

The indigenous Sámi people of Norway and their linguistic struggle



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Introduction

The Sámi are the oldest indigenous peoples inhabiting the Scandinavian Peninsula, having lived there since approximately 8000 BCE when early Sámi practiced reindeer herding, fishing, and hunting. Their nomadic culture and geographic isolation left them largely untouched by the rest of Europe for centuries. In the Middle Ages, Norwegian settlers moved into Sámi lands, pushing them to the northwest. This migration escalated in the 18th century, as missionaries sought to convert the Sámi to Christianity. From the mid-19th century through the end of World War II, a wave of nationalism and social Darwinism took hold in Norway. Through Norwegianization, the Norwegian government tried to integrate the Sámi by suppressing their culture and language until a Sámi linguistic and cultural revival in the late 20th century.

I. Official Norwegian Assimilation Policy

From the mid-1800s until World War II, the Sámi were forced to assimilate into many aspects of Norwegian culture, including their religion and education system. Initially, missionaries wished to educate the Sámi in an attempt to convert them to Christianity from their original shaman-like belief. However, with the influx of settlers and the Norwegian desire to form a cohesive nation-state, education began to center on the imposition of ideals and language. Sámi boarding schools became the vehicle through which Norwegian language use was imposed. A 1773 decree allowed only Dano-Norwegian as a medium of instruction, until it was reversed in 1830 with new legislation allowing the use of Sámi in textbooks. Although an 1879 law allowed instruction in Sámi, it was ineffective, and by 1880 Norwegian was used for all subjects, excepting religious instruction. By 1936, the use of Sámi in schools was officially banned. Without any instruction in their native language (from 1898-1959), Sámi children were forced to learn Norwegian as a first language, effectively decimating the language and culture of the Sámi people.

II. 1902 Land Sales Act

Norwegianization affected more than just the educational system. The 1902 Land Sales Act restricted land ownership to those who could read and write Norwegian. This forced many Sámi families to give up their land, unless they assimilated into Norwegian society. They were forced to adopt Norwegian names, to speak Norwegian in both public and private spheres, and could no longer conduct business in Sámi. Official documents originally written in Sámi had to be accompanied by a Norwegian translation, or be rewritten solely in Norwegian. Sámi place names that were replaced with Norwegian names on all signage. Furthermore, the Sámi's previous form of government, "siidas", was made subject to Norwegian rule. Protest against these measures was ineffective; refusing to learn Norwegian would displace families from their ancestral lands and lower their socio-economic status. They would be unable to work or take part in society or politics, while also being under-educated.

III. Return of the Sámi

After World War II, concern for minority rights swept Europe. This was reflected in UN declarations, first in 1948 and later in 1966, which instituted new policies protecting minority civil and political rights. Norway responded to this by reversing anti-Sámi laws banning the use of Sámi in education. Starting in 1948, some textbooks were printed in both Norwegian and Sámi, as many programs began to focus on bilingualism. With the establishment of accessible education and an international concern for indigenous minorities, the Nordic Sámi Council was formed in 1953. This rise in activism and political voice allowed Sámi to return to the public sphere.

IV. Alta Dam Sámi Protests

The late 1970s saw a controversy emerge over a hydroelectric plant project on the Alta River in northern Norway, which would flood the Sámi village of Måse and disrupt reindeer migration and salmon fishing. By 1978, a People's Action Group was created to oppose the project. In 1979, seven Sámi activists began a hunger strike outside the Norwegian parliament while activists conducted a sit-in at the construction site, preventing progress on the project. The government reacted swiftly, and considered the use of military force to support police efforts to stop the protestors. The prime minister attempted to prevent the issue from escalating by having the parliament review the situation, however construction continued. When construction resumed in 1981, police forcibly removed over 1,000 protestors, marking the first time since World War II that anti-rioting laws were used to arrest Norwegians. Sámi organizations retaliated by refusing to cooperate with the Norwegian government. Opposition ended in 1982, when Norway's Supreme Court upheld plans for a smaller project that would displace fewer Sámi and limit environmental impacts. Though activists failed to stop construction entirely, the Sámi were shown as an important ethnic group in Norway that belonged on the national agenda, with their loss here translating to longer-term gains.

IV. Institution of Sámi Political Power

Protests at the Alta Dam gave the Sámi an opportunity to unite under a shared ethnic and linguistic background. This newfound mobilization of the Sámi led to the institution of a Norwegian Sámi Parliament, created by the Sámi Act in June 1987. In October 1989, the Sámi Parliament held its first session, giving



Norwegian Sámi an official role in government and legitimizing their language in the public sphere. The act allowed the parliament to decide which issues it would consider, while in elections both Sámi and national political parties had the right to compete.

V. The Sámi Today

In recent years, the Sámi have made great strides in achieving relative political and linguistic autonomy in their traditional homeland. The Alta Dam protests tied Sámi interests to those of environmentalists and ethnic Norwegians living in Sámi lands, increasing their visibility and connection to mainstream Norwegian society. However, passive discrimination continues, and was the highlighted in a social media campaign (#everdayracismtowardSami) which focused on Sámi experience with racial slurs, hostile comments on their traditional clothing and occupations, and insensitive comments made by various politicians, showing that while political institutions such as the Sámi Parliament are important, but Norwegian attitudes to Sámi can improve.



VII. Conclusion

Today, the Norwegian Sámi benefit from partial autonomy under their own parliament, a Sámi political party, and decades of activism, especially relating to environmental issues in their homeland. They have made great strides towards full equality in recent decades, but progress is still needed. While anti-Sámi restrictions are no longer commonplace in Norwegian society and politics at an institutional level, linguistic and ethnic discrimination remains an issue. Sámi language is now permitted in schools, government bodies, and legal affairs, but other acts of individual discrimination persist, especially those targeting traditional Sámi clothing and occupations. This said, Norwegian Sámi are better off than those in Russia and Sweden, who have less institutionalized political power and autonomy.

Further Use of Case Study

This case study has been incorporated into the *Encyclopedia of Global Ethnolinguistic Conflict* project under Professors Stanley Dubinsky and Michael Gavin, alongside many other case studies surveying linguistically-based conflicts around the world. This case will appear on the *Encyclopedia* website, which categorizes ethnic conflicts by various factors including region, duration, and contributing factors. In this way, the present study will be easily accessible to university students, academics, and members of the general public, and will serve as a part of a wider project to increase public awareness and understanding of the complex ethnic and linguistic basis of similar conflicts.