In the historical border area between Finland and Russia, close to the polar circle, small streams and rivers feeds a vast water system that ends in the White Sea. The 300-mile long waterway of lakes, narrow straits, and thundering rapids has formed for centuries the main path in a seemingly endless wilderness called White Karelia. In the beginning of the 20th century, the region was inhabited mostly by the Karelians, a Baltic Finnic ethnic group who were living archaically in pretty, gray timber houses that formed small villages along the waterway. Small scale farming, fishing, and hunting together with the harsh environment limited the prosperity of the region and made an effective buffer against the modernization and centralization efforts of the Russian Empire. However, in 1918, these remote backwoods in the margins of Europe became a scene of merciless warfare, with volunteer units of Finnish Whites fighting both Finnish Reds and Karelians while the Finnish Civil War extended into Russian territories.

The bloody encounters in the wilderness of White Karelia were only a prelude. During the next few years, not only White Karelia but also the whole stretch of land between the Arctic Ocean and the Finnish Gulf – including the regions of Pechenga, East Karelia, Ingria, and Estonia – would become a target for an aggressive Finnish irredentist policy that resulted in a dozen semi-official military campaigns between 1918 and 1922. The campaigns, involving more than 10,000 Finnish volunteer soldiers, were all directed toward areas with a Baltic Finnish population, with the goal of liberating the people from Bolshevnik and Russian rule and integrating the areas into an entity named Greater Finland (Suur-Suomi), the main aim of an ideological vision called heimoaate (literally “Kindred Idea”). Already the contemporaries called the campaigns heimosodat (literally Kindred Wars, in this article translated as Irredentist Wars), a name emphasizing images of a romantic and even mythological national past with a timeless bond between the scattered Baltic Finnish peoples.

The Finnish irredentist wars and their associated ideology composed an indivisible part of the formation process of the independent nation, including the Civil War. For the victorious White Finland, military activity in neighboring
regions was merely an extension of the same struggle against the Reds and the Revolution that had started in Finland in January 1918. Although most of the campaigns failed, they became important narratives of Finnish nationalism during the interwar years and formed an integral part of the Finnish Civil War history written by the victors. The irredentist campaigns were children of their time, emerging from the upheavals caused by a disastrous world war and empowered by the belief in head-on action, violence, and the survival of the fittest. They were the result both of the romantic idea of the Finnic kin that was to be unified and return to its imagined ancient glory in a world where the past and present were entangled into a spiritual oneness and of a coldhearted Realpolitik with strategic reasoning aiming at strengthening the defensive and economic capacity of the newly independent nation in a chaotic post-revolution northeastern Europe.

A Finnish Shangri La

The main target for the Finnish irredentist policy was East Karelia, a region also referred to sometimes as Russian Karelia or Far Karelia.1 The more than 600-miles-long and 200-miles-wide area consisted of the historical regions of White Karelia in the north and Olonets Karelia in the south. In the west it bordered on Finland and in the east on the lakes of Ladoga and Onega and the White Sea. This vast, scarcely populated, and by any standards massively under-developed region had during the 19th century become an essential part of the flourishing Finnish nationalism (Fennomania). The nationalistic movements of the late 19th century emphasized, in the search for roots and national history, vernacular purity and produced ideas of vanished golden ages. The more ancient, original, and greater the nation was, the more powerful was its prevailing political position. Eyes were turned away from the emerging cities and industrialization to the more remote and archaic regions of the homeland. In Finland, the Fennomans regarded the more modern and ethnically heterogeneous coastal areas foreign compared to the inland’s uncontaminated wilderness, which was regarded as the home of the Finnic culture. Of all regions, East Karelia was in purity and ancientness above all the others, paradoxically, though, because it had never been part of the political entity of Finland. The idea of an unnatural border between East Karelia and Finland, which hindered

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1 Due to the fact that Karelia as a regional and an ethnic concept has always been politically divided between Sweden and Russia and later between Finland and Russia, there have been multiple subregions throughout the centuries, according to geopolitical fluctuations.