

## English abstract

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*Peace believers. Finns at the World Youth Festivals in the 1940s and 1950s*

This book tells a history of the Finnish working-class youths who travelled to various East European capitals in the 1940s and 1950s. The purpose of their journeys was to attend a Soviet-sponsored international event, the World Festival of Youth and Students, which was held biannually, beginning in Prague in 1947. The story of the Finns at the World Youth Festivals provides a new window to the Cold War, focusing on personal experiences, perceptions, emotions and memories of those years, which were coloured by the superpower conflict, antagonism between socialist and capitalist worlds, as well as wide restrictions on international mobility.

By drawing on oral history interviews, diaries, travelogues and memoirs, this book gives voice to people who are often marginalized in Cold War research and popular history. Unlike the perspective put forward by mainstream narratives of the Cold War, cultural exchange between the East and the West was not only defined by superpower rivalry, nuclear armament or ideological battle. International gatherings, like the World Youth Festival, brought together thousands of young people from around the world to chat, dance, celebrate and establish contacts with each other across political, ideological, cultural, religious, and class divides.

The journeys to the youth festivals became crucially important experiences for these Finnish working-class youths, or peace believers. Against the experiences of the recent total war, a carnivalesque get-together with peers from other countries appeared a tangible way of enacting the aims of the festival's peace agenda, promising a better future for humankind. Furthermore, the Finnish festival-goers were among the first in their social groups who could travel abroad in such huge numbers. In the 1950s, Finns ranked among the biggest national delegations at the World Youth Festivals with more than 2,000

delegates. Before the emergence of mass tourism, travelling abroad was the luxury of a few. Being able to stay in a hotel, travel in comfortable trains and being served at restaurants formed unusual experiences for young Finns, who were more used to the scarcity of the post-war reconstruction period. At the youth festivals, the grim everyday life in a war-torn country was replaced by joy, smiles and friendly welcomes by hospitable strangers in new countries.

Both the mainstream media and research on the international history of Finland have paid only marginal attention to the subject. Finnish participants to the youth festivals have been depicted either as victims of communist propaganda or propagandists themselves. The mainstream post-war narrative of Finland has told the story of a small but determined nation building an international reputation and finding its place among world nations. In this process, the Summer Olympic Games in Helsinki in 1952 and the victory of Armi Kuusela in the Miss Universe beauty pageant have been referred to as key milestones. Thousands of Finns taking part in an international, communist-sponsored youth gathering, however, has not been accepted as part of this narrative, as it was not the right kind of internationalism. The appropriate way of being international meant fostering contacts with the Western world, while the USSR and the East symbolised a threat to the independent existence of the Finnish nation and state. Officially, Finland was tied to the Soviet Union with the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, but the society beyond the communists still viewed the Eastern neighbour with open hostility in the 1940s and 1950s. Hence, rejected from the mainstream narrative, the experiences of young leftist workers on socialist internationalism represent a marginalized history or the history of “the other” within one’s own society.

Travels to the World Youth Festivals proved to be an empowering experience to Finnish working-class youths. At the festivals, they felt accepted as they were with their political and ideological beliefs – something that “official” Finland did not allow them in the 1940s and 1950s. Mingling with like-minded people, singing labour movement songs, shouting together peace slogans, exchanging small gifts and hearing stories from other countries made young Finns understand that

they were not alone in their fight for a socialist future. What is more, they realised that the world outside Finnish borders was way beyond the dichotomy of socialism-capitalism. It was full of languages, cultures, lifestyles and worldviews. Being a young communist might be a very different thing in Finland, the UK or the USSR. This interconnectedness of similarities and differences, the familiar and unfamiliar, radically widened their horizon about the world, and also about the international communist community.