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Paper title:

Assimilation failures?: Finnish laborers in Arctic Sweden

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Assimilation failures?: Finnish laborers in Arctic Sweden

My case study is transnational migration of Finnish laborers to Kiruna, Sweden for work in the state-owned LKAB mine. Kiruna, 145 kilometers north of the Arctic Circle, is the location of the world's largest underground iron mine and also has a sizable population speaking Meänkieli (Torne Valley Finnish). In 1954, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland created a legislated common labor market. Nordic citizens were no longer required to obtain permits to live and work in another Nordic country. During the 1950s and the 1960s, the "golden years of capitalism," Finnish immigrants began moving to Sweden in larger numbers. Some ended up in Kiruna, at the LKAB mine. This general Finnish cross-border movement to Sweden has not been worry free. Writing years later on the Finnish "adjustment failures" to immigration, Saarela and Finnäs (2007) found that Finnish immigrant mortality in Sweden is higher than that of native Swedes – and that of the population in Finland. Swedish research seems unclear on how much of immigrant differences depend on varied "country-specific skills" – speaking and understanding Swedish, having obtained an education in Sweden (Duvander, 2001) – and how much stem also from discrimination and factors like initial socio-economic differences. Hedberg and Kepsu (2003) see Finland Swedes, those in Finland whose mother tongue is Swedish, as having undertaken a simpler "cultural migration," a culturally "internal" move, not a movement between two separate countries, two distinctly different languages. Beginning with the 1950s, Finnish-speaking labor migrants from Finland would also have found themselves at a lesser linguistic distance in Kiruna among the speakers of Meänkieli. Very little is known research-wise about the Finnish laborers in Kiruna. In this paper, I shall explore how they seem to have fared culturally, socially, and economically in the arctic north, and why.