

# SWEDISH POLITICAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS BALTIC INDEPENDENCE IN THE SHORT TWENTIETH CENTURY

Mart Kuldkepp

---

## ABSTRACT

This article considers the history of Swedish attitudes towards Baltic independence during the short twentieth century (1914–91), focusing primarily on the years when Baltic independence was gained (1918–20) and regained (1989–91). The former was characterized by Swedish skepticism towards the ability of the Baltic states to retain their independence long-term, considering the inevitable revival of Russian power. Sweden became one of the very few Western countries to officially recognize the incorporation of the Baltic states in the Soviet Union in the Second World War. During the Cold War, Sweden gained a reputation for its policy of activist internationalism and support for democratization in the Third World, but for security-related reasons it ignored breaches of human rights and deficit of democracy in its immediate neighborhood, the Soviet Union and the Baltic republics. However, in 1989–91 the unprecedented decline in Soviet influence, the value-based approach in international relations, feelings of guilt over previous pragmatism, and changes in domestic politics encouraged Sweden to support Baltic independence, and to take on the role of an active manager of the Baltic post-soviet transition.

*Keywords:* Baltic independence, Sweden, political history

In the decades following World War II, Sweden played an ambivalent and – at least to a Baltic observer – confusing role in international politics. Its foreign policy was characterized by something of a moralistic stance, exemplified by the famously strict Swedish military nonalignment policy, value entrepreneurship in areas such as democratization, environmentalism

---

This article is published as a part of the project “Estonia, the Baltic states and the collapse of the Soviet Union: new perspectives on the end of the Cold War” (PUT683). The author wishes to thank Carl Marklund for his very helpful comments during the writing process.

and gender equality,<sup>1</sup> and promotion of international development assistance and conflict mediation under the aegis of “solidarity”.<sup>2</sup> One might assume that the same principles of activist internationalism would have extended to Sweden’s immediate geographical vicinity in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea region. In this narrower context, however, Swedish policy can just as justly be criticized for its lack of initiative, overtly cautious attitudes towards political developments threatening the *status quo*, and even spinelessness in reaction to great power demands. Perhaps the readiest examples can be found in the ways that Swedish governments accommodated various Soviet requests during the Cold War, and their often dismissive attitude towards independence movements in what are now again the three Baltic states.

This ambivalent nature of Swedish policy can most intuitively be explained as something determined by the fundamentally unequal relationship between a world superpower, the Soviet Union, and a small neutral state, Sweden. Whilst freer to act proactively and spread its soft power in more distant parts of the world, it is easy to see why Sweden’s immediate security needs in the Baltic Sea area would have made its local foreign policy passive and noncommittal – either as a result of the overwhelming military danger projected by the USSR, of self-inflicted cautiousness, or a combination of both. It is clear, however, that such two-faced policy configuration of global activism and local passivism was also acceptable to the two world superpowers, the US and the USSR, who could make use of the neutrals as convenient actors-in-between or spaces of negotiation when such neutral ground was needed.

At the same time, while avoiding infringement on Soviet interests, Sweden also retained a capability for steps that could go against this general policy. Over the course of the end of World War II and the Cold War, Sweden accepted refugees from the Baltic states, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and vocally criticized the Soviet/Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. For much of this period, it also maintained a clandestine security cooperation with NATO in complete contradiction

---

<sup>1</sup> Christine Ingebritsen, “Norm entrepreneurs. Scandinavia’s role in world politics”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 37:1 (2002), 11–23.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Agius, *The social construction of Swedish neutrality: challenges to Swedish identity and sovereignty* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 107–116; Lars Trädgårdh, “Sweden and the EU: welfare state nationalism and the spectre of Europe”, *European integration and national identity: the challenge of the Nordic states*, ed. by Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 130–181.

to its stated official policy.<sup>3</sup> Most significantly for the purposes of this article, when a window of opportunity appeared at the end of the Cold War, Sweden was among the earliest Western states to adopt a form of “duck policy”<sup>4</sup> vis-à-vis the emerging Baltic states: prepared to support the cause of their independence with means not always entirely open or in the best interests of Swedish-Soviet friendship.

This article has relatively little to say about the Cold War itself. In the post-World War II decades’ Swedish politics, there was likely no serious attention paid to the possibility that the independent Baltic states might one day be restored. These decades were, however, preceded by the interwar era and followed by the *détente* of the late Cold War and post-Cold War era, when the issue of Baltic independence became too pressing for Sweden to ignore. Therefore, I think it would be a useful exercise to consider the so-called short twentieth century (1914–91)<sup>5</sup> in Swedish-Baltic relations by focusing primarily on these two pivotal periods: the unexpected appearance of the three new states in the final stage and aftermath of World War I, and their equally unexpected re-appearance in 1989–91. As the starting and the end point of Swedish skepticism towards Baltic independence, they frame, at least from a Baltic perspective, a certain era in Swedish foreign political attitudes and understanding them should therefore make a contribution towards understanding twentieth-century Swedish foreign policy in general.

It hardly needs to be emphasized that, for various reasons, the following examination can only be very preliminary. Nevertheless, I hope to be able to demonstrate that the Swedish skepticism was initially anchored in generally negative attitudes about “the East” as underdeveloped and dangerous, but more importantly in the assumed “eternal” character of Russia and its security/geopolitical interests.<sup>6</sup> These assumptions fed into a long-term tradition in Swedish politics which associated “activism” in the east with irresponsible and “adventurous” foreign policy.

Significant changes in Swedish attitudes first took place in the final stage and the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when a convergence

<sup>3</sup> About the secret Swedish-NATO cooperation, see Mikael Holmström, *Den dolda alliansen: Sveriges hemliga NATO-förbindelser* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> As described by Lars Fredén: “smooth and unruffled on the surface, but paddling like hell underneath”. See Lars Fredén, *Förvandlingar. Baltikums frigörelse och svensk diplomati 1989–1991* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2004), 193.

<sup>5</sup> A term proposed by Iván Berend and Eric Hobsbawm. See Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of extremes: the short twentieth century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> This also hampered interwar-era Swedish cooperation with Finland and Poland.

between domestic and international factors created a uniquely favorable policy environment facilitating Swedish support for the Baltic liberation movements and then the newly independent Baltic states. Thereby, a much more optimistic period was initiated in Swedish-Baltic relations, paving the way for ever-tighter economic and political integration in the decades that have followed.

### *Conceptual and explanatory issues*

In order to understand the nature and significance of this change in Swedish policy, several explanatory contexts must be taken into account. It is not sufficient to simply point out the “geopolitical facts” – i. e. Sweden’s closeness to Russia, and then to the USSR (and then to Russia again) – as the universal determinant of Swedish policy. A nuanced analysis must allow for innovation as well as for continuities, and it needs to place Swedish policy in the context of its domestic factors including, for example, the resilience of the Swedish neutrality doctrine and the historically unfavorable connotations attached to “activism” in the Baltic. Last but not least, even geopolitical facts are subject to changing interpretations, no matter how “eternal” they might appear on the first sight.

Furthermore, there are conceptual issues to discuss. Assuming that the underlying Swedish attitude at all times was cautiousness in Baltic matters, it could be argued that the increasingly active support for Baltic independence in the period 1989–91 was just as much a product of this cautiousness, as had been the passivism of the interwar era. In this view, what actually changed was the perception of which policy cause would be most “cautious”, reflecting the fact that the international situation and Sweden’s circumstances in the interwar period made “the course of least resistance” different from the one in 1989–91.<sup>7</sup>

While the above is certainly true on some level of generalization, I would argue there is still room for a more basic-level policy developmental perspective. For Swedish political elites, it was unprecedented to take on the view that Baltic independence was something sustainable in principle, as well as desirable enough for Sweden to justify (or perhaps also to provide an excuse for?) giving up its traditional policy of nonalignment in the Baltic region. It is also clear that both in spirit and actual significance, the steps that Sweden took to help and encourage Baltic independence movements in this period went beyond the bare minimum it had done for the independent

<sup>7</sup> Carl Marklund, personal communication 31 August 2016.

Baltic states during their first emergence in 1918–20 – even if back then it had had potentially freer hands when threatened only by a very young and weak Soviet Russia, rather than the declining world superpower USSR.

Of course, the point about “freer hands” must also be qualified. For example, it seems that there was some potential for Swedish military intervention in the Russian successor states in 1918–19, exemplified by its officially sanctioned Åland adventure in early 1918,<sup>8</sup> but also by the unofficial recruitment of Swedish volunteers into the Finnish Civil War and the Estonian War of Independence.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if activism in Baltic matters is to be defined as intervention, there was certainly more of it in the late World War I and early interwar period. However, it is important to point out that this early activism did not necessarily imply supporting Baltic independence. From Swedish perspective, the purpose of the unofficial intervention plans in the Baltics in 1918–19 was to hinder the spread of Bolshevism, not to prop up the national democratic governments – if, indeed, there was no intention to overthrow them.<sup>10</sup>

At the end stage of the Cold War, any military intervention was probably completely out of the question. On the other hand, Sweden could be much more confident in its soft power appeal due to the obvious Soviet failures and Sweden’s own remarkable successes over the post-World War II decades, as well as the fact that unlike in 1918–19, Swedish political elites had no reason to feel threatened by their domestic Soviet sympathizers.<sup>11</sup> Even more significantly, the domestic and international situation that Sweden found itself in was such that it encouraged novel initiatives putting this soft power into new uses, revamping long-held political convictions in the process. As will be argued below, it was this position of relative soft power strength, combined with a more general need for policy innovation, that – after some initial hesitation – facilitated Sweden’s strong stance of support for Baltic independence and Baltic-Nordic cooperation, something that had never been the case in the interwar era.

Another important context to be taken into account are the right-left fluctuations in Swedish politics. There was, and in some ways still is, a

<sup>8</sup> See e. g. Herbert Tingsten, *Svensk utrikesdebatt mellan världskrigen* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1964), 89–149.

<sup>9</sup> See Mart Kuldkepp, “Eesti Vabadussõja vabatahtlike värbamine Rootsis”, *Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi Aastaraamat 2013* (Tartu, 2013), 191–209.

<sup>10</sup> See Mart Kuldkepp, “Kaks majorit kahel pool Läänemerd: väljaõeldu ja väljamõeldu Carl Axel Mothanderi romaanis “President””, *Akadeemia*, 2 (2014), 251–257.

<sup>11</sup> About the revolution fears in Sweden in 1917–18, see Carl Göran Andræ, *Revolt eller reform. Sverige inför revolutionerna i Europa 1917–1918* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1998).

long-standing foreign policy tension between the left wing (mainly social democrats, but also the liberals) and the right wing (above all the conservatives). The left-wing politicians have typically seen the international system (League of Nations and then the United Nations) as the firmest security arrangement available for Sweden, preferring it to more limited regional alliances or commitments.<sup>12</sup> This has been in contrast to typical conservatives, who have tended to conceive of a Swedish “special mission” in its immediate geographical vicinity – often, but not always based upon historical precedent<sup>13</sup> – while considering international commitments more secondary or even against Swedish interests.<sup>14</sup> In a sharp way, this is still evidenced in a Swedish right-wing sense of “Baltic commitment” (and shame/anger regarding Cold War passivity towards the USSR) in contrast to the Swedish left-wing feelings of “Third World solidarity” (and shame/anger regarding Cold War complacency towards the US). These sentiments have been mutually constitutive and are frequently played out against one another.

Therefore, Sweden’s proclivity for regionally limited commitments has been closely linked to the domestic political situation, and the fortunes of respective parties. The extremely long reign of the social democrats in the Cold War era certainly played a role in the absence of the Baltics in Swedish political discourse, as they were downplayed in preference for a broader internationalist approach. Since the Baltic region remained earmarked as a conservative concern, it is therefore only natural that the new right-wing cabinet of Carl Bildt from autumn 1991 onwards was instrumental in consolidating and fully legitimizing top-level Swedish support for Baltic independence.

Yet the explanatory power of domestic party politics is limited in this case. No right wing Swedish governments before Carl Bildt’s can be considered to have been true believers in Baltic independence. On the other hand, a strong stance of Swedish support for it made its appearance already

<sup>12</sup> About the internationalist tradition in Swedish foreign policy, see Kjell Goldmann, “The Swedish model of security policy”, *West European Politics*, 14:3 (1991), 122–143.

<sup>13</sup> See Mart Kuldkepp, “Sweden’s historical mission and World War I: a regionalist theory of Swedish activism”, *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 39:1 (2014), 126–145.

<sup>14</sup> About the conservative skepticism towards the League of Nations, see L. Torbjörn Norman, “Ansiktet mot öster: Svensk nationalism mot Nationernas förbund”, *Väst möter öst: Norden och Ryssland genom historien*, ed. by Max Engman (Stockholm: Carlsson, 1996) and L. Torbjörn Norman, “A foreign policy other than the old neutrality: Aspects of Swedish foreign policy after the First World War”, *The Baltic in international relations between the two World Wars*, ed. by John Hiden and Aleksander Loit (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic Studies, 1988), 236–238.

in the final years of Ingvar Carlsson's first government, a social democratic one. There is thus a need to also take into account other explanatory factors, likely to be found in international developments and the changing expectations connected to them.

### *Sweden, Russia and activism in the Baltic*

Beyond the differences between main Swedish political parties, all of them have for a long time subscribed to a view of Russia being the main geopolitical threat to Sweden.<sup>15</sup> This basic assumption has had a decisive importance for the development of Swedish political imagination, and thereby naturally also the way that the Baltic states have fit into it. In fact, Swedish attitudes towards the emergence of Baltic independence can justifiably be seen as responses to a major challenge that the Baltic states' existence posed to the basic essence of the Swedish security policy: its avoidance of conflict with Russia.

Ultimately, this principal reluctance to anger Russia can be followed back to Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte's so-called policy of 1812, which aimed to quell any further anti-Russian revanchism in Sweden following the loss of Finland to Russia in 1809. The former Napoleonic marshal Bernadotte, who in the aftermath of this national catastrophe was elected as the heir-presumptive of Sweden in 1810 and crowned the King of Sweden (as Carl XIV Johan) in 1818, was successful in re-orientating Swedish expansionism towards Norway, which, following a short war in 1814, was with Russian blessings converted into a Swedish protectorate for the next 90 years.<sup>16</sup> Further tensions with Russia were thereby largely, if not entirely avoided, cementing a security configuration which was suitable for both states. In hindsight, it could be argued that it was from that point onwards, after Sweden had turned its back to the Baltic Sea and further conflict with the hereditary enemy Russia, that Sweden shed the warlike reputation which had been following it since the sixteenth century, and became the state

<sup>15</sup> See e. g. Gunnar Åselius, "The "Russian menace" to Sweden", *The belief system of a small power security elite in the age of imperialism* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1994). This idea of "Russian menace" has to a degree been counterbalanced by an alternative image of Russia as a land of opportunity for Swedish manufacturing and commerce. See Carl Marklund, "A Swedish Drang nach Osten? Baltic-Nordic pendulum swings and Swedish conservative geopolitics", *Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 3 (2015), 223–248.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Munch-Petersen, "The policy of 1812: Swedish foreign policy from the Congress of Vienna to the outbreak of the Crimean War", *Northern Studies*, 31 (1996), 37–56.

widely admired today: one that has stayed out of war already for more than 200 years.

The long period of successful neutrality in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries created a strong tradition in Swedish politics which associated peace and prosperity with neutrality, and neutrality with the appeasement of Russia. With dogged determination, Sweden held onto this policy more or less until 1995 when it joined the EU. Active foreign policy in the Baltic, or activism, as it was known as in Sweden, was conversely associated with loss of territory and political misfortune, as historical lessons from the Great Northern War onwards appeared to demonstrate.

The designation of activism is rather telling, since the appeasement of Russia in Swedish policymaking was manifested not so much in any particular concessions to Russian interests, but in a general passiveness in pursuing any lines of policy that could or would have led to a conflict with Russia. In the post-1809 and pre-1917 times, this was most prominently exemplified by the general Swedish refusal to pursue a revanchist line in the Finnish question. This refusal was not, of course, entirely unchallenged and there always remained a revisionist undercurrent in Swedish public opinion which continued to see Russia as a threat to be eliminated by active means. Due to the rise of anti-Russian and pro-Finnish opinion, especially among the Scandinavist liberals, Sweden came close to participating in the Crimean War against Russia in the 1850s. The 1855 November Treaty, in which Sweden pledged to not to cede any northern territory to Russia, in exchange for allied help in case of a Russian invasion, is usually taken to signify the end of the original policy of 1812.<sup>17</sup>

During the First World War, activist anti-Russian sentiment was again gaining prominence, leading to proposals of Swedish alliance with Germany and a joint campaign in Finland against St. Petersburg. The activists regarded Swedish neutrality policy as shameful and dangerous in this era of great struggles, and saw in joint Swedish-German re-conquest of Finland a chance of reestablishing Sweden as a regional economic and military great power presiding over a federation of Baltic Sea states. The latter might also have included the Baltic German-dominated Baltic provinces, but it is important to note that Swedish activists were hardly supporters of Estonian or Latvian independence. In activist propaganda, it was *Svärdriiddarordens Baltien* – the Balticum of the Teutonic Knights – that they envisioned as

---

<sup>17</sup> Ole Elgström, *Images and strategies for autonomy: explaining Swedish security policy strategies in the 19th century* (Springer, 2000), 93, 57.



the new state to be separated from Russia.<sup>18</sup> They certainly did not have in mind a region of small nation states fragmented along ethnic lines.

The activists were a cross-party group of mainly young nationalist conservatives and German-friendly social democrats, but also included some General Staff officers and several high-standing members of established right-wing political elites. However, activism never became anything approaching a mass movement, and found only very limited support in the parliament and government.<sup>19</sup> The activist plans furthermore naturally hinged on German victory, which was not forthcoming. After the war, it thus appeared that Sweden had avoided a major danger by not giving in to their propaganda, and that the correctness of the neutrality policy had been reaffirmed. A similar episode occurred during World War II, when proposals were made in 1941 by the supreme commander of Swedish defense forces, Olof Thörnell, to send Swedish expeditionary forces over to Finland to fight against the Soviet Union (and thereby, effectively, side with Nazi Germany). These, however were met with even more skepticism and never reached public consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond the German-friendly activists, there were other and more moderate Swedish voices amidst lackluster Swedish attitudes calling for more active engagement with the eastern half of the Baltic Sea region, sometimes also embracing the idea of Baltic independence.<sup>21</sup> However, as will be seen, mainstream political belief in the sustainability of Baltic independence appeared relatively late, even if its desirability in principle (*vis-à-vis* Swedish national interests) was recognized much earlier.

<sup>18</sup> *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning* (Stockholm: AB Nordiska Bokhandeln, 1915), 72.

<sup>19</sup> Kuldkepp, *Sweden's historical mission and World War I*; Mart Kuldkepp, "Hegemony and liberation in World War I: the plans for new Mare Nostrum Balticum", *Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 3 (2015), 249–286.

<sup>20</sup> Klas Åmark, *Att bo granne med ondskan. Sveriges förhållande till nazismen, Nazityskland och Förintelsen*, Utökad och reviderad utgåva (Stockholm: Bonniers, 2011), 64–65.

<sup>21</sup> E. g. the Dagens Nyheter journalist Ejnar Fors Bergström who was instrumental in assisting the first official Estonian foreign representative Jaan Tõnisson in Stockholm in the spring of 1918: Ejnar Fors Bergström, *Minnen från ett händelserikt liv* (Samfundet Sverige-Island, 1983), 18–19.

### *Sweden and the Baltic question in 1918–19*

The Russian October Revolution in the autumn of 1917 and the defeat of Germany a year later meant that by the beginning of the interwar era, Sweden's geopolitical situation was suddenly much better than it had ever been since the Napoleonic Wars. Neither Soviet Russia, caught in a bloody civil war, nor the worn-out and defeated Germany could in any near future assert itself as the new ruler of the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, a row of new nation states had appeared on the other side of the sea – Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – constituting a buffer zone that could shield Sweden from Russian danger.

At the same time, the situation had become more complicated in other ways. The habitual stability in the region, based on a balance between the great powers, had already been upset during the war and now disappeared completely. Instead of long-established empires and monarchies, Sweden now had to face new and shaky nation states, as well as the entirely unprecedented and unpredictable phenomenon of Communist Russia.<sup>22</sup>

The young Baltic states, deeply aware of their own weakness, were putting great hopes on Sweden. Especially for Estonians, the idea of political alignment with Sweden and the rest of Scandinavia represented a possible way towards secure national autonomy and later independence, encouraged by the traditionally Swedish-friendly sentiment in Estonian nationalism.<sup>23</sup> Already in the autumn of 1917, when the Estonian Temporary Diet (*Maapäev*) debated for the first time Estonia's possible separation from Russia and the ways to avoid the threat of German occupation, Jaan Tõnisson proposed that Estonia should “go active” and take the initiative in creating a Nordic-Baltic federation of small states presided over by Sweden, the leading neutral state in the region. In autumn 1918, Estonian diplomats Ants Piip and Karl-Robert Pusta submitted essentially the same plan of federalization and neutralization of the Baltic Sea region to the government of Great Britain, asking it to become the protector of the so-called Baltic League, a future federation of small states. The British, who had already been discussing similar ideas, welcomed this sign of Estonian willingness, and the plan was presented to Sweden.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Wilhelm M. Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum: från mellankrigstid till efterkrigsår: en översikt* (Stockholm: Publica, 1993), 11–12.

<sup>23</sup> See Mart Kuldkepp, “The Scandinavian connection in early Estonian nationalism”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 3:44 (2013), 313–338.

<sup>24</sup> *Jaan Tõnisson Eesti välispoliitika 1917–1920: dokumente ja materjale*, ed. by Heino Arumäe (Tallinn: Jaan Tõnissoni Instituudi kirjastus, 1993), 9–17; Marko Lehti,

In Sweden, however, the conditions for the plan's reception were less than ideal. The traditional right-wing political elites still remained broadly German-friendly, and were very unlikely to make a common cause with the anti-German Baltic nationalists. During the German occupation of the Baltic states in 1918, the Swedish envoy to St. Petersburg Edvard Brändström had, at a meeting with a representative of the Latvian Temporary Government, outright dismissed the idea that neutral Sweden would get involved in Baltic affairs in conflict with the interests of Germany as the occupying power.<sup>25</sup>

By that point, however, the power of the traditional political elites was waning. The end stage of the war and the immediate post-war era were marked by an unprecedented turn to the left in Swedish politics. In 1917, a new liberal-social democratic coalition cabinet of Nils Edén came to power. This first democratically elected government in Swedish history was in 1920 followed by the first fully social democratic cabinet under Hjalmar Branting. Even though this government lasted only for the better part of 1920, and was thereafter replaced by the non-partisan cabinet of Louis De Geer, its existence gave ample evidence of how thorough the changes in the Swedish political landscape had been.

There is little doubt that these new developments also contributed to a relative Swedish passivism in Baltic matters. From the outset of the war, Swedish left wing and liberal elites had been deeply critical of the adventurous ideas of German-friendly activism.<sup>26</sup> Now, when Great Britain seemed to be replacing Germany as the driving force behind Baltic-Nordic federalization, they again sensed that Sweden should remain devoted to the successful neutrality policy, and avoid being tempted by delusions of future grandeur.<sup>27</sup> In particular, it had to resist the temptation of getting

---

“Baltoscandia as a national construction”, *Relations between the Nordic countries and the Baltic nations in the XX century*, ed. by Kalervo Hovi (Turku: University of Turku, 1998), 35; Marko Lehti, *A Baltic League as a construct of the new Europe: envisioning a Baltic region and small state sovereignty in the aftermath of the First World War* (Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Bern, New York, Paris, Wien: Peter Lang, 1999), 140–142; Charles Robert Pusta, “La ligue baltique”, *Revue Baltique*, 3–4 (1918), 68; Kaido Jaanson, “Põhjalvagus või fatamorgaana? Balti-Skandinaavia liidu idee ja koostöö süünd ühest suurest sõjast teiseni”, *Akadeemia*, 9 (1990), 1896.

<sup>25</sup> Andres Küng, *Sverige och Estland: äntligen goda grannar?* (Göteborg: Akademiförlaget, 1991), 39.

<sup>26</sup> See e. g. Johan Östling, *Frisinnets krig: den kulturradikala svenska opinionen under första världskriget* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, Institutionen för idé- och lärdomshistoria, 2002).

<sup>27</sup> Jaanson, “Põhjalvagus või fatamorgaana?”, 1897; Erik Palmstierna, *Orostid II. 1917–1919: politiska dagboksanteckningar* (Stockholm: Tidens Förlag, 1953), 259.

entangled in regional commitments relating to the question of the future of Russia, with Finland being the sole exception. Even in the Finnish case, Swedish engagement was limited. While the Edén government did launch the “humanitarian” Åland expedition in February 1918 – very much against the wishes of the white Vaasa government – it stopped short of officially condoning Swedish participation in the Finnish Civil War, allowing only for the unofficial recruitment of volunteers.<sup>28</sup>

Probably the only member of the Edén cabinet to be broadly in favor of joint Anglo-Swedish hegemony over a neutralized Baltic Sea was the social democratic minister for naval affairs, Erik Palmstierna, who had also been the main instigator behind the Swedish Åland expedition.<sup>29</sup> Already in the autumn of 1918, Palmstierna envisioned a future for Sweden following German defeat in which “Finland, Estonia and Livonia” would become free, Swedish security would be assured due to weak Russia and “a market towards Asia opened through Estonia”.<sup>30</sup> Thereby he came close to the position advocated by the wartime activists;<sup>31</sup> which indicates that there was some possibility for both right and left to identify joint “national” Swedish interests in the Baltic region beyond the fundamental conservative-socialist/liberal opposition. At the same time, this would have meant embracing the idea of Baltic independence – something that the Swedish elites were hardly prepared for.

Indeed, Palmstierna, with his background as a naval officer, was very much of an exception. The dominant socialist/liberal attitude, in addition to being generally skeptical about “adventures” and “militarism”, also reflected the conviction that such regional commitments would imply continuing channeling of resources into the armed forces, which would not only hamper domestic social reform, but could also potentially play into the hands of the conservative opposition. In fact, the government had committed itself to overturning the defense provision of 1914 and reducing military expenditure to peacetime levels already in 1917, long before the end of the war.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See e. g. Torsten Gihl, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia IV: 1914–1919* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1951), 356–370.

<sup>29</sup> Another example among the political elites was the liberal Swedish envoyé to Paris, Albert Ehrensverd. See Norman, “A foreign policy other than the old neutrality”, 244–246.

<sup>30</sup> Palmstierna, *Orostid II*, 200.

<sup>31</sup> See Marklund, “A Swedish Drang nach Osten?”

<sup>32</sup> Hans Wieslander, *I nedrustningens tecken. Intressen och aktiviteter kring försvarsfrågan 1918–1925* (Lund: Gleerups, 1966), 4

The defeat of Germany was therefore not a turning point in Swedish policy towards the Baltic states. Already in June 1918, the question of Baltic independence had been debated in a conference of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian prime and foreign ministers where it was decided that – with the exception of Finland – the Nordic countries would not formally recognize the independence of any Russian successor states and would continue the neutrality policy.<sup>33</sup>

The reasons behind this decision were most clearly formulated by prime minister Nils Edén in a secret speech in February 1919, already after the end of the war. There, Edén argued that it would be very dangerous for Sweden to become too closely involved with the separatist Baltic provinces who had only very slight possibilities of having their independence internationally recognized. But even if it would happen, Edén thought, they would not be able to retain it and would soon become embroiled in a new war with Russia. If Sweden by that point had developed too close ties to the Baltic states, it too would also be drawn into this war. Therefore, Swedish policy would be to not take on any responsibilities toward the Baltics, and not to give in to the temptation to take on a leading position in any federation. At the same time, the new states would be supported and their independence encouraged in ways not binding for Sweden.<sup>34</sup> No-one present during the speech questioned the wisdom of Edén's arguments, which meant that they were effectively accepted by all of the parties in the Swedish parliament.

Indeed, throughout the whole interwar period, Sweden went on to stick to this basic policy of passivism: supporting the Baltic states in noncommittal ways where appropriate, but remaining distrustful of their long-term prospects and therefore eschewing any closer political and military ties to them. Not least due to their close political cooperation with Sweden, Denmark and Norway adopted the same policy.<sup>35</sup>

### *Beyond the fear of Russia*

In essence, Swedish cautiousness about Baltic independence was grounded in a view of “eternal” Russia as a temporarily weakened revisionist power that would soon rise again and reacquire its lost territory. Initially, this

<sup>33</sup> Seppo Zetterberg, “Der Weg zur Anerkennung der Selbständigkeit Estlands und Lettlands durch die skandinavischen Staaten 1918–1921”, *Ostseeprovinzen, Baltische Staaten und das Nationale. Festschrift für Gert von Pistohlkors zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed by Norbert Angermann, Michael Garleff, Wilhelm Lenz (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 417.

<sup>34</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> Zetterberg, “Der Weg zur Anerkennung der Selbständigkeit”, 425.

view was likely combined with the expectation that the Communist rule would not last, and the Russian Empire would reconstitute itself. Later during the interwar era, however, Swedish discourse came to accept the USSR as a successor of the Tsarist state, with similar security interests in the Eastern Baltic and thereby a similar role *vis-à-vis* Sweden.

Combined with this dominant factor, however, there were some other issues that played a subordinate but still significant early role in inhibiting the development of a more pro-Baltic policy in Sweden.

Especially in the Swedish right-wing circles, there existed a fear of Bolshevism in the Baltic states. Outside of the possibility that the Red Army might yet be victorious in the ongoing wars of independence, the lessons of the Finnish Civil War and the radicalization of the Sweden's own lower and working classes during the last two years of the World War I easily roused the suspicions that the popular political movements in the Baltic provinces also represented some kind of Bolshevism or at least quasi-Bolshevism.<sup>36</sup> This assumption played into the hands of the Baltic German lobby that, still very influential in the immediate aftermath of World War I, was happy to play the red card by pointing out, for example, the left-leaning composition of the Estonian Constitutive Assembly, elected in 1919, and the revolutionary nature of Estonian land reform law of 1919, which stripped many of them of their land holdings and could be interpreted to constitute the denunciation of the concept of private property in general.<sup>37</sup>

In Swedish radical left-wing circles, there existed a different assumption: namely that the Baltic political elites were nothing but pawns in the hands of international capitalism, and British imperialism in particular. By a side sympathetic to the Soviet cause, the ongoing wars of independence were seen as the suppression of local working classes by a conspiracy bringing together foreign intervention and the class interests of the local upper and middle classes.<sup>38</sup> Although this made the Swedish left a vocal opponent of military intervention in the Baltic, it is possible that this viewpoint, too, was influenced by Baltic German propaganda which for its own purposes

<sup>36</sup> See, e. g., the memorandum submitted to the Swedish Department of War by General Harald Hjalmarson, the former leader of the Swedish Brigade in the Finnish Civil War: Sveriges Krigsarkiv, Generalstaben, Utrikesavdelningen (H), F V Handlingar rörande Lettland, vol 1, P. M. rörande vissa förhållanden i Estland iakttagna vid en resa dit under tiden 7–19 januari 1919.

<sup>37</sup> See Aleksander Loit, "Baltisaksa rüütelkondade seisukohad ja tegevus Eesti iseseisvumisel 1918–1920", *Tuna*, 4 (2006), 60–61.

<sup>38</sup> Palmstierna, *Orostid II*, 278.

was also keen to point out the close links between the Baltic national movements and the Entente powers, Great Britain in particular.<sup>39</sup>

Swedish elites also had concerns about the rise of nationalism in the former Baltic provinces. Likely anchored in orientalist stereotypes about the lack of culture and political restraint in “the east”,<sup>40</sup> the assumption went that nationalist passions in the new Baltic States, now released after centuries of inhibition, would turn on their former rulers.<sup>41</sup> Such upstart nationalism was seen as immature and dangerous, particularly when directed against those that could be regarded as culturally or racially superior.<sup>42</sup> Even in this case, both the Finnish precedent and the Baltic German lobby likely played a role. In Finland, the conflicts between Finnish- and Swedish-speakers had soon escalated after the achievement of Finnish independence, becoming especially topical in one of the most important Swedish foreign political issues of the day: the question of the future of the Åland islands. The Baltic Germans, for their part, were eager to express their dissatisfaction with the loss of political influence and the land reforms in terms of nationalist Estonians and Latvians suppressing them, motivated by national hatred.<sup>43</sup> The Swedish conservatives, certainly feeling greater commonality with the “civilized” Baltic barons than with the new “uncultured” elites, were furthermore afraid that this “oppression of Germanic peoples” would extend to the small minority group of Estonian Swedes,<sup>44</sup> which was having something of its own “Åland moment” in 1918–19, unsure whether to feel political allegiance to a national Estonian state or not.<sup>45</sup>

A further negative influence was the less than glorious Swedish participation in the Estonian War of Independence. In the autumn of 1918, Estonian and Latvian politicians, supported by Great Britain, unsuccessfully requested

<sup>39</sup> See, e. g., Eduard Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse süünd* (Stockholm: Vaba Eesti, 1964), 125–127.

<sup>40</sup> For more about Swedish orientalism towards the Baltic states in the interwar period, see Sven Nordlund, “Självständiga stater eller östersjöprovinser? Mellankrigstidens svenska bilder av Baltikum”, *Svenska överord: en bok om gränslöshet och begränsningar*, ed. by Raoul Granqvist (Stockholm/Stenhag: Symposion, 1999), 96–98.

<sup>41</sup> See “Östersjöfrågorna och freden. Dagens frågor”, *Svensk Tidskrift*, 1 (1919), 62.

<sup>42</sup> Fredrik Eriksson, “Coping with a new security situation – Swedish military attachés in the Baltic 1919–1939”, *Baltic Security and Defence Review*, 15:2 (2013), 58–59.

<sup>43</sup> See the memorandum submitted by Heinrich von Stryk, a former Land Marshal of Livonia to the Swedish Foreign Minister Johannes Hellner on January 6, 1919: Riksarkivet (Marieberg), UD 1902, 6 A 38, Vol. 287. See also Loit, “Baltisaksa rüütelkondade seisukohad ja tegevus”, 59.

<sup>44</sup> “Östersjöfrågorna och freden”, *Dagens frågor, Svensk Tidskrift*, 1 (1919), 62.

<sup>45</sup> See Kari Alenius, “Unification with Sweden, autonomy, federal self-government? The dilemma of the Swedish minority of Estonia during the period between the World Wars,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 31:3–4 (2006), 308–327.

Swedish military intervention in the Baltic states following the retreat of German regular forces after the end of the war. This was declined by the Swedish government with the argument that Sweden would not act independently of the Entente powers, even though it was also in Swedish interests to keep the Red Army away from the shore of the Baltic Sea.<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, nationalist Baltic politicians tried their hand at recruiting Swedish volunteers to serve alongside Estonian and Latvian servicemen. Recruitment bureaus were set up in Stockholm, but owing to the lack of money and a wave of protests by the socialist movement, they succeeded in attracting only a limited number of volunteers, most of whom had been unable to find work after participating as volunteers on the white side in the Finnish Civil War. Not particularly knowledgeable about or interested in helping the Estonian and Latvian national causes, they were generally motivated by money and mercenary adventurism similarly to the German ex-soldiers who went on to join the *Freikorps* fighting in the Baltics. The few Swedish volunteers who did arrive to Estonia – around 300 out of the originally intended 4000 – quickly made themselves known not for their military prowess, but a series of scandals culminating with a Swedish lieutenant being executed by his own comrades after a war tribunal of questionable lawfulness. This was widely reported in Swedish newspapers, contributing to the image of the Baltic states as a sort of wild east, where nothing but misfortune awaited.<sup>47</sup>

### *Sweden and the Baltic states 1920–89*

During the interwar era, Swedish radical right-wing circles continued to advocate a “return” to more activist Baltic politics, which for them primarily meant closer engagement with Finland.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, social democrats would use the accusation of “activism” against their conservative opponents,<sup>49</sup> thereby branding them as backwards and irresponsible.

<sup>46</sup> Kārlis Kangeris, “Die schwedische Baltikumpolitik 1918–1925: ein Überblick”, *The Baltic in international relations between the two World Wars*, ed. by John Hiden and Aleksander Loit (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic Studies, 1988), 188–189. For a more thorough account, see Seppo Zetterberg, “Die schwedische Regierung und die baltische Krise im Herbst 1918”, *Reval und die baltischen Länder: Festschrift für Hellmuth Weiss zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. by Jürgen von Hehn, Janos Kenez (Marburg an Lahn: Herder-Institut, 1980), 75–89.

<sup>47</sup> For an overview, see Kuldkepp, “Eesti Vabadussõja vabatahtlike värbamine Rootsis”.

<sup>48</sup> See e. g. Marklund, “A Swedish Drang nach Osten?”, 236–240.

<sup>49</sup> See e. g. the conservative response in the Swedish parliament to such attacks made during the election campaign of 1925: *Riksdagens protokoll vid lagtima riksmötet år 1925: Andra kammeren*, Vol. 5, 55 (24.05.1925, nr 39).



Any Swedish support for significantly closer cooperation with the new Baltic states, however, was marginal indeed, with the overwhelming majority of conservatives, social democrats and liberals alike conceiving of the power difference between the small Baltic and Nordic states and Russia as far too wide to make any such ambitions sensible. As Fredrik Eriksson has pointed out, although the bastion of activism in Sweden – the conservative officer corps – tended to consider Finland a “natural and organic” state (even if under Soviet threat), they, too, saw Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as having no future due to the likewise natural geopolitical interests of the USSR.<sup>50</sup>

This Swedish fear of entanglements in the east also delayed the official recognition of Baltic independence. The first memorandum requesting the recognition of Estonian independence had been submitted to the Swedish government already in March 1918, but had only led to the formulation of a joint Scandinavian policy against it, as described above.<sup>51</sup> One reason why the recognition was refused was that the Scandinavian states were unsure whether the future belonged to Estonian and Latvian nationalists, the Baltic barons with their idea of a united Baltic state, or the circles that advocated the Baltic states to remain a part of future democratic Russia.<sup>52</sup> After another two years, however, the question was revisited. Once the Baltic Germans had been politically marginalized, the White Russian restoration movement had ebbed out in 1919, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had made peace with Soviet Russia in 1920, and many other states had already recognized their independence, it made little sense to delay recognition any longer. After all, as the now-foreign minister Erik Palmstierna had explicitly stated in 1920, Sweden had a real interest in the continuing existence of the Baltic states.<sup>53</sup>

This meant that now when the situation was stable enough, the formal recognition of the Baltic states would become an option. Once the Western powers recognized Estonian and Latvian independence on 27 January, Sweden immediately followed suit on 2 February 1921 and the new Swedish government headed by prime minister Louis De Geer and foreign minister Herman Wrangel recognized *de jure* Estonian and Latvian independence (that of Lithuania followed on 26 September), after which formal diplomatic relations could be established.

<sup>50</sup> Eriksson, *Coping with the New Security Situation*, 60.

<sup>51</sup> Zetterberg, “Der Weg zur Anerkennung der Selbständigkeit”, 416.

<sup>52</sup> Kung, *Sverige och Estland*, 40–41.

<sup>53</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 16.

Following the recognition, Swedish-Baltic relations naturally improved, and Swedish cautiousness subsided somewhat, especially after all of the three new states were accepted into the League of Nations on 22 September 1921.<sup>54</sup> However, it did not mean that prejudice about their long-term future was abandoned. This continuing skepticism was best exemplified in the attitudes of the Swedish envoy in the Baltic states, Torsten Undén (1922–28), who admitted that the new international situation which had come into being after the end of the Great War was essentially a welcome and favorable development for Sweden, but that the future of the new Baltic states could nevertheless not to be seen as secure, meaning that Sweden should not take on any direct political or military responsibility for them.<sup>55</sup> He also influenced the views of his brother Östen Undén, the social democratic foreign minister in 1924–26, who in the beginning of his tenure would only admit that as far as Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian independence was concerned, “Sweden of course had a certain, even if limited, interest in it”.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Sweden saw a significant geopolitical threat in the survival of the idea of the Baltic League. After Sweden itself had rejected these plans, they now threatened to compete for the sympathies of Finland, which Sweden wanted to keep as its own buffer state unencumbered by any Baltic connections. A potentially dangerous episode occurred in 1922, when Finland signed a defense treaty together with Estonia, Latvia and Poland that was to put these countries under obligation to cooperate in case of an unprovoked attack on one of them by a third party. The majority in the Finnish parliament, however, voted against the treaty’s ratification and the foreign minister, the main proponent of Finnish-Baltic cooperation Rudolf Holsti was forced to resign. This failure effectively hindered the development of closer political ties between Finland and its southern neighbor states, and was welcomed in Sweden.<sup>57</sup>

The political fluctuations and frequent changes of government in the Baltic states were unfavorably reported in Swedish press, even though Sweden’s own politics in the 1920s were hardly less turbulent. In his 1926 report to the Swedish parliament’s foreign policy commission, foreign minister Undén blamed the political instability in the Baltics “partly on the lack of education and experience of the leaders”, but “mainly on the feeling of

<sup>54</sup> See Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 18–19.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–19.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–20. See also Lehti, *A Baltic League as a construct of the new Europe*, 394–396.

weakness and doubt in their own long-term capability of being able to bear the burdens associated with independence".<sup>58</sup> Although there was certainly some truth in this assessment, it was no less a projection of Sweden's own fears onto its Baltic neighbors.

All the same, the relations between the states continued to warm up until the end of the 1920s. In the Estonian case, this was exemplified by the state elder Jaan Tõnisson's visit to Stockholm in 1928,<sup>59</sup> as well as, most significantly, the visit of the Swedish king Gustav V to Tallinn in 1929.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as Carlgren points out, these high-level contacts were the best evidence yet that – in spite of all the evidence in contrary – Sweden nevertheless had an interest in the Baltic states. All the same, these visits remained ceremonial and did not translate into any real political commitments.<sup>61</sup>

The impossibility of the latter can be illustrated by an episode from autumn 1928, when it was proposed by Föreningen Norden, one of the first organizations of inter-Nordic cooperation (established in 1919), that Estonia and Latvia might be accepted as its members. This relatively benign idea was immediately countered by both security concerns and cultural arguments: such relaxation of Swedish political restraint could bring about increased integration between Finland and the Baltic states, endangering Finland's status as a Scandinavian state and thereby also Swedish security; and it would also undermine inter-Nordic cultural cooperation by strengthening the Finnic component on the expense of the dominant Germanic one. In the end, the Swedish government forced Föreningen Norden to give up any such plans.<sup>62</sup>

By the beginning of the 1930s, the possibility that Finland might choose a Baltic orientation over the Scandinavian one was already almost non-existent, which meant that Sweden lost much of the little interest it had had in the Baltic states.<sup>63</sup> As the international climate in Europe was growing tense, the interwar-era political relations never became as close again as they had been in 1928–29. While social democracy became the dominant political force in Sweden, authoritarian *coups d'état* took place in Estonia

<sup>58</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 22–23.

<sup>59</sup> Hain Rebas, "Läänemere kolmnurgas. Meie suhetest rootslaste ja soomlastega 1918–", *Tulimuld*, 3 (1986), 116.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Lepp, "Rootsi kroonikandjate külaskäigud Eestisse XX sajandi esimesel poolel. Svenska kungliga besök i Estland under 1900-talets förra hälft", *Eesti ja Rootsi. Estland och Sverige*, ed. by Anne-Marie Dahlberg and Toomas Tamla (Tallinn: Huma, 1993), 127–134.

<sup>61</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 26.

<sup>62</sup> Nordlund, "Självständiga stater eller östersjöprovinser?", 105–106.

<sup>63</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 28.

and Latvia in 1934 (in Lithuania, this had happened already in 1926), meaning that different political regimes became a new reason – or a convenient excuse – to avoid closer cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, the isolated Baltic states were increasing their attempts to intensify Baltic-Scandinavian cooperation for similarly security-related reasons. Although there were some Swedish politicians sympathetic to their ambitions, including the Swedish social democratic minister of foreign affairs Rickard Sandler, who visited all three Baltic states 1937, and the former mayor of Stockholm, Carl Lindhagen, who was very vocal in the Swedish parliament expressing his support for the Baltic states, they remained isolated on this issue.<sup>65</sup> The Baltic politicians, too, had to take the hint. On 7 February 1937, the Estonian envoy in Sweden, Heinrich Laretei, wrote to the Estonian minister of foreign affairs that Sweden is at any cost trying to avoid getting involved in military or political conflicts, and wants to retain its neutrality in the purest possible form. Therefore, closer political cooperation between Estonia and Sweden was out of the question “because Estonia, together with the other Baltic states, has a geopolitical position which, according to Sweden, can easily become a field of collision between the West and the East”. Therefore, Laretei suggested that Estonian politicians “for the time being eschew any official declarations concerning our wish to seek political connection to Sweden, and limit themselves in such only to cultural and economic cooperation” and “avoid any kind of initiatives [in Swedish-Estonian relations] that could be interpreted by Sweden as political actions”.<sup>66</sup>

When the Baltic states were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939–40, Sweden made itself notable by its near-total lack of protest over the events, in marked contrast to the reaction to the Soviet attack on Finland in 1939.<sup>67</sup> Second only to Nazi Germany (at the time a Soviet ally), Sweden was the first Western country – and one of the very few to ever do so – to recognize the incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR as lawful. As Wilhelm M. Carlgren points out, this can be seen as the ultimate proof of Swedish conviction that their interwar-era Baltic policy had been the correct one.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Ulf Larsson, *Svensk socialdemokrati och Baltikum under mellankrigstiden* (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic Studies, 1996), 52–65.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 69–73.

<sup>66</sup> Heino Arumäe, “Parimad soovid ja karm reaalsus: Ilmar Tõnissoni välispoliitilistest tõekspidamistest”, *Akadeemia*, 7 (1998), 1553, 1557.

<sup>67</sup> See e. g. Martina Sprague, *Swedish volunteers in the Russo-Finnish Winter War 1939–1940* (Jefferson, North Carolina/London: McFarland & Company, 2000), 49–52.

<sup>68</sup> Carlgren, *Sverige och Baltikum*, 48.

It is therefore easy to see why in the post-World War II decades, Swedish politics remained silent on the question of Baltic independence. As far as Sweden was concerned, the Baltic states did not exist any longer, and there is no indication that anybody among Swedish political elites believed that they would ever exist again. Yet, as already noted in the beginning of this article, Cold War-era Sweden could well take low-level steps that went against its overarching policy goals. Even concerning the Baltic issue, there were some ways that the “noncommittal” Swedish support continued.

This was most evident in the generally benevolent treatment of Baltic refugees. Over the course of the World War II, about 30 000 Estonians and 5 000 Latvians managed to flee to Sweden, most of them during the autumn of 1944 and the winter of 1944–45.<sup>69</sup> This unprecedented wave of non-Nordic migration had a major influence on the development of subsequent Swedish refugee policy, and is widely seen as a success story, as the refugees became for the most part very well integrated into the Swedish society.<sup>70</sup> The success was nevertheless tainted by the episode known as *Baltutlämningen* (“the extradition of Balts”) when Sweden extradited on Soviet demand 167 interned refugees, most of them Latvians, who had fought on German side in the war.<sup>71</sup> The subsequent attempts to justify this antihumanitarian act furthermore tended to paint the extradited refugees as Nazi sympathizers, effectively adding insult to injury.<sup>72</sup>

Given that Sweden had recognized the annexation of the Baltic states as lawful, it is also understandable why it was not entirely tolerant of the inevitable political activities of the Baltic refugees. For example, the Estonian exile government (1953) was not allowed to constitute itself in Sweden and had to do so in Oslo, Norway. After the fact, however, the Estonian exile president, social democrat August Rei was informed by the Swedish foreign ministry that the exile government would be allowed to “exist, but not act in Sweden”, which could nevertheless be viewed as a kind of *de facto* recognition of it.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Maija Runcis, “The collective strategies of Latvian Second World War refugees adapting to Swedish society”, *Baltic biographies at historical crossroads*, ed. by Aili Aarelaid Tart and Li Bennich-Björkman (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 53.

<sup>70</sup> See Mikael Byström, *Utmaningen: den svenska välfärdsstatens möte med flyktingar i andra världskrigets tid* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2012).

<sup>71</sup> See Curl Ekholm, *Balt- och tyskutlämningen 1945–1946: omständigheter kring interneringen i läger i Sverige och utlämningen till Sovjetunionen av f. d. tyska krigsdeltagare* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1984).

<sup>72</sup> Janerik Larsson, “Varför var inte balternas sak vår?”, *Svensk Tidskrift*, 77 (1990), 109.

<sup>73</sup> *Töotan ustavaks jääda... Eesti Vabariigi Valitsus 1940–1992*, ed. by Mart Orav, Enn Nõu (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 2004), 23, 177.

Over the post-war decades, some of the World War II refugees or their descendants continued propaganda for the cause of Baltic independence, facilitating the development of a more pro-Baltic opinion in Sweden. One prominent example was the Estonian journalist and liberal politician Andres K ung who was active for decades informing Swedish public opinion about Baltic issues. Therefore, while official Swedish policy was hardly any cause for Baltic optimism, Sweden by virtue of being a democratic state still provided a safe haven for Baltic refugees.

### *Sweden and the re-emergence of Baltic independence in 1989–91*

In some ways, the change in Sweden’s geopolitical situation at the end of the Cold War was similar to the one that had taken place at the end of World War I. Again, the developments were very favorable at least in principle. The fast weakening and then even quicker collapse of the Soviet Union – by this point not only a regional power, but a world superpower – meant that Sweden’s security situation improved almost immeasurably. And, just as had been the case in 1918–20, a row of small nation states emerged on the other side of the Baltic Sea, further shielding Sweden from Russia, but also forcing it to come to terms with their existence.

This new actualization of the Baltic question must be seen in the context of Sweden’s own relative state of crisis at the end of the Cold War. At the time, the social democratic welfare state, predicated on the stable growth of economy being able to fund the expensive social services, was turning increasingly unfeasible due to globalization and structural changes in world economy. These difficulties, which had made themselves seriously felt already at the end of the 1970s, had by 1990 led to a recession and the worst economy crisis in Sweden since 1929. Social democrats regained power in the early 1980s, following a stint of right-wing governments from 1976 to 1982, but were now forced to operate in a climate of relentless neo-liberal criticism advocating a systemic shift in social policy. In an attempt to keep up with the times, social democrats abandoned several of their traditional policies and came up with “third way” alternatives, some of which further contributed to the political and economic tensions instead of resolving them.<sup>74</sup>

Even more importantly, the so-called Nordic balance, a remarkably resilient Cold War-era security configuration in the Baltic Sea region which

<sup>74</sup> Urban Klas, Klas  mark, "Social rights and social security: the Swedish welfare state, 1900–2000", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 26:3 (2001), 172–173.

for a long time had facilitated Sweden's strict neutrality policy, was turning obsolete by the end of the 1980s. As Soviet influence declined, Finland and Norway (the only NATO member state to border the USSR) were losing their role as the frontier states of capitalism, and Sweden, too, had to rethink its neutrality in a situation where there "no longer was anything to be neutral about".<sup>75</sup> Again, just as at the end of World War I, the seemingly unchangeable reality of confrontation between great powers/super-powers was unexpectedly replaced by a much more pluralistic security architecture.<sup>76</sup>

It is therefore only natural that when the broad right-wing government of Carl Bildt assumed office in September of 1991, it took advantage of these widespread expectations of policy innovation, and made a break with several long-standing traditions in Swedish politics. One consequence of this rethinking of Swedish policy were the harsh retrenchment cuts to the social services in 1992, which, enacted together with social democrats in the best traditions of Swedish consensus politics, certainly changed the direction of Swedish welfare state development even if they did not quite amount to dismantling it.<sup>77</sup> Another consequence was the opening up to Europe and the submission of a Swedish European Union membership application in due course. This also meant that the traditionally strict Swedish neutrality doctrine was replaced by that of non-alliance in peacetime and only possible neutrality in the case of war.<sup>78</sup> Finally, it was at this point that active Swedish support for Baltic independence became firmly established on government level with the prime minister Carl Bildt taking keen interest in Baltic matters.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Erik Ringmar, "Re-imagining Sweden: the rhetorical battle over EU membership", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 23:1–2 (1998), 45.

<sup>76</sup> About the Nordic balance and its disappearance at the end of the Cold War, see David Arter, *Scandinavian politics today* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 379–382.

<sup>77</sup> See Peter Starke, *Radical welfare state retrenchment: a comparative analysis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 170–171.

<sup>78</sup> Hans Mouritzen, "The Nordic model as a foreign policy instrument: its rise and fall", *Journal of Peace Research*, 31:1 (1995), 9–21; Kazimierz Musiał, "Reconstructing Nordic significance in Europe on the threshold of the 21st century", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 34:3 (2009), 287; Bernhard M. Beitelmaier, *Explaining Sweden's Baltic policy: construction of regionalism in northeastern Europe* (München: GRIN Verlag, 2010), 92–93; Christine Ingebritsen, "Redefining national security: Scandinavia comes out of the cold", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 20:3 (1997), 27–44.

<sup>79</sup> See Lars Peter Fredén, *Återkomster. Svensk säkerhetspolitik och de baltiska ländernas första år i självständighet 1991–1994* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2006), 9–23; Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 246–247.

The latter development was in certain ways foreshadowed by the attitudes and activities of Swedish diplomats in the emerging Baltic states. The Swedish diplomat corps had for a long time been characterized by inherent assumed bourgeois identity and a certain sense of bureaucratic legalism, which, invested with socialist fervor during the Cold War, had produced a generation of highly politicized ideological diplomats such as Jean-Christophe Öberg and Pierre Schori.<sup>80</sup> From their perspective, Swedish support for Baltic liberation movements was thus conceived of as simply a matter of justice and democracy, which could now be extended also to include the Baltic peoples, although previously voiced primarily with regard to issues in the Third World. Therefore, as far as Swedish attitudes towards the new Baltic independence were concerned, it was the diplomats like Dag Ahlander and Lars Fredén who were the first important policy innovators. Their memoirs of this period are furthermore nearly the only available source giving a Swedish perspective on these events, making them therefore indispensable in trying to understand the development of Swedish policy.<sup>81</sup>

Paradoxically, these early diplomatic activities were also facilitated by the old Swedish recognition of the Baltic states' incorporation into the USSR. Even though this had a detrimental effect on the reputation of Sweden in the Baltic liberation circles, it also meant that Sweden had somewhat freer hands there than the states which had not recognized the annexation. In September 1989, when Ahlander was appointed the Swedish general consul in Leningrad, he was also tasked with acting as a point of contact with the Baltic independence movements and thus became a very frequent, nearly weekly visitor to the Baltic capitals.<sup>82</sup> When Lars Fredén was appointed as the second consul in October the same year, the work could intensify and more or less permanent "Swedish offices" were established in Tallinn and Riga as "departments" of the general consulate in Leningrad. All this amounted to a Swedish diplomatic presence from very early on, even if the political activities were concealed under the pretense of taking care of consular affairs.<sup>83</sup> Thereby, Baltic hopes of making their voices heard and interests recognized were again closely connected to Sweden, even if the situation was very different from 1918–20.

<sup>80</sup> See Gunnar Åselius, "Revolutionen under kristallkulorna – den svenska utrikesförvaltningen och 1968", *Aktuellt om Historia*, 1 (2016), 113–130.

<sup>81</sup> Of course it is possible that as new sources become available, a somewhat different picture might emerge.

<sup>82</sup> Dag Sebastian Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1992), 11–15, 25–26.

<sup>83</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 39–45.



By experiencing the Baltic liberation movements first-hand, the Swedish diplomats could in due course provide a counterweight to the cautious attitudes in Stockholm. One of the earliest memoranda there on the Baltic question was written by the foreign office's Soviet Union specialist, Hans Olsson on 18 September 1989; shortly after the Baltic Way demonstration on 23 August and ahead of the Swedish minister of environment Brigitta Dahl's visit to all three Baltic republics. Although Olsson's analysis of the political situation in the USSR was astute, he also stated that "for the foreseeable future, full independence [for the Baltic states] seems to be out of the boundaries of what is realistic".<sup>84</sup>

It is of course understandable that just like the politicians of most other Western countries, the Swedish foreign office could not predict how fast the collapse of the Soviet Union would happen. In the meantime, they were inclined to advise the hot-blooded Baltic national separatists to be more cautious. With hopes remaining on perestroika and Gorbachev at least until the *coup d'état* attempt in August 1991, the Swedes were afraid that a violent response could be unleashed if the situation was further escalated, perhaps creating a humanitarian crisis and initiating a new wave of Baltic refugees to Sweden just like in 1944.<sup>85</sup> At the same time, it is also probable that the foreign office, then run by social democrats, also considered how a more activist stance in the near neighborhood might spur demands for further commitments also in the Third World, thus overextending Swedish resources, or alternatively replace the traditionally social democratic solidarity with the Third World with that for the Baltic states, seen, if anything, as a right-wing concern.

Other than a general fear of escalation and Soviet resurgence, Swedish policy was unclear, as Lars Fredén also states in his memoirs.<sup>86</sup> He links this deficiency to some early diplomatic blunders, especially the disastrous visit of the Swedish social democratic minister of foreign affairs Sten Andersson to the Soviet Baltic Republics in the autumn of 1989. Once there, Andersson made a scandalous claim that the Baltic States had never been occupied by the USSR. This statement was of course fully in line with official Swedish Cold War-era policy, but Andersson's articulation of it, which by then had become a source of shame, left the impression that he was,

<sup>84</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 47–49.

<sup>85</sup> See, e. g., the fears expressed in the TV news program *Rapport*, broadcasted in the middle of the coup attempt in Moscow on August 19, 1991. Immigration authorities in the south of Sweden were interviewed concerning Swedish preparations for receiving tens of thousands of Baltic refugees.

<sup>86</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 18.

at best, ignorant, or, at worst, dismissive of Baltic aspirations towards the restatement of their independence.<sup>87</sup> By this point, even Arnold Rüütel – the official head of the Soviet Estonian government – had been quoted in Swedish press as saying that both the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union in 1940 were illegal and therefore not valid.<sup>88</sup>

Although the Swedish government was lagging behind the times, it was also keeping in touch with the Baltic liberation movements and Swedish diplomats soon came to appreciate the Baltic viewpoints.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Sweden’s lack of clear policy was useful in that they could ignore certain larger questions. As Fredén points out, he was lucky to not to have made any declarations comparable to the notorious Chicken Kiev speech of George Bush in the summer of 1991 – not because of his superior understanding, but rather because he was never instructed about how to deal with these issues of principal importance.<sup>90</sup>

Around 1990 the latest, genuine sympathies for the cause of Baltic independence became evident in Swedish political circles and even the society at large. The Baltic liberation movements gathered active support in the Swedish parliament<sup>91</sup> and the series of cross-party “Monday meetings” (*Måndagsrörelsen*) began in March 1990 on Norrmalmstorg in Stockholm, where support for Baltic independence was articulated.<sup>92</sup> Swedish public opinion thus seemed ready to work on its guilty conscience over decades of official indifference, but it also expressed its admiration for the Baltic strategy of nonviolent political change, exemplified in such mass demonstrations as the Baltic Way and the singing revolution.<sup>93</sup> As expected, support for the emerging Baltic states was most notable in right-wing circles, but many social democrats, too, were now willing to overcome their traditional passivism, even if they, as admitted by Brigitta Dahl, never quite felt at home on Norrmalmstorg shoulder to shoulder with the conservatives.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 51–57, 242–243.

<sup>88</sup> Ahlander, *Spelet om Baltikum*, 60.

<sup>89</sup> See examples of Lars Fredén’s insights received from direct communication with Baltic politicians: Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 26, 68, 186.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 259–262.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>93</sup> Krister Wahlbäck, *Baltisk befrielse. Svenska insatser för friheten* (Jarl Hjalmarson Stiftelse, 2012), 19.

<sup>94</sup> *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse: två vittnesseminarier om storpolitik kring Östersjön 1989–1994*, ed. by Thomas Lundén and Torbjörn Nilsson (Stockholm: Samtidshistoriska Institutet, Södertörns Högskola, 2008), 61.

The efforts of Swedish diplomats and politicians were furthermore boosted by the activities of the sizable exile Baltic community in Sweden.<sup>95</sup>

More concrete steps also followed. Already in the beginning of 1990, the representatives of the newly elected Baltic parliaments (Supreme Soviets) received an official invitation to visit Sweden. Similarly, in early September 1990, Baltic representatives were invited to an international conference on the health of the Baltic Sea in Ronneby, Sweden, meant to give them a chance to appear in a large international forum not concerned with the delicate security issues. Lithuanians nevertheless declined the invitation after it was demanded by Moscow that the Baltic representatives participate as members of the larger Soviet delegation.<sup>96</sup> Sweden also allowed the opening of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian information offices in Stockholm in spring 1991. On 3 March, even a polling station for the referendum on Estonia's independence was set up on the premises of Estonia's office after oral consent was obtained from the Swedish foreign ministry.<sup>97</sup>

Yet there was also some continuity with the previous Swedish tradition of avoiding active Baltic politics, motivated by the need to appease Russia. Such viewpoints remained above all connected to left-wing circles, and initially also the cautious social-democratic government which remained in power until autumn 1991. Significantly, Lars Fredén mentions in his memoirs how one of his memorandums in February 1991, arguing that Baltic developments were important for Swedish national security interests, and that Sweden needed to come to terms with the possibility of Baltic independence, was deemed "too activist, which back then was certainly no praise at the Swedish foreign office."<sup>98</sup>

In hindsight, Fredén has pointed out that the Swedish cautiousness in formulating a clear policy – let alone an "activist" policy – must above all be seen as a feature of the immensity of the task at hand. Decisions about how to handle the independence movements in the Baltic states touched upon the most central Swedish security issues that had remained unchallenged since the defense negotiations following the end of World War II.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 245–246.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 143–146.

<sup>97</sup> Aadu Must, "The formation of Estonian diplomacy: the Estonian foreign delegation in Stockholm in 1918 & the Estonian Information Office in Stockholm in 1991", *Independence of the Baltic states: origins, causes, and consequences: a comparison of the crucial years 1918–1919 and 1990–1991*, ed. by Eberhard Demm, Roger Noel and William L. Urban (Chicago: Lithuanian Research and Studies Center, 1996), 8.

<sup>98</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 185.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–244. Back then, the Swedish-initiated talks for the creation of a Nordic defense union, meant to hinder Norwegian and Danish NATO membership, ultimately

At the same time, the tradition that was being eroded was in fact an even older one: the one that had come into being as the policy of 1812 and had played a central role in Swedish thinking in foreign affairs ever since.

In spite of this mental challenge of having to overturn long-held traditions of policymaking, Sweden found the strength to be remarkably proactive and supportive of the Baltic leadership. This was true not least during the January 1991 events in Vilnius and Riga, which became something of a milestone in accelerating the development of a pro-Baltic Swedish policy,<sup>100</sup> and was reported on Swedish television in an alarmist manner, in marked contrast to the previously relatively relaxed reporting on events in the Baltic countries. The same was repeated during the seismic failure of the coup attempt in August 1991, bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the full independence declarations of the Baltic states which had not yet issued one (Lithuania had done so already in 1990).

Unlike its Nordic neighbors Iceland and Denmark, however, Sweden was not among the first foreign countries to recognize the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states. In fact, it was only the twentieth state (on 27 August 1991) to issue a declaration about the “re-establishment” of diplomatic relations, using a formulation which naturally only belonged to those states that had never formally recognized the annexation of the Baltic states. Now, the social democratic Swedish government and the foreign minister Sten Andersson seemed to engage in purposeful political amnesia, making it look like the recognition of the annexation of 1940 had never happened.<sup>101</sup>

### *Beyond the support for independence*

Just like in the aftermath of World War I, the ever-present Swedish concern with Russia – “a finlandisation of our brains”<sup>102</sup> – was exacerbated by a set of more particular fears or problems affecting engagement with the Baltic states. After August 1991, the main Swedish concern was no longer an immediate Soviet backlash, but rather that the Baltic states, having now regained their independence, would not turn into “failed states”, plagued by undemocratic regimes, failure of economy and mass unemployment, or the presence of ex-Soviet troops as a long-term destabilizing factor.<sup>103</sup>

---

failed and resulted in the Nordic balance as they came to be known.

<sup>100</sup> Fredén, *Förvandlingar*, 149–183.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 222–223.

<sup>102</sup> Larsson, “Varför var inte balternas sak vår?”, 109.

<sup>103</sup> Lundén, Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 98.

Even though this too, can be seen as an expression of age-old Swedish cautiousness – Fredén remarks how it was somewhat difficult for the Swedes, himself included, “to grasp that the Soviet Union did not exist anymore”<sup>104</sup> – the new Swedish concern amounted to remarkable policy innovation in other ways. In November 1991, in a major political meeting in the Baltic question, Fredén argued to a compliant audience that whether Sweden understood it or not, it was a “regional great power” with regard to the Baltic states, due to geographic adjacency and shared history. Therefore, the resources at Sweden’s disposal for foreign aid and foreign policy development were to be distributed accordingly.<sup>105</sup>

Thus, unlike in the interwar era, the relative lack of confidence in the future of the Baltic states did not lead to a cold shoulder from Sweden but rather facilitated generous foreign aid to the Baltic states and close Swedish engagement with crucial issues such as the removal of Soviet troops from their Baltic bases and the citizenship question of the Russian-speaking immigrants in Estonia and Latvia. As before, it was recognizably in Sweden’s own security interests that the Baltic states would remain independent and turn into “normal” European states, but this time, Sweden had the self-confidence, means and willingness to actively help them.

The spread of Swedish soft power on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea not only benefited the emerging Baltic states, but it also reassured Sweden that it still had a positive international role to play in these changed circumstances. By taking on the role of managers of Baltic post-soviet transition, Sweden and the other Nordic countries could strengthen their own international reputation,<sup>106</sup> and keep alive the traditions of norm entrepreneurship that in the previous decades had been directed towards the Third World, but now could be directed at the Baltics as well.<sup>107</sup> To conservatives as well as some social democrats this represented a welcome alignment of Swedish ideals with Swedish policies. Of course others saw the Baltic commitment as competing with Third World solidarity, channeling off resources from the aid budget, and effectively diffusing Swedish “active foreign policy” by aligning it with general “Western” policy, thus defanging Swedish neutralism. This might have been the reason that the sums of money earmarked for the Baltic states remained laughably small compared

<sup>104</sup> Fredén, *Återkomst*, 36.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>106</sup> See e. g. Beitelmaier, *Explaining Sweden’s Baltic Policy*, 18.

<sup>107</sup> See Annika Bergman, “Adjacent internationalism: the concept of solidarity and post-Cold War Nordic–Baltic relations”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 41:1 (2006), 73–97.

to the overall Swedish foreign aid budget.<sup>108</sup> But in hindsight, there is nevertheless no reason to regard this initiative anything but a success, and the “normalization” of the Baltic states happened faster than perhaps anyone had dared to believe.<sup>109</sup>

A principal difference in Swedish attitudes made itself felt even in areas where one finds some continuities with earlier Swedish skepticism and paternalism. Unlike in 1918–19, Baltic political elites were no longer suspected of being too “red”, but they were certainly suspected of being too nationalistic, idealistic and maybe too uncultured to participate in “real” politics without some further learning. Yet now Swedish politicians tended to take a more active role in engaging with the Baltic politicians and to point out when they were acting “tactically wrong”, even if they believed in the justness of their cause in principle.<sup>110</sup>

Just as in 1919, there were fears that Baltic nationalism would lead to oppression of minorities. Whereas in 1919, the minority in question had been the tiny Baltic German one, in 1991 it was the much more numerous and mostly working-class Russian minority that in Estonia amounted to up to one third, and in Latvia even up to one half of the population. The legal context was also somewhat different. Whereas in 1919, the issue had been the land reform and its disrespect for private property, in the early 1990s the issue was the citizenship and the alleged disrespect for the civic rights of the minority population after the restoration of independence.<sup>111</sup> The change reflected the development of international norms from the nurturing of minority rights to a focus on human rights. But unlike in 1918–20, Sweden actually did much to communicate the Baltic viewpoint to other international actors.<sup>112</sup>

Just as in interwar era, there was also a pressing military issue. This time, however, the question was not the threat of an outright war with Russia, but rather the issue of when and how completely Russia would draw out its troops from its Baltic military bases. The Swedish response was also very different. Whereas Sweden in 1918–20 had reacted with near-total unwillingness to provide help to the Baltic states, it now became involved in the negotiations, even if not overtly, to encourage Russian withdrawal.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Fredén, *Återkomster*, 139.

<sup>109</sup> Lundén, Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 98, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Fredén, *Återkomster*, 21.

<sup>111</sup> See *ibid.*, 89–106.

<sup>112</sup> See *ibid.*, 108–130; Wahlbäck, *Baltisk befrielse*, 75–81.

<sup>113</sup> Fredén, *Återkomster*, 65–88; Wahlbäck, *Baltisk befrielse*, 31–36, 47–66.

A novel part of the Baltic-Swedish discourse were the environmental questions. Some of the earliest direct contacts between Sweden and the Baltic states, such as the visit of the Swedish minister of environment Brigitta Dahl to all three in the autumn of 1989,<sup>114</sup> were the result of concerns over environmental issues, which in turn drew upon preexisting contacts established already during Cold War era (HELCOM and others) and oceanographic cooperation between the Nordics and the Warsaw Pact countries, one result of which was the Baltic participation in the Ronneby conference mentioned above.<sup>115</sup> Much of the Soviet (and Baltic) public protest during the 1980s had also often forged itself as “environmentalism”. This was doubly beneficial for Baltic-Swedish cooperation since it provided a shared, mutual concern for the Swedes including social democrats and Green Party figures who would otherwise have found it difficult to take on what in Swedish politics had been a traditionally right-wing concern.

### *Conclusions*

The somewhat gradual but nevertheless remarkably fast change in Swedish attitudes towards Baltic independence in 1989–91 was a product of both domestic and international developments. The space for policy change that opened up in Sweden after the social democratic welfare state had become unsustainable in its traditional form, combined with the almost bloodless decline and collapse of Soviet power, created a situation where engagement with the emerging Baltic states was essentially a welcome opportunity for Sweden to reassert in changed circumstances both its previously-held position as an international champion of democratization, as well as to finally adopt its long-missing role as a regional power with a natural interest in supporting its neighboring states. This solution was acceptable to Swedish conservatives as a form of compensation for past Swedish isolationism and willingness to appease the Soviet Union, but it also satisfied at least some social democrats as a way of continuing the post-World War II Swedish traditions of activist internationalism and foreign aid.

As we have seen, previous Swedish skepticism towards the Baltic states during their previous period of independence can most readily be explained with the belief in the “eternal” character of Russia and its territorial and security interests. It was certainly also influenced by negative prejudices

<sup>114</sup> Lundén, Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 20–23.

<sup>115</sup> See e. g. David Isaksson, “Visst blev Liepaja renare!”, *Baltikum-Sverige, möten över havet*, ed. by David Isaksson (Stockholm: Sida, 2004), 62–66.

towards Baltic politicians and their capability to bear the long-term burden of independence. Thereby committed to remain only minimally engaged with the Baltic states, Sweden even came to see them (in particular Estonia) as a competitor for the sympathies of Finland, rather than as possible partners in a broader federation of Baltic Sea states, as the Baltic politicians themselves would have wished to be seen. Ultimately, this cautiousness appeared to have been well-founded, as the Baltic states were indeed swallowed up by the Soviet Union in the matter of a couple of decades. To what extent this could have been avoided by closer cooperation with the Scandinavian states will always remain an open question.

However, beyond all its concerns in this early period, Sweden did recognize the existence of the Baltic states as being in principal Swedish interests and was therefore prepared to support the Baltic states using noncommittal means. While excluding close political and military cooperation, these included their *de facto* and subsequently *de jure* recognition, a plethora of economic and cultural contacts and visits of high-level dignitaries. Some of this – admittedly very low-key – support also carried over to the Cold War era, as evidenced by the generally positive treatment of Baltic refugees.

In the crucial period of 1989–91 when Soviet influence declined to the point of the collapse, and Sweden had already developed an international renown for moralistic foreign policy, it could hardly treat the Baltic question in quite as pragmatic and “valueless” way as it had in the interwar period. Furthermore, Sweden also bore the burden of guilt over having previously done so. It was for those reasons that Swedish policy, which in principle had long recognized Sweden’s interest in the existence of independent Baltic states, was able to shed much of its traditional concern with appeasing Russia, and actively took on the cause of Baltic independence, thereby for the first time also corresponding to the expectations of the Baltic politicians. This change became more marked over time, developing from the unfortunate comments of Sten Andersson to the pro-Baltic politics of the government of Carl Bildt, and for a long time, the Swedish attitudes still largely proceeded from the question of “how much it would be possible to help the Balts without angering Moscow”. Yet from autumn 1991 onwards, this new enthusiasm for Baltic independence that had appeared and taken root as a form of low-level “duck politics”, or “salami tactics” (to use Hans Olsson’s formulation)<sup>116</sup> was successfully made one of the principal Swedish foreign policy issues, laying the ground for the deep political and

<sup>116</sup> The politics of small steps without big words and bombastic rhetoric. See Lundén, Nilsson, *Sverige och Baltikums frigörelse*, 33–34.



economic integration between the Scandinavian and the Baltic states that has come into being in the following decades.

MART KULDKEPP (b. 1983) is Lecturer in Contemporary Scandinavian History, Department of Scandinavian Studies (SELCS)/European Social and Political Studies, University College London.\*

### *KOKKUVÕTE: Rootsi poliitilised hoiakud Balti riikide iseseisvuse suhtes lühikesel 20. sajandil*

Artikkel vaatleb Rootsi suhtumist Balti riikide iseseisvusesse nn lühikesel 20. sajandil (1914–91), keskendudes eeskätt nende iseseisvumis- (1918–20) ja taasiseseisvumisperioodile (1989–91). Esimest ajajärku iseloomustas Rootsi skeptilisus Balti riikide võime suhtes oma iseseisvust pikema aja vältel säilitada. Seda umbusku saab seletada eelkõige veendumusega, et Venemaa nõrgenemine Esimese maailmasõja lõpuks oli ajutine ning see püüab kaotatud Läänemere-äärsed territooriumid (peale Soome) oma “loomulike” territoriaalsete ja strateegiliste huvide tõttu esimesel võimalusel tagasi vallutada. Oma rolli mängisid ka negatiivsed stereotüübid Baltikumi kui omamoodi “metsiku ida” kohta, kus arvati lohkavat natsionalismi ja bolševismi ning poliitikuid kahtlustati kultuurituses ja mõõdutundetuses. Ühtlasi avaldas mõju Rootsis juba enne Esimese maailmasõja lõppu alanud sotsiaaldemokraatliku partei tugevnemine, mis tähendas, et nii Teise maailmasõja eelsel kui ka järgsel ajal eelistas Rootsi säilitada oma neutraliteedipoliitikat ning toetuda pigem laiapõhjalistele rahvusvahelistele organisatsioonidele kui regionaalsetele, võimalike otsuste julgeolekuriskidega seotud liidusuhetele. Kõige selle tõttu otsustas sõdadevahelise aja Rootsi jääda Balti riikide tuleviku osas äärmiselt ettevaatlikule seisukohale ning vältida nende suhtes igasuguste poliitiliste ja sõjaliste kohustuste võtmist. Püüti isegi takistada Balti riikide koostööd Soomega, kuna Rootsi soovis

---

\* Correspondence: Department of Scandinavian Studies, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK. E-mail: m.kuldkepp@ucl.ac.uk

säilitada viimast eraldiseisva puhverriigina. Samal ajal Rootsis siiski mõisteti, et iseseisvate Balti riikide säilimine on põhimõtteliselt Rootsi huvides ning toetati neid erinevate mittesiduvate meetmetega, mille hulka kuulus rahvusvahelise olukorra stabiliseerumise järel ka nende ametlik *de jure* tunnustamine. (Taolisel heasoovlikkusel oli oma järjepidevus ka Balti pagulaste vastuvõtmise ja nende üldjuhul hea kohtlemise näol Teise maailmasõja lõpujärgus ja järel.)

Balti riikide iseseisvuse kaotamine 1939. ja 1940. aasta sündmustes oli Rootsi jaoks seega ootuspärane ning Rootsi oli üks vähestest lääneriikidest, kes nende Nõukogude Liitu inkorporeerimist ametlikult tunnustas.

Teise maailmasõja järgsetel kümnenditel kogus Rootsi rahvusvahelist tuntust aktiivselt moralistliku välispoliitikaga, võttes endale kolmanda maailma riikide demokraatiseerimisprotsesside toetaja ja helde sponsori rolli, jättes aga samal ajal julgeolekukaalutlustel tähelepanuta inimõiguste rikkumised ja demokraatia defitsiidi Nõukogude Liidus, sh selle Balti vabariikides. Aastatel 1989–91, kui Nõukogude mõjuvõim kiirelt vähenes kuni riigi enda kokkuvarisemiseni välja, oli Rootsil aga raske jääda Balti küsimuses sama skeptiliseks ja pragmaatiliseks kui sõdadevahelistel ja külma sõja aastatel. Ühtlasi oli süveneva majanduskriisi tingimustes saanud Rootsi sisepoliitikas aeg küpseks olulisteks muutusteks, mille väljenduseks oli eelkõige 1991. aasta sügisel võimule tulnud Carl Bildti valitsuse uus, varasemast sotsiaaldemokraatliku healuriigi ja range neutraliteedipoliitika mudelist otsustavalt kaugenev poliitika. Balti riikide jaoks tähendas see, et Rootsi võttis endale nende postsotsialistliku ülemineku toetaja ja konsultandi rolli, aidates neid muuhulgas tundlikes küsimustes, nagu vene vähemuse kodakondsusprobleem ja Nõukogude vägede väljaviimine. Selline roll oli aktsepteeritav Rootsi moderaatidele, kuna see andis riigile tagasi selle "loomupärase" rolli regionaalse suurvõimuna Läänemere regioonis ning ühtlasi korvas süütunnet varasemate aastakümnete isolatsioonismi üle. Selline suund oli vastuvõetav ka vähemalt osale sotsiaaldemokraatidest, kes nägid selles võimalust Rootsi varasema aktiivselt moralistliku välispoliitika jätkamiseks.