



# Lake Ladoga

*The Coastal History of the Greatest Lake in Europe*

Edited by  
Maria Lähteenmäki and Isaac Land

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##### Editorial Office

SKS  
P.O. Box 259  
FI-00171 Helsinki

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## Preface

This edited volume examines and analyses the historical changes on the shores of Ladoga, Europe's largest lake, and its drainage basin over a long period of time. The focus of the study is on the Northern Ladoga region, which was an administrative region of Finland from 1812 to 1944. Since the Second World War, the shores of Ladoga have been part of the northwestern border area of the Soviet Union/Russia.

The themes that unite the volume include the interpretations related to the early settlement of the Ladoga region and the definition of the human-nature-relationship in an industrializing and modernizing society. The unifying research approach to the chapters is the *new coastal history*, which has been applied to research on the Great Lake. The chosen approach emphasizes both environmental, socio-economic, and multisensory historical dimensions.

It can be concluded that the multi-level changes of the shores of Ladoga cannot be understood without knowledge of the history of the wider drainage basin, international cross-border trade and settlement history, the changing geopolitics of the regions and climate. On the other hand, the relationship between people and aquatic nature has changed significantly over the last centuries. Purely economic benefit rationales gradually gave way to the principles of sustainable development. In relation to the previous one, the change also applies to the redefinition of the spatial perspective of the Great Lake, as the nationalist ownership of the region has broadened into a global concern about the state of the lake.

The idea of writing an English volume on the history of Ladoga was born after the release of the edited volume "*Laatokka. Suurjärven kiehtova rantahistoria*" (edited by Maria Lähteenmäki) in the spring of 2021. Colleagues interested in coastal history and working in different universities were interested to read it and asked if it was possible to get the volume in English. The selection as a finalist in "The History Book of the Year 2021" by the Finnish Historical Society, and the award "The Best Karelian Research in 2021" which we received in Finland encouraged us to get to work. In contrast to the Finnish volume, we introduce in this edited volume two brand-new chapters introducing new themes (written by Tuomas Räsänen and Thomas Rosén). All other chapters (written by Isaac Land, Kati Parppei, Pertti Rannikko & Jarmo Kortelainen, Karl-Erik Michelsen, Alfred



Colpaert & Augustine-Moses Gbagir, Ismo Björn, Alexander Osipov, Maria Lähteenmäki & Oona Ilmolahti) are partly or totally re-written: Wording has been revised or augmented to accommodate readers who are not familiar with the history of Finnish-Russian border regions.

At the end, we would like to thank the authors of this volume and all our collaborators, such as Director Kirsi Keravuori from the Finnish Literature Society, Editor-in-chief of *Studia Fennica Historica* -series Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, and the peer reviewers for their valuable comments.

In Helsinki and Terre Haute on March 8, 2023

*Maria Lähteenmäki & Isaac Land*

Focus on Coastal History I



## Transnational History of Ladoga

Predrag Matvejevic's excellent work *Mediteranski brevijar* (1987, English translation *Mediterranean Breviary*) opens with advice to the reader: "First, we have to choose a starting point: coast or setting, port or event, voyage or story." The starting point for this edited volume is the coast, more specifically the shoreline areas of Europe's largest lake, Ladoga, their settlement patterns, and the history of their northern location. Literary scholars have insightfully observed that the shore, the space on the boundary between water and land, nature, and culture, acts as a producer of contradictory experiences, a landscape of possibilities that holds the seeds of change.<sup>1</sup> In our book, we demonstrate how the shores of Ladoga have changed over the centuries as an historical site of habitation, experience, and social space.<sup>2</sup>

Our volume strengthens a new research genre and methodology alongside sea coastal history research by emphasizing transnational, multidisciplinary, and multimethodological approaches to environmental history and human-nature relations of lakes.<sup>3</sup>

Although lakes are undoubtedly very important objects of study for social, economic, cultural, and environmental historians, they have received surprisingly little attention in academic humanities and social science research. Until recent years, historians have focused more on the economic aspects of onshore resources (fishing, transport, trade) than on the socio-cultural dimensions of the encounters between humans and aquatic nature,

1 Ameel 2018, 73.

2 This chapter has been edited from the chapter published in the Finnish volume *Laatokka. Suurjärven kiehtova rantahistoria*. See Lähteenmäki 2021, 11–31; Thanks to Kate Sotejeff-Wilson who has translated partly the text from Finnish to English; I would like to express my warm thanks also to my colleague, Isaac Land, for the discussions in Chicago and inspiration surrounding the theme.

3 See also Lähteenmäki 2021; the edited volume *Laatokka. Suurjärven kiehtova rantahistoria* published in Finnish (2021) is the first academic history book on Lake Ladoga. The research frame of our English version is similar to that in the Finnish, although some authors are new. The English version has been edited and focused to make it more accessible to international readers.



as in river history classics such as Claudio Magris's brilliant *Danubio* (1986, English *Danube*, 1989).

Coastal history has been a reference point in maritime, harbor, and naval history, coastal urban history and interdisciplinary marine studies,<sup>4</sup> but it is only in the last twenty years that climate change has stimulated environmental humanities<sup>5</sup> practitioners to focus on water, sustainable management of its resources, and multidisciplinary studies.<sup>6</sup> In the process, coastal research has also acquired new historical dimensions.

Biologists have done most of the research into lakes, such as on water quality, especially eutrophication, fauna, and flora. Natural scientists have been particularly interested in the biochemical and ecological processes in lakes.<sup>7</sup> On the boundary between land and water – the shore – where the land is lapped by waves and crushed by ice, there is memory, albeit selective and sometimes very short, says biologist Esko Kuusisto, who has studied Finland's largest lake, Saimaa.<sup>8</sup> As historians, we have evaluated shores primarily as human communities, often taking a more complex view of time than our natural scientist colleagues.

Finns often fondly refer to their home as the land of a thousand lakes. Lake settings are perceived as iconographic, deeply Finnish cultural landscapes and natural heritage. School textbooks, informational literature, and travel advertisements reproduce this stereotypical image of Finland. The waterscape draws from a deep well: the country's 180 000 or so lakes – and a large number of small lakes and ponds – attracted early settlers to their shores and estuaries, first to build family communities, then as the population grew, villages and towns. For centuries, lakesides have been settlements and crossroads for Finns, from where they set off into the hinterland and out onto open water. So, it is surprising that Finland does not make it into the top ten countries with the most lakes in the world: the list includes Sweden and Norway, which have not been as proud of their lakes as Finland.<sup>9</sup> Yet for Finns, these shocking figures do not detract from their identity and desire to be seen as a nation of lakes.<sup>10</sup>

4 Merihistoria 2018; A modern classic in this field is Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean World*. First ed. 1948.

5 E.g. DeLoughrey, Didur & Carrigan 2015; The Baltic Sea, Ladoga's "big sister," has been relatively extensively written about and compared to Lake Ladoga. E.g. Klinge 2007; *Itämeren tulevaisuus* 2010; *Baltic Sea Action Group* 2019.

6 E.g. Lehtimäki, Meretoja & Rosenholm 2018, 7–8; Chen, McLeon & Neimanis 2013; AKVA Project 2012–2016; *Euroopan ympäristö, tila ja näkymät* 2015.

7 Messenger et al. 2016.

8 E.g. in geohuman sciences and urban studies in the humanities. Ameal 2018 and Kuusisto 1999.

9 Canada, Russia, the United States, China, Sweden, Brazil, Norway, Argentina, Kazakhstan and Australia have the largest number of lakes. Messenger et al. 2016, Table 1.

10 In 2010, a national brand delegation identified one of Finland's strengths as its close relationship with nature, especially lakes, which had to be made drinkable: water purification is a major national project that can make extensive use of Finnish water expertise. *Tehtävä Suomelle* 2010, 4.

## *Ladoga, lake of the northern borderland*

We have chosen to study Ladoga for its size – the largest lake in Europe – but above all for its historical, cultural, and transnational character. Ladoga was on the border between Finland and the Soviet Union from 1812 to 1944. Finland lost direct contact with Ladoga as a result of the Second World War, after which Ladoga and its banks have been a peripheral inland waterway and stopover for the Soviet Union and Russia from Ääninen (Russian Onega) via the Syväri (Svir) to the Neva River and finally to the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea. In her study *Sustaining Lake Superior*, renowned American environmental historian Nancy Langston points out that the great lake between the United States and Canada is enigmatic with its timelessness and diverse ecosystems, and that lakes – like people – have their own life histories.<sup>11</sup> As does Ladoga. Its most densely populated northern and western parts still live on in the memories of Finns, not least the war refugees who fled from there in 1944 to the interior of Finland. This is despite the fact that there few Finns remain who have lived, let alone been born, on the shores of the great lake.

In the 2010s some 145 000 inhabitants lived in the Ladoga region. That is almost an equal number of people as in 1939 (148 000). The central communities are the same as in the Finnish period: Sortavala region, Käkisalme region and Pitkäranta community. The largest communities in the southern Ladoga are still Šlisselburg, Olonets and Novaya Ladoga. Today the inhabitants of the Ladoga region get their living from the forest and mining industries and tourism (see appendix 1).

Dozens of often-repeated images are associated with the Ladoga Karelia, described as a land of sea storms, unspoiled waters, and rocky islands, a lovely home to bards and a sensitive people. This is how the editor of the Finnish magazine *Rajaseutu* characterized the region in 1928.<sup>12</sup> Ladoga itself – a body of water that separated off from the Gulf of Finland – has been commonly described as the Karelian Sea,<sup>13</sup> and no wonder, because despite its saltless fresh water and the Neva estuary, its broad (17 900 km<sup>2</sup>), long (1 570 km) shoreline, beautiful archipelago of more than 500 islands in the north and marine feel<sup>14</sup> make it more like a sea than a lake.<sup>15</sup> In the reflections of its inhabitants, in memoirs, and in landscape photography, Ladoga figures as a sea in its own right, as can be seen in narratives about the world's other great lakes.<sup>16</sup>

Lake Ladoga continues to greatly influence and be influenced by the surrounding drainage basin (276 500 km<sup>2</sup>; Map 1) – and the wider

11 Langston 2017, 2–3.

12 Laatokan Karjala. *Rajaseutu* 1928 2, 41–42.

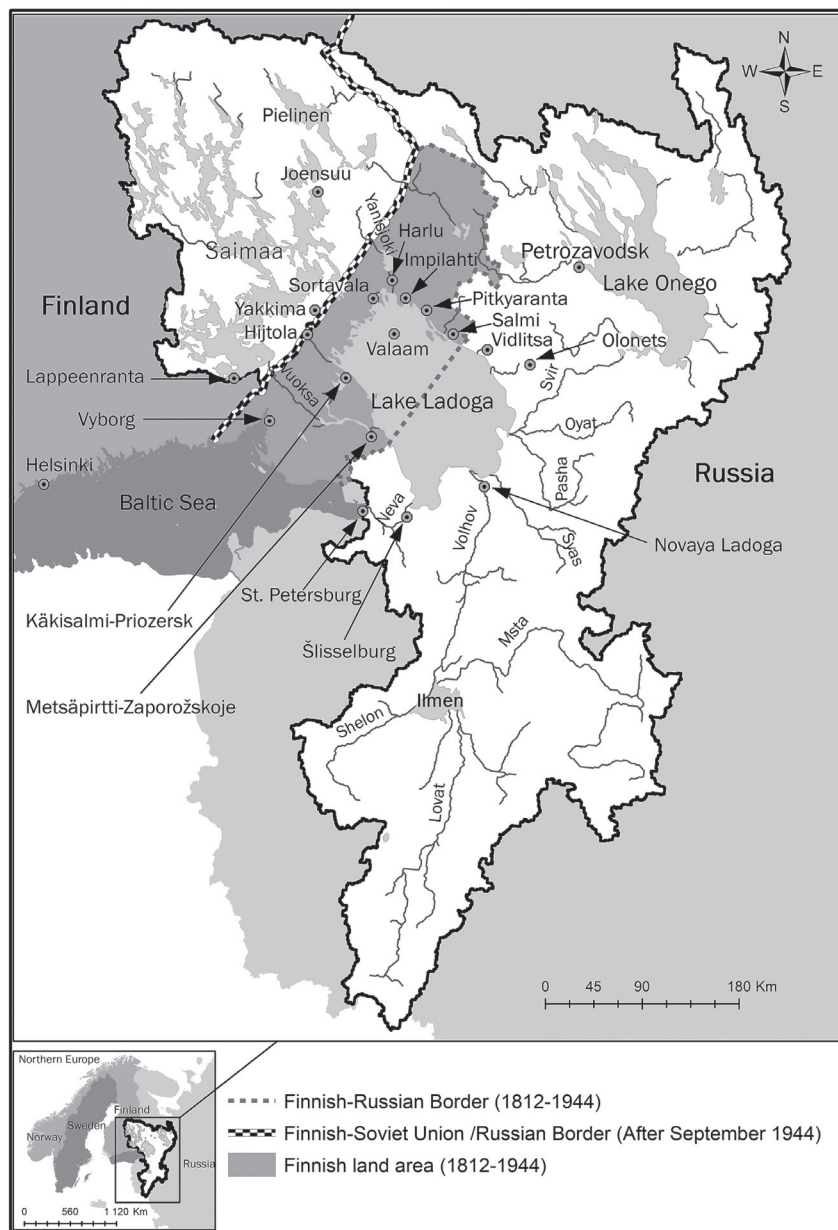
13 E.g. Siilahti 2008, 94–96.

14 Rajaseudun kuvia, kirj. Kehvas. *Rajaseutu* 1931 1, 9.

15 Ladoga is 219 km long and 138 km at its widest point. Its average depth is 100 m and its deepest point, 225 m, is located between the island of Valamo and the coast of Sortavala.

16 *About Our Great Lakes: Great Lakes Basin Facts* 2019; *The Great Lakes An Environmental Atlas and Resource Book* 2019.

Map 1. The Drainage Basin of Lake Ladoga



Map: Augustine-Moses Gbagir & Maria Lähtenmäki 2022.

environment – temperature, seasons, flora, and fauna. The area is generally defined as middle or south taiga, which is characterized by spruce forests with wood sorrel and blueberry, and lush groves. The archipelago is divided into the barren outer islands and leafy inner islands with steep eroding fjords and varying rock vegetation. In the 2010s, the broken shoreline still hosts the richest flora in the Karelia region, including many endangered species

of plants and birds. The northern parts of the lake, “Ladoga’s cliffs,” are rugged and deep, broken up by dark straits and narrow labyrinths of natural channels, while the southern shores are shallow and mostly sandy. In the first half of the twentieth century, Ladoga was wracked by tremendous storms to the rhythm of the seasons, like the Spanish Biscay; the fogs and mirages, but also the blissful summer mists, the sounds of the numerous tugs, steamers, and motorboats,<sup>17</sup> the bells of the monasteries Valaam (Fin. Valamo) and Konevets (Konevitsa), the everyday bustle of the towns and villages, the puffing of the factory chimneys, the clanging of the harbors, and the lowing of cattle. The sounds combined with the scents of human settlements, fish, smoke, vegetation, and farms. There was no shortage of sandy beaches around Ladoga; the shores of Vätiko (Vätikkö) island in the Kurkijoki river were compared to the French Riviera and Sweden’s Marstrand.<sup>18</sup>

The specific “rural Finnish” image of the North Ladoga region was created with determination in the 1920s and 1930s, alongside the regional self-image of Karelia.<sup>19</sup> At the time, the region was characterized by its proximity of the border between capitalist Finland and the Bolshevik Soviet Union; the military-political tension that escalated in the late 1930s, culminated in war between the two countries at the end of November 1939 when the Soviet Union attacked Finland. Before that, Finns made canal plans to link Ladoga with the Gulf of Finland to support the region’s greater independence from the Soviet Union. This would have freed Finland from the Russian-controlled Neva waterway,<sup>20</sup> but it was never dug.

### *Part of the global family of great lakes*

Ladoga is part of a wider chain of lakes in Northern Europe, which I call the northern great lakes region. It includes Onega (Europe’s second largest lake) in the Russian Karelia, Päijänne<sup>21</sup> and Saimaa with its extensive catchment areas in Finland,<sup>22</sup> Vänern, Vättern and Mälaren in Sweden,<sup>23</sup> and Lake Peipsi on the Estonian-Russian border.<sup>24</sup> This is comparable to the great lakes regions in North America and Africa.<sup>25</sup> In this broader context, Ladoga

17 E.g. Konkordia, Karjala, Anna, Janaslahti, Koitto, Sirkka, Vulcan, Lennart, Imatra, Otava, Taimi.

18 *Suomen Matkailijayhdistyksen vuosikirja* 1927 1, 45–60.

19 Lähteenmäki 2009, 276–277; Lähteenmäki 2012, 33–50.

20 E.g. Laatokan-Suomenlahden kanavan tarve. *Hakkapeliitta* 21.7.1928; Kanava Suomenlahteen. Kirj. Antero Rautavaara. *Suomen sotilas* 17.11.1928.

21 On Päijänne, see Hakkari and Saukkonen 1998.

22 Ks. Suur-Saimaa 2020.

23 Sveriges 15 största sjöar 2020.

24 The total water surface area of the northern great lakes is 45 219 km<sup>2</sup> and the coastline 23 491 km (excluding Onega). The largest body of water is Ladoga, followed by Onega, Vänern, Saimaa, Lake Peipsijärvi, Vättern, Mälaren and Päijänne. *World Lake Database* 2019.

25 It includes three great lakes, Victoria, Tanganyika, and Malawi, and seven smaller lakes. The lands bordering the rift valley include Congo, Tanzania, and Uganda in East Africa.





*Boaters on the shore of Honkasalmi island in front of the city of Sortavala. Photo: Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland. CC BY 4.0.*



This multidisciplinary volume offers a spectacular view and the first overall presentation of the history of Lake Ladoga, the greatest lake in Europe. The focus of the study is on the northern parts of the shores of the lake, which belonged to Finland's rule between 1812 and 1944. Adopting the lens of coastal history, the edited volume presents the development of the vast Great Lake's catchment area over a longtime span, from archaeological traces to Viking routes and from fishery huts to the luxury villas of the power elite. It reflects on people's sensory-historical relationships with aquatic nature, and considers the benefits and harms of power plants and factories to human communities and the environment. The authors from different universities explore a wide range of questions, including: What has the Great Lake meant to local residents in cultural and emotional terms? How should we conceptualize the extensive and diverse networks of activities that surrounded the lake? What kind of Ladoga beaches did the Finns have to cede to the Soviet Union at the end of the war in 1944? How have Finns reminisced about their lost homelands? How have the Russians transformed the profile of the region, and what is the state of Ladoga's waters today? The history of Lake Ladoga helps readers to understand better the economic, political, and socio-cultural characteristics of the cross-border areas, and the dynamics of the vulnerable border regions.



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