



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

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Project title: *Swedes, emotions, and moral diplomacy in the Great Terror. Foreign Office's rescue operation in the Soviet Union, 1937-38*

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

A) *The diversity of different Swedish groups living in the Soviet-Union.* Earlier researchers have taken for granted that the so called Kiruna-Swedes in the 1930s were the only Swedes living in the Soviet Union, after the Bolshevik Coup in 1917 and the Civil War afterwards. The Kiruna-Swedes arrived from Sweden around 1930, some of them earlier and some a couple of years later. What they had in common was the vision of the Soviet Union as the land of the future, a workers' paradise, although not all of them were organized communists.

However, by using the archive of the Swedish Foreign Ministry, documents from the legation in Moscow and the consulate in Leningrad, a different picture is visible. Different groups could be discovered besides the Kiruna-Swedes, people with different backgrounds and relations to the Soviet authorities, in a way also to the Swedish authorities. Normally they had not moved to the Soviet-Union in what has been called "the Karelian fever", but had been living in the country for a longer period. Some of them belonged to families of Swedish heritage who had been living in Russia for many decades, all the time keeping their Swedish citizenship.

These groups are: Relatives to Swedes that had migrated to Russia during the czarist period; a group of families in Baku who had stayed after the nationalization of the Nobel industries in the 1920s; engineers travelling to the Soviet-Union in the 1920s – more by career reasons than political dreams; and finally Russian-born widows to Swedish men. Former Swedes who had been Russian citizens since long ago and more or less been assimilated in the Russian/Soviet society, probably were invisible in the archives due to that. Many of the Kiruna-Swedes now were Soviet citizens.



Some of the individuals who "returned" to Sweden – they had never visited their "homeland" – knew very little of the country and the language. That was especially the case of widows to Swedes.

B) *The importance of the ethnic dimension.* In the 1920s ethnic and cultural diversities in the Soviet-Union were encouraged. That was especially important for the comprehensive Finnish settlement in Karelia. The Swedes were too few to establish their own settlements with institutions in form of schools, newspapers and cultural arrangements. When Stalin turned the cultural policy in 180 degrees and abolished all forms of separate cultural strivings the Finnish people soon were persecuted, suspected of nationalism and betrayal of the state.

In the Soviet system citizenship mainly was related to ethnicity. That had terrible consequences for ethnic communities situated mainly in the boarder regions: Poles, Germans, Chinese, Koreans and Finns. The "ethnic operations" that started in 1937, nearly unknown for the historians before 2000, attacked different ethnic groups, thought to be traitors and spies. In some cases that seems to have been fatal for Swedish citizens, or former citizens, from the North of Sweden with Finnish as mother tongue. And reverse maybe a rescue for Swedish speaking people from Finland.

On a scale measuring victims for the Stalin terror, Sweden and Finland could be said to represent a terminal point each. Finns were persecuted as belonging to a hostile neighbour, with conflicts between the states in the near history. Swedes nowhere made up separate areas suspected of conspiracies in the extreme suppressive climate that characterized the late 1930s in the Soviet-Union. One exception is the village (Gammalsvenskby) in today's Ukraine. Most of the villager were allowed to move to Sweden in 1929. Although some of them returned the Swedish traditions almost ceased after the 1930s and the War. However, dozens of Swedes perished in the terror, executed, disappeared or sentenced to 10-25 years in the Gulag.

C *The unknown rescue mission of the Swedish diplomats.* Before our project no research had been done on the diplomats' trying to help Swedes threatened by arrest or worse. When desperate Swedes in 1937 contacted the Legation the diplomats had very poor information of the Swedes in the Soviet empire. The Kiruna-Swedes were not interested in



registration in the Legation when arriving to the Soviet-Union. Other groups were better known by the diplomats, but many unknown names appeared in a short time.

One problem was the Swedes who had accepted Soviet citizenship. For many of the Kiruna-Swedes this was a way of showing loyalty, or receiving social benefits, or getting an attractive work. The reasons could be blended, but anyhow – not being a Swedish citizen formally prevented the Swedish diplomats from contacting Soviet authorities in order to get information. Maybe surprisingly, the diplomats yet managed to maintain working relations with their Soviet colleagues, at least before 1937. From then on all questions on former Swedish citizens were rejected.

However, the diplomats managed to help many Swedes to Sweden. In some cases also former Swedes. They had to get permission to leave the country and at the same time abolish the Soviet citizenship. Former Swedish citizens had no problem getting entrance visas to Sweden. Soviet widows were regarded as Swedish citizens, although by Soviet citizens in the Soviet Union. Discussions with Soviet officials were sometimes successful. In that case what remained were helping the Swedes with money to the travel and protecting them from sudden arrests by the NKVD.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

The comparison between Sweden and Finland (B), as totally opposites, contributes clearly to the international research frontline. The same could be said of the different consequences by the ethnic operations.

Regarding the rescue mission (C) there are also interesting differences. The concept of the rule of law seems not to have been guiding other countries. Definitely not Nazi Germany of course, and not Finland, at least not generally. In Britain there are some resemblances to the different views by diplomats in the Embassy/Legation and the more restrictive officials in the Foreign Office/Department of Foreign Affairs in London/Stockholm.

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

The project touches the Baltic Sea Region by discussing the situation for two of the countries in the region, countries that had much in common: Relatively small states sparsely populated, trying to get their policies of neutrality appreciated by the rulers in the



Soviet Union. The Foreign ministers of both Finland and Sweden made official visits to the Soviet Union in 1937, however not simultaneously. Especially the Finnish government was criticized in the Soviet party controlled press, both before and after the visits. In both countries the Social democrats were in power, in alliance with peasant parties. However, no kind of brotherhood existed between the two parts of the worker's movement. Up to just a couple of years earlier the Social democrats were seen as the main enemy of the communists in Comintern, the International Communist organization located in Moscow and totally dominated by the Soviet party.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

Due the changes of the international political situation (Russian assault on Ukraine) working in former Soviet archives were impossible. Covid-19 also prevented working in Swedish archives for almost 1.5 years. However, if such research will be possible in the future is impossible to say.

A theme that we have started to work with is the destiny of the children to the Swedes in prisons, Gulag or executed. In some cases they were sent to orphanages. In the material we have read there are some notions of children. There are also international literature on the subject.

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

List of Publications

Per-reviewed articles

Torbjörn Nilsson, "Nordiska öden under Stalins etniska rensningar", *Festskrift till Öystein Sörensen*, Oslo 2024

Torbjörn Nilsson, "Rescued from Stalin's Terror: The unknown Swedish operation in the 1930s", *Baltic World* 2024. Forthcoming

Torbjörn Nilsson & Andrej Kotljarchuk, "Svenskt och finskt i mörkt sovjetiskt 1930-tal", *Historisk tidskrift för Finland*, 2023, vol. 107:4, 527–550. OA (open access):

<https://journal.fi/htf/article/view/127664>



Andrej Kotljarchuk & Torbjörn Nilsson, “Finland Swedes, Sweden Finns and the Great Terror in Karelia. Issues of Nationality, Citizenship and Diplomatic Assistance” (in Russian), *Nordic and Baltic Studies Review*, 2021, vol. 6, 177-197. OA: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1624796/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Andrej Kotljarchuk “Norden och nordiska minoriteter i den sovjetiska pressen”, *Propaganda – en antologi om påverkan*, red. Oscar Österberg. Stockholm: Forum för levande historia, 2020, 50–76. OA: <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1511793/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Andrej Kotljarchuk, “Understanding Stalin’s terror against ethnic minorities. The National Operations of the NKVD in contemporary academic research”, *The Historical Journal* 5, 2023. ISSN: 0018-246X . Forthcoming.

Debates, open lectures and interviews in media

Föredrag vid Estlandssvenska seminariet vid Uppsala universitet ”Tvångsnormaliseringens teknik och kollektivt motstånd. Svenskbyborna i Stalins Sovjet och Nazi-ockuperade Ukraina”, Institutet för Rysslands- och Eurasienstudier, 22 februari 2023.

Föredrag vid Historiska Föreningen i Uppsala ”Storpolitik i det individuella ödet. Svenskar i Sovjetunionen och den Stora terrorn, 1937–1938”, 12 oktober 2022.

Five most important conferences (organized and papers presented)

Andrej Kotljarchuk & Torbjörn Nilsson, Paper “Rescued from Stalin’s Terror: The unknown Swedish operation in the 1930s”, at the Aleksanteri Conference 2023 “Decolonizing Space in the Global East”, 25-27 October 2023, University of Helsinki.

Andrej Kotljarchuk, ESSHC: European Social Science History Conference 2023. Chair and opponent at the panel M-4 ETH03 “Finns in the Soviet Union, 1917-1964”, 12-13 April 2023, Gothenburg University.

Torbjörn Nilsson & Andrej Kotljarchuk, Paper “Storpolitik i det individuella ödet. Svenskar i den Stora terrorns Sovjet, 1937–1938”, at Nordiska historikermötet 2022. 7-10 August 2022, Gothenburg University.

Torbjörn Nilsson & Andrej Kotljarchuk, Research seminar ”Storpolitik i det individuella ödet. Svenskar i den Stora terrorns Sovjet”, Slaviska institutionen, Stockholms universitet, 1 juni 2022.

Andrej Kotljarchuk, Paper “The Swedish colony in Ukraine and Holodomor: international reaction and strategies of survival” presented at the international research conference “The National Minorities of Ukraine and Holodomor in 1932-1933”, Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Kiev. 14-16 December 2020, online.

Internship within the project:

Fall term 2023, Koert Jansen, MA-student in modern history at Uppsala University. The subject: Mapping of Swedish diaspora in the interwar Soviet Union.