after the Russian bureau is established, Nuorteva also edits its weekly bulletin, which eventually expands to a substantial weekly newspaper.³⁵ His letters suggest that his private life was rarely isolated from his work, and his friends and associates appear to be one and the same. His contacts in the United States included socialist leaders, congressmen, and White House aides, and a selection of prominent figures in journalism and literature, including John Reed and Carl Sandburg.³⁶

Carl Sandburg, in fact, was enmeshed in a small scandal concerning Nuorteva, one that succinctly illustrates Nuorteva's approach to his work at the bureaus. Returning from journalistic work in Oslo in late 1918, the great Chicago poet and socialist brought with him bank drafts worth \$10,000, presumably from Finnish socialists in Russian exile, intended for Nuorteva's bureau. The money was seized at customs, and Nuorteva lodged a formal protest with United States District Attorney in New York.³⁷ In his request for the funds, Nuorteva writes:

³⁵ The entire run of the bureau's newspaper, *Soviet Russia*, has been digitized on Google Books.

³⁶ This is a summary derived from the Halonen Papers taken as a whole, and regarding travel on the East Coast, from McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 288. It will be expanded upon, and footnoted, below.

³⁷ Auvo Kostiaainen, "Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations," *American Studies in Scandinavia*

“I in my work have strictly observed the principle of non-interference with American affairs. I have not and my office has not, nor will it, conduct any propaganda interfering with American institutions. I am interested only in presenting the truth about Russia and Finland. I believe that I am thereby rendering a genuine service not only to my constituents on the other side, but to the American people as well. America is called upon today to be the arbiter of the future of the world. In order to be able to do so, Americans must know just what are the conditions in [Russia and Finland]... The whole truth can never be found out about countries engulfed in bitter internal struggles by considering one side alone.”³⁸

He went on to demand the bank drafts that had been seized, but those funds never reached him. The incident testifies to his faith in communication as the only avenue to the truth. Its outcome was, perhaps, an early expression from the government that Nuorteva failed to interpret.

Before the Intervention

In the first half of 1918, from the Finnish Revolution until President Wilson dispatched the first 5000 US troops to intervene on the Russian Arctic coast, Nuorteva made a great push for cooperation with the United States government. To this end, he addressed letters and appeals to prominent figures of all ideological stripes within the administration, laying out his rationale and proposing concrete measures to improve relations. This included multiple unanswered letters to President Wilson and his staunchly anti-Bolshevik Secretary of State, Robert Lansing; to Edward House, Wilson’s more liberal foreign policy advisor; to Felix Frankfurter, the (then) left-leaning Harvard law professor, political advisor to Wilson, and future Supreme Court Justice; and to various officials at the Committee on Public Information. His tone was often deferent and assertive in equal measure, admitting unfamiliarity with diplomatic formalities but arguing forcefully for his objectives. Those objectives, at this time, were twofold – food aid for Finland was always primary, but through this, he explicitly sought assurance from the government that the Germans, not the world’s workers, were the United States’ primary foe. On February 25th, only five days after assuming his post as ambassador, he sent Wilson a letter to this end. In it, he clarifies immediately that he does not seek official recognition, only food aid. But to this he adds, “Finland will either

15 (n.d.): 1–14.

³⁸ Halonen Papers, Miscellaneous, letter to the United States District Attorney, January 11, 1919.

become a republic of, for and by labor, or a Prussian vassal state.”³⁹ Finland at this time, as so often in its history, was pinned between far more powerful neighbors, and Nuorteva thought the choice rather clear. The Germans had not yet intervened on the Whites’ behalf, but were being actively courted to do so. A letter to Robert Lansing followed, dwelling largely on the same themes, and similarly stressing that he did not, at that time, seek official recognition.⁴⁰ To Felix Frankfurter, who, unlike Wilson and Lansing, responded, Nuorteva names aid to Finland as the clearest signal the government could send that it would rather crush the Germans than the world’s workers.⁴¹ A third, consistent theme in the letters is the economic benefits associated with cooperation, namely access to the Finnish market but, much more so, the Russian market. Alongside these letters, the bureau released multiple public statements regarding the famine in Finland to cultivate public awareness and, ideally, pressure on elected officials.

It is worth noting that, in his letter to Wilson, Nuorteva borrows from Lincoln. Such phrases pepper his writing and reflect not only his political acumen but also a certain respect for the government he was petitioning. This will be addressed in greater detail below, but much of his writing suggests ideological overlap with the United States. Whether this was Nuorteva being “shrewd” or “high-minded” is open to interpretation, but it is clear that he had no ideological qualms with extensive cooperation. Describing his approach of pursuing economic and ideological common ground, Nuorteva wrote in a letter to Soviet Finnish Commissar of Foreign Affairs Yrjö Sirola, “my understanding is that it is fully consistent with the principles of Marxian socialism to seek such points of contact and mutual interest,” so long as it might advance the workers’ movement. In practical terms, finding “points of contact and mutual interest” defined much of his work.⁴² In addition to laying out his argument, Nuorteva proposed several concrete strategies towards improving relations.

In the same letter to Sirola, Nuorteva states that he has already, within months of assuming

³⁹ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Letter to the President of the United States of America, February 25, 1918.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Letter to Robert Lansing, March 9, 1918.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. First letter to Felix Frankfurter.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918.

his post, contacted many sympathetic US officials, and believes that Wilson is sympathetic enough to see the benefits of relations. To establish such relations, Nuorteva offers to the government the names of several intermediaries, including a detailed list sent to Felix Frankfurter. This formal list, in Nuorteva's phrasing, contains nineteen native-born Americans, naturalized Americans, Russians, and Finns, who "believe in America," and might "bring about a proper understanding with Russia."⁴³ In addition, Nuorteva conceded that any such understanding must include efforts from the Soviet side. Writing again to Yrjö Sirola, he insists that goodwill gestures from the Soviets are the best means to secure support from the American public:

Advances towards friendly relations... cannot be one-sided. It is up to you and the Russian Soviets to decide in what form you and they can prove a sincere willingness to find a working basis of cooperation... to establish a *modus vivendi*. ... You will leave nothing undone that can bring about a sincere and mutually advantageous understanding with the United States. I am also certain that a large mass of the American people, some of them consciously, others intuitively, desire such an understanding.⁴⁴

In letters to Wilson, Nuorteva assured him of this desire to compromise. "The Russian people, as represented by the Soviet government," he writes, "are willing to go great lengths to do away with such sources of friction which are removable at all."⁴⁵ And indeed, the Soviet side did offer many concessions, showing flexibility even after the US intervention. Wilson's later, most direct attempt to negotiate with the Bolsheviks, the Bullitt Mission of March 1919, concluded that Lenin was willing to sacrifice even more than at Brest-Litovsk, and sought conciliation "even at the cost of things they hold most dear."⁴⁶ The Bullitt report was suppressed but suggested that Nuorteva's stance was not simply diplomatic posturing.⁴⁷ If, in this period before intervention, Nuorteva had any doubts as to the Soviets' and Americans' mutual interest or the possibility of communication, he does not show them in public nor private correspondences. Writing to Robert

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Second letter to Felix Frankfurter.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, third letter to President Wilson, September 13, 1918.

⁴⁶ See McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 228-240, for a good summary of concessions the Bolsheviks were prepared to make.

⁴⁷ *The Bullitt Mission to Russia*. Testimony of William C. Bullitt to the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. Washington, D.C., September 12, 1919. Bullitt's mission was a major, if secretive, effort to survey both the situation in Russia and the nature of the Bolshevik leadership, and succeeded in speaking to Lenin and other prominent leaders. The testimony is available at <http://archive.org/details/cu31924014635555>, accessed December 3 2012.

Lansing, arguably the most zealous anti-Bolshevik in Wilson's administration, Nuorteva once more made his case for finding a common language:

My ardent desire is to bring about genuine understanding between the United States and the revolutionary masses in Finland and Russia, and I am sincerely convinced that [this] ... would be consistent with the ideals expressed by the President of the United States... and would lead to a state of affairs mutually beneficial to the people of Finland and Russia and the cause of the United States.⁴⁸

For the time being, Nuorteva did not see the American government as a barrier to the “genuine understanding” he sought. That role was reserved, in his conception, for the American press.

Nuorteva the Journalist

Like many people of exceptional talent, Nuorteva performed best when facing his greatest rival. In battling the newspapers, he found a means both to speak directly to the American public and to overcome what he perceived to be his most fundamental obstacle—mass misinformation. His own past in journalism no doubt contributed to his enthusiasm for this task, and he employed his energies and eloquence in the papers throughout his tenure at the bureaus. Again to Yrjö Sirola, he laid out his early, perhaps peculiar, conception of the United States, conflating the press with the reactionary classes:

[There are] two tendencies in regard to the Russian situation... there is a powerful reactionary capitalist class, of imperialist tendencies, avowedly hostile to revolutionary Russia. Their ideas control a large portion of the press, and they therefore have great influence on the public mind... [the press] uses and magnifies any alleged or real mistakes of the Soviet government as arguments against Russian democracy. *It should be added that this element is almost wholly hostile to President Wilson and his more liberal policies* [italics mine].⁴⁹

Before the events of late summer 1918, when he still presumed the “open-minded, anti-imperialist” nature of the Wilson administration, he strove to prevent an armed American intervention by means of shifting public opinion.⁵⁰ To this end, he was constantly correcting errors and writing letters to editors, lambasting the newspapers and newsmagazines for their biases, and often with

⁴⁸ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Second letter to Robert Lansing, October 15, 1918.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Letter to Yrjö Sirola, April 24, 1918.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

great irony, accusing individual writers and their papers of sullyng the good name of journalism. Taken together, these efforts constitute nearly half of his collected letters and writings. But this mass of text, naturally, paled in comparison to the Russia coverage he aimed to combat. “The daily quota of Russian news is one of the most remarkable phenomena of the war,” he wrote in a July 1918 announcement from the bureau. “For confusion and defiance of natural law it makes an old-fashioned three-ring circus look like a Quaker meeting.”⁵¹ In this early period, while combatting the war-mongering newspapers, he often deferred to the reason of Wilson and his allies against a press run wild.

In a submission titled “Potpourri Russe,” Nuorteva demonstrates at once his disdain for the press and his faith in Wilson’s good intentions, in typical form:

The newspapers of American capitalism, having decided to interpret President Wilson’s pledge to stand by Russia as meaning the invasion of Russia by a huge army of from 300,000 to 2,000,000 men... are very busy printing ‘news’ from all parts of the world – except from Russia itself – to show the wisdom of their program. The result is a potpourri Russe... served up daily in the morning papers and salted to taste in the editorial pages. The honest American reader who partakes of this mess is left in a sad condition of mental indigestion.⁵²

What follows, also typical of these writings, is an extensive list of recent erroneous reports, this time from the *New York Times* and drawing from British, Japanese, and Dutch sources. The reports claimed a Siberian government with unanimous support, a military alliance between the Soviets and Germany, and, perhaps most egregious to Nuorteva, that “the Russian peasants have had all the land they need ‘since time immemorial.’” Evidently, as Nuorteva explains, “German agents had deceived the peasants into believing they didn’t have land.” Indeed, Nuorteva reserved a particular contempt for the *Times* (“always the voice of the toiling masses,” in his words) and the *New York Tribune*, among a large field of resilient and vocal foes.⁵³ In a particularly aggressive outing in June of 1918, he wrote of the *Tribune*:

It wants the United States to send an American military expedition across this country from the great

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, “Potpourri Russe,” 1918. This essay, like several in the collection, has no indication of where it was published. Judging from other similar essays that are addressed to specific organizations, it was likely distributed by the Finnish Information Bureau to a wide range of socialist and mainstream newspapers in New York City, and if written after the spring of 1919, also published in the bureau’s newspaper, *Soviet Russia*.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Halonen Papers, “A New Holy Alliance.”

Eastern camps, across the Pacific Ocean and from Vladivostok across 7000 miles of exceedingly sketchy railroad “to reestablish the Eastern front.” Anyone who criticizes the feasibility of this stupendous journey is perfidious. Anyone who questions the morality of such an unasked-for invasion is a traitor. Anyone who dares assert that the plan would hopelessly alienate the Russian people from any sympathy with the United States is a German propagandist. In fact anyone who disagrees with the Tribune is pro-German.

We have often wondered during the past few months why the administration did not abdicate in favor of the Tribune, which is pointing out almost every day how much more efficiently it could run the war... At present the Tribune is conducting a mighty propaganda for suspending intelligence in the United States during the period of international hostilities. This propaganda has apparently met with great success in the Tribune office.⁵⁴

Until events turned against the revolution, Nuorteva retained hope for the people and for the government of the United States despite this bitterness towards the press. His hope hinged largely on a conviction that, the press notwithstanding, the United States and the revolution truly could understand one another. After all, if he understood both sides fluently – as he evidently believed – why should communication be so difficult? Nuorteva is never entirely disabused of this notion, though the following two years test it severely, and in his writing, optimism often appears alongside despair.

After the Intervention

Both of the articles cited above accused the press of clamoring for intervention, despite (at least according to Nuorteva) broad public opposition and calmer heads in the Wilson administration. But by July 1918, within a month of these writings, Wilson had committed troops to intervene on the Murman coast, with further deployments in Siberia during August and September. There was some opposition from the public, but it by no means represented the opinion of the majority.⁵⁵ In the middle of that same September, Nuorteva was arrested for his exposé of the Sisson documents, which publicly rebuked both the Committee on Public Information and the newspapers that reported its documents uncritically. The government’s aggressive response to his essay – as well

⁵⁴ Halonen Papers, “Suspending Intelligence.”

⁵⁵ See Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment, 1917-1933*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), ch. 1 for a good summary of public opinion regarding intervention.

as the intervention, which undermined the hopeful vision he'd promoted both in America and to his comrades at home – would prompt an adjustment to his strategy.

When military intelligence appeared at his door, it posed a direct challenge to the bifurcated vision of America he had described to Yrjö Sirola, and from these events onward the tone of his work shifted. Towards the government, his views were now decidedly mixed. “I have of course my difficulties, and there are departments in Washington which would be glad to hang me if they got a legal reason,” he lamented to friend and associate George Halonen a month after his arrest.⁵⁶ “There are others, however, who begin to realize that dealing with me is perhaps more feasible, and that they may have to deal with worse things by and by if they do not use the present possibility.” Gone, at least in this moment, was the rhetoric of common purpose, supplanted by pragmatism and no small degree of resignation. Even before these events, Nuorteva had, on occasion, feared he was betraying his Finnish and Russian comrades’ confidence “by urging them to rely on something which in the end may turn out to be only a mirage.”⁵⁷ But only after does a certain bitterness appear in his personal letters. This bitterness, however, never defines his work, and the most significant transformation after late summer 1918 is a great redoubling of efforts and ever more personal engagement in his undertakings.

With regard to the government, Nuorteva embarked in this time on two extended trips to Washington to confer with his network of contacts in Congress and the administration.⁵⁸ He also increasingly offered his own services as a mediator. In September, he penned another letter to Wilson, offering to fly to Moscow at his own expense, either privately or officially, to mediate between the sides immediately following the intervention. This letter also asks a list of demands from Wilson, so that Nuorteva might communicate them to sympathetic ears in Russia.⁵⁹ The following January, Wilson invited the warring factions in Russia to a summit on the island of Prinkipo in Turkey, and Nuorteva again offered his own services as a mediator, this time in a letter

⁵⁶ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919, letter to George Halonen, October 18, 1918. George Halonen was the representative from Soviet Karelia in the US at this time, and later, the compiler of Nuorteva’s documents.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Second letter to Felix Frankfurter.

⁵⁸ McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 288.

⁵⁹ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, third letter to President Wilson, September 13, 1918.

to Wilson advisor Grenville MacFarland.⁶⁰

With regard to the American public, Nuorteva at this time opened several new lines of communication, likely in an effort to circumvent the press. In February of 1919, he began publication of a weekly bulletin from the bureau, which by June was a full weekly newspaper titled *Soviet Russia*. On top of his pre-existing duties, Nuorteva served as editor for the paper, though it would outlast his tenure in New York. He also gave public speeches, wrote a barrage of letters to American socialists and liberals, and organized mass rallies in New York for the recognition of Soviet Russia. These were attended by Finnish and Russian socialists, some liberal leaders, and, at least once in the summer of 1919, several thousand other foreign and American sympathizers.⁶¹ In addition, he and fellow socialist immigrants ran an organization called the Russian Recognition League, which operated at least semi-independently of the bureau.⁶² Together these efforts were intended to speak to those he called “the real America,” on behalf of those he called “the Finnish and Russian people.”

One attribute of Nuorteva’s remained predictably unchanged after the intervention – his contempt for the American press. When that first battle was lost, Nuorteva continued to fight the slander and misinformation he perceived in print. For instance, in an article published in *the Annals*, the journal of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Nuorteva accused the press of hypocrisy in highlighting Red terror while ignoring its White counterpart in the Russian Civil War. He goes on to explain apparent sympathies for the Whites among the American public as resulting from an organized blockade of information: “The American public is not in a position to pass judgment [on the Soviet government’s progress], because they have been systematically prevented from getting news about the constructive work in Russia.”⁶³ He then tells of an unnamed correspondent from a major paper who left Russia when the vast majority of his telegrams were blocked. It is worth noting that nowhere does Nuorteva acknowledge his own lack of information,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Miscellaneous, letter to Grenville S. MacFarland, January 28, 1919. The Prinkipo summit never convened, as the Bolsheviks were the only Russian party that agreed to send delegates.

⁶¹ McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, 272.

⁶² Kostiainen, “Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations,” 6.

⁶³ Nuorteva, “The Soviet Republic,” 110.

about which he complained privately.⁶⁴ In a different moment of frustration, on coverage of Lenin's near assassination, Nuorteva wrote:

If the capitalist press sees fit today to degrade itself to the moral standard of thugs and bandits in their futile rage against the Russian Labor Republic, it is not for me to bewail it.⁶⁵

Of course, he continued to bewail it. But even if, as these excerpts suggest, he felt powerless in the face of capitalist interests, he never accepted the press as speaking for the country at large. His own vision of America – his regard for its ideals, for its history, and even for its leadership – remained a major current of his writing throughout his service in the country. This vision was a coherent one, based both in his personal experience and in a red-tinted interpretation of American history and politics. The American response, in its way, was coherent as well. But despite the mass of words exchanged in both directions, the two sides were rarely in dialogue. Looking at both sides in turn, Nuorteva's vision was certainly brighter, but the American response was more in line with the realities of the era.

Nuorteva's America

Like the Nobel Committee that awarded Wilson his Peace Prize, Nuorteva's enthusiasm for the president was rooted more in Wilson's words than his actions. Wilson did distinguish himself from his imperialist allies in rhetoric - his Fourteen Points offered a vocabulary of liberation for political minorities the world over, including those in Finland and Russia.⁶⁶ "President Wilson's messages have shown a broader vision of democracy than has come from any European statesman," Nuorteva writes. "Like the Russians... he has discarded secret diplomacy and imperialism."⁶⁷ In this same statement from the Finnish bureau, he once more contrasts those dual evils with Russia's new "government of, for, and by the Russian people." Writing later to Felix Frankfurter, Nuorteva celebrates "Europe's becoming inoculated with the young, living virus of all that is

⁶⁴ Problems of communication plagued both bureaus, and Martens and Nuorteva both cited these as a major impediment to their work. It is unclear to what extent this resulted from chaos in Europe or from US government interference, though both certainly played a part.

⁶⁵ Nuorteva, "An Open Letter to American Liberals."

⁶⁶ See Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) for the global response to Wilson's professed ideals.

⁶⁷ Halonen Papers, "The Case for Russia," May 18, 1918.

real in American democracy,” his Europe clearly encompassing both Finland and Russia.⁶⁸ His writings are saturated with such praise, which, with some exceptions, takes a more pronounced (if defensive) form as pressure on his bureau mounts.⁶⁹ During the Sisson Affair, George Creel, head of the CPI and Nuorteva’s loudest detractor, published a defense of his documents in the *New York Evening Post*. The defense, in part, took aim at the person of Nuorteva, describing his “absolute adherence to Lenin and Trotsky and all those other directors of murder now operating in Moscow and Petrograd,” as well as his handling of “German money” and his general propensity to lie. In response, Nuorteva disputes each accusation in turn, and takes particular issue with Creel’s allegation of enmity towards the United States. “Not a word of enmity can be attributed to me from many speeches, writings or acts in America,” he writes, and no historical research since has concluded otherwise.⁷⁰ In fact, professions of admiration for the United States and the adoption of its rhetoric are a striking and consistent feature of Nuorteva’s work.

One device frequently employed by Nuorteva was comparison of the nascent Soviet state to the revolutionary American colonies, the only difference being Russia’s immense size, many tongues, and myriad social challenges. The colonies, he points out (with great frustration) in a statement addressed to American liberals, “took ten years... to establish a stable government and orderly efficient rule.” This is contrasted with the immense complexity and diversity of Russia, in a plea for fairness and patience from the United States. In an earlier statement from the bureau, he insists that “the ideals of social and economic democracy are just as vital to the democratic movements in Russia as were the ideals of political democracy to the democratic movement in America in 1776,” aiming again to evoke America’s revolutionary origins.⁷¹ He frequently combined such appeals to the past with professions of his own fondness for the contemporary America he saw around him. These often eloquent defenses of the country were usually aimed at the press he saw as harming it. But in personal and professional correspondences he was no less

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919. Second letter to Felix Frankfurter.

⁶⁹ In one curious exception, Nuorteva explicitly denies an overlap of values or a common cause in his article “*The Soviet Republic*.” This article is peculiar for other reasons, as discussed above in note 24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Miscellaneous, letter to the *New York Evening Post*, October 3, 1918.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, “Finland’s Bitter Struggle,” spring 1918.

adamant on these points. His letters to Felix Frankfurter perhaps illustrate this best:

There is an America which I believe in, and which the Russians believe in, which is the real America, the America, of the people, for the people, and by the people, the America of the workers of brain and brawn, of technical genius, democratic spirit and straightforward action. In spite of the persistent vilifications carried on by the press, in spite of the many lying stories published about alleged massacres and crimes by the Russian proletariat, and in spite of the fact that many most encouraging proofs of the idealism and constructive ability of the Russian people have been kept away from the knowledge of the American public, there is in the heart of tens of millions of American people an intuitive sympathy towards Russia and its struggle, America, the America wants to understand Russia and to be understood.

There is one great asset of America, the historic result of the great country having been for hundreds of years the place of refuge of millions of people escaping the body-and-soul-destroying European feudalism, classism, formalism... which has kept the economic progress of Europe hitched to dead forms of bygone centuries and has used these forms in economic and political oppression. This asset... is a readiness not to flinch from a thing or policy only because it never has been done before.⁷²

These and other expressions of Nuorteva's testify to his particular understanding of his host country, one that is in equal parts deep and incomplete. The language Nuorteva borrows is familiar, voiced first in the country's revolutionary birth and echoing to the present day. There can be no doubt that it reflects, then and now, a perennial current in American thought and an ideal held by leaders and led alike. But in this tumultuous period his interpretation was tested, and the outcome laid bare its errors.

Wilson's America

The process of Nuorteva's rejection spanned his entire time at the bureaus, even if the intervention was its first dramatic expression. In this period, Nuorteva watched the weather, reacting daily to the moods and opinions changing around him, often unaware of broader trends in the climate. Alexis de Tocqueville famously foresaw that Russia and the United States would come to divide the world, but he made another, perhaps more subtle observation of America that Nuorteva would have been wise to ponder. Already eighty years before Nuorteva's arrival, Tocqueville saw forming an enfranchised but depoliticized middle class, intent on its own material betterment and

⁷² *Ibid.*, Nuorteva, Santeri, assorted documents 18 October 1918–1919, second letter to Felix Frankfurter.

representing an electoral majority. Members of this majority “do not clearly see what they have to gain by a revolution, but they continually and in a thousand ways feel that they might lose by one.”

Most prescient for Nuorteva, Tocqueville saw little hope for revolutionary agitators:

It is a mistake to believe that, when once the equality of conditions has become the old and uncontested state of society... men will easily allow themselves to be thrust into perilous risks by an imprudent leader or a bold innovator. Not indeed that they will resist him openly, by well-contrived schemes, or even by a premeditated plan of resistance. They will not struggle energetically against him, sometimes they will even applaud him – but they do not follow him. To his vehemence they secretly oppose their inertia; to his revolutionary tendencies their conservative interests; their homely tastes to his adventurous passions; their good sense to the flights of his genius; to his poetry their prose. With immense exertion he raises them for an instant, but they speedily escape from him, and fall back, as it were, by their own weight. He strains himself to rouse the indifferent and distracted multitude, and finds at last that he is reduced to impotence, not because he is conquered, but because he is alone.⁷³

Inertia, conservative interests, good sense, and no shortage of prose would indeed show Nuorteva to be impotent and alone.

In the broadest sense, the United States was threatened by the Bolsheviks’ missionary claims, unwilling to see itself as anything but the top rung on the ladder of historical progress.⁷⁴ The February Revolution in Russia generated great enthusiasm among Americans, both for its apparent embrace of democratic liberalism and for the hope it offered in the war effort. This enthusiasm, for both of these reasons, was easily converted to resentment when the Bolsheviks seized power and claimed a grand historic advance. From the American side, widespread ignorance about Russia’s affairs made its political chaos a morality play, with the Bolsheviks cast as the villains (particularly after the perceived betrayal at Brest-Litovsk).⁷⁵ All of these sentiments informed the broadly defined early Red Scare, a great convergence of forces that eventually encircled the Russian bureau.

Contrary to Nuorteva’s hopes, the reaction against the Bolsheviks truly was expressed throughout society, among the people as well as the press and the state. The Great War’s celebration of patriotism and nationalism was not confined to Europe, and wartime propaganda placed

⁷³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Translated by Henry Reeve, Esq. Cambridge, (Mass: Sever and Francis, 1863), vol. 2, book 3, ch. XXI. This edition is available on Google Books.

⁷⁴ Filene, 37.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

America's pacifists and socialist internationalists squarely in the German camp. After the war, the press pivoted to an equally hostile stance, blaming radicals for postwar economic ills.⁷⁶ This is not to speak of their treatment of the Bolsheviks. To this end, Nuorteva's disdain for the press was well placed. With regard to the Russian situation, the *New York Times* truly was an exceptional fount of misinformation – a contemporary analysis of the news found that the *Times*, in the three years after the February Revolution, had announced the imminent collapse of Bolshevism ninety-one times, the flight of Lenin and Trotsky seven times, Lenin's imprisonment three times, and once, Lenin's death.⁷⁷ Another common device, with its clearest manifestation in the Sisson documents, was the conflation of the Bolsheviks and the Germans. To these add alarmist rumors about alleged Bolshevik policies (most famously, the Bolshevik plan to “nationalize women”), and one might believe, as Nuorteva did, that “intelligence had been suspended” in the press.⁷⁸ Of course, it had not been.

From the people, Nuorteva found less support than he might have expected. His natural constituency, the workers, had been significantly appeased during the war, signing away their right to strike in return for collective bargaining and other rights. As across much of Allied Europe, this severely undermined the more radical socialists.⁷⁹ The far-left I.W.W. stood opposed to a moderate and powerful AFL (in a “new holy alliance” with the *New York Times*, according to Nuorteva), and socialists in general were riven by divides between left and center, as well as between native and foreign-born.⁸⁰ Communist parties were no more coherent, and differed in their level of support for the bureau and for the Bolsheviks. When the war ended, although support for the American intervention in Russia plummeted, anti-Bolshevism remained a majority position.⁸¹ In this sense, Wilson's growing hostility towards the revolution was consistent with public sentiment.

⁷⁶ Pfannestiel, ch. 1

⁷⁷ Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, “A Test of the News: And examination of the news reports of the *New York Times* on aspects of the Russian revolution of special importance to Americans: March 1917-March 1920,” *New Republic*, XXIII, pt. 2 (August 4, 1920), 10-11. As cited in Filene, 59.

⁷⁸ See Filene, 46 for press-fed rumors about the Bolsheviks.

⁷⁹ Pfannestiel, ch. 1

⁸⁰ For rifts in the American socialist movement, see Pfannestiel, 10-11. The term “new holy alliance” is used in an article by that name in the Halonen Papers.

⁸¹ Filene, 51-52.

Concerning the government's views of the Bolsheviks, there were as many vacillations by Wilson and his administration as there are historical monographs on the subject. Yet, taken together this historiography suggests a rough going for Santeri Nuorteva regardless of his route. Though Wilson was evidently of two minds and engaged in sincere attempts to feel out the situation, the period shows a surprisingly steady hardening of the line from the revolution to intervention and beyond.⁸² The aforementioned Bullitt Mission in the spring of 1919 was Wilson's most direct attempt to negotiate terms with Lenin, but the report was suppressed upon the delegation's return. An earlier American Red Cross mission to Russia, headed by Raymond Robins and in direct contact with the White House, was the other major effort at conciliation, and Robins himself lobbied forcefully for direct aid as a means of moderating Bolshevism's more extreme expressions. This mission, like Bullitt's, would encourage those more sympathetic to the revolution, but ultimately leave little impact on policy.⁸³

The Fourteen Points, Wilson's "broader vision" in Nuorteva's phrasing, may ultimately be the most telling of the president's many gestures. Very early in 1918, the liberals in his administration seemed to have the upper hand – for instance, as one historian astutely observed, Wilson's Fourteen Points address did not distinguish between the Bolshevik government and the Russian people.⁸⁴ This mirrored a pattern in the pronouncements of Edward House and his circle, who still saw Bolshevism as a potentially useful weapon against Germany. But with Lenin's January dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, perceived accurately as a brazen power grab, much of this hope for the Bolsheviks fizzled. This, notably, occurred even before the Finnish Revolution, before Nuorteva assumed his first post.⁸⁵ Wilson came to regret the Fourteen Points, conceding retrospectively his own lack of familiarity with European affairs, and in the Peace of Paris, failed

⁸² The two dated but essential monographs on Wilson's policy towards the Bolsheviks in this period are Norman G. Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics; America's Response to War and Revolution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) and George F. Kennan's two volume *Soviet-American Relations, 1917-1920*, (New York: Norton, 1984).

⁸³ The Robins mission is briefly summarized in Levin, 75, but given quite thorough treatment throughout McFadden's *Alternative Paths*.

⁸⁴ Levin, 61-62.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 70

in significant respects to have his vision realized.⁸⁶ His administration as a whole reflected this wavering, as well as the ultimate default to conservatism.

American liberals, whom Nuorteva later described as “embodying the best American traditions, [uncontaminated] by the sordidness of machine politics,” stuck with Wilson throughout these shifts, preferring to see him as a victim of other forces.⁸⁷ But as noted above, Wilson did not fight for his Fourteen Points, and although the language of self-determination spread across the world, Wilson himself abandoned it before the end of Nuorteva’s story.⁸⁸ There were significant factors, unquestionably, which pushed in the other direction, and, as mentioned above, the United States on multiple occasions showed interest in compromise. But indeed Wilson opposed the Soviets, and by August 1920, the administration had enunciated a clear policy of hostility.⁸⁹ By then, Nuorteva would no longer be in New York to read the *Times*’ opinion on the matter.

Nuorteva’s Departure

Met with a flood of misinformation in the press, an official silence from the government, and lukewarm reception by the public, Nuorteva awaited only a push to confirm his failure in the United States. His writings reflect some sense that the space around him was constricting, though he rarely says so explicitly. Although aware, again, that some in Washington “would be glad to hang [him],” he still rarely seemed cognizant of the real possibility of suppression and deportation. He once surmised that agents of the Finnish White Guard were slandering him to the American government, and, perhaps tellingly, suggested a broader conspiracy by the press “to mislead American authorities.”⁹⁰ On the whole, however, Nuorteva evinced confidence in his

⁸⁶ Manela, 138-140 and elsewhere. In a June 1919 interview by prominent members of the American Commission on Irish Independence, Wilson said “when I gave utterance to those words [on the right to self-determination], I said them without a knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day... You do not know and cannot appreciate the anxieties that I have experienced as the result of many millions of people having their hopes raised by what I have said.” Quoted in Manela, 215.

⁸⁷ Filene, 49

⁸⁸ Manela, 219

⁸⁹ The “Colby Note,” a note from then-Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby to the Italian ambassador, is seen as a watershed moment in the official rejection of Bolshevism. For a relatively recent analysis of the note’s significance, see David W. McFadden, “After the Colby Note: The Wilson Administration and the Bolsheviks, 1920-21,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall 1995), 741–750.

⁹⁰ Halonen Papers, Nuorteva, Santeri, letter to George Halonen, September 30, 1918.

position, in the legality of his activities, and in his right to express his radical political views. In his public response to Creel after the Sisson Affair, he claims outright that, in the event of a conflict, he would side with the Soviets, with only the caveat that he strove to avert such an end.⁹¹ When the bank drafts were seized from Carl Sandburg, Nuorteva asserted to the District Attorney that there is nothing illegal about his operation, and that his role, though unrecognized, was perfectly legitimate.⁹² All the while, quieter but more powerful forces disagreed.

On the second anniversary of the October Revolution, with the intervention and the blockade in full swing and the Bolsheviks holding their ground, Nuorteva gave an unusually defiant speech to a group of socialists gathered in New York. It would be among his last in the country:

We want just one thing over there. Just one thing. We want to be left in peace, so that we may concentrate our forces on that work of construction and reconstruction which is before us there. We want to do that, and we are sure that if left alone, if not pestered by all these little dogs that are trying to bite us in the legs ... we will be able to show the world that the Russian Workers' Revolution is not a crazy thing...⁹³

This could well serve as the mission statement of the late Russian bureau, on behalf of which Nuorteva spoke. But “these little dogs” were closer than Nuorteva imagined. The speech itself reaches us in the form a transcript, recorded on site by an agent of the Bureau of Investigation. From its inception, both federal and state authorities watched the Russian bureau closely. It was investigated for spreading foreign propaganda, its funds were frozen or intercepted, its cables were blocked, and its officials were shadowed and reported on in great detail. As a direct consequence, the Bolshevik center grew ambivalent towards the bureau, frustrated by the complications of funding and communication. The bureau’s economic outreach efforts, in many respects its primary function, were stifled by the US blockade. On June 12th, 1919, investigators from the Lusk Committee [formally, the New York Joint Legislative Committee Investigating Seditious Activities] raided the bureau’s office and seized its internal documents and publications.⁹⁴ Shortly thereafter, Nuorteva

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, Miscellaneous, letter to the New York Evening Post, October 3, 1918.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Miscellaneous, letter to the United States District Attorney, January 11, 1919.

⁹³ Santeri Nuorteva, “Speech in Celebration of the 2nd Anniversary of the Soviet Republic, New York City,” November 17, 1919. Accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/groups/rsgb/1919/1107-nuorteva-speechonrev.pdf>

⁹⁴ Kostianinen, *Kansainvälinen Suomalainen*, 102-106. For a detailed, English-language account of the investigation of the bureau, see McFadden, *Alternative Paths*, ch. 12 or Siegel, ch. 2.

and Martens were called before a US Senate committee investigating Bolshevik propaganda. In June of 1920, Nuorteva entered Canada with false papers, and briefly continued his work there. Hounded similarly by Canadian authorities, he fled to England, where he was promptly arrested for domestic subversion and, eventually, deported to Soviet Russia.⁹⁵ Martens made a comparable, nominally voluntary departure a year later.

Whose Ambassador?

Santeri Nuorteva failed to convey his message but not for lack of eloquence. Awareness of his misjudgment of the American political climate emerged most clearly following his arrest, in his impassioned and often bitter “Open Letter to American Liberals.” In it he claims that the plans for intervention were laid “long before the editors of the American papers learned how to spell the name of the Czechoslovaks,” dismissing each justification for intervention as he had many times before.⁹⁶ Though he never could resist a dig at the press, this letter places the blame elsewhere:

I cannot refrain from writing you [American liberals] these lines. The greatest crime the history of the world has ever witnessed is being perpetrated against the Russian people – under the guise of “helping Russia” – a crime as much blacker than that of the German imperialists, as is a stab in the back from a man pretending to be a friend more repugnant than a blow in the face from a confessed enemy. The Germans were at least frank in their indecency. They never pretended “helping Russia.” ... German papers printed vigorous criticism of Germany’s policy in Russia. Here nobody dares to say anything – least of all you, the so-called liberals, who have been trying to persuade us, the “dogmatic socialists,” that class interests are not the paramount issue in the world war and that there is some guarantee to the democracy of the world in the idealistic aims of great individuals.

What are you doing in Russia, sir? ... *As long as you have not raised your voice in protest, you are responsible for it along with all the others.*⁹⁷

The italics were Nuorteva’s. Such emphatic indictment of the American left faded from his writing after this point, but as he crossed the border into Canada some eighteen months later, there can be little doubt that he departed with these views. By the end of his time in America, Nuorteva had found himself alone.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118-121. An adequate summary of this story is available in the English-language article by Kostianen, “Turbulent Times: The Last Years of Santeri Nuorteva in America, 1918-1920,” *Finnish Americana* III (1980), 43-50.

⁹⁶ Nuorteva, “An Open Letter to American Liberals.”

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

His long journey to Russia in 1920 nearly coincided with a different journey in the other direction – Wilson had recalled the last American troops from Siberia that spring. Thus the world divided in two, a physical unmixing as an afterword to the ideological one. Like the international revolution he represented, Nuorteva was not recalled into Russia but pushed there. It was precisely this moment – when hopes had faded for Wilson’s vision and the Soviets turned inward – that the United States sacrificed its revolutionary status before the world, becoming instead the conservative norm against which revolutions would be measured. On the Soviet side, the revolution was now exclusively Bolshevik, and as we now know, something quite apart from what Nuorteva had been promoting. He would spend much of the remainder of his life just east of the Soviet-Finnish border, a border he once believed had vanished.

Santeri Nuorteva was not a propagandist in the United States, but an interpreter, communicating between that country and a revolution he claimed to understand fluently. From the same letter:

The truth about Russia does not reach us today; you do not realize what the Soviets are accomplishing. When the work of the Soviet government does become known it will most likely result in bitter criticism of interference... The war will end; and then will come a time when uncensored speech is once more a fact. There will be years and centuries of human life after the war is over, during which the historian will be permitted to judge the events of today without the prejudice of passion and without the will to distort.⁹⁸

Not long after his arrival in Russia, Nuorteva was arrested, most likely on account of ideological errors.⁹⁹ He was imprisoned for at least ten months, though he would die free and in relative comfort in 1929. The historian, permitted to judge his days in America without the will to distort, finds that Nuorteva spoke fluently in the American idiom but ultimately misunderstood its subtext. On a different question, the archives are silent – did it ever occur to Nuorteva, as he sat imprisoned by the Bolsheviks, that perhaps he had misunderstood their language, too?

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

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