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Abandoning Ideals and Producing Graphic Disillusionment in *Suomen suurin kommunisti*

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Chapter 7

Abandoning Ideals and Producing Graphic Disillusionment in *Suomen suurin kommunisti*

Oskari Rantala

In the short national history of Finland, the radical left has been a significant political force, but its relationship to the national project remains problematic. In the Finnish Civil War of 1918, a socialist uprising against the government was suppressed with widespread terror, and in World War II, Finland fought the Soviet Union. Even though communists and socialists were the antagonists of the state in these formative conflicts, the radical left has enjoyed considerable support in Finland throughout the 20th century and played a major role in postwar politics and culture. Following the centenary of national independence in 2017, creators of popular culture have taken a revived interest in the earliest and most violent stages of national history, calling attention on the Finnish left-wing movement, its traumatic past, and its ambiguous legacy. One notable work in this regard is the graphic novel *Suomen suurin kommunisti* (“The Greatest Communist of Finland”)¹ by Jesse Matilainen. Published in 2017, it is a fictionalized historical account detailing the lives of the leaders of the socialist uprising in 1918 who later became key figures in the Finnish diaspora communist movement functioning under the auspices of Russian Bolsheviks. Ironically, much of it was ultimately decimated not by Finnish authorities or nationalists but by Soviet secret police in Stalin’s Great Purge in 1936–1938.

In this article, I discuss *Suomen suurin kommunisti* (later *SSK*) through the lens of abandoning ideals and disillusionment which takes an intriguing graphic and intertextual form in the narrative. The first half of the graphic novel deals with revolutionary optimism of the years following the formation of the Soviet Russia under Lenin. In contrast, the second part of *SSK* focuses on the 1930s, a decade marked with increasing control, political suppression and ultimately mass exterminations and world war. Rather than historical truthfulness – arguably a problematic notion – I focus in this article on the interpretation of history offered by the graphic novel and the narrative strategies it employs. One exceptional feature of *SSK* is its use of Soviet political art. The graphic novel incorporates tens of appropriations

1 I provide a rough translation in quotation marks for Non-English titles and all quotations.

of recognizable artworks from the first decades of communist rule in Russia, commenting on the story and creating narrative irony.

First, I discuss the historical background of the narrative and the legacy of radical leftist politics in Finnish popular culture. Subsequently, I focus on the graphic novel, its use of history and its ambivalent position on who should be regarded the titular “Greatest communist of Finland”. The novel interrogates particularly harshly the character of Otto Wille Kuusinen, by far the best known and most influential Finnish communist of the era. Finally, I present examples of redrawn appropriations of political artworks by El Lissitzky, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, Gustav Klutskis and Yakov Guminer, all of them leading luminaries of the Russian avant-garde movements such as Suprematism and Constructivism during the early Soviet years. In these appropriations, themes of political disillusionment are brought to the fore and narrative irony is introduced.

Civil War, radical left and their legacy in Finnish culture

In 1917, imperial Russia was imploding due to the disastrous World War and civil unrest throughout the empire. Revolutions taking place in February and October (of the Julian calendar) first toppled the Tsarist regime in favour of a multi-party provisional government, in turn replaced by Vladimir Lenin’s Bolsheviks, setting the stage for the Grand Duchy of Finland becoming an independent nation. The next year, following a period of political turmoil, rising tensions and sporadic violence, civil war broke out between the socialist and nationalist factions which became known as the Reds and the Whites (not to be confused with the similarly named sides of the Russian Civil War)². The brutal conflict lasted from January until early May when the White Army secured a decisive victory with the aid of the German military and the socialist uprising was suppressed. It is estimated that 36,000 people – more than one percent of the Finnish population – lost their lives in the war and the subsequent political terror, executions and prison camps (Westerlund 2004, p. 53), which makes the brief conflict one of the bloodiest civil wars in European history.

During the final stages of the war, the remaining leaders and functionaries of the revolutionary government fled to Soviet Russia. In Finland, they had constituted the left wing of the Social Democratic Party and supported a democratic state with strong parliament and new constitution (Uitto 2013, pp. 37–39). Once in exile, however, they became communists and supporters of the USSR under Lenin and later Stalin, establishing the Communist Party of Finland in order to bring about a revolution on the other side of the border (Hodgson 1967, p. 80; Saarela 2015, p. 89). In 1920s and 1930s, tens of thousands of Finns escaping political persecution, as well as the hardship following the Great Depression, either voluntarily joined them in exile or were forcibly deported by nationalist paramilitary groups (Kamppinen 2019, pp. 13–14, 34). Thousands of Finnish immigrants also arrived from North America, making Finns one of the largest immigrant populations in the early Soviet Union (Golubev and Takala

2 Both White factions did fight the revolutionary socialists, but the Finnish White Army fought for national sovereignty whereas the Russian Whites sought to restore the Russian Empire and, as a consequence, were hostile towards national separatism of Finland and the Baltic states.

2014, p. xii). The Finnish presence was especially strong in the autonomous republic of Karelia by the border. Tragically, the émigré community was decimated in the Stalinist purges of the late 1930s and it is estimated that in the order of 20,000 Finns lost their lives (Rentola 1994, 72).

In Finland, a nationalist-conservative perception of the Civil War as “a war of liberation” against Russian interference dominated the public discourse for much of the following decades and is still a bone of contention among historians (Roselius 2014, p. 299). However, artistic interpretations of the Civil War, its aftermath and the following political repression have challenged the nationalistic historiography by focusing on the losing side of the conflict. Frans Eemil Sillanpää, the sole Finnish Nobel laureate in Literature, discussed the uprising from socialists’ point of view in his 1919 novel *Meek Heritage* (*Hurskas kurjuus*). Especially influential in this respect was *Under the North Star* (*Täällä Pohjantähden alla*, 1959–1962), a novel trilogy by Väinö Linna who has since gained the status of a respected national author, even though his sympathetic representation of people taking part in the uprising were initially met with resistance (Tepora 2014, pp. 391–392). Over half a century later, Linna’s interpretation of the war and its causes are still debated (e.g. Lehtinen and Volanen 2018, p. 7–8), but his work cemented the legacy of the Civil War as a national tragedy. Indeed, the main mode of fiction discussing the Civil War and the following events has since been political tragedy, not heroic military action. Civil war narratives are characterized by social inequality, unjust killings and painful memories which are passed on from one generation to the next.

The centenary of the Civil War in 2018 saw the publication of diverse works of popular culture discussing the violent events. Whereas the Civil War had previously been primarily a subject for serious historical novels and films, some of the contemporary works employed other media and modes of expression, often also shifting the focus on the experiences of otherwise disregarded groups, such as women. Notable examples include the musical *Tytöt 1918* (“Girls 1918”) by TTT-Theatre and the comics anthology *Sisaret 1918* (“Sisters 1918”), edited by Reetta Laitinen, both portraying the experiences of women during the war, some of whom took up arms and fought on the Red side. New perspectives on the conflict were introduced by the dark comedy film *Suomen hauskein mies* (“The Funniest Man in Finland”) by Heikki Kujanpää, the interactive novel *Sinä vuonna 1918* (“You in 1918”) by Mike Pohjola and the documentary television series *Laulu sisällissodasta* (“A Song about the Civil War”) about the rap artist Paleface and his process of writing a song discussing the Civil War. Many of these works were well-received. *Sisaret 1918* won the Sarjakuva-Finlandia prize for year’s best comics work, whereas Paleface performed live as part of the official Independence Day celebrations in November. It is worth pointing out that works which discuss the civil war solely from the point of view of the victorious White Army are almost completely absent. In short, the Red experience has become part of the national history.

Despite the interest in the tragedies of the Red side, the fate of the Soviet Union's Finnish diaspora community has been mostly ignored. It has been discussed in only a handful of historical novels such as *Ikitie* ("Forever Road", 2011) by Antti Tuuri and *Graniittimies* ("Granite Man", 2014) by Sirpa Kähkönen, with the award-winning film adaptation of *Ikitie* by AJ Annala (2017) leaving the most memorable mark in the cultural mainstream. In works discussing Civil War and its aftermath, it is customary to focus on the experiences of ordinary people amid the political upheavals and show how human lives are destroyed by the forces of history outside their control. In both novels, the protagonists end up experiencing the horrors of the purges in late 1930s, losing their friends and families into mass graves or forced labor camps.

Suomen suurin kommunisti is a noteworthy exception among Finnish civil war narratives and stories dealing with the Finnish immigrants in the interwar USSR. The graphic novel focuses on leading figures of the communist movement, describing their power struggles, relationships, and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to survive persecution on both sides of the Finnish-USSR border. In contrast to the more typical protagonists of *Ikitie* or *Graniittimies*, the men and women in *Suomen suurin kommunisti* wield political power and are high in the Soviet hierarchy, even though it does not protect them from the purges.

Forging the Red history

Suomen suurin kommunisti examines the lives of several prominent Finnish communists and has no one single protagonist. Perhaps the three most significant personalities in the narrative are Otto Wille Kuusinen, Arvo Tuominen and Hanna Malm. A leading social democratic parliamentarian prior to the Civil War and later a member of the revolutionary government of Red Finland, Kuusinen became a high official in Comintern, the Soviet organization coordinating, financing and controlling the work of communist parties around the world. *SSK* discusses in depth the internal power struggles of the Communist Party of Finland (SKP) in which Kuusinen and his supporters managed to sideline other key figures in 1930s. Most important of his opponents was Kullervo Manner who had led the party for more than a decade and served as the highest-ranking Red leader in the Civil War.

Arvo Tuominen and Hanna Malm, on the other hand, both took part in the Civil War as journalists and propagandists, meeting each other in the first scenes of the graphic novel before the fall of the city of Tampere. During the following decades, they became political adversaries, Tuominen aligning himself with Kuusinen and Malm with Manner, whom she married. After the removal of Manner and Malm, Tuominen assumed control of the party and led it through the first years of Stalinist terror with Kuusinen's support. During the 1930s, a power struggle in a communist party was not only a political question but a matter of life and death. Kullervo Manner and Hanna Malm were ultimately arrested and sentenced to labor camps in which they died without seeing each other again. They were

soon followed by most other notable Finnish communists in the USSR – ironically, many of those who survived did so because their underground work had landed them in prison in Finland. Unlike their colleagues, Arvo Tuominen and Otto Wille Kuusinen were among the few who survived the purges. However, increasingly alarmed by Stalin’s terror, Tuominen left the country for Sweden in 1937 and broke with the communist movement when the invasion of Finland began, dedicating his later political career to championing social democracy and challenging Stalinism and Finnish communists. Kuusinen was left behind to witness the purges of his trusted allies and family members after the destruction of his enemies. He remained a loyal communist who served under Khrushchev after Stalin’s death and was finally buried in the Kremlin Wall in 1964, even though his later life is not discussed in *JSK* which ends when the invasion against Finland begins in 1939.

The general outline of the events as shown in the comic is historically accurate, even if Matilainen has decided to foreground some characters and left other prominent figures on the background or omitted them completely. Even though Kuusinen, Tuominen and Malm take the center stage in the story, the narrative revolves around several other people as well and often resists taking the viewpoint of any single character. Kuusinen’s wife Aino, for example, is another key character, even though she plays a somewhat minor role in the narrative. Aino Kuusinen lived an extraordinary life: she worked for Comintern and Soviet intelligence around the world until she was arrested, spending nearly two decades in prisons and Siberian camps before being released after the death of Stalin and leaving USSR in 1960s. She is best remembered for her posthumously published memoir *Jumala syöksee enkelinsä* (“God Topples his Angel”, 1972) which criticized both the Soviet Union under Stalin and also Otto Wille Kuusinen, as her husband apparently did nothing to save her from the purges.

Despite the overall arc of the story being based on historical characters and events, the graphic novel’s relationship to historical fact is not clear-cut. The narrative does not present itself as nonfiction. Rather, Matilainen acknowledges in his foreword that “this story is not real but could be” and admits to “taking liberties” (p. 5). That is, of course inevitable, as exact details of many events are not known. Because, communist political action was illegal in Finland after the Civil War, communists operated in secret. Furthermore, even discussing some issues was potentially dangerous during the Stalinist years. There is little reliable evidence of the personal thoughts and motivations of many of the people featured in the graphic novel, even if some Soviet archives have been opened after the fall of USSR. Some of those who survived and defected to the West have written influential autobiographical works, but they have their own limitations. In addition to Aino Kuusinen’s posthumous memoir, Arvo Tuominen wrote a series of autobiographical books later in life, discussing his time in the communist movement and the Soviet Union (see Tuominen 1956a, 1956b, 1958, 1970). However, historians have called into question whether he described the events accurately or sought to minimize his own role in the mass extermina-

tions (e.g., Rajala and Rautkallio 1994). Both works offer insight into the communist movement of the 1920s and 1930s, but they were published decades later, and the objectivity of these accounts is debatable at least to some extent. Therefore, a lot of unknown history remains for Matilainen to speculate.

It is evident that Matilainen has simplified the course of events, leaving out certain important characters altogether and inserting others in scenes they were not present. *SSK* relies at times heavily on authentic documents, often quoting speeches verbatim and foregrounding its documentary aspects. Condensing the events, simplifying the storyline and highlighting characters' qualities that fit the narrative needs of the work are customary, if not necessary, in fact-based fiction. However, *SSK* is not a documentary comic in the strict sense defined by Nina Mickwitz (2017), who excludes "comics biographies and historical narratives that exclusively draw on secondary source materials" (p. 9). Its use of secondary sources as well as speculations by the author should therefore label it more of a fictionalized account of historical events.

The first chapter of the graphic novel offers a salient example. In several scenes, Matilainen describes the activities of young Arvo Tuominen, who is the editor of a socialist newspaper in Tampere, a Red stronghold sieged and captured by the White Army in April 1918. Unlike his colleagues and Red leaders, Tuominen did not try to escape the city and desert its defenders before it fell, and was arrested. This meant almost certain execution, as historians Panu Rajala and Hannu Rautkallio (1994, p. 24) have pointed out. However, Tuominen was saved by two of his childhood friends and neighbors who had served in the White Army and had come specifically to rescue him (Tuominen 1956a, pp. 89–90; Rajala and Rautkallio 1994, pp. 24–29). In *SSK*, however, Tuominen seems to run into an old acquaintance by accident. He talks his way out of the difficult situation by lying about his role in the uprising and the narrative shows him quickly abandoning his arrested friends (*SSK*, pp. 30–32). Furthermore, he was actually about to desert the city in the graphic novel before Hanna Malm persuades him to stay. It is not the only instance in which *SSK* presents him as a cunning, smooth-talking and somewhat cowardly person, especially in comparison to the idealistic and strong-willed Malm. Perhaps not surprisingly, Tuominen's own recollections in his memoirs are noticeably different (1956a, pp. 82–86), but Matilainen has chosen to portray him as a significantly less heroic character.

Looking for the greatest communist of Finland

Despite its title, *Suomen suurin kommunisti* does not explicitly name the eponymous "greatest communist of Finland". The graphic novel especially scrutinizes Otto Wille Kuusinen, who is the best-known of all the characters but also "one of the most hated and controversial icon of Finnish politics" as his biographer Antero Uitto (2013, p. 7) writes. As an ally of Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev, as well as a Comintern leader and finally a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the So-

viet Union in his own right, Kuusinen is likely the most politically powerful Finn who has ever lived. However, his legacy is extremely controversial and serving in the Soviet-backed puppet government that supported the unsuccessful invasion of Finland in 1939 damaged his reputation beyond repair (Vi-havainen 2003, p. 7; Rentola 2003, p. 61). Furthermore, many have suggested that he did little to save his colleagues, his lifelong friends or his family from the purges in 1930s. In hindsight, it is uncertain whether he in fact could have interfered and to what extent he was fighting for his own survival. People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Soviet agency conducting the purges, was reportedly very close to arresting him but there is no denying that he was politically opportunistic and ready to denounce the ideological mistakes of his close friends when that served the purpose of demonstrating his loyalty to the current leadership (Rentola 1994, p. 59).

While Arvo Tuominen (1970, p. 216) and others have suggested that Kuusinen hated Stalin and was eager to take part in the de-Stalinization efforts under Khrushchev, this is not part of *SSK*, which presents Kuusinen as Stalin's cynical and power-hungry pawn. In many scenes of the graphic narrative, Kuusinen pompously defends Stalin with phrases such as "Stalin is steel and with his help Finland will once again be mine!" (*SSK*, p. 126). The last time Kuusinen meets his wife Aino he accuses her of "blasphemy" after she voices her concerns about Stalin destroying the Soviet Union and "everything we once dreamed of" (*SSK*, p. 194). Some of the dialogue in the scene is lifted straight from Aino Kuusinen's memoir (1972, pp. 159–164), but her remarks about Stalin are invented by Matilainen for the graphic novel in which she often acts as a voice of reason and a contrast to her husband. *SSK* often highlights the mismatch between communists' ideals and the Soviet reality. In his interactions with Stalin, however, Kuusinen is often shown to be disturbed by the dictator's murderous plans. His face is sweating, he stammers, and his expression looks regretful when he meets Stalin to discuss the number of executions in Karelia or the plans to invade Finland (*SSK*, pp. 242, 250). The graphic novel ends with Kuusinen assuring Stalin that all the difficult choices and sacrifices he has made have been worth it, but the narrative seems to leave open whether he really speaks his mind. Even though the portrayal is rather negative, Kuusinen of *SSK* remains a conflicted character.

Arvo Tuominen is also portrayed rather unflatteringly. He is an acolyte of Kuusinen and ready to ruthlessly do his bidding. However, whereas Kuusinen is obsessed with invading Finland – something that the real-life Kuusinen in fact opposed (Rentola 1994, p. 178) – and seems to hold a grudge against Manner for a decade, Tuominen is a more relatable and reasonable character. He is visibly taken aback by the darker aspects of the Soviet Union, like the starving masses he sees on train stations (*SSK*, pp. 166–167) or the brutal conditions of the forced labor camp (*SSK*, pp. 171–172). Tuominen also decides to make his move and gets him and his wife out of the Soviet Union alive. For him, the last straw are the purges targeted at the most loyal Finnish communists close to him.

The portrayal of Hanna Malm is sympathetic, in stark contrast to those of Tuominen and Kuusinen who are significantly better known. She is an idealistic and energetic character and the most influential Finnish female communist of the era, serving as a member of the SKP central committee for nearly a decade (Katainen 2001). During the Civil War, the graphic novel portrays her as more courageous than the men around her. After the war, she is equally competent as a communist operative working underground, evading the police and spreading propaganda. In the communist movement, Malm and Manner supported a more intransigent revolutionary approach than Kuusinen who often emphasized legal political action via front parties, labor unions and co-operation with the social democrats (Hodgson 1975, p. 89; Rentola 1994, p. 26). Manner's inefficient hard line was a factor in the losses that the communists suffered in late 1920s, when they were unable to gain wider support or organize against the threat of police and nationalist militias (Lackman 2017, pp. 166–175). Hints of these tendencies are present in Malm's character in the graphic novel in which she is an ardent communist not willing to compromise. *SSK* describes in detail how she declines to backtrack the opinions in articles she had published even when it becomes obvious that she and Manner have lost the fight for the party. Manner attempted to get Malm to publicly disown her views in order to save herself, but she rebelled and provided more ammunition for their opponents with more critical writings (Lackman 2017, pp. 193–194; Paastela and Rautkallio 1994, p. 37). In the era of Stalinism, breaking the party discipline this way was an inexcusable offence.

In *SSK*, Malm is a tragic figure whose honesty and strong commitment to her values lead to death. The graphic novel does not explicitly state that she should be considered greatest of the Finnish communists. However, the cover image in which she is standing on top of a monumental number one is a clear indication of what Matilainen considers her place is in the communist hall of fame. The cover image is an appropriation of a Soviet propaganda poster by Yakov Guminer dated 1923. In the original, a drawn figure is kneeling on top of a similarly monumental “1”, with their red banner wrapped around the monument in the same angles. In Guminer's poster, titled *May First* (1923), the huge number stands for the date of International Workers' Day.³ In addition to the cover, similar images are present throughout the narrative and they often highlight important thematic aspects of *SSK*. In the next chapters, I discuss them in more detail.

Shedding revolutionary optimism

Suomen suurin kommunisti illustrates the transformation of political idealism into murderous self-preservation, and one of the most striking narrative strategies it employs is the use of appropriations of Soviet political art. In the beginning of the novel, Matilainen intersperses the comics narrative with redrawn versions of Suprematist avant-garde artworks, turning later to Constructivism. In Russia, notable artists belonging to different avant-garde movements were initially strongly in favor of the revolutions against

³ The poster is in public domain and can be viewed online at:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yakov_Guminer_-_The_1st_of_May_poster.jpg

the old order and championed socialist politics in their art. Abstract and radical works challenged the classical and conservative sensibilities connected to the Tsarist regime (Moszynska 1990, p. 42). Following the Bolshevik takeover, revolutionary avant-garde became something of an official art when futurist writer Anatoly Lunacharsky became the director of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Saari 1989, p. 34).

Between chapters 2 and 3 of *SSK*, there is a full-page rendering of an abstract artwork by El Lissitzky (figure 1). Drawing on Suprematism developed by Kazimir Malevich, who painted the seminal *Black Square* (1915), Lissitzky's composition consists of circles, squares and triangles. Many of Lissitzky's works specifically attempt to represent the revolutionary forces and ideas with geometric forms. In his influential propaganda poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919), for example, a red triangle intruding into white space symbolizes the Bolsheviks and their counterrevolutionary opponents, but here the reference is not as explicit. The design was originally used by Lissitzky in his series of painting under the title *Proun*⁴ – an acronym for “Project for the affirmation of the new” in Russian (Druitt ©2020) – as well as an earlier sketch for a monument to the executed Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg⁵.

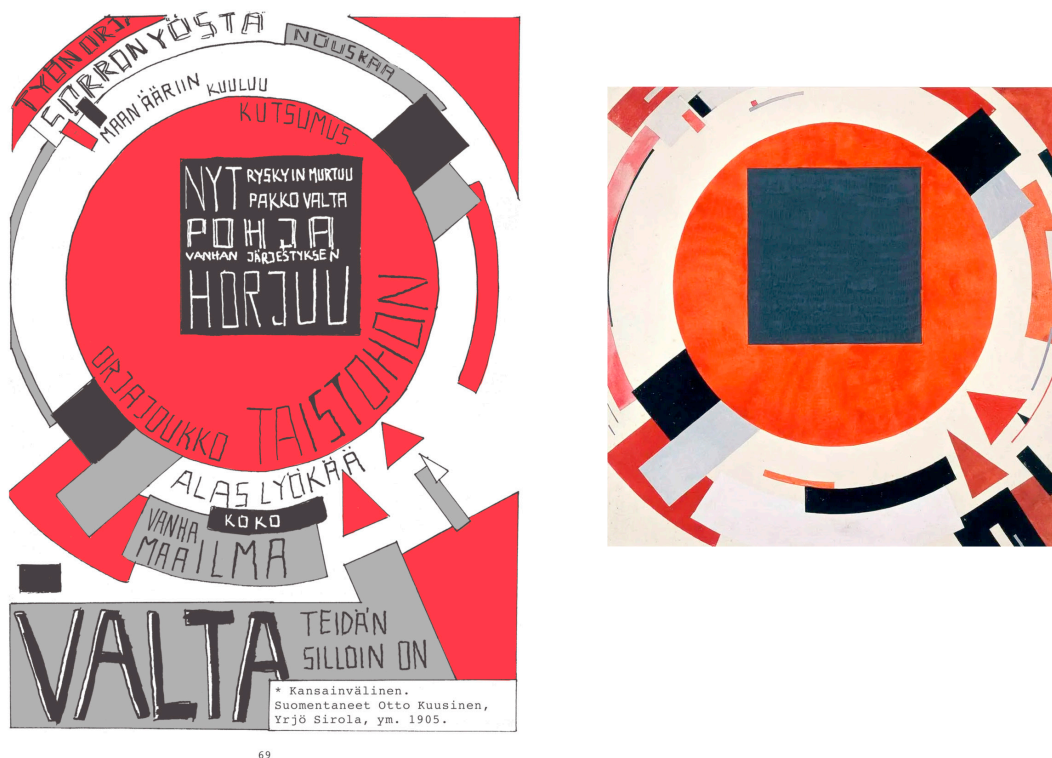


FIGURE 1: *Suomen suurin kommunisti*, p. 69. El Lissitzky: *Proun* (c. 1922–1923).

In *SSK*, Matilainen has faithfully traced the forms of Lissitzky's geometric painting and inscribed the Finnish lyrics of the international socialist anthem ‘The Internationale’, translated in 1905 by Otto Wille Kuusinen and Yrjö Sirola. Revolutionary optimism of such lines as “Alas lyökää koko vanha maa-

4 Currently, the painting dated 1922–1923 belongs to the collection of Van Abbe Museum in the Netherlands. It is in the public domain in Russia and can be viewed online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:El_Lissitzky_I84363.jpg.

5 Lissitzky's sketch dated 1919–1920 belongs to the George Costakis collection and it can be viewed online at: <https://www.costakiscollection.com/artists/Ki0vgWRZqX99WIJ1taxS>.

ilma / ja valta teidän silloin on!” (literal translation: “Strike down all of the old world / and the power shall be yours!”⁶) reflects the situation in the narrative: even though the Reds have lost the Civil War in Finland, Kuusinen is successful in his underground organizing efforts and the Red Army of the newly established Soviet Russia is victorious in the Russian Civil War. There is hope for communist revolutions in new countries and a worldwide movement for bringing about political change. In the words of the English translation of ‘The Internationale’ by Charles Hope Kerr: “A better world’s in birth!”

Lissitzky’s gouache and pencil painting features a large red circle at its centre with radial forms and triangles pointing at it, giving the circle an almost magnetic quality. The design is powerful and dynamic, and like the lyrics of the song, the pure geometric shapes seem to promise a more exciting future and give a visible form to the willingness to break free from old traditions – whether it is the classical ideals of art or conservative politics. ‘The Internationale’ is an empowering call to arms for the oppressed working class that has nothing to lose but their chains. Initially an anthem of the Second International of socialist and labour parties, the song was also adopted as the national anthem of the Soviet Union when the federal Soviet state was officially established in 1922. On the following page of the graphic novel, the lyrics continue and the chorus, which encourages everyone to join the united front and become brothers, is inscribed on a Suprematist artwork consisting of a red circle and linear forms by Nikolai Suetin, another pupil of Malevich (Guerman 1988, p. 8).

On another level, these choices foreshadow the forthcoming cultural trajectories in the Soviet Union. During the Second World War, ‘The Internationale’ was replaced by a more nationalistic state anthem – perhaps understandably as the original lyrics called for peace and encouraged soldiers to go on strike and attack their commanders. Furthermore, despite initially embracing the new experimental and energetic artistic movements, leaders of the Soviet Union ultimately turned to support a more traditional style in arts. In 1932, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party disbanded all artistic groups (Guerman 1988, p. 13). Socialist Realism was established as an official artistic style, and turned artists to monumental paintings depicting industrial production, scenes of war and images of Stalin (Saari 1989, p. 41). In 1930s, some artists left the Soviet Union while others, like Malevich who had laid the foundations for the artistic vocabulary used by Lissitzky and Suetin, faced confiscation of artworks, ban on exhibitions and imprisonment.

Another ‘ism’ dominating the early Soviet avant-garde to an even greater extent was Constructivism, which emphasized materiality instead of representation and contained a distinct anti-art element (Milner 1979, p. 22). Constructivist manifestos encouraged artists to find the “quickest way to the factory”, denounced aesthetes as “great corrupters of human race” (Vladimir Stenberg, Georgii Stenberg and Constantin Medunetsky, cited in Mount 1997, p. 12) and proclaimed that “representation is finished: it’s

⁶ This is the end of the first verse. In the English translation of ‘The Internationale’ by Charles Hope Kerr: “The earth shall rise on new foundations: / We have been nought, we shall be all!”

time to construct” (Aleksander Rodchenko, cited in Moszynska 1990, p. 76). An artist-engineer (Mount 1997, p. 11) or artist-technician (Moszynska 1990, 78) became the ideal practitioner of culture.

Cinema and graphic design were considered some of the crucial agitational tools, as many Russians were illiterate (Mount 1997, 11). Therefore, film posters were a prominent part of Soviet visual culture of the era. In chapter 6 of *SSK*, one of the pages mimics a poster by Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg advertising the documentary film *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kino-apparatom*, 1929) directed by Dziga Vertov (figure 2).⁷ The avant-garde film documents life in a modern Soviet city while experimenting with collage, photomontage, split-screen and a gamut of other unusual film editing techniques (Milner 1979, p. 28; Stollery 2013, 602). *Man with a Movie Camera* presents a utopian communist vision with citizens enjoying themselves, carrying out productive work and connecting with others and with modern technology (Stollery 2013, 603). The original poster for the film features a woman with her back arched backwards and hands thrown up, as if she is flying. The woman looks joyous in the middle of multicolored skyscrapers that are reaching out to the sky all around her. As Vertov’s film, the design embodies optimism and the new Soviet way of life and reflects the ideals of Constructivism which Stenberg brothers and Vertov were all committed to.

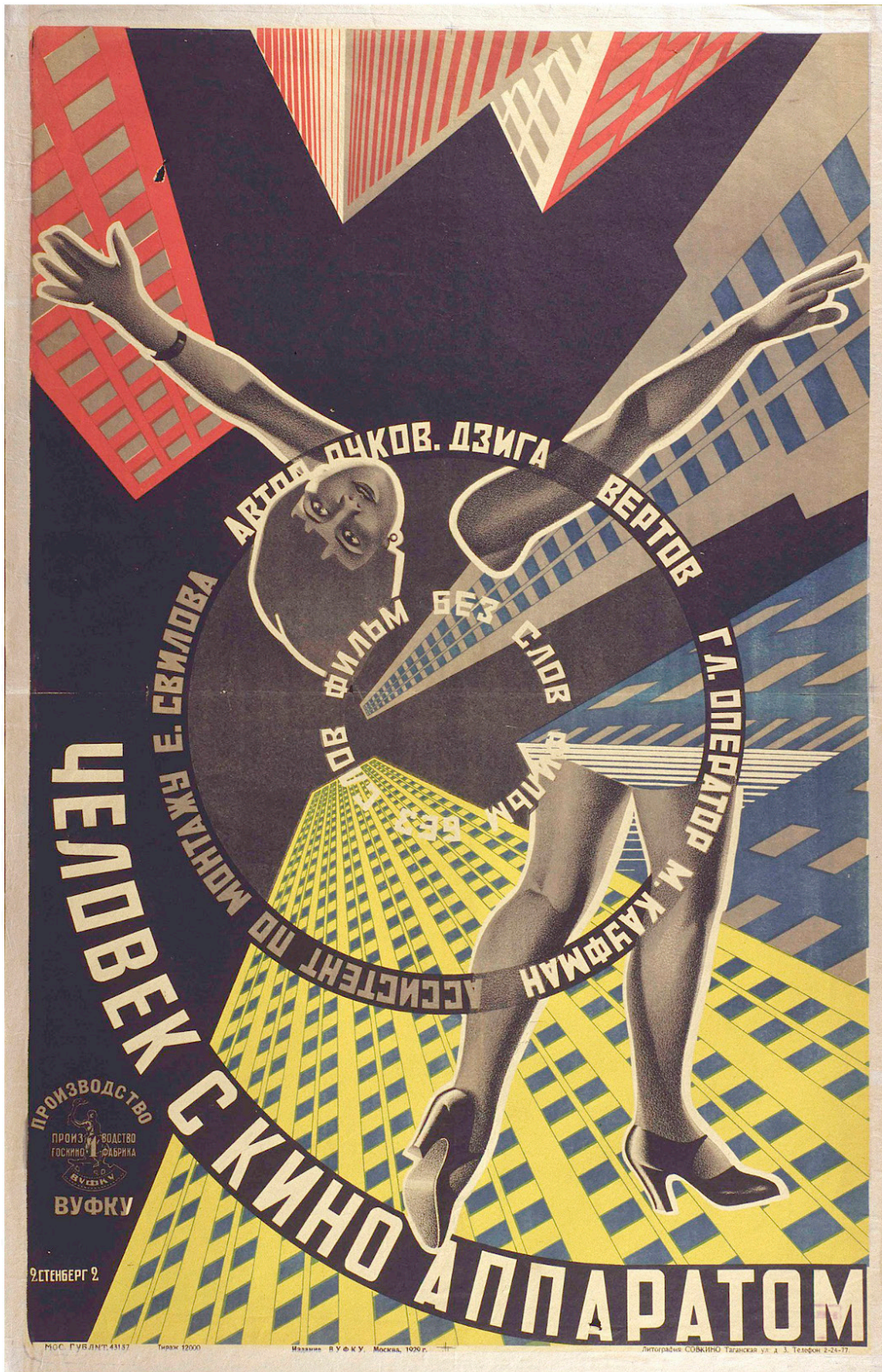
In *SSK*, however, utopia is giving way to dystopia. Arvo Tuominen arrives to the Soviet Union and helps Kuusinen take power in SKP, removing Manner and Malm in 1934. At the same time, the forced collectivization and mass repression of peasants is under way and the people labelled class enemies by the communist regime are sentenced to forced labor camps, one of which Tuominen visits. In 1935, Stalinist repression escalated after the murder of the Leningrad party leader Sergei Kirov was used as a pretext for a thorough purge in the party ranks (Shearer 2009, p. 292). All communist parties were ordered to monitor their members for dangerous influences and expel members of opposition factions, which led to SKP leaders gathering evidence against Manner, Malm and their supporters and reporting it to NKVD (Rentola 1994, 28). As a result, the secret police arrested Malm on the night before 14 April 1935, which marks a turning point in the narrative.

At this point, the graphic novel includes a page that appropriates the *Man with a Movie Camera* poster by the Stenberg brothers. Instead of the joyous woman, the central figure on the page is the distressed Hanna Malm in a similar position with her body bent along the spiraling text. In the original, the circular lines announce the credits of the film, whereas in *SSK*, there is narrative text explaining the turn of events: “Hanna Malm’s arrest sets in motion a wave of arrests. First Malm and Manner’s friends and acquaintances. Finally, Kullervo Manner is arrested as well. / The ones arrested are sentenced to NKVD camps to forced labor.” In the space where the film poster includes the title of the film on another curved line, Matilainen has placed Malm’s speech bubble. She exclaims: “Kullervo! What is happening? Our dreams – only ashes!” Shapes of the other panels on the page imitate the dramatic shapes of sky-

7 A copy belong to the collection of MoMA and can be viewed online at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/217943>.



FIGURE 2: *Suomen suurin kommunisti*, p. 189. Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg: Poster for the film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).



scrapers of the film poster. In Stenberg’s design, they surround the woman and rise towards the sky. In the graphic novel, the panels look more like broken pieces of glass, each event representing a new blow to Malm’s socialist ideals. The top-left panel features the agitated Kullervo Manner shouting “My love!” as NKVD officials are dragging Malm away. Other panels reveal assorted scenes from the narrative:

there is Malm with a prisoner's uniform in an NKVD camp, Kuusinen on holiday where he meets his third wife, Manner being arrested, school director Yrjö Sirola wondering why so many of his students have disappeared and a troika of NKVD officials delivering the guilty sentence.

In 1935, Finns first became a target in NKVD campaigns of repression. In addition to Manner, Malm and their allies, Finns were also attacked in the Finnish-led Karelian ASSR, a hub of Soviet Finns where Finnish was one of the official languages. In a campaign against "Finnish nationalism", Finns were displaced from leadership positions and many Red Army officers and students were arrested, even though at this point the sentences were not severe and many were later set free (Rentola 1994, pp. 31–32). The Soviet authorities had begun to systematically suspect ethnic minority populations, and especially Finns, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians and other minorities connected to foreign countries were deemed hostile to Soviet Union (Shearer 2009, pp. 316–317).

Facing the Great Terror

In the appropriations of artworks, irony becomes more pronounced as the purges commence in *SSK*. Chapter 7 chronicles the events from late 1935 to the New Year's Day 1938 when NKVD agents arrest Aino Kuusinen in early morning – carrying out arrests at night was a common intimidation tactic by Soviet authorities. Before the chapter is over, the majority of the graphic novel's cast have lost their lives or disappeared into the Gulag archipelago. Some, like Yrjö Sirola, die of natural causes, even though an arrest order was waiting for them. Others are taken into custody and sent to labor camps or executed. NKVD collected and manufactured evidence in interrogations and those arrested often confessed to imaginary crimes and named others under torture or in hopes of getting released (see Rentola 1994, pp. 54–60). As the events become more gruesome, the art appropriations turn more subversive and ironic.

In the beginning of chapter 7, there is a page employing the design of the propaganda poster *Under the Banner of Lenin for Socialist Construction* (1930)⁸ by Gustav Klutis⁹, a Latvian constructivist artist who produced political art for the Soviet state (figure 2). On the poster, giant heads of Lenin and Stalin are partially overlapping, with smaller photographs of factories and tractors on the sides illustrating the industrial expansion under the communist regime. In *SSK*, the exact same layout is used, but Lenin has been replaced with Kuusinen. Hovering ominously behind him is Stalin, as in the original. Instead of scenes of industrial progress, however, the faces of the two men are surrounded with prisoners toiling in labor camps on the lower side of the page and an execution site on the right. Armed NKVD officials are standing on the edge of a mass grave filled with bloodied bodies. The blood stands out dramatically due to the graphic novel's limited color palette of just black, gray and red, the same as Klutis' poster.

8 One of the copies belongs to the collection of Museum of Modern Art in New York and it can be viewed at <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/6503>.

9 Or Gustavs Klucis in Latvian.



Kuusisen puhe NKVD:lle.

FIGURE 3: Jesse Matilainen: *Suomen suurin kommunisti*, p. 196. Gustav Klutsis: *Under the banner of Lenin for socialist construction* (1930).



In the places where Klutsis' original design includes slogans about socialist construction under Lenin's banner, Matilainen quotes a speech Kuusinen gave as a Comintern leader to the NKVD. In the sinister passage, Kuusinen denounces as self-delusional "pacifist wusses" the people who do not believe that "the redemption of the humankind requires a sword" (SSK, p. 196). He also states that people who end up in the hands of the brutal Soviet political police will later be thankful because the experience

helps them return to a life of dignity. Historian Kimmo Rentola (1994, pp. 48–49) has described it “the most hideous speech of [Kuusinen’s] long career” but notes that rather than stating his actual views, Kuusinen is speaking out of political expediency and fighting for his own life at the time. In *SSK*, these considerations are absent, and his comments merely reflect the troubling views of Kuusinen the comics character, a person increasingly devoid of morals.

The narrative irony is not limited to the subversion of the propaganda poster to reveal the grim reality of state repression. Furthermore, it resonates with the fate of Gustav Klutsis who was a devoted communist but unfortunately of Latvian origin. Eight years after completing the poster he was arrested and executed in the “The Latvian Operation” by NKVD (Derkusova 2012, p. 54). In these nationality operations, more than 200,000 people belonging to targeted minority populations – German, Polish, Latvian and Finnish among others – were arrested and executed or deported (Shearer 2009, 349). Exact numbers are not available, but it is estimated that at least every fourth and perhaps even every third Finn living in Karelia was arrested and convicted, with 85% of the sentences leading to execution (Kangaspuro 2000, p. 352). According to Markku Kangaspuro, the events of 1937–1938 can be considered an ethnic cleansing (2000, p. 353).

As the purges escalate in chapter 7, the graphic novel employs a whole-page composition with circular frames (figure 4). Circular, overlapping frames present images from pivotal scenes in the purges against Finnish communists. On top, Otto Ville Kuusinen and Arvo Tuominen are discussing new orders by Stalin requiring “a couple thousand more arrests” (*SSK*, p. 213). In other frames, these orders are implemented by NKVD officials. The three circles on the bottom show the surprised faces of Finnish communist leaders Tyyne Tokoi, Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio when the political police come for them. The text on the side describes the details of the crackdown in the Finnish-led Karelian ASSR: the use of Finnish is completely prohibited; Finnish newspapers and printing houses are disbanded and the inhabitants of the Finnish-USSR border zone arrested.

The dialogue about quotas of arrests *does* reflect the reality of the years of the Great Terror, even though Kuusinen and Tuominen would not receive such orders. Rather, the purges were carried out by NKVD and SKP had to provide it with information about its members that the secret police considered possible suspects. Regional NKVD offices were given quotas for how many people should be executed and how many sentenced to forced labor throughout the country, and often the preliminary quotas were exceeded by a massive margin (Shearer 2009, 345–349).

The page design is again borrowed from a poster related to cinema, even though not a film poster *per se*. The design mimics a Soviet propaganda poster by Yakov Guminer commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 1917 revolution.¹⁰ Guminer’s poster has a similar series of circles which show film footage from Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov’s silent movie *October: Ten Days that Shook the*

¹⁰ The poster is in public domain in Russia and can be viewed online at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yakov_Guminer._1917_poster_\(1927\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yakov_Guminer._1917_poster_(1927).jpg)



FIGURE 4: Jesse Matilainen: *Suomen suurin kommunisti*, p. 213. Yakov Guminer: 1917 (1927).



World (1928). The center shows Lenin, played by Vasili Nikandrov, encouraging the people to revolt against the Provisional Government and scenes in which Bolshevik troops storm the Winter Palace and take control of Petrograd. Both the original poster and Matilainen's comics page have the year in which the events are taking place – 1917 and 1937, respectively – placed at the bottom. The inscription

of the years underlines the political shift that took place in Soviet Union in the twenty years following the October Revolution from revolutionary optimism into Stalinist terror and paranoia. In addition to suspect social groups and minority populations, high levels of the Bolshevik Party and Red Army were ‘cleansed’ and numerous leading communists were put to death after show trials.

Edvard Gylling and Kustaa Rovio, who are pictured on the page, belonged to the old guard of Finnish communists who knew Lenin personally. Rovio had helped him hide in Helsinki when he was escaping the persecution of the Russian government in 1917 prior to the October Revolution (Salomaa 2001), and Lenin had himself invited Gylling to emigrate to Soviet Russia in 1920 to run the Karelian autonomous republic (Uola 2001). After their displacement from leadership positions in Karelia, Gylling and Rovio lived in Moscow where SKP tried to protect them (Rentola 1994, p. 44), until they were arrested in July 1937 and found guilty of leading a counterrevolutionary terrorist organization and executed in 1938 (Salomaa 2001). In 1950s, the two men were posthumously rehabilitated as part of de-Stalinization efforts under Krushchev, as was Gustav Klutsis – it was acknowledged that they had been prosecuted without due basis and they were adjudged innocent.

The revolution of 1917 under Lenin was an event of mythic proportions for the Soviet Union. As there was little footage of the events taking place around Petrograd, the scenes of Eisenstein and Alexandrov’s film became iconic representations of the revolution (von Bagh 1998, p. 130). Therefore, the visuals used in Guminer’s poster are almost sacred, especially the figure of Lenin who became extremely revered following his death. The subversive nature of the appropriations is more pronounced and the irony more poignant in this image. Lenin has been seen as the Russian leader who pushed other Bolsheviks to accept the right of Finland and other parts of the Russian Empire to secede. In *SSK*, the page describes a reversal of this internationalist policy as Finns are accused of nationalist cabal against the Soviet Union.

In conclusion

Suomen suurin kommunisti is a graphic novel that on the other hand treads a fine line between fiction and nonfiction and on the other employs intriguing narrative strategies such as art appropriations in order to illustrate the disillusionment of Soviet Finns. To some extent, the narrative acknowledges that its historical accuracy is under negotiation. In his opening and closing remarks, Matilainen states that the story “is not true but could be” (*SSK*, p. 5) and that “factual errors can probably be found” (*SSK*, p. 254). Furthermore, *SSK* goes through the Finnish communists’ fierce debates on the correct interpretations of their movement’s history in depth, since they were one of the ultimate reasons for the downfall of Kullervo Manner and Hanna Malm who are sympathetically portrayed in the graphic novel. During the Stalinist years, historical research was considered an ideological weapon. For communists, it was

more important that history was useful for their political project and issues of factuality came a distant second. This was the party line that Stalin himself laid down in his letter to the historical journal *Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya* in 1931, demanding that established party history is not open for questioning.

The potential unreliability of graphic representations of historical events is thematized in an interesting way when *SSK* appropriates elements and designs of Soviet propaganda art. The works, ideas behind them and techniques of Soviet avant-garde artists were groundbreaking and visionary in many respects, but as propaganda, their relationship to truthful information is ambiguous and the visual forms are loaded with political meanings. It is one of the most fascinating contradictions of the early Soviet years how revolutionary, thought-provoking and experimental art turned into a tool of the authoritarian leadership in its attempt to manufacture personality cults around Lenin and Stalin. On the pages of the graphic novel, appropriating political art and propaganda in scenes which reveal brutal political violence against innocent people creates peculiar narrative irony and highlights the fact that political ideals are quickly being abandoned. The purges, executions, and massacres of the Great Terror took place more than 80 years ago. However, the history is anything but settled, and Finnish victims have become part of what Mark Edele (2017) has called “Russia’s history wars”. Even though the Soviet Union has not been in existence for three decades, the Russian ruling regime has grown increasingly concerned about how Soviet history is perceived and interpreted. In 2020, a historian who had worked to uncover Great Terror grave sites in Karelia received a prison sentence that is widely considered political (Human Rights Watch 2020), and in 2019, a Kremlin-sponsored historical association conducted controversial excavations, aiming to play down the number of purge victims buried in Sandarmokh, one of the major sites (Carroll 2019). Expressing certain opinions about the Soviet past, especially in relation to the Second World War, was criminalized in 2014 (Edele 2017, pp. 94–95).

In Finland, there have been calls for a more thorough historical inquiry into the fates of Finns who emigrated to Soviet Russia and USSR during the interwar period. Time will tell whether such an effort will be undertaken and whether even an approximate count of victims of the Great Terror – or “Great Hate” (“Isoviha”) as the surviving Soviet Finns later dubbed the events – will ever be found out. In this historic conversation, *SSK* is an exceptional work of fiction or fictionalized nonfiction. Instead of only describing the horrors and suffering that took place in Finnish and other minority communities in interwar USSR, the graphic novel aspires to explain the political forces and tensions which caused them. At the same time, it demonstrates the expressive potential of comics, as it is difficult to imagine a similar narrative being realized in any other medium.

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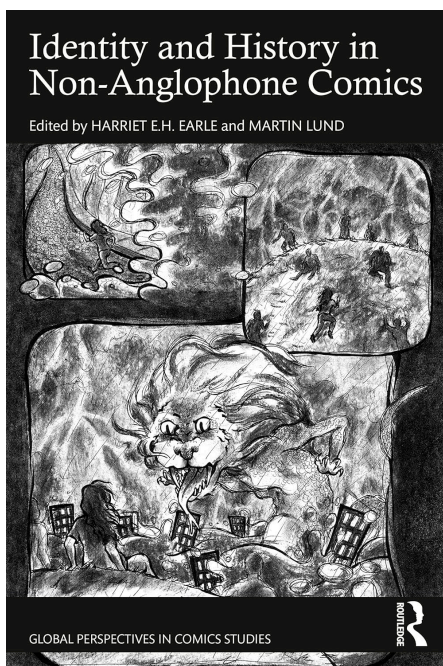
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