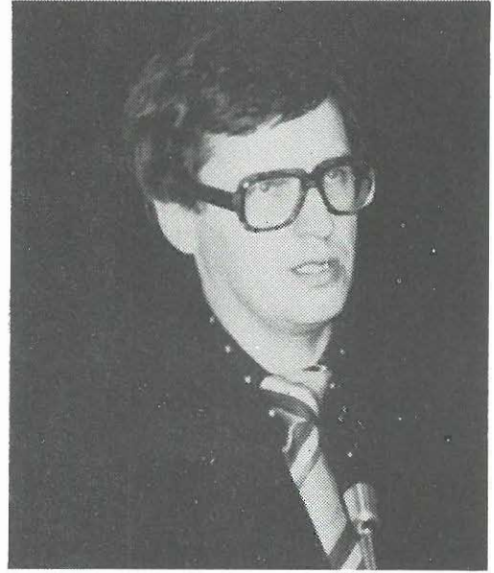


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Illegal Emigration to the U.S.S.R. during the Great Depression



The author is docent of general history in the University of Turku and at present is doing research work on a special grant from the Academy of Finland. Most recently, he has investigated the illegal emigration from Finland to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The following article draws its information from an extensive study to be published in 1987.

Illegal emigration is for many reasons a subject difficult to deal with. The difficulties stem from the very nature of the phenomenon, its illegality. Illegal migrations take place outside the jurisdiction of the authorities, and therefore no official information about the matter is normally available. Both the preparations made and the travel from country to country take place under uncontrolled circumstances. By an illegal migrant is generally meant a person who enters a foreign country or establishes residence there in violation of that country's laws and regulations. He is therefore an "undocumented worker," an "illegal alien" or an "illegal immigrant."¹⁾

Such illegal migrants are often referred to in common parlance as "renegades" or "turncoats." The Finnish equivalent, *loikkari*, comes from the verb *loikata*,

meaning to leap or to bound (*loikkari*= "bounder"). And, though the term does vividly represent the illegal crossing of the national boundary from Finland to neighboring Russia and it was quite commonly used in its time, its import could indicate in particular persons who "leap" or "bound" across national frontiers for political reasons. The present article deals, on the other hand, with "bounders" whose primary motive for migrating were of an economic nature. It aims to shed light on the background factors prompting Finns to cross over into Soviet territory illegally as well as on the salient characteristics of the migrants. Outside the scope of this article are such matters as, for example, the migrants' finding their place in the Soviet work force and their efforts to become repatriated.

The illegal migratory movement across

the Soviet border from Finland at the beginning of the 1930s was due mainly to the critical state of economic affairs. The great Wall Street crash in the fall of 1929 made a strong impact on the economies of many European countries. Many branches of industry — the metalworking, wood-working and construction industries, for instance — found themselves in serious trouble. As a result, the ranks of the unemployed grew alarmingly all over Europe. Financing difficulties also afflicted agriculture. Farm hands had to be laid off and farms auctioned off. Social welfare was poorly organized on the whole, as a consequence of which many people went hungry and were forced to look for work in other communities.

Earlier, America had been the promised land of many Europeans. In the 1920s, however, the United States government adopted an increasingly strict immigration policy, and Canada followed suit with alacrity. After that, only a few hundred Finns could gain entry into the United States each year. Would-be Finnish emigrants were obliged to look for other destinations.

The Soviet Union appeared to offer an alternative worth considering as a place to emigrate. The trouble, though, was that the Soviet authorities had no desire to open their gates to a migratory flood. The only migrants they were inclined to welcome were skilled workers and specialists in various branches of industry, in response to the requirements of any given economic plan.

The numbers of illegal migrants

In the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, there had already been large numbers of people in the Western countries who were eager to pull up stakes and move to the Soviet Union. In the late 1920s, too, applications for admission were addressed to the Soviet authorities each year by the thousands, but only a small proportion of the applicants were admitted.

In the 1920s, the workers from the West settling in the Soviet Union were admitted mainly through so-called concessions granted Western enterprises to operate in Soviet territory. In the early years of the decade, thousands of workers from the West also entered the Soviet Union in connection with the establishment of different types of cooperatives.

The principal means by which a worker from a Western country could enter the Soviet Union legally in the 1930s was on the basis of technical assistance agreements. Contracts were concluded by the Soviet authorities with many Western enterprises — American, German, French, Swedish, etc. According to official Soviet sources, at the beginning of September 1932, there were employed in the country 9,190 foreign specialists and 10,655 foreign workers, who were accompanied by their families, numbering 17,655 members. All told, these foreigners numbered 37,500.²¹ This figure probably includes some people who had entered the country illegally.

During the Great Depression, the numbers of illegal migrants crossing the border into the Soviet Union increased greatly; in the 1930-33 period, thousands migrated into that country from certain European countries, notably Finland and Poland. Not much research has so far been done on these illegal emigrants, although studies do exist dealing with the migrations in general that took place from Western countries to the Soviet Union during the period between the two World Wars. The published works concern in the main only political refugees, such as, for example, members of the German Communist party who had taken to their heels after the rise of the Nazis forced their party to go underground. The fortunes of those who had moved or sought to enter the Soviet Union for economic reasons have been accorded less attention. Only a few special studies have been done on the migrants who entered the U.S.S.R. illegally on account of the Depression — perhaps none exist except the

ones dealing with Finns.³⁾

Sporadic information about illegal Finnish migrants exists in a number of archives, such as those of the Consulate-General of Finland in Leningrad and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Helsinki.⁴⁾ More information can be gleaned from, for instance, Finnish and Soviet newspapers of the time, which carried frequent reports on the subject. There are still alive, furthermore, many people who remember background factors relating to the illegal migrations as well as factual details involved in individual cases. It has also been possible to contact persons who clandestinely crossed the border into the Soviet Union in the hope of finding work and later came back to Finland.

In the light of the information now available, it appears that in the early 1930s there migrated illegally from Finland to the U.S.S.R. at least 10,000, perhaps as many as 15,000, persons. Besides Finland, Poland was another country from which large numbers of illegal migrants originated; the total figure amounts likewise to many thousands. The information about the Finns, however, is considerably more reliable than about the Poles. Evidence exists of illegal migration to the Soviet Union from quite a few other countries as well, including, for example, Sweden and Germany. There is no reason to doubt that people crossed the border illegally in no insignificant numbers from most of the other countries situated close to Soviet territory. Altogether no less than probably between twenty and thirty thousand people from different European countries made their way into the Soviet Union illegally in those years.

Who were the illegal migrants?

It is possible to obtain a fairly accurate overall picture of the social background of the Finns who crossed the border into the Soviet Union during the Great Depression, although for practical reasons the factual material was collected by sampling. On the whole, it can

be stated that the illegal emigrants left homes in both cities and industrial centers as well as purely agricultural areas. This is indicated by the circumstance that the economic slump overran the entire social structure. Compared with Poland, the circumstances involving the Finnish migrants were somewhat different. Many of the Poles seeking to migrate illegally into the Soviet Union were natives of agricultural sections of the eastern part of the country, marked by economic backwardness and relatively little industrial activity. As a special feature, in addition, many of the Poles were bent on avoiding military conscription.⁵⁾

The research material consists of 3,674 persons, 71.2 % of them men and 28.2 % women. In contrast to the great wave of emigration from Finland to America at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the illegal emigrants were predominantly men. Of the Finnish emigrants who crossed the Ocean to North America between 1869 and 1914, males accounted for 64.7 % of the total number.⁶⁾

The Finnish male exodus to the East was connected with the situation in the labor market. With the worsening of employment opportunities, the attention of the jobless turned to the neighboring Soviet Union, whose five-year plans had become known to the public in the Western countries. While the rest of Europe struggled in the depths of a general slump, the Soviet Union projected the image of a country actually short of labor. Especially during the early stages of the illegal migratory movement, it was mostly the menfolk who headed for the Eastern border. The "border-jumpers" were predominantly unmarried men, but very many families too pulled up stakes to seek their fortunes on the Russian side. Usually, the family breadwinner, the man, went in advance and the rest of the family followed later. The family generally tried to be admitted legally, but since the chances proved slim, resort was had to illegal means.

Illegal crossing of the frontier was attended by many dangers and risks. One had to

avoid inhabited areas, which meant traversing wild, rough country with dense forests and treacherous bogs. The Finnish border guards, who were sparsely stationed, could be rather easily bypassed at sea; and hundreds, perhaps thousands, crossed the Gulf of Finland by boat over to the Soviet side. Smuggling "bounders" by the sea route proved at one stage to be a lucrative business.

The age structure of the illegal emigrants corresponded fairly closely to that of the Finns who had previously headed West to the North American side. The great majority were in their prime: 45 % of the men were between 20 and 30 years of age. On the other hand, quite a sizable number of the emigrants were over 50 and among them were small children, too. Children under the age of 15 years accounted for 14.7 % of the total number.

The regional background of the illegal emigrants reflects the economic conditions prevailing at the time in Finland. It was the industrial centers of southern Finland and the northern Finnish districts mainly occupied in providing raw material for the wood-working industries that were the most conspicuous localities of origin of these emigrants. Certain communities can be singled out as particularly important in this respect. Kotka, Viipuri and Helsinki were the southern cities highest on the list. Considering the geographic whole, the largest number of illegal emigrants were natives of the provinces of Viipuri and Uusimaa (the principal city of which is Helsinki), where many industrial centers were located - with, for examples, sawmills and other woodworking plants. Besides the southern coastal region, certain places in the interior of the country, like the industrial center of Tampere and the parish of Suojärvi, located north of Lake Ladoga, contributed substantial numbers of their local people to the army of job-hunters clandestinely crossing the border to the Soviet side.

In northern Finland, considerable numbers of illegal emigrants made their departure

from the towns of Kemi and Oulu and surrounding areas, with their forest-based industries. As down south, there were many sawmills, paper mills, etc., in this region, which was likewise hit hard by the Depression. Illegal crossings of the border to the Soviet side also took place frequently from frontier districts, notably on the Karelian Isthmus and up North, as from Kuolajärvi (later renamed Salla, as it is known today). Taking the country as a whole, it is possible that proportionally the largest number of illegal emigrants were natives of Kuolajärvi. From this large parish, according to Irmeli Kasvinnen's study, no less than 358 persons, or 5.2 % of the total local population, crossed the border illegally between 1929 and 1935.⁷⁾

Among the illegal emigrants, a substantial number had become uprooted earlier, having moved to a different locality from their original home, whether to find work or for other reasons. Many industrial towns and rural communities had become temporary places of residence for such people. This was true of at least Helsinki, Kotka, Tampere, Oulu and Kemi. At Suojärvi, there was lively lumbering activity at the turn of the decades of the 1920s and 1930s, and migrant workers arrived there from different parts of Finland looking for work. When no jobs were to be had or workers were laid off, "jumping" the border illegally to look for work on the Soviet side struck many as a natural alternative to forced idleness.

The end of illegal migrations

Various reasons have been found for the significant slowing down of the illegal migratory movement after the year 1933. Evidently, the main factor was the recovery from the economic slump that started to take place in Finland, as reflected by the decreasing unemployment figures after the middle of 1932. Another contributing factor was the opposition of both the Finnish and the Soviet authorities to unsanctioned



Map 1. The Main places of origin and routes to the Soviet Union of the illegal migrants from Finland.

crossings of the frontier. Also the Finnish Communist party in exile in the Soviet Union opposed the illegal migration on the ground that the revolutionary elements ought to stick it out in Finland and operate there

rather than "flee" to the bosom of Mother Russia.

The expiration of the migratory movement was further significantly influenced by the increase in reports about the conditions in

which the emigrants existed. Theirs was by no means an enviable lot; even in comparison with Finland in the grip of the Depression, conditions in the Soviet Union were lamentable. In the early 1930s, the Soviet regime was beset by troubles, especially as far as food supplies were concerned. The shortage of consumers' goods in the country also left many of the Finnish emigrants disenchanted.

The eagerness of the people planning to cross the frontier illegally was also dampened by reports that many of those who had gone over had spent periods even of several months as prisoners under interrogation. Further, word had been received of illegal migrants' being banished to far-away Siberia. Many had attempted to escape back to Fin-

land, as repatriation through legal channels appeared scarcely possible. Of the cases included in the research material, about one-tenth had managed to return to Finland, either legally or illegally.

The picture that can be produced of the illegal emigration from Finland to the U.S.S.R. is naturally imperfect. Owing to the unlawful nature of the matter, it can apparently never yield research data unflawed by gaps. Even so, possibilities of filling out the picture do exist, but they depend above all on the Soviet authorities' lifting restrictions on access to archival and other material. On the other hand, it must be stated that obtaining Western archival material for the present study had proved rather difficult.

Notes

1. See Ellen M. Brennan, *Irregular Migration: Policy Responses in Africa and Asia*. - *International Migration Review* Vol. XVIII, No 3, Fall 1984, p. 409-410.
2. N.L. Kornijenko *Razvitije internacional'nyh svjazej sovet'skogo rabocego klassa v gody pervoj p'jatiletki*. - *Istorija SSSR* 6/1979, p. 170.
3. See Irmeli Kasvinen, *Salainen muuttoliike Lapin alueelta Neuvostoliittoon vuosina 1929-1935*. (Secret emigration from Lapland to Soviet Union in the years 1929-1935). MA Thesis in Finnish-History, Univ. of Tampere 1981 and Matti Lackman, *Oliko Neuvosto-Karjala 1930-luvun El Dorado?* - *Suomalaisten siirtolaisten kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä*. (Was Soveit-Karelien the El Dorado of Depression of the 1930's? - Some Experiences and Views of Finnish emigrants) - in the book *Historian - A Prophet watching backwards*. A jubileum book dedicated to Mauno Jokipii. *Studia Historica Jyväskyläensis* 30. Saarijärvi 1984, p. 215-242.
4. The Archives of the General Consulate in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) is kept in the State Archives in Helsinki. The Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been scattered both into the State Archives and into the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
5. See J. Tomaszewski, *Z dziejoi Polesia 1921-1939*. *Zary s stosunkow spoleczno-ekonomicznych*. Warszawa 1963, especially p. 138-139; J. Lewandowski, *Materiały MSWOJ o polityce narodowosciowej wojska w latach trudziestych*. - *Zeszyty Naukowe WAP. Seria Historyczne* 8/29/1963, p. 89; and Alexander Gieysztor et al., *History of Poland*. Warszawa 1968, p. 662, 698, 705.
6. Reino Kero, *Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War*. - *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis, Ser. B. Part 130*. Vammala 1974, Table 12, p. 91-92.
7. Kasvinen 1981, table 1, p. 3. The numbers of the departures are based on the records of the Register Authorities.