Karelia

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(kərēˈlēə; Finnish: Kaarelia), constituent republic (1990 pop. 800,000), 66,409 sq mi (172,300 sq km), NW European Russia, extending from the Finnish border in the west to the White Sea in the east and from the Kola Peninsula in the north to Lakes Ladoga and Onega (Europe's largest freshwater lakes) in the south. Petrozavodsk is the capital. A glaciated plateau, Karelia is covered by over 60,000 lakes and by coniferous forests; fishing and lumbering are major industries. Agriculture, generally hampered by cold climate and poor soil, is possible only in the south, where some grains, potatoes, fodder grasses, and vegetables are grown; dairy farming and livestock raising are also carried on. Karelia has valuable deposits of iron ore, magnetite, lead, zinc, copper, titanium, marble, and pyrite. Power for industry is supplied by the republic's many short, rapid rivers. Besides lumbering and related industries, Karelia has shipbuilding and repair yards, food-processing plants, and factories that produce furniture, aluminum, building materials, and textiles. The republic is crossed by the Murmansk RR and by the Baltic–White Sea Canal, which is both commercially and strategically important. Russians and Ukrainians constitute a majority of the population, the rest of which consists mainly of Karelians, Finns, and Sami (Lapps), who are very closely related and have an identical written language. The Karelians, a major division of the Finns, were first mentioned in the 9th cent. and formed a strong medieval state. Karelia, properly speaking the region N and E of Lake Onega, was conquered in the 12th–13th cent. by the Swedes, who took the west, and by Novgorod, which took the east. The eastern part was taken from Russia by Sweden in 1617 but restored in 1721 by the Treaty of Nystad. The western part shared the history of Finland until 1940. It was from oral traditions among the Karelians that the Finnish national epic, the Kalevala, was compiled in the 19th cent. by Elias Lönnrot. The Karelian area of the Russian Empire was economically backward and was often a place of exile for political prisoners. In 1920 an autonomous oblast, known as the Karelian Workers' Commune, was set up in E Karelia; in 1923 it was made into the Karelian Autonomous SSR, which, after the Soviet-Finnish War of 1939–40, incorporated most of the territory ceded by Finland to the USSR. In Mar., 1940, the region's status was raised to that of a constituent republic, called the Karelo-Finnish SSR. During World War II, the Finns (allies of the Axis powers) occupied most of Karelia, but it was returned to the USSR in 1944. Karelia reverted to the status of an autonomous republic in 1956. It was a signatory to the Mar. 31, 1992, treaty that created the Russian Federation (see Russia).
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