



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

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Project title: **Activism, civilizing mission and national project. Sweden and the Finnish Civil war 1918 in a transnational perspective**

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project has been to study Sweden's position in the Baltic area during the last stages of World War I and the years to come and what part the Finnish civil war played in defining and polarizing the conflicting lines in Sweden on how to modernize society. The focus of the project has been, in connection with the centenary of the Finnish civil war, to study how the Swedish political sphere during the last stages of World War I dealt with the conflict in its eastern neighbour country and also how this complex and brutal process in Finland influenced the Swedish political arena and society during and after the conflict. In this context the concept of political sphere refers to the right wing activists, the industrial and financial capital and bourgeois political parties in Sweden and their contacts with their German and Finnish counterparts on the one hand and the parties and organizations of the Swedish labour movement, including the trade union movement, and their counterparts in Finland, Germany and Russia on the other hand.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Lately, the picture of Sweden as dominated by a peace-keeping and consensus oriented political tradition has been questioned in historical research. In the wake of this critique a quest has followed for more systematic and concrete studies to analyse the lines of conflict in the Swedish orientation to the surrounding world and the relations of this international lines of conflicts to national conflicts between different social and political forces on the development of Swedish society. In this perspective, the years around the end of World war I stand out as a period of intense conflicts on fundamental social and political questions, the result of which in many ways became decisive for decades to come, in some aspects for the greater part of the twentieth century.

Democracy and reformism

At the end of 1918 Sweden became a liberal democracy with universal suffrage and parliamentarism. This raised more fundamental questions about the limits of liberal democracy and the necessity to cross these limits of what was in the labour movement called the bourgeois, political or "half" democracy. Ultimately, it actualized the question of the relation between democracy and capitalism, to what extent "real" democracy could be developed under capitalism. From 1917 to the beginning of the nineteenth-twenties these questions were high on the agenda of the international labour movement but also discussed among industrial capitalists, the scientific world and circles of undemocratic forces. In recent research, there are attempts to find the roots of neoliberalism in these discussions.

In other words, the revision of the constitution at the end of 1918 did not mark the end of the struggle on democracy and what should be meant by a democratic society. Rather, in the following years liberal democracy was questioned in different ways and from different quarters. On the one hand there were some anti-democratic and authoritarian movements or groups in which some leading figures had been active on the white side in the Finnish civil



war while others had their background in the military and other parts of the state apparatus. In contrast to other parts of Europe these movements or groups never became a direct threat to liberal democracy and the attempts in the following years to develop a broader fascist movement failed.

On the other hand, and more important, in the labour movement the debate on democracy and a democratic society became intense the years after the revision of the constitution and contributed to increasing antagonisms in the movement. The discussion in the Swedish Social democratic Party (SAP) was deeply influenced by the debate in the international social democratic movement. Not the least inspired by the austro-marxists and especially the book *The Road to socialism* by Bruno Bauer, this debate questioned a dominant position in the ideology of the Second International. According to this ideology, socialism could not be put on the political agenda before capitalism had reached a certain “maturity”, a certain level in the development of the productive forces; a position, furthermore, that was a central ground for the repudiation of the Russian and Finnish revolutions. In the debate after the war, this ideological position was more or less turned upside down. Out of a critique of capitalism as ineffective, irrational and unfair it was declared that the time was ripe for putting socialism on the political agenda. This rejection of the determinism of the Second International and putting socialism on the agenda had its outspoken advocates in leading positions in the Swedish party and was also reflected in the party program that was decided at the 1920 party congress.

In one or two years, this reformist strategy for a socialist transformation of society was, not only in Sweden, totally absent from the social democratic movement’s political agenda. There were multiple reasons for that: the difficulties to win the majority in the democratic assemblies, the counteroffensive from the political and economic bourgeoisie, an economic crisis with increasing unemployment but also difficulties in uniting the movement behind this strategy. Accepting this, the Swedish Social Democratic Party could say to have taken steps back to even if not fully accepting the earlier criticized ideology of the Second International. In this new perspective, it was not a question of passively waiting for capitalism being mature for its overthrow but to actively strive for a transformation of society in the frames of capitalism, hopefully even to contribute to the maturing of capitalism. Out of this, a strategy was developed for a democratization of society where politic democracy should be followed by social, in the form of the welfare state, and economic democracy. It was a strategy with profound consequences for the development of Swedish society the coming half-century. In principal terms, this meant a redefinition of the concept of reformism. While reformism in the years immediately following the end of World War I was interpreted as a strategy for a socialist transformation of society, the concept more and more came to stand for social and other changes within the capitalist society.

Against this background, one important result of the project is the questioning of the common reduction of the so called democratic breakthrough to the constitutional changes initiated at the end of 1918. To some extent, this reductionism can be criticized for accepting and taking as its point of departure a specific definition of democracy, that is liberal democracy, missing the conflicts between different views on democracy as well as the wider context in which these conflicts were fought out. Obviously, focusing on this wider context also makes the need for a transnational perspective more apparent. Not only had the dramatic events and social changes in the international surroundings an immediate and deep impact on the conflicts and debates in Sweden, the latter were also to a high degree influenced by transnational discussions and ideas where different social forces, parties and groups in Sweden had their specific international contacts and sources of inspiration. No doubt, a deeper understanding of the wider conflicts in Swedish society around “the democratic breakthrough” at the end of World War I demands a transnational perspective.



Another important result of the project is in demonstrating the possibilities a transnational perspective offers in an attempt to present a deeper understanding of the development of the Swedish labour movement during these years. This can be seen as a contribution to old controversies in historical research, one concerning the question to what extent the movement has a revolutionary past, another if the split of the moment in 1917 could be seen as a result of a conflict between a revolutionary versus a reformist strategy and a third about the degree to which Sweden was facing a revolutionary situation in these years. In a transnational perspective a general answer to these questions must be that they are wrongly posed as well as missing closer definitions of central concepts. In other words, the transnational perspective points to the conclusion that the used concepts, reformist and revolutionary, are not relevant or must be given a more clear and specific definition in an attempt to explain the development of the Swedish labour movement in these years.

A third important result is in demonstrating the ways in which not only the political but also economic bourgeoisie looked upon and attempted to influence the development of society, either through political parties or by politically acting behind the scenes and actively trying to put its mark on the development of the labour market. In the latter case, international contacts were developed in order to organize a transnational network of strike-breakers.

3. The projects contribution to the international research frontline

Democracy

In the last years, there has been a upswing for different kinds of research on democracy, more and more focused on the question in what ways and by which forces democracy today is under threat. The question has got new energy from the rapidly escalating climate crises. The studies in the project can be seen as a contribution to this research and discussion on democracy offering a historical perspective on the questions posed today. In general terms, the studies demonstrate the extent to which democracy always has been a contested concept. In more concrete terms, the studies analyse the struggle between opposing views on democracy but also the threats to democracy in the form of attempts to either limit its space of action or altogether undermining it.

Reformism

The discussion on reformism and reformist strategies can be said to be nearly as old as the labour moment itself, the fundamental and divergent question in research being the possibilities to transform this abstract ideology into a practical political strategy. The project demonstrates on the one hand that Swedish social democracy at that time were not only convinced of the possibilities of reformism but also developed a concrete political strategy for its realisation, on the other hand discusses possible explanations for the failure of this strategy. Furthermore, the studies demonstrate that also reformism was, and is, a contested concept in political practice as well as research. In the latter, divergent but to often not clarified definitions of the concept are problematic. On the other hand, as demonstrated in the studies, a clear and open definition of different forms of reformism opens possibilities for an understanding of the development of the labour movement.



The Bourgeoisie

As one central aspect of the transformation of Swedish society after World War 1, the labour movement came forward as a central social and political force in society. To some extent, the same could be said about industrial and financial capital. This marked a fundamental change of power relations in society. While the old power centre around the court, the traditional bureaucracy and the military began to be marginalized, the relationship between labour movement and economic and political bourgeoisie tended to be the dominant antagonism in society, in democratic assemblies as well as in the labour market and working life. The studies in the project are to be seen as a contribution to research on this process. In that sense, the project is a contribution to the lately growing research interest in the bourgeoisie and its place and role in society. In a national and transnational perspective, the networks of capital and bourgeois political parties are studied as well as the relations between the two groups.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The Swedish society underwent fundamental changes the years around the end of World War 1, a transformation that cannot be captured by a limited focus on a narrow definition of democracy and its breakthrough. As aspects of this wider transformation, the project has actualized three different but interconnected problems. The first concerns the economic bourgeoisie and its view on and attempts to set its mark on the future society, raising questions on its relationships to the political parties, to the trade union movement and to the scientific, academic world. The second problem concerns the trade union movement and its corresponding view on and attempts to influence not only the labour market and working life but also the development of society. No doubt, this is a neglected problem in research not only on the labour movement but also on the transformation of society. Finally, there is the perhaps even more neglected problem of the institutional aspects the state and its apparatus, to what extent and in what ways it was being transformed and to what extent the state, its organization and role in society, was a contested terrain.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The transnational approach in the project combined with network analyses offers a picture of the close contacts different groups in the Swedish political sphere developed to their counterparts in the Baltic Sea Region and eastern Europe. Not only did events and societal developments in this region have fundamental impact on conflicts and antagonisms in Swedish society. No doubt, there was also an intense exchange of ideas in the networks that were established or deepened these years. This goes for all the groups studied, from the right-wing activists to the left in the labour moment. Obviously, most of these networks survived these dramatic years and continued to play its role in the coming decades.

6. The contribution of the research to multidisciplinary knowledge formation

The transnational approach in the project focusing the impact of events and societal changes as well as exchanges of ideas could be said to demand a challenge and transgression of disciplinary borders. As a consequence, the approach has a potential to question central concepts and perspectives in specific disciplines, in this context exemplified by contested definitions of democracy and reformism. Furthermore, in the project the transnational approach has been combined with a focus on a specific historical problem, in this case the



Finnish civil war. This has made it possible to combine the transnational approach with a comparative perspective by initiating studies of not only the impact of this conflict in Finland on Swedish but also Norwegian and Danish society (see below). This could be seen as a contribution to the discussion on the relations between comparative and transnational approaches.

7. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Early on the project developed a cooperation with Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap (AKS), a society for information and studies of the Swedish labour movement, aiming at publishing three anthologies on the history of the Nordic countries the years around the end of World War I with contributions from researchers from the four Nordic countries; as members of the project we were invited to be co-editors. In line with the aim of the project, the second one has its focus on the Finnish civil war analysing the ways the other Nordic countries reacted and related as well as was influenced by the conflict in Finland whereas the third one poses the same questions but in a long-range perspective. In this way it has been possible to combine a transnational approach with a comparative perspective. By this cooperation it has been possible to establish a network of researchers in the field and also different ways to disseminate the result of the project.

Conferences/workshops organized by the project:

- *Svensk samhällsutveckling i det finska inbördeskrigetets skugga*, Södertörns högskola 2017-05-16/17. Presentations and papers; Lars Ekdahl (LE), Anne Hedén (AH). (Financed by CBEES)
- *Norden under 1920-talets första år: arbetarrörelsens vägval, medborgarrätten och hoten mot demokratin*, Södertörns högskola 2020-02-25/26. Presentations and papers: LE, AH

Conferences/workshops: presentations and papers

- Paper presented at the conference organized by ESSHC in Valencia 1916-03-29/04-02 on Swedish activism in Finland; (AH)
- Presentation of the project at the workshop "Politik underifrån" in Malmö 2016-10-19/21; AH
- Presentation of the project at a workshop at Södertörns högskola on research in progress organized by Åbo Academy and The Institute for Contemporary History at Södertörns högskola, 2017-01-13; LE, AH
- Presentation of paper at the conference "Reform and revolution in Europe, 1917-1919: Entangled and Transnational Histories" in Tampere 2017-03-16/18; AH
- Presentation of paper at Svenska historikermötet in Sundsvall 2017-05-10/12; AH
- Presentation of paper at a conference on "The Labour movement in the Nordic countries" in Oslo 2017-11-02; LE
- Presentation of the project at a workshop organized by Åbo Academy in Åbo 2018-04-19/20; LE, AH



- Presentation of paper at the conference organized by ESSHC in Barcelona 2018-04-04; AH
- Presentation of paper at the conference “Towards a New Baltic Sea Region?” in Tallinn 2018-09-6/8, AH
- Presentation of paper at the workshop “200 years of Peace in Sweden” organized by RA and Stockholm University 2020-04-16

Seminars

- Participation in a seminar organized by the Swedish Embassy in Helsinki on the contacts Sweden-Finland in 1917-1921; AH
- Co-organizer and participants in a seminar at the National Labour Archive in Stockholm on Sweden and the Finnish civil war 2018-10-31

Lectures

- Lecture for teachers on the Finnish civil war at Tyresö 2017-05-19; AH
- Lecture at Sjöhistoriska Museet on “The Bourgeoisie and the civil war in Finland” 2017-10-17; AH
- Lecture on “Sweden and the Russian revolutions 1917” at ABF/Stockholm 2017-11-07; LE
- Lecture on “The labour movement and democracy” at ABF/Stockholm 2017-11-07; LE
- Lectures with presentations of the project in connection with a study journey to Finland on the Finnish civil war organised by AKS in cooperation with the project, 2018-5-27- 06-02; LE, AH
- Lectures with presentation of the results of the projects studies at the National Labour Archive in Stockholm 2018-10-30; LE, AH
- Lecture at “Socialistiskt Forum” on Sweden and the Finnish civil war 2018-11-24; AH
- Lecture on “The labour movement and democracy” at Café Marx 2019-02-07; LE
- Lecture, “The labour movement and economic democracy”, at a conference on Marx at ABF/Stockholm 2019-10-26/27; LE

Publications

Monographs

Hedén, A.: *Finlandsaktivismen och blicken mot öster: nätverk, planer och storsvenska drömmar under första världskriget* (Activism for Finland, Looking East: Networks, Plans and Grand Swedish Designs During the First World War), forthcoming



Articles

Lars Ekdahl

- "1917 idag – ett efterord inför framtiden", Bosdotter, K., Ekdahl, et al (red): *Då var det 1917*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2017
- "Mot en reformistisk strategi? Svensk arbetarrörelse och finskt inbördeskrig", Bosdotter, K., Ekdahl, L., Hedén, A., et al (red): *Den röda våren 1918. Finska inbördeskriget i nordisk samhällsutveckling*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2018
- "Humanitär hjälp och internationell solidaritet. Arbetarrörelsens stödinsatser i inbördeskrigets skugga", Bosdotter, K., Ekdahl, L., Hedén, A. et al (red): *Den röda våren 1918. Finska inbördeskriget i nordisk samhällsutveckling*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2018
- "Demokratisk socialism? Svensk arbetarrörelse inför en revolutionär situation", Bosdotter, K., Ekdahl, L., Hedén, A. et al (red): *Början på en ny epok. Arbetarrörelsens vägval i nordisk samhällsutveckling under 1920-talet*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2020 (kommande)
- "Socialism idag eller i morgon? Arbetarrörelsen inför en revolutionär situation", Östberg, K. (red), *Socialismens brytpunkter under 1900-talet*, kommande

Anne Hedén

- "Grand Swedishness, Historical Mission and Modes of Modern Progressive Thought: Swedes in Finland in 1918", Marja Vuorinen, Tuomas Kuronen, Aki-Mauri Huhtinen (eds), *Regime Changes in 20th Century Europe: Reassessed, Anticipated and in the Making*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-on-Tyne 2016.
- "Blicken mot öster. Svenska drömmar om Finland under världskrigets sista år", Andreas Linderöth & Mirja Arnshav (red), *Sverige och första världskriget. Maritima perspektiv* Historiska Media, Lund 2017.
- "Mannerheims egen historieskrivning kastar fortfarande lång skugga", *Historisk Tidskrift* nr 1 2018.
- "Making Sense of the War (Sweden)", 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, <http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>.
- "Samtida mediebilder av finska inbördeskriget 1918–1919. Desinformationen och tolkningsföreträdet", Kjersti Bosdotter, Lars Ekdahl, Anne Hedén & Aapo Roselius (red), i *Den röda våren 1918. Finska inbördeskriget i nordisk samhällsutveckling*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2018.
- "Borgerliga storhetsdrömmar i neutralitetens ramverk. Det svenska stödet till det vita Finland och finansieringen av Svenska Brigaden", Kjersti Bosdotter, Lars Ekdahl, Anne Hedén & Aapo Roselius (red), *Den röda våren 1918. Finska inbördeskriget i nordisk samhällsutveckling*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2018.



- "Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Sweden)", 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, <http://www.1914-1918-online.net/>

- "Elsa Brändström", *Svenskt kvinnobiografiskt lexikon*, Göteborgs universitet, Institutionen för historiska studier 2018, ISBN: 978-91-639-7594-3, www.skbl.se/sv/artikel/ElsaBrandstrom

- "Elsa Brändström", Lisbeth Larsson (red), *Märkvärdiga svenska kvinnor*, Bonniers 2019, Stockholm.

Anne Heden & Lina Sturfelt, "[Den svårfångade freden: Fredsforskning i ett historiskt perspektiv](#)", inledning till *Historisk Tidskrift* 3/2019, temanummer om fred.

- "Bild i perspektiv: Kvinnorna som tog strid för freden gör fortfarande avtryck", *Historisk Tidskrift* 3/2019.

- "Arbetarrörelsens vänner och ovänner. Hoten mot de demokratiska krafterna och reaktionens organisering", Kjersti Bosdotter, Lars Ekdahl, Anne Hedén och Aapo Roselius (red), *Början på en ny epok. Arbetarrörelsens vägval i nordisk samhällsutveckling under 1920-talet*, Arbetarnas Kulturhistoriska Sällskap, Stockholm 2020.