




ARTICLE

Finland and Military Volunteers in the Swedish Fascist Imaginary, 1809–1944

Nathaniël D. B. Kunkeler 

Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
Email: nathaniel.kunkeler@c-rex.uio.no

Abstract

This article explores the place of Finland and the Swedish military volunteers of the 1918 civil war, and 1939–44 Finno-Soviet wars, in the Swedish fascist imaginary. The loss of Finland to Russia in 1809 was heavily romanticized in Swedish nationalist culture, and shaped Swedish responses to both conflicts, mediated through famous literary works which encouraged a sense of shame and betrayal. Through examination of the historical relationship between the two countries, the volunteer effort in 1918, and the subsequent emergence of fascism in the interwar period, it is shown that this imaginary of the Finnish–Swedish relationship strongly shaped Swedish fascism. The article traces key military volunteer veterans in various fascist organizations, and the symbolic appropriation of the veterans. Rather than a comparatively peaceful manifestation of fascism in neutral Sweden, Swedish fascism was possessed of a heavily militarized imaginary rooted in violent proxy conflicts in its former eastern borderlands – in this regard it also showed substantial overlap with Swedish conservative nationalism.

Do not ever forget the day,
When this tale became true;
When like a dark thunderclap,
The sure message reached us,
That the country's last hope had fallen,
That Sveaborg was Swedish no more.¹

The verse is from *Fänrik Ståls Sägner* (*The tales of Ensign Stål*, 1848, 1860), a collection of romantic poetry by Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–77). Sveaborg (today Suomenlinna) is an eighteenth-century fortress built on a series of islands a few kilometres south-east of Helsinki, under the supervision of Field Marshal Count Augustin Ehrensvärd (1710–72). A supposedly impenetrable fortress, it underpinned Sweden's military might in the eastern province

¹ 'Sveaborg', 9 in Johan Ludvig Runeberg, *Fänrik Ståls Sägner* (Stockholm, 1913), p. 85.

of its Baltic empire, and was a bulwark against the arch enemy, Russia.² The province of Finland was lost to Russia in the Russo-Swedish war of 1809.³ The Finnish coast had been settled by Swedes (*Svear*) since late antiquity, and the lands were integrated into the Swedish state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Finnish cities operated as de facto capitals for the Swedish empire. Several Swedish monarchs ruled the realm from Finland for years at a time. Urban elites were typically dominated by Swedish (and at times, German) nobility, and for much of the medieval and early modern period administration, secular and ecclesiastical, was in Swedish. At its peak under Gustav II Adolph, some 20 per cent of the Finnish population was Swedish, only seriously declining in the early twentieth century.⁴ Sveaborg, and its ignominious loss to the enemy through Cronstedt's infamous 'betrayal' in the 1809 war, symbolized the historic entanglement of Finnish and Swedish destinies, and the latter's shame at having failed the eastern outpost. That shame remained a powerful political motivator in the following century.

There is good reason to start with Runeberg's *magnum opus*, without question the most influential work to shape the Swedish nationalist historic imaginary in this period.⁵ In this imaginary, Finland was critical *terra irredenta*, and as such its relationship to Swedish fascism should be given proper attention. Sweden and Finland's entanglement was not fully severed with the creation of the Grand Duchy. Finland gained independence before a short but exceptionally brutal civil war, which was directly tied up with the Russian Civil War and the revolutionary conflicts of central and eastern Europe. The creation of White Finland at the end of this war, which saw the participation of over a thousand Swedish volunteers, entrenched a radical militarized right in the new state. The largest Nordic fascist movement of the interwar period emerged in Finland, the Lapua movement of 1929–31, which successfully pushed for a legal ban of communism, and nearly overthrew democracy.⁶ In the thirties, new fascist groups emerged under the banner of national socialism – many of them with Swedish-speaking members.⁷ The potential for entanglements between the Swedish and Finnish far right was strong, but remains largely unexamined.

This entanglement occurred between one space which experienced tremendous military violence in a brief time span, and another which did not. At the

² Henrik Meinander, *Finlands historia: linjer, strukturer, vändpunkter* (Helsinki, 2014), pp. 93–5.

³ Olle Larsson and Andreas Marklund, *Svensk historia* (Lund, 2012), pp. 239ff.

⁴ John Chrispinsson, *Den glömda historien: om svenska öden och äventyr i öster under tusen år* (Stockholm, 2011), chs. 1–2.

⁵ For a definition of historic imaginary, see Claudio Fogu, *The historic imaginary: politics of history in fascist Italy* (Toronto, ON, 2003), p. 11.

⁶ Andres Kasekamp, 'Radical right-wing movements in the north-east Baltic', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34 (1999), pp. 587–600, at p. 590; Ylva Stubbergaard, *Stat, kris och demokrati: lapporörelsens inflytande i Finland 1929–1932* (Lund, 1996); Marvin Rintala, *Three generations: the extreme right wing in Finnish politics* (Bloomington, IN, 1962), pp. 164–77.

⁷ Göran Djupsund and Lauri Karvonen, *Fascismen i Finland: högerextremismens förankring hos väljarkåren 1929–1939* (Åbo, 1984); Henrik Ekberg, *Führerns trogna följeslagare: den finländska nazismen 1932–1944* (Ekenäs, 1991).

same time, the Swedish historic imaginary of Finland was dominated by fantasies of war and military security, while most practical transnational connections in 1918–44 were through military volunteers. Interwar Sweden did not produce any fascist movements of significant size. However, Swedish neutrality in the First World War has led to something of an omission in the assessment of Swedish fascism, and its relationship to violence. Swedish fascists were mainly people with no experience of military conflict, especially students and essentially school children. Hence they were often dismissed as a rabble of schoolboys and dilettantes – not always inaccurately.⁸ But the Finnish connection shows another side, and underscores how Swedish fascism's violent side might have been underestimated. It is important here to underscore that this connection is less about numerous concrete collaborations – these remained limited in practice – but rather how imaginaries drove those connections, and shaped Swedish fascism.

The significance of the transnational dimension for the study of fascism is hardly contested today, and can by now be considered a firmly established paradigm. Ultra-nationalism and racist ideologies were no impermeable barrier to cross-border transfer and co-operation, and we are long since comfortable with the paradox that nationalisms have origins or connections abroad.⁹ Even national socialist Germanic racism did not particularly hamper transnational connections in this case-study. Given the ancient historic ties between Sweden and Finland, their fascisms, and shared right-wing universe, are a rich locus for research of this type.¹⁰ On this basis, this article looks towards the heavily romanticized and historicized relationship to Finland and the East more generally, and its place in the Swedish fascist imaginary. The formerly Swedish provinces on the Baltic coast were the destination of Swedish military volunteers, and reconnected Sweden to its historic empire through concepts of

⁸ Henrik Damberg, *Nazismen i Skaraborgs län 1930–1945* (Broddeborp, 2009), p. 21.

⁹ Arnd Bauerkämper, 'Ambiguities of transnationalism: fascism in Europe between pan-Europeanism and ultra-nationalism, 1919–1939', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 29 (2007), pp. 43–67; Aristotle Kallis and António Costa Pinto, 'Conclusion: embracing complexity and transnational dynamics: the diffusion of fascism and the hybridization of dictatorships in inter-war Europe', in António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Rethinking fascism and dictatorship in Europe* (Basingstoke, 2014), pp. 272–82; Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe, eds., *Fascism without borders: transnational connections and cooperation between movements and regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945* (Oxford, 2017); Kevin Passmore, 'Fascism as a social movement in a transnational context', in S. Berger and H. Nehring, eds., *The history of social movements in global perspective* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 579–617; Ángel Alcalde, 'The transnational consensus: fascism and Nazism in current research', *Contemporary European History*, 29 (2020); Constantin Iordachi, 'From "generic" to "real-existing" fascism: towards a new transnational and historical-comparative agenda in fascism studies', in Constantin Iordachi and Aristotle Kallis, eds., *Beyond the fascist century: essays in honour of Roger Griffi* (Basingstoke, 2020), pp. 283–307; Nathaniel Kunkeler and Martin Kristoffer Hamre, 'Conceptions and practices of international fascism in Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, 1930–1940', *Journal of Contemporary History* (2022), pp. 1–23.

¹⁰ E.g. Oula Silvennoinen, 'Demokratins framgångshistoria? Skogsindustrin, arbetsmarknaden och en fascistisk samhällssyn 1918–1940', in Henrik Meinander, Petri Karonen, and Kjell Östberg, eds., *Demokratins drivkrafter: kontext och särdrag i Finlands och Sveriges demokratier 1890–2020* (Stockholm, 2018).

moral duty, heroism, and history. Critically, this was not an exclusively fascist imaginary, and helped connect the fascist groups to the mainstream Swedish right.

An analysis of the Swedish fascist historic imaginary is also a fruitful contribution to a historiography that is long since familiar with fascism's tendency to romanticize the national past¹¹ – indeed a core theme of some conceptions of generic fascism.¹² Given the nineteenth-century bifurcation of Finno-Swedish history, this is a particularly intriguing study of that tendency. As such, it contributes to a broader literature on fascist temporalities, including the recently popular chronopolitical studies, which is dominated by literature on the Nazi–Fascist regimes. Much of the rhetoric and many of the themes that characterize Swedish fascist conceptions of Finland, viewed through the prism of romanticized historic wars, are recognizable as part of a general European fascist temporality. Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt posit a common fascist voluntarist, anti-historicist, and monumentalist understanding of history – this was certainly present in the Swedish case.¹³ But, as this article will emphasize, it was thoroughly tied up with conservative attitudes to history, and characterized above all by nostalgia. As such, it will make a contribution to the ongoing debate about fascist temporalities with a perspective on the Nordic countries,¹⁴ showing how temporalities were caught up in the violent historic and present. There is a tension here between the transnational dynamics that facilitated romantic imaginaries, and characterized interwar European fascism, and the highly specific national historic roots of Swedish fascist temporality. As this Swedish–Finnish case-study will show, transnational connections do not obviate the need to pay attention to specific national and regional contexts – they even amplify it.

The second dimension of this study is the relationship between fascism and war veterans, *and military volunteers in particular*. This is a subject that has been dealt with extensively in the historiography for decades.¹⁵ The transnational turn gave this research an exciting and highly fruitful impetus, revealing crucial entanglements and transfers among paramilitary and counter-revolutionary groups during the First World War and the central- and east-European revolutions. In the study of not just fascism but especially the counter-revolutionary right, this has been heavily focused on southern and central-eastern Europe.¹⁶

¹¹ George L. Mosse, *The fascist revolution: toward a general theory of fascism* (New York, NY, 1999), p. 25; Helen Roche, 'Mussolini's "third Rome", Hitler's Third Reich and the allure of antiquity: classicizing chronopolitics as a remedy for unstable national identity?', *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascism Studies*, 8 (2019), pp. 127–52, at p. 127.

¹² Roger Griffin, *The nature of fascism* (London, 1993).

¹³ Fernando Esposito and Sven Reichardt, 'Revolution and eternity: introductory remarks on fascist temporalities', *Journal of Modern European History*, 13 (2015), pp. 24–43, at pp. 39–40.

¹⁴ For a recent study of another Nordic case, see Fredrik Wilhelmssen, 'Reconnecting forward: Nasjonal Samling's apocalyptic temporality as a key to the fascist regime of historicity', *Fascism*, 10 (2021), pp. 134–65.

¹⁵ Robert G. L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: the Free Corps movement in postwar Germany, 1918–1923* (Harvard, MA, 1952).

¹⁶ Robert Gerwarth, 'The central European counter-revolution: paramilitary violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War', *Past & Present*, 200 (2008), pp. 175–209; Jochen Böhrer, 'Enduring violence: the postwar struggles in east-central Europe, 1917–1921',

Ángel Alcalde's 2017 monograph *War veterans and fascism in interwar Europe* deserves particular mention here,¹⁷ as his monograph cuts through much of the ambiguity surrounding the relationship between veterans and fascism,¹⁸ and analyses the category of the veteran above all as a cultural construct. He shows how the fascist movement symbolically appropriated the veteran category, associating it with a very small and marginal group, creating the myth of the fascist veteran.¹⁹ Alcalde also noted that other fascist movements could 'develop an idiosyncratic model for the mobilization of veterans in order to destroy the left, suppress democracy and pursue ultra-nationalistic aims'.²⁰

In the study of right-wing military volunteers and veterans of this era, northern and north-eastern Europe remain quite the black box by comparison, not least in the anglophone historiography. Only for Finland, and most recently Denmark, have military volunteers been extensively researched, with excellent studies by Aapo Roselius and Oula Silvennoinen on the Finnish and Scandinavian post-civil war expeditions to East Karelia, Ingria, and the Baltic,²¹ and Mikkel Kirkebæk with his monumental volumes on the Danish-Baltic Auxiliary Corps.²² The number of Norwegian volunteers were very few,²³ but the military dimensions of Norwegian fascism have been mapped by Lars Borgersrud.²⁴ The political dimensions, revolutionary context, and post-war trajectories of Swedish volunteers in 1918–20 – the largest Scandinavian group by far – remain comparatively unclear, even if they have been studied by military historians.²⁵

Journal of Contemporary History, 50 (2015), pp. 57–77; Jan-Philipp Pomplun, 'Keimzellen des Nationalsozialismus? Sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte und Personelle Kontinuitäten Südwestdeutscher Freikorps', in Daniel Schmidt, Michael Sturm, and Massimiliano Livi, eds., *Wegbereiter des Nationalsozialismus: Personen, Organisationen und Netzwerke der extremen Rechten zwischen 1918 und 1933* (Essen, 2015), pp. 73–88; Manfred Wichmann, 'Die Konzeption einer "Weißen Internationale" bei Waldemar Pabst', in *ibid.*, pp. 125–42; Rudolf Kučera, 'Exploiting victory, sinking into defeat: uniformed violence in the creation of the new order in Czechoslovakia and Austria, 1918–1922', *Journal of Modern History*, 88 (2016), pp. 827–55.

¹⁷ See also his earlier article: Ángel Alcalde, 'War veterans and the transnational origins of Italian fascism (1917–1919)', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21 (2016), pp. 565–83.

¹⁸ Kristian Mennen and Wim van Meurs, 'War veterans and fascism', *Fascism*, 6 (2017), pp. 1–11.

¹⁹ Ángel Alcalde, *War veterans and fascism in interwar Europe* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 1ff, 47–51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²¹ Aapo Roselius and Oula Silvennoinen, *Finlands okända krig: finska och skandinaviska frikårer i Baltikum och Ryssland 1918–1920* (Stockholm, 2021).

²² Mikkel Kirkebæk, *Den yderste grænse* (2 vols., Copenhagen, 2019); see also Bernadette Preben-Hansen and Michael H. Clemmesen, *Bondefanget til borgerkrigen: det danske korstog til ærkeenglen Michaels by* (Odense, 2015).

²³ Morten Jentoft, *Finland 1918: den finske borgerkrigen og nordmennene som var vitne til den* (Oslo, 2019).

²⁴ See especially Lars Borgersrud, *Vi er jo et militært parti: den norske militærfascismens historie 1930–1945* (2nd edn, Oslo, 2018); Lars Borgersrud, *Like gode nordmenn? Den norske militærfascismens historie*, II (Oslo, 2012).

²⁵ Lars Ericson, *Svenska frivilliga: militära uppdrag i utlandet under 1800- och 1900-talen* (Stockholm, 1996); Lars Gyllenhaal and Lennart Westberg, *Svenskar i krig, 1914–1945* (Stockholm, 2008); Jan Olov Näsman, *Till Finlands räddning och Sveriges heder: svenska brigaden i det finska inbördeskriget, 1918* (Helsinki, 2012).

Within this twofold transnational framework, this article brings together fascist and nationalist imaginaries of the Finnish–Swedish past with the experience of war and violence in 1918–44, and military *volunteers* as transnational agents who served as potent symbolic vehicles for those imaginaries. It will first show the lasting impact of the loss of Finnish territory to Russia, and how the shame of that loss was compounded by the mixed results of Swedish volunteer efforts in the 1918 Finnish Civil War. Throughout this period, the romantic narratives of Runeberg’s poetry are shown to play an important role in shaping conservative and fascist imaginaries. The following sections deal with the rise of fascism and the far right in Sweden and Finland during the interwar period, and the connections between the two countries from the perspective of Swedish fascism. Irredentism and shame were leading themes in Swedish fascism, and were disproportionately shaped by military volunteers from 1918, both actual and symbolic. This profoundly shaped fascism’s response to the volunteer effort in the Finno-Soviet wars of 1939–44, which reiterated these themes, and further highlighted Swedish fascism’s entanglement with nationalist conservative imaginaries, even as it sought to distinguish the fascist military contribution.

I

Is there anyone who believes that Sweden’s people, even during the years of decline, which came before Sveaborg and Fredrikshamn, considered Finland to be ‘something to lose’?...Of course not! *For Finland has never been something to lose.* Finland was then an unmissable part of Sweden like Skåne, Västerbotten or Gottland now, and its loss meant nothing less than the first splitting of Sweden. The tribe of the Swedes was split into two branches, [and] Swedish cultivation was scattered, to its own ruin and the lasting misfortune of collective Germanic culture.²⁶

This battle cry in the struggle for Finland was published by the conservative nationalist historian Olof Palme²⁷ (1884–1918) in 1917, shortly before the outbreak of the Finnish Civil War, in which he died a year later as a volunteer. In this racist imaginary, Finland was an inseparable part of Sweden, going back to ancient times, part of a Nordic state-building project that saw Vikings build a Germanic empire, bringing law and culture to Asiatic populations in the Baltic and Russia. Swedish cities like Åbo and Vyborg functioned as militarized outposts that held the armies of Novgorod and Russia at bay; Courland had been deemed Swedish soil since Charles XII’s conquest of Narva (1700). Critically, the Carolingian ideal, a core part of Swedish nationalism – especially in the far right – was formed in these areas.²⁸ Irredentism later became unsurprisingly central to the Swedish fascist imaginary. The fact that most Swedish wars were fought against Russia, including the last major conflict of 1809,

²⁶ Proteus, *Finland!* (Uppsala, 1917), p. 8.

²⁷ Uncle of the prime minister of the same name.

²⁸ Christinsson, *Den glömda historien*, pp. 12–13, 147, 239.

cemented it as the arch enemy. Long after 1809, Swedish military circles studied the conflict and the Carolingian wars as the last relevant military operations the country engaged in, so that perceptions of Nordic security remained firmly focused on the East.²⁹ Anti-Russian and imperial nostalgia for lost Finland was also widespread in Swedish society at large, not least through popular literary works and history education in schools.³⁰

No work was more significant in this regard than Runeberg's *Fänrik Ståls Sägner*. The book's poems were ballad-like and in epic style, presenting morally uplifting episodes from the 1809 war against Russia, and were excellent tools of patriotic propaganda. Written in the tradition of romantic idealism, the collection constructed a new image of the Finns in a Herderian nationalist vein. The poems celebrated Finnish bravery, and its opening piece became the Finnish national anthem.³¹ Written in Swedish, the work easily reached the Finno-Swedish cultural elite, and from there became a literary classic in Sweden as well. In the long run, Runeberg and his *magnum opus* were understood very differently in the East and West, with Finns typically venerating him as the great chronicler of Finnish national character, while Swedes saw him as the great restorer of Swedish national honour. The latter tended to read his work as demonstrating abiding Finnish loyalty to the empire, while the former saw it as a description of independent national character.³² Runeberg endured as a near-universal reference point among Swedes and Finns alike well into the next century, and was an unmissable part of the nationalist imaginary which came into its own with Finnish independence.

This sense of a national bond and shared history with Finland made the loss of this territory akin to a 'lost limb' in Swedish nationalism, i.e. a fundamental part of Sweden itself without which the nation was incomplete. At the same time, the paternalistic view of the Finns meant the Russian conquest was regarded as a failed duty. In Sweden proper, Växjö Bishop Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846), undoubtedly the most highly regarded Swedish Romantic poet of the nineteenth century, decried the loss of Finland as a moment of blackest shame in Swedish history, symbolized by the loss of Sveaborg, 'bloodily torn from the heart of the state'. His 1811 revanchist poem, 'Svea', urged a (spiritual) re-conquest of Finland.³³ Finland had been lost due to military incompetence, a venal and cowardly king, and ignominious betrayal. The idea of the lost war and territory as a profoundly shameful moment obtained a particularly strong foothold in the Swedish nationalist imaginary around Finland, which, with Runeberg's gloss, evoked a complex mixture of treachery, humiliation, and shame. This would turn out to be a potent tool of mobilization for the

²⁹ Nathaniël Kunkeler, 'The Swedish Brigade: from national romantic heroes to European counter-revolutionaries?', *European History Quarterly*, 53 (2023), pp. 88–114, at pp. 91–2.

³⁰ Gunnar Åselius, 'Hotbilden: svenska militära bedömningar av Ryssland 1880–1914', in *Mellan björnen och örnen: Sverige och östersjöområdet under det första världskriget, 1914–1918* (Visby, 1994), pp. 197–208, at p. 204.

³¹ Vårt Land, *Our country*.

³² Johan Wrede, *Världen enligt Runeberg: en biografisk och idéhistorisk studie* (Stockholm, 2005), pp. 18–19, 315, 337.

³³ Svea, in Esaias Tegnér, *Fritjofs saga, och andra större dikter* (Stockholm, 1935), p. 262.

Swedish right, including the fascists, until the Second World War, which concentrated these themes in the symbol of the military volunteer.

II

On 20 February 1918, the Swedish government declared its neutrality in the Finnish Civil War. The Swedish right, in light of the imaginary sketched out above, was dismayed. In White propaganda, the conflict was portrayed as a struggle of liberation for Finnish independence, against the Russian oppressor. Hopes for an intervention on the side of the White government in Vasa were dashed, but around a thousand volunteers were permitted to cross the border and serve in General Gustav Mannerheim's (1867–1951) White Army.³⁴ At the same time, the government covertly supported White Finland with armaments and other resources.³⁵ The volunteers included a high number of Swedish officers, particularly for the general staff which benefited from the officers' world-class training. People continued volunteering for months, desperate to make any contribution, women as well as men, though the former were rarely accepted in any capacity.³⁶

There was an all-Swedish volunteer unit: the so-called Swedish Brigade (*Svenska Brigaden*).³⁷ While intended as a brigade, it never grew to more than a little over five hundred men in the field at any one time, with about a thousand men in total.³⁸ One of the primary organizers of the project was Olof Palme. Among the volunteers was Ernst Walter Hülphers (1871–1957), a writer and journalist, well known for his novels and plays in the 1910s, and a Social Democrat. Though a man of the left, Hülphers was well versed in the nationalist tradition, and, like Palme, viewed the Finns as racial inferiors who had benefited from Swedish colonization. In the 1920s, he became the editor of *Nationalsocialistisk Tidning* (National Socialist Newspaper), the principal paper of Birger Furugård's National Socialist Freedom Movement (*Nationalsocialistisk Frihetsrörelse*). He participated in actual combat to a very limited extent due to illness, and instead found his primary purpose as de facto bard, writing poetry, composing the Brigade's marching song,³⁹ and corresponding with Swedish newspapers about their advance.⁴⁰ In his memoirs, Hülphers claimed it was 'almost as a liberation that [he] heard the calls for help from Finland'. Like other volunteers, he construed the fight for Finland as a Swedish duty, a

³⁴ Larsson and Marklund, *Svensk historia*, p. 333.

³⁵ Ingvar Flink, 'Svenska krigsförluster i Finland år 1918', in *Norden och kriget i Finland och Baltikum, 1918–1919* (Helsinki, 2004), pp. 25–37, at p. 27.

³⁶ See, for instance, letter, Margit Carlhammar to Gustaf Hallström, Romanäs, 4 Apr. 1918, in Krigsarkivet (Swedish Military Archive, henceforth KrA), Arninge (Stockholm), Archive Föreningen Finlands Vänner, 0271/001:Ö, vol. E:25.

³⁷ Gyllenhaal and Westberg, *Svenskar i krig*, pp. 83–5.

³⁸ Näsman, *Till Finlands räddning och Sveriges heder*, p. 54.

³⁹ Pamphlet, E. Walter Hülphers, *Svenska Brigadens Marsch* (Stockholm, 1918), KrA, Archive Svenska Brigaden, 0271/003:Ö, vol. B:2.

⁴⁰ E.g. 'Svenskarna som kämpa Finlands kamp: E. Walter Hülphers talar ur de frivilligas led', *Svenska Dagbladet*, 11 Mar. 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

natural obligation that the government had neglected. In a letter sent in March, Olof Palme noted the political value of the Brigade, and the importance of the Swedish volunteers seeing combat *before* the German *Ostseedivision* of General Rüdiger von der Goltz.⁴¹ Dismayed at the official response, Hülphers addressed the Finns: 'I too am Sweden. Sweden is also my friends here.'⁴² Swedish neutrality compounded the shame of the previous century, and the Brigade offered an opportunity to symbolically expunge it.

As such, the military volunteers were perfect vessels for the conservative historic imaginary: their choice to fight for (White) Finland symbolized Swedish bravery and heroism in accordance with the Carolingian ideal, and their casualties a sacrifice to be weighed against the shame of official neutrality that echoed the perfidious leadership of 1809. Bourgeois papers literally waxed lyrical over the idea of Swedish boots on Eastern soil. *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* (New Daily All Kinds), quite representatively, published a poem on the Brigade's return, declaring Sweden's honour saved. 'For the battle you have waged for Finland, / [and] the honourable death your brothers suffered, / has redeemed with its heart-blood; what the anxious and fearful did not understand.'⁴³

The volunteers themselves wholeheartedly shared and contributed to this imaginary. The second commander of the Swedish Brigade, Harald Hjalmarson (1868–1919) motivated his immediate participation in the war with explicit reference to King Charles XII, and the restoration of Sweden's honour. In this regard, Hjalmarson was an entirely typical product of the Swedish army. To his mind, the Russia of 1918 was little different from a hundred years before, and the Swedish government acted as shamefully now as then. Invoking the idea of Finland as *irredenta*, this was an opportunity to fight 'on old Swedish soil and against the old enemy'. 'It was so obvious that one should join.'⁴⁴ The sense of fulfilling an almost sacred duty was also shared by volunteers further down the hierarchy. Bengt Svedmark wrote to his mother:

I felt that this place was supposed to be filled by me and I felt fucking right. Because now I am a *whole* person. You, who are not so fortunate to now be able to participate, will never really be able to feel the war's holy spirit, the war for what we believe is right.⁴⁵

Runeberg was at the heart of this romantic idealism. On his arrival, Hülphers noted that 'Runeberg is with us everywhere', albeit in Finnish translation, seeing it as a sign of how Swedish culture had 'penetrated the Mongolian heart' of the Finns.⁴⁶ References to Runeberg are ubiquitous in contemporary texts.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Letter, Olof Palme to Palme at Thule, Haparanda, 8 Mar. 1918, KrA, 0271/001:Ö, vol. E:25.

⁴² E. Walter Hülphers, *Med svenska brigaden* (Stockholm, 1918), pp. 6, 8, 20.

⁴³ Ivar Lannge, 'Brigadens hemkomst', *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 31 May 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

⁴⁴ Harald Hjalmarson, *Mina krigsminnen från Finland* (Stockholm, 1919), pp. 15–17.

⁴⁵ Letter (copy), Bengt Svedmark to mother, Uleåborg, 17 Mar. 1918, KrA, 0271/001:Ö, vol E:25.

⁴⁶ Hülphers, *Med svenska brigaden*, p. 26.

⁴⁷ E.g. Boëthius, *Svenska Brigaden* (Helsinki, 1920), p. 11.

Swedish volunteers visited Runeberg's hometown, and the Brigade laid flowers at his grave. A sermon in the local church highlighted the continued presence of Runeberg's romantic idealism in the nationalist imaginary:

Wherever you go in Finland on historic ground, you will find witness of your fathers' struggle for the most lasting of the Swedish spirit's creations outside the realm's current borders, western culture in Finland...and thus the royal poet's words about Sweden's heroes and knights are once more become glorious truth, living reality.⁴⁸

This was a poignant moment, especially given the presence of aristocratic descendants from Runeberg's celebrated heroes. At the end of the war, the Finnish literary historian Gunnar Castrén (1878–1959), in a pamphlet dedicated to the Swedish Brigade, wrote: 'When our Finnish army...marched past its commander-in-chief, we did not see some modern army before us, well-equipped and trained – no, it was as if Ensign Stål's old Finnish army had risen again.'⁴⁹ At the end of the war, all volunteers were gifted a special edition of *The tales of Ensign Stål*.⁵⁰

Socialist papers, perhaps lacking in Runebergesque idealism, were less keen. 'That the Swedish Brigade is praised in right-wing circles is of course entirely natural, since this brigade has worked for and secured the interests of capitalism in Finland by murdering our class brothers there.'⁵¹ Upon their return to Sweden in May 1918, workers from the Swedish Brigade found that they had been stigmatized by the trade unions, who condemned the cold-blooded killing of the 'members of brother organizations' (*broderförbunds medlemmar*).⁵² Veterans were barred from the trade unions.

The left-wing response shows that both sides of the media were effectively operating in different dimensions, in a highly polarized political landscape, but it also brings home the fact that the nationalist imaginary was being deployed in the greater context of the Bolshevik revolution, Russian Civil War, generalized revolutionary conflict, and terror. In 1918, Finland was a hotbed of extreme anti-Bolshevism, reflected in the White Terror in which many Swedish volunteers participated. For instance, the reactionary Colonel Erik Grafström (1872–1952) held responsibility for many of the arbitrary executions and overall treatment of the prisoners of war in Tampere, even by his own account.⁵³ Shortly after the fall of Tampere, Martin Ekström (1887–1954) led a regiment in the conquest of the thirteenth-century city of Vyborg. Vyborg

⁴⁸ E. P., 'I hänryckningens tid: En pingstutflykt till Runebergs stad', *Aftonbladet*, 10 June 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

⁴⁹ Pamphlet, Gunnar Castrén, *Till Svenska Brigaden*, Helsinki, 18 May 1918, KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. 20.

⁵⁰ Axel Westberg, 'Svenska brigadens sista vecka i Finland: gästvänskap och hyllningar', *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 31 May 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

⁵¹ 'Ytterligare protester mot svarta brigaden', *Politiken*, 28 June 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

⁵² J. O., 'Samhällsröta', *Bageriarbetaren* [fr. *Metallarbetaren*], no. 6–7, June–July 1918, newspaper clipping in KrA, 0271/003:Ö, vol. E:35.

⁵³ MS autobiography, pp. 241–4, Erik Grafström's archive, KrA, 0035:0280, vol. 1.

used to be the most militarily significant Swedish city after Stockholm, and became a mythical bulwark against the Muscovites, 'our ancient enemy' in the words of King Gustav Vasa, who ruled the realm from the city. The city fell to Tsar Peter I in 1710.⁵⁴ In the light of this history, it is notable that upon Ekström's capture of the city, his regiment massacred large parts of the Russian civilian population.⁵⁵ The sheer brutality and revolutionary character of the civil war lent a whole new ideological dimension to the nationalist imaginary around Finland, which it could not have possessed before 1917/18.⁵⁶ That is to say, it is not that the Finnish Civil War necessarily brought violence and anti-Bolshevism to the Swedish (far) right, but rather that it encouraged a uniquely salient fusion with the nationalist imaginary that would be impossible in a different regional and historical context.

As some of the accounts above have already illustrated, this was a conflict that was both extremely brutal, and racialized.⁵⁷ Swedish volunteers frequently saw themselves as representatives of a Germanic culture that was returning order to lost borderlands inhabited by racial inferiors. It was also the crucible of the Judeo-Bolshevik myth. It is notable that the first translation of the *Protocols of the elders of Zion* was a Swedish one, published in Finland in 1918 under the title *Förlåten Faller*, including photographs of contemporary Jewish communists (or people it claimed were Jewish).⁵⁸ There was ample potential for volunteer veterans to lead a dynamic far-right scene at home after the counter-revolutionary struggle was finished.

III

However, the most fruitful place for a new far right was Finland. In the wake of the establishment of an independent White Finland was a large and experienced veteran class, spearheaded by the Jäger Corps,⁵⁹ which found its home in the paramilitary Protection Corps (*suojeluskunta/skyddskårer*), or the privately funded *Freikorps*-style expeditions which set out to conquer Greater Finland (*Suur-Suomi*) and vanquish the Bolsheviks.⁶⁰ Ultimately, these efforts ran into the sand, and a normalization of relations with the newly established Soviet Union was forced with the Treaty of Tartu (14 October 1920). The years

⁵⁴ Chrispinsson, *Den glömda historien*, pp. 83ff.

⁵⁵ Kunkeler, 'The Swedish Brigade', p. 104.

⁵⁶ Juha Siltala, 'Dissolution and reintegration in Finland, 1914–1932: how did a disarmed country become absorbed into brutalization?', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46 (2015), pp. 11–33, at p. 21; Kunkeler, 'The Swedish Brigade'.

⁵⁷ Kirkebæk, *Den yderste grænse*, II, pp. 13ff.

⁵⁸ Håkan Blomqvist, *Myten om judebolsjevismen: antisemitism och kontrarevolution* (Stockholm, 2013), p. 24; Sofie Lene Bak and Terje Emberland, 'Early Nordic fascism and antisemitic conspiracy', in Nicola Karcher and Markus Lundström, eds., *Nordic fascism: fragments of an entangled history* (London, 2022), p. 38.

⁵⁹ Agilolf Kesselring, *Des Kaisers 'Finnische Legion': die finnische Jägerbewegung im Ersten Weltkrieg im Kontext der deutschen Finnlandpolitik* (Berlin, 2005).

⁶⁰ Oula Silvennoinen, "'Home, religion, fatherland": movements of the radical right in Finland', *Fascism*, 4 (2015), pp. 134–54, at pp. 137–8.

that followed saw no return to the brutal violence that had accompanied the country's independence, and in many ways the levels of reconciliation and unity that were achieved by 1939 were remarkable.⁶¹

But there was a host of far-right organizations, including paramilitaries, societies, and political parties. The Finns showed enthusiasm for Mussolini as early as 1921, not least the Protection Corps, with over 100 000 members.⁶² The 1922 Academic Karelia Society (*Akateeminen Karjala-Seura*, AKS) was founded in the wake of the failed Karelia expeditions, and concentrated a rabidly nationalist student following with considerable political clout. The AKS was characterized by an anti-democratic Greater Finland ideology, and fervent Russophobia. It was a popular reaction against a communist meeting in Lapua in 1929 which most famously sparked the creation of the fascist Lapua movement (*Lapuan liike/Lapporörelsen*), which concentrated much of the Finnish far right in one organization. It orchestrated a highly successful terror campaign in the summer of 1930, which resulted in the adoption of anti-communist laws. But Lapua went a step too far in 1932, with an armed rebellion at Mäntsälä which was crushed by the military, leaving a scattered and delegitimized far-right scene. The Protection Corps was a core component of the attempted uprising, but it turned out most members sided with the republic.⁶³ In the thirties, national socialism mobilized much of what was left – most importantly the Patriotic People's Movement (*Isänmaallinen kansanliike/Fosterländska folkrörelsen*, IKL) after 1932, chaired by the former Lapua leader, Vihtori Kosola (1884–1936). But the time for violent extra-parliamentary activism was over.

On the other hand, there was a broad socio-cultural reaction against Swedishness and the Swedish language in the name of Finnish nationalism, Fennomania. The so-called 'language struggle' (*språkstriden*) intensified sharply after 1918. Numerous 'true Finnish' groups were founded in 1922, and the AKS became an influential advocate of curtailing Swedish.⁶⁴ By 1939, the Swedish population of Finland had declined to less than 10 per cent. It speaks volumes about the relationship between the Finnish and Swedish far right that *Wiborgs Nyheter* (Vyborg News) reported for Runeberg Day in 1939 that 'Swedes were scared to be lynched by screaming Finnish fascists.'⁶⁵

The anti-Swedishness of the Finnish right presented a dilemma for Swedish fascism during the twenties and thirties, which explains their ambiguity vis-à-vis Finland in those years.⁶⁶ Finnish antagonism dated back to long before the civil war, and had roots in the class resentment over Swedish elite dominance in the empire. But official Swedish neutrality in 1918, as well as conflicts over the territory of Åland, aggravated Finnish mistrust of

⁶¹ Tuomas Tepora, 'Coming to terms with violence: sacrifice, collective memory and reconciliation in inter-war Finland', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 39 (2014), pp. 487ff.

⁶² Rintala, *Three generations*, pp. 125ff.

⁶³ Silvennoinen, "'Home, religion, fatherland'", pp. 144, 149–50.

⁶⁴ Henrik Meinander, *Republiken Finland i går och i dag: Finlands historia från inbördeskriget till 2012* (Helsinki, 2012); Meinander, *Finlands historia*, p. 210.

⁶⁵ Chrispinsson, *Den glömda historien*, p. 128.

⁶⁶ Meinander, *Republiken Finland i går och i dag*, pp. 125–6.

Swedish intentions and goodwill, which volunteer efforts such as the Swedish Brigade could not cancel out. As will be shown below, this was a dilemma for Swedish fascists since they were actually in broad agreement about the shameful and inadequacy of Sweden's behaviour, and the heroism of the Finns in the struggle against Russia and the Bolsheviks.

IV

Military veterans did not and could not be as central to the Swedish far-right project in the twenties as they were to the Finnish, given that it was a narrow veteran base that was at most in the low thousands. Some of the Finland veterans ended up in strikebreaking organizations as a response to trade union hostility, for instance the Swedish National Protection Corps (*Sveriges Nationella Skyddskår*) – the name evokes the Finnish paramilitary White Guards – which was founded by and employed Swedish Brigade veterans.⁶⁷ Given the ideological nature of the civil wars in Finland and the Baltic, and the treatment of veteran volunteers by the organized left, it was natural that strikebreakers became entangled with the far right. It also displays eye-catching parallels to the circulation of the anti-socialist myth of the abused veteran that was prevalent in other parts of Europe.⁶⁸

We do not know how many of these volunteers made it into fascist movements, but Swedish fascist parties were significantly militarized and celebrated the volunteers. This holds particularly true of the Swedish fascist militant organization (*Sveriges Fascistiska Kamporganisation*, SFKO), founded in 1926, the first nation-wide fascist organization in Sweden. While it never grew to any great size during its brief existence in the latter half of the twenties, it became the foundation for the national socialist organizations of the thirties. SFKO had a considerable proportion of military members, and was chiefly anti-communist and antisemitic.⁶⁹ Party newspaper *Spöknippet* (The Fasces) regularly featured articles of military interest covering topics like budget cuts; the security questions around Åland; the threat of Russia; and the shame of Swedish neutrality in the Finnish 'War of Liberation'. It consistently advocated violence, particularly for the annihilation of Bolshevism in Sweden.⁷⁰ In practical terms, it planned for the foundation of fascist branches across the country, which would be instrumental in organizing a Finnish-style protection corps (*skyddskårer*) to counter a revolution.⁷¹ SFKO celebrated the Swedish Brigade of 1918 as an 'elite troop' of Swedish 'heroes', and imagined the fascists as walking in the footsteps of these volunteers.⁷² The fascist identification with the volunteers of 1918, a decade after the fact, highlights that the tactic of symbolic appropriation vis-à-vis veterans was also practised in countries

⁶⁷ Ingvar Flink, *Strejkbryteriet och arbetets frihet: en studie av svensk arbetarmarknad fram till 1938* (Uppsala, 1978), pp. 85–6.

⁶⁸ Alcalde, *War veterans and fascism in interwar Europe*, p. 64.

⁶⁹ 'Svenska kvinnor och män!', *Spöknippet*, 23 Oct. 1926, p. 1.

⁷⁰ E.g. 'Svenska fascismens handlingsprogram', *Spöknippet*, 13 Nov. 1926, p. 1.

⁷¹ 'Nödvändigheten av svenska fascistorganisationer', *Spöknippet*, 9 Mar. 1927, p. 3.

⁷² R-e, 'Två tioårsminnen', *Spöknippet*, 4 Apr. 1928, p. 2.

where the veteran class was necessarily extremely small. This is in no way to say that Swedish military veterans made their way into fascist groups in any great numbers – this is probably impossible to know – but that they disproportionately structured the fascist imaginary, especially in relation to Finland and the eastern parts of the historic empire.

SFKO was led by three people, with Konrad Hallgren (1891–1962) at the helm. The others were Sergeant Sven Olov Lindholm (1903–98), future leader of the National Socialist Workers' Party (*Nationalsocialistiska Arbetarepartiet*, NSAP – after 1938, Swedish Socialist Union, SSS), and his friend and adviser Lieutenant Sven Hedengren (1897–1972). Hedengren was interrogated by the police in 1946. His records in the security service archives state that he joined SFKO out of concern over the military budget cuts, and to combat the internal security threat of communism directed from abroad.⁷³ Hallgren was not in the Swedish army, but had served as a volunteer in the German imperial army during the First World War, and claimed to afterwards have joined the Russian army of General Pyotr Wrangel (1878–1928), who made the White Army's last stand in Crimea in 1922.⁷⁴ Whether Hallgren indeed fought the Bolsheviks in this formation or not remains uncertain: the primary source for the claim remains Hallgren himself – but either way it was well advertised. His war record was contested during a fractious dispute in the Swedish fascist movement in the early thirties, highlighting the prestige of such an anti-Bolshevik military record in the Swedish far right.⁷⁵

SFKO was not the only fascist organization in Sweden at the time. The Furugård brothers' national socialist movement in the early twenties was far more concerned with appealing to farmers than soldiers, and more inspired by German connections.⁷⁶ However, they did not appear to have substantially different attitudes towards Finland, and clearly participated in the same historic imaginary. Golden Age heroes like Charles XII or Gustavus Adolphus (1594–1632) were celebrated in the party newspaper *Vår Kamp* (Our Struggle), as were Romantic poets like Esaias Tegnér and the Finno-Swedish fascist veteran Bertel Gripenberg (1878–1947).⁷⁷ Interestingly, the editor and Swedish Brigade veteran Ernst Walter Hülphers also wrote an 'SS-march' for the paper, which directly copied several lines from his original march of the

⁷³ Report, O. G. Dahlgren, Stockholm state police, 5 Oct. 1946, pp. 1–2, Swedish Security Service Archives (henceforth SÄPO), Arninge, P4770 (Sven Hedengren file).

⁷⁴ Wrangel did recruit c. 8,000 volunteers for a Third Russian Army in Poland towards the end of the Russian Civil War, but these were intended to be all Russians. Richard Lockett, *The white generals: an account of the White movement and the Russian Civil War* (London, 1971), p. 366.

⁷⁵ Eric Wärenstam, *Fascismen och nazismen i Sverige 1920–1940: studier i den svenska nationalsocialismens, fascismens och antisemitismens organisationer, ideologier och propaganda under mellankrigsåren* (Stockholm, 1970), pp. 55–7.

⁷⁶ Heléne Lööv, *Hakkorset och wasakärven: en studie av nationalsocialismen i Sverige 1924–1950* (Stockholm, 1990), ch. 3.

⁷⁷ 'Gåtan kring Karl XII', *Vår Kamp*, 1 Dec. 1930, no. 16, p. 2; 'En nordgermansk folkledare: till Gustav Adolfsminnet', *Vår Kamp*, 1 Nov. 1932, no. 21, pp. 2–3; 'Bertel Gripenberg', *Vår Kamp*, 19 July 1930, no. 9, p. 2; 'Ur Tegnér's straffdikt "SVEA"', *Vår Kamp*, 18 Nov. 1933, no. 45, p. 4.

Swedish Brigade ('Forward, forward to eternal glory, God is close to us in a moment like the present.').⁷⁸

The prominent role volunteer veterans could play individually in Swedish fascist politics is demonstrated by the National Socialist Block (*Nationalsocialistiska Blocket*, NSB). After the disintegration of Birger Furugård's Swedish National Socialist Party (*Svenska Nationalsocialistiska Partiet*, SNSP) in the wake of Lindholm's founding of the NSAP in January 1933, the NSB searched for a replacement leader to gather the fascist right in Sweden. This new luminary was revealed on 9 December 1933. This turned out to be an outsider entirely without political experience, namely Martin Ekström.⁷⁹ Accurately noting his unrivalled popularity as a war veteran, NSB publicized him as 'the last Swede to fight in the eastern ranks'.⁸⁰ Indeed, Ekström had an impressive record: aside from his (murderous) activities in the Finnish Civil War, it included service in the Persian gendarmerie in 1911–15, and the German imperial army in the First World War. His main claim to fame was the conquest of Narva during the Baltic civil wars in January 1919. He led a battalion of 700 men to seize the historic city from the Bolsheviks, in a distant echo of Charles XII's conquest, to the delight of an adoring right-wing press.⁸¹ There was no doubt that a war record like Ekström's possessed incredible prestige among Swedish fascists, and it is intriguing that it in fact seems to have overshadowed other more immediately relevant qualities for a political leader. Ekström turned out to be a terrible politician, and the NSB quickly bankrupted itself under his leadership.⁸²

V

Concrete links between the Swedish national socialist parties and Finnish fascism were sparse, however. This is rather notable – even Norwegian fascists seemed to have stronger connections to Finland.⁸³ Viewed from the Finnish point of view, the explanation seems obvious: Swedish fascist groups were unattractively weak and unstable, and it is not at all obvious what Finns stood to gain from contacts with groups like the SNSP or the NSB if there were no pre-existing connections. Nevertheless, it is worth examining Finland's position in fascist discourse in this period, not least considering Finland's challenging position in matters of history, language, and race as far as the national socialists were concerned.

⁷⁸ E. Walter Hülphers, 'SS-marsch', *Vår Kamp*, 13 May 1933, no. 19, p. 1.

⁷⁹ 'Upprop från Martin Ekström!', *Vår Kamp*, 9 Dec. 1933, no. 48, p. 1.

⁸⁰ National Archives of Sweden (*Sveriges Riksarkiv*, henceforth SRA), Marieberg, 720615: Martin Ekström's archive, propaganda card.

⁸¹ Kunkeler, 'The Swedish Brigade', p. 111. See also the Swedish General Staff report on the composition of Finnish troops in Estonia, 20 Jan. 1919, p. 1, 'Estland, Lettland och Lithauen, inkomna skrivelser, etc', Generalstabens, Utrikesavdelningen, KrA, 0200, 007:H, E I ae, 1, 1919–25.

⁸² Wärenstam, *Fascismen och nazismen i Sverige*, p. 114; 'En allvarlig maning! Upprop från Martin Ekström', *Vår Kamp*, 3 Mar. 1934, no. 9, pp. 1, 4.

⁸³ Claus Christensen and Terje Emberland, 'Nordic heretics: a national socialist opposition in Norway and Denmark', in Karcher and Lundström, eds., *Nordic fascism*, pp. 95–113, at p. 97.

The ambivalence towards Finland came to the fore in the newspapers of the NSAP/SSS, when Per Dahlberg, the party ideologue, outlined a Nordic national socialist foreign policy. Invoking the Vikings' eastwards colonization, he affirmed a Sweden 'facing East' as the traditional mainstay of foreign policy, with the goal of securing the Baltic Sea as exclusively Nordic territory. Highlighting the fascist imaginary as also a conservative historic imaginary, he credited Gustaf II Adolf with Sweden's Golden Age, and reified 1809 as the endpoint. With the 'poor substitute' of Norway, Sweden lost faith in its 'historic mission'. The nadir of this decline was reached in 1917–18, with Sweden's bumbling and shameful response to the situation in Finland and the threat of 'red barbarism'. On this basis, Dahlberg excused Finnish hostility to the Swedes. His position on race was also interesting:

It could admittedly be said that neither Finland nor the Baltic are inhabited by the Nordic race to any great extent, but these peoples have received their culture mainly from Sweden, and belong to a Nordic league of states through both their military-political position as well as because of historical tradition.⁸⁴

This position was consistently reiterated over the years into the Second World War.⁸⁵ It was culture and historical tradition, not race, which proved the decisive factor. Other *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* (The Swedish National Socialist) writers were less forgiving, speaking of the Finns' 'illusions of grandeur born from an inferiority complex';⁸⁶ Ebbe Mark rejected all Finns: even the Germanic Finno-Swedes had 'betrayed their tribe' and gone over to the True Finn camp. The Germanic world had no use for them, since their Nordic blood only made them more effective racial enemies.⁸⁷ Concepts of race, culture, and language sat uncomfortably next to one other in the Swedish fascist press on this issue.

Another perspective came from one of the few direct Finnish connections, Baron Eric Fock. Eric Fock (1916–?) was a Finno-Swedish national socialist student based in Helsinki. He was briefly a supporter of the Lapua movement around the age of fifteen, and a member of IKL from autumn 1932 onwards as youth representative. He was offered membership to the NSNP in 1932, and in the NSAP in 1935, but declined. He lived in Sweden for parts of 1937 and 1938, and was then active as a member of NSAP's youth wing, Nordic Youth (*Nordisk Ungdom*).⁸⁸ One of Fock's positions was that the Swedish-speaking minority should mobilize to secure its position in future Finland, and improve translingual relations.⁸⁹ Indeed, after the Second World War, Fock noted that Finnish national socialists were generally anti-Swedish

⁸⁴ Per Dahlberg, 'Sveriges nordiska politik: Nationalsocialismen fullföljer traditionen', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 11 Apr. 1933, no. 7, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Den Svenskes Argus, 'Svenskarna i Finland', *Den Svenske Folksocialisten*, 17 Feb. 1940, no. 7, p. 3.

⁸⁶ T. G. E., 'Nationalism och chauvinism', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 30 Jan. 1935, no. 8 p. 2.

⁸⁷ Ebbe Mark, 'Rastankens innebörd', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 30 Sept. 1936, no. 75 p. 4.

⁸⁸ Report on Eric Fock, Stockholm secret police, 3 Mar. 1946, pp. 86–84, SÄPO, P633 (Eric Fock), A1.

⁸⁹ Ekberg, *Führerns trogna följeslagare*, p. 172.

in their attitudes, and were in fact what drove him to move to Sweden.⁹⁰ Fock's motivations here offer an intriguing explanation of the comparative *lack* of other Finno-Swedish fascist relations. As early as the beginning of 1932, he wrote articles for the SNSP weekly newspaper, *Vår Kamp*, and was the main, if not only, Finnish correspondent for the Swedish national socialist press for several years. He also gave a speech at the annual NSAP party congress in 1935, and at a Nordic Youth event later that year.⁹¹ As for his ideology, his account of the Lapua movement speaks volumes, despite his previous support for the movement.

The Lapua movement was of course from the beginning a healthy and for the moment necessary national movement (*folkrörelse*), but even if it had been allowed to work in its original spirit its work would only have accomplished a temporary improvement. Lapua meant a *negative* [emphasis in original] cleansing work.⁹²

Not until IKL did he deem true national socialism to have arrived in Finland.⁹³

The picture that emerges from a reading of national socialist publications on Finland in the thirties shows a variety of inconsistent positions. Pragmatic perspectives on Finland's relationship to Sweden in terms of military security clearly played a role, while the historic imaginary continued to exert a powerful influence on the understanding of that relationship. Contact with the actual Finnish far right was extremely limited, and Eric Fock did not appear to have shaped a particular party line. Based on the limited material available to historians, it is not clear that the fascist imaginary around Finland was profoundly different from the nationalist conservative historic imaginary – if anything the latter appears to have had the effect of decentring race somewhat in national socialist discourse, most overtly in Dahlberg's writings.

The role of the volunteer veterans did not recede entirely in all this. On the fifteenth anniversary of Finnish independence, *Vår Kamp* – relying on the conservative Finno-Swedish *Hufvudstadsbladet* (The Capital Newspaper), a national daily newspaper – wrote of the Swedish debt to Finland for their sacrifice for the north by maintaining a bulwark against Bolshevism, though it did not mention the volunteers.⁹⁴ The Finnish Civil War and revolutionary conflicts of central and eastern Europe had passed. After the right's victory in the so-called 'Cossack Elections', the fear of revolution subsided. Accordingly, the romanticized anti-Bolshevik heroes of 1918–19 vacated much of their contemporary relevance in the fascist imaginary as well. Nevertheless, the topic of the

⁹⁰ Account (*redogörelse*) of Eric Fock, 23 Feb. 1946, Stockholm, pp. 2–3 (pp. 61–60), SÄPO, P663, A1.

⁹¹ Police summary for Eric Fock, [p. 36], SÄPO, P663, A1.

⁹² Eric Fock, 'Finland: Lapporörelsen', *Vår Kamp*, 1 Sept. 1932, no. 17, p. 4.

⁹³ Fock, 'Kampen om Finland begynner! Nationalsocialistiskt parti bildat. Ringen i Norden sluten', *Vår Kamp*, 14 Jan. 1933, no. 2.

⁹⁴ 'Till det nationella Finlands 15-årsminne', *Vår Kamp*, 18 Feb. 1933, no. 7, p. 4.

Swedish Brigade was raised once more in 1935 in a discussion of the Åland question, in which Finnish hostility to Sweden was excused again:

The peak was reached in 1918, when an irresponsible government denied its support to Finland's fighting nation in its moment of destiny. Brave warriors in the Swedish brigade could not eradicate this stain of shame [!], which will cling to our politics for a long time...The loquacious punch patriots in the ranks of the right were missing in the fighting ranks of 1918's Swedish brigade, and one must not think ill of the Finnish nationalists, for not wanting to have anything to do with...democratic Sweden.⁹⁵

The point was reiterated almost verbatim when the twentieth anniversary of the Finnish Civil War came round. The NSAP marked the occasion with a commemorative article ('We should be ashamed') reifying the narrative of official Swedish cowardice and infamy, and glorifying the volunteers.⁹⁶ 'Whatever deeds of heroism the Swedish frontline fighters committed to distinguish themselves, it cannot wash away the stain...on Sweden's honour.'⁹⁷ *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten* suggested the scandal would be rectified through legal persecution in a National Socialist state.

The fascist appropriation of the volunteers as dutiful heroes remained, and they were in fact burdened with even more unlikely signification in the fascist imaginary, as they supposedly manifested a true Swedish politics against right-wing inaction and left-wing democracy, which had brought shame and dishonour to the nation. Their symbolic counter-example exemplified both a particular fascist politics and understanding of and relationship to Finland. Critically, the shame of betrayal and inaction in 1809/1918 was indelible: only fascist action could expunge it.

VI

Ancient Swedish-Finnish outpost positions have had to be given up. Ground that has been defended by our forefathers for five hundred years; ground for which Tsar Peter's Russia, in league with half of Europe, needed 20 years to take from us, has been forced from lonely Finland in the most shameless of Nordic peace [settlements]...One day the lost fortresses will be reclaimed. That is a decision, from which we will never withdraw.

'Vyborg will be reconquered!'⁹⁸

The symbol of the Swedish Finland volunteer was reactivated with the Soviet attack on Finland, December 1939. The Winter War inspired the organization of

⁹⁵ Md., 'Ålandsfrågan', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 13 Feb. 1935, no. 12, p. 2.

⁹⁶ 'Vi borde skämmas', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 29 Jan. 1938, no. 8, p. 1. See also 'Ett 20-årsminne', *Den Svenske Nationalsocialisten*, 9 Feb. 1938, no. 11, p. 3.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 11.

⁹⁸ 'Vyborg skall återtagas!', *Den Svenske Folksocialisten*, 11 Mar. 1940, no. 11, p. 6.

a volunteer effort in Sweden unlike anything previously seen in Nordic history. A National Collect for Finland and the Central Finland Aid were formed, and a committee for the recruitment of military volunteers. The state was once again formally neutral, and military volunteers were again enlisted by the thousands.

Two things stand out in Swedish fascist involvement in the Finno-Soviet wars of 1939–44. The first is the immediate recycling of tropes from the conservative-fascist imaginary that were already present in 1918. The second is how this shared project blurred the boundaries between the fascist and conservative right, and even the broader Swedish mainstream. This point must also be seen in the context of the transformations SSS (as the NSAP was known after 1938) had gone through recently, as it now emphasized co-operation and unity, even outside the party, in a new bid to win relevance.

SSS supported the national volunteer effort, publicizing recruitment drives and urging members to donate to the cause. The Swedish Volunteer Corps (*Svenska Frivilligkåren*) received applications from 12,705 volunteers, accepting 8,260, just under 7,000 of which saw combat, with an additional 500 or so being taken up in Finnish units, and several hundred more in various auxiliary and support units. Among the volunteers recruited were also 727 Norwegians.⁹⁹ A considerable minority of the volunteers were veterans from the 1918 civil war.¹⁰⁰

The war entailed a fascinating development for Swedish fascism, as it suddenly became possible for SSS to align itself with the political mainstream. Naturally it did so in the shared language of the nationalist historic imaginary, spearheaded by Runeberg fantasies. One recruitment poster published in *Den Svenske Folksocialisten* (The Swedish People's Socialist) used a large portrait of Georg Carl von Döbeln (1758–1820), one of *Fänrik Ståls Sägner's* heroes, to encourage volunteers to help save 'a nation in danger'.¹⁰¹ SSS members were among the very first Finland volunteers.¹⁰² At their head was an important SSS functionary, the Finno-Swedish Gösta (Gustaf) Hallberg-Cuula (1912–42). A dedicated activist, soon sporting an eye patch, he was an excellent representative for the Swedish fascist volunteer effort. In a post-war letter to the historian Lennart Westberg, Lindholm noted that

Our Finland volunteers had quite a lot of Runebergesque national romanticism (*runebergsk nationalromantik*) in their spiritual baggage (*spirituell utrustning*), which helped them through many difficulties. And our foremost (and first) volunteer, Gösta Hallberg-Cuula...was as if cut directly from *Fänrik Ståls Sägner*.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Meinander, *Republiken Finland i går och i dag*, pp. 163–4.

¹⁰⁰ Gyllenhaal and Westberg, *Svenskar i krig*, pp. 233ff.

¹⁰¹ *Den Svenske Folksocialisten*, 1940, no. 1.

¹⁰² 'Svensksocialister till Finland', *Den Svenske Folksocialisten*, 23 Dec. 1939, no. 95, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Letter copy, Lindholm to Lennart Westberg, Rönninge, 24 Oct. 1977, p. 6, SRA, Sven Olov Lindholm's archive, vol. 5.

Hallberg-Cuula received a medal for bravery in January 1940, and was wounded in combat the following month. This very first of the Swedish volunteers also received praise and admiration in the conservative press, where his fascist activism was seen as a minor detail next to his bravery and idealism for a popular cause.¹⁰⁴ His treatment in the fascist and conservative press alike shows that this fascist volunteer comfortably occupied space in a shared imaginary.

The actual number of fascist volunteers for Finland, SSS or otherwise, is uncertain. For the Winter War of 1939–40, these must have been proportionally quite few. SSS membership had steadily declined after the failed elections of previous years and the party's ill-fated makeover in 1938, so that it cannot have numbered more than a few thousand by the end of 1939. Heléne Lööw has estimated their number at about 150.¹⁰⁵ We know a little more about fascist membership among the volunteers for the subsequent Continuation War (1941–4) fought alongside Nazi Germany during Operation Barbarossa. This conflict had less public support, partially because it was motivated by Great-Finland expansionism,¹⁰⁶ while much higher demands were placed on the quality of volunteers. Of c. 4,000 volunteers, only 811 ended up in the new Swedish Volunteer Battalion (*Svenska Frivilligbattaljonen*, SFB). Many of the volunteers were also veterans of the Winter War.¹⁰⁷ An official report concluded that c. 25 per cent of the units consisted of 'organized fascists', meaning predominantly SSS members – nothing if not a remarkable over-representation of fascists among the volunteers. Again, Lööw, relying predominantly on internal party documents and police estimates, puts the number of SSS volunteers for all Finnish wars in these years at about 500, with 49 killed.¹⁰⁸

The centrality of the deeply romantic Swedish fascist preoccupation with Finland and the joint struggle against Russia is perhaps best exemplified by the frontline organization founded by SSS members of the Hangö Battalion on 3 August 1941, two weeks after the start of Operation Barbarossa. The name of the organization spoke volumes: Sveaborg. Initially founded by seven party members in SFB, the group was within a few months expanded into a daughter organization of the party. Sveaborg was envisaged as an elite organization embodying the ideals of the party. True to its origins, it first included all Finland volunteers by default. Secondly, all activists of the party joined, if they fulfilled certain conditions like having fought in previous 'Nordic' wars (most likely the Finnish Civil War), had a record of continuous and blameless service, or were active military personnel with at least one year of service. During the war, local SSS branches had Sveaborg leaders assigned to them, ideally actual Finland volunteers, so that the significance

¹⁰⁴ "Den Cuulan visste var han tog..."", *Den Svenske Folksocialisten*, 17 Feb. 1940, no. 7, p. 4. Note that the title of the article is a reference to a line from *Fänrik Ståls Sägner*.

¹⁰⁵ Heléne Lööw, *Nazismen i Sverige, 1924–1979: pionjärerna, partierna, propagandan* (Stockholm, 2004), p. 36.

¹⁰⁶ Meinander, *Republiken Finland i går och i dag*, p. 200.

¹⁰⁷ Gyllenhaal and Westberg, *Svenskar i krig*, pp. 244–5.

¹⁰⁸ Lööw, *Nazismen i Sverige, 1924–1979*, ch. 1, n. 96.

of the Swedish volunteer effort in Finland was made even more overt in the party.¹⁰⁹ The organization remained fundamental to the party until its final dissolution in 1950. The spirit of Runeberg was alive and well.

Sveaborg exemplifies the centrality of war veterans, and specifically volunteers, to the symbolic order of Swedish fascism. Swedish fascism was an uncritical participant in the Runebergesque imaginary of Finland, and had always had an interest in the symbolic value of the military volunteers, who were reconstructed as proto-fascists. This project of symbolic appropriation came far too late to have any chance of actual success, but was sustained and reached its culmination in 1939–44, when fascists finally had the chance of sending actual volunteers to Finland. The Sveaborg organization made a specific fascist claim to the shared Swedish historic imaginary of Finland.

The Finno-Swedish far-right relationship was highly ambiguous throughout the twenties and thirties, caught between national chauvinism, race, language, and the romanticization of historic ties. The Finnish far right did not display much international reach into Sweden, with models like the Lapua movement and IKL having little discernible influence. It also speaks of the *weakness* of Swedish fascism – they provided very little incentive for far-right Finns to establish and maintain contacts. Insofar as Finnish role models were present in Swedish fascism, it was clearly the Protection Corps that circulated most prominently. Discussion of fascist *skyddskårer* against communism continued into the thirties, and remained an appealingly undemocratic and militaristic instrument for the counter-revolutionary agenda. This also points to Sweden's position on the periphery of a north-east Baltic paramilitary culture, centred on veterans' organizations and the wars of independence, which was a powerful political force in Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, countries that had lived through years of brutal ideological conflict in 1918–20.¹¹⁰ Sweden was not a site of such conflict, but Swedish volunteers created a connection to those sites. But in the final analysis, the ill-defined and diffuse ideas that came out of the nationalist conservative Swedish imaginary around Finland were much more significant for explaining fascism's links to Finland, and creating the military volunteer connection in the first place. While it is tempting to focus on the immediate transnational military connections, forged in 1918, as the site of Swedish fascism's relationship to Finland, the regional history ironically provides a more compelling explanation. This is an interesting contrast to how the connection between the transnational counter-revolutionary right and fascism has been conceived of elsewhere in the literature.

The fascist historic imaginary of Finland was essentially conservative, or there was a large grey zone between the conservative and the fascist imaginary. It was characterized by romantic idealism and a rosy view of the militaristic Golden Age of Sweden's Baltic-imperial past. Poetic representations like Runeberg's were central, as was the package of Russophobia and Carolingian militarism. Swedish fascists grew up in this imaginary, and fascism did not

¹⁰⁹ Police memorandum 'från SA till SVEABORG', [probably 1942], pp. 15–18, SÄPO, 2H1, vol. 22.

¹¹⁰ Kasekamp, 'Radical right-wing movements in the north-east Baltic'.

significantly alter it, even where for instance national socialist racism would give cause to do so. Those who broke with the old nationalist imaginary for a radically different race-oriented one were the exception, not the rule. Part of the explanation must be that fascists were much more entangled with traditional cultures and establishment institutions, and vice versa, than sharply defined historical categories imply. Fascism contained a great many conservatives, and much of conservatism was strikingly tied up with fascism and its antecedents.¹¹¹ Interestingly, the fascist conception of the past remained nostalgic, rather than either reactionary or particularly future-oriented. When it came to Finland, Swedish fascist temporality stands out as rather unorthodox, though it also contained plenty of the characteristic fascist monumentalism.

What *did* make the difference was the role of shame. While shame was an important theme already – symbolized by 1809 and Sveaborg – it was central, multiplied, and indelible for the fascists, and important for driving fascist mobilization in the East, in a way that did not apply to their conservative counterparts. For the fascists, shame was multiplied by Swedish neutrality in 1918, and again in 1939–44, separating ‘official’ Sweden from its proper destiny. Critically, while the efforts of the Swedish volunteers in the East were heroic and fulfilling a sacred historical duty, they could never be enough to eradicate Sweden’s shame. In other words, in the fascist imaginary there was a historically ordained ideal to protect Finland from Russia, from Bolshevism and barbarism, but which democratic Sweden could never manage: only a fascist Sweden could live up to this ideal. Fascism promised a solution to a historically compromised nation, to purify a legacy stained by betrayal.

Hence why volunteer veterans occupied such a central place in the Swedish fascist symbolic order, since they were laden with romantic and idealistic signification, across conservative/fascist imaginaries. They naturally also functioned as attractive conventional representations of fascist masculinity as an extraordinary military masculinity. Nor was it likely that the lionization of veterans in other fascist movements had passed the Swedes by. The myth of the counter-revolutionary veteran had been vigorously disseminated by the Italian and German, but also Finnish far right. Units like the Swedish Brigade were cast by the left and right as specifically anti-Bolshevik and counter-revolutionary, and many veterans did in fact end up in a variety of right-wing and fascist groups afterwards. The handful of prominent veterans in Swedish fascist politics can only have encouraged this myth. Active attempts at symbolic appropriation of the veterans, especially the brigadiers, were made in Swedish fascism throughout the period, culminating in 1939–44, when fascists could make their own symbolic (and insignificant) contribution. The volunteers were therefore an uncommonly potent symbol for Swedish fascism to which their sparse numbers were completely irrelevant. That should be an important gloss on how we understand the relationship between fascism and veterans in Europe’s transnational political networks.

¹¹¹ Ismael Saz, Zira Box, Toni Morant, and Julián Sanz, ‘Introduction’, in *Reactionary nationalists, fascists and dictatorships in the twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2019), pp. 8ff.

Military volunteers were a flexible and useful symbol for fascism, but their significance to fascism's transnational connections elsewhere should not override our attention to national, and regional, contexts, or assume these worked similarly to regions like southern and central Europe. The Swedish nationalist imaginary, with its deep historic roots, and emotive themes and symbols, most powerfully expressed by Runeberg, had an incredible mobilizing potential. Tangible transnational connections and networks could matter a great deal less than the imagined relationship between Finland and Sweden that was informed by this history and poetry, even as it was being shaped by ongoing violent ideological conflicts. In Sweden, the transnational fascist actor was also an active participant in the conservative nationalist imaginary, and cannot readily be extracted from this entanglement. If anything, it was this nexus of transnational political practice and nationalist temporality that so deeply characterized Swedish fascism, and the imaginary that drove many of its adherents to fight and die for Finland. Thus, with the help of the military volunteers, in spite of Sweden's neutrality in all the major conflicts of the twentieth century, a violent but redemptive fascist vision finds its way there too.

Cite this article: Kunkeler NDB (2023). Finland and Military Volunteers in the Swedish Fascist Imaginary, 1809–1944. *The Historical Journal* 66, 795–817. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000183>