

Reviews

Raittila, Penti, Elena Bashkirova and Lyudmila Semyonova, *Perestroika and Changing Neighbour Images in Finland and the Soviet Union*. University of Tampere Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, 1989, 105 pp.

The title of this small volume is somewhat misleading; it might be taken to indicate a single piece of comparative research. It is, in fact, two independent studies conducted in sufficiently different ways to make detailed comparison difficult the researchers acknowledge.

There are certain common elements. Both surveys — each of about 1000 respondents — were carried out about the same time (late 1988). The general concern of both was with 'peoples' images of their respective neighboring countries'. The total enterprise was conducted under the auspices of the Finnish-Soviet Committee for Scientific and Technological Cooperation. However, the barriers to a real comparative study are great, and these so condition the responses that most of the comparisons are simple parallel presentations of data.

Both sets of respondents cite the media as their most important source of information about the other country. But Finnish news media have reported on the USSR in great detail over the last forty years, while Soviet media have carried very little about Finland. This, of course, is the predictable big power, little neighbour news imbalance. It is hardly a surprise to find that Finns know far more about the USSR than the Russians know about Finland; more than half the Soviet respondents found questions about contemporary Finnish affairs 'difficult to answer'.

Another barrier to comparative analysis lies in the sophistication, if that is the proper word, of the two research groups. The Finnish study was carried out by the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Tampere, which for years has been in continual contact with social scientists in the rest of Europe and North America. The department has produced a sizeable body of work; this volume is the thirty-sixth of a series of research reports also available in English and Swedish.

The Soviet research was carried out by the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow. However, Russian research of this sort has not been particularly visible internationally. Soviet citizens are not accustomed to answering questions for strangers carrying clipboards (the data were collected by means of personal interviews).

Thus, it is hardly surprising that the Finnish survey is more detailed and produces much more data, which in turn are analysed more carefully. There are forty-one pages of text and twenty-two tables devoted to the Finnish survey, twenty-one pages and thirteen tables for the Soviet project. Quantity is no guarantee of quality, but the two go together here. Interview questions in the Finnish schedule are more focused and less suggestive of the desired answer. For example, we are told that 'about 60% of the [Soviet] respondents said that Soviet-Finnish relations serve as an example for co-operation between the Soviet Union and the West in general'. It

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must have been hard for a Soviet citizen to say anything other than 'yes' to that; only 11 percent said 'no'.

Images of the neighbouring country are examined by questions relating to knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the other. Knowledge is measured in terms of factors such as population, area, political system and political leaders' names. Perceptions of social problems in the neighbouring country are also probed (most Finns put 'poor quality of consumer goods' at the top of their list of perceived problems in the USSR; Soviet citizens perceived a three-way tie: 'high rents', 'drug problems', and 'environmental pollution' topped the list of perceived Finnish problems).

Questions about attitudes toward the other country were direct: Finns were asked, for example, 'What do you think about the Soviet Union's foreign policy?' with the following choices: 'peace-loving', 'aggressive and threatening', 'either', 'difficult to say' (well over half said 'peace-loving', and less than 10 percent said 'aggressive and threatening').

Despite featuring in the title, 'perestroika' gets modest attention in the surveys. Respondents were asked what, in effect, was the objective of perestroika (67 percent of the Soviets and 59 percent of the Finns said 'strengthening socialism'). Three-quarters of the Soviet respondents felt that perestroika had improved the USSR's image in the West.

Soviet responses seem guarded, with unusually high percentages of 'don't knows' on many questions. However, the same may be said of the much more detailed and elaborate data from Finnish respondents.

More than fifty years ago Soviet troops invaded Finland, which put up a fierce and costly resistance before surrendering; it lost not only thousands of lives but thousands of square miles of territory. A powerful national consciousness grew out of that defeat, manifest in films, books, plays and monuments. Every Finn over 60 must remember that war, and every male over 70 today either fought in it or, certainly, was close to people who died in it. Yet 70 percent of Finnish respondents aged 50-59 regard the Soviets as 'peace-loving'; 59 percent of those over 60 agree. In a question related to Finland's partial responsibility for the outbreak of the war, 29 percent said none at all — but 53 percent said 'to some extent'.

These data, and others like them, lead the authors to conclude:

There is no deep-rooted hostility toward the Russians in today's Finland; attitudes toward the Russian people are largely the same attitudes as toward any foreign people . . .

This might indicate one of two things: either the Finns are the most forgiving of modern peoples — or they, too, tend to give guarded answers on certain subjects to strangers bearing clipboards.

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