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The political choices and outlooks of the Estonian Swedish national minority, 1917–1920

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ABSTRACT

The Estonian Swedish national awakening did not start until the turn of the twentieth century, but by the 1917 Russian February Revolution, it was well underway. This article studies Estonian Swedish political choices and outlooks in the period that followed: 1917–1923. As Estonia went through tumultuous political changes, the leadership of the Swedish minority faced the task of formulating and carrying out a political strategy that would safeguard their national interests. This article discusses how they did it, while also asking why the strength and influence of Estonian Swedish politics soon began to decline despite earlier remarkable successes.

KEYWORDS

Estonian Swedes; history of Estonia; national identity; political activism; minority politics

The end stage of the First World War and the early interwar period was an unprecedented time of state formation in Central and Eastern Europe. On the ruins of the defeated belligerents – Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany – torn apart by internal turmoil and enemy action, new nation states made an appearance.¹ In many cases for the first time, statehood was thus granted to peoples whose collective experience up until that point had been that of national minorities in multinational empires. Although not all of these so-called successor states went on to enjoy uninterrupted independence, it is hard to overestimate the importance of their interwar era statehood as a factor in legal continuity, cultural tradition and political ambition in the decades that followed.

Yet this triumphalist narrative, familiar to any student of what has sometimes been called In-Between-Europe (*Zwischen-Europa*),² conceals a plethora of further questions, not least in terms of national minority politics. None of these successor states were entirely nationally homogenous; they all had national minorities on their own. It would therefore be relevant to ask whether the titular nationalities, as former national minorities themselves, showed correspondingly greater understanding for the needs and aspirations of their own minorities? Were some national minorities treated differently from others and why? Did their treatment change over time? And last, but not least: how did the national minorities themselves engage with the process of state formation; what were their political aims and how (if at all) were they reconciled with their continuing minority status?

Such questions have not entirely flown under the radar. Below, when discussing the present case study, reference is made to relevant work by David Smith, John Hiden,

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Kari Alenius and Martyn Housden, amongst others.³ What I would like to do in this article is to contribute a further perspective to this ongoing conversation: that of the Estonian Swedish national minority. I will argue that a better understanding of the political choices and outlooks of the Estonian Swedes in 1917–1920 can add to our knowledge of modern Estonian history. But more broadly, it can provide useful comparative material for studies of the political successes and failures of other national minority groups elsewhere in post-imperial, post-World War I Europe.

Estonia and the Estonian Swedes

The Republic of Estonia was (and is) a successor state of the Russian Empire. It was formed in its former northern Baltic borderlands as a result of a series of cataclysmic events of 1917–1920. These included, most notably, the Russian February revolution of 1917, the institution of Estonian autonomy over the following spring and summer, the Russian October revolution and the Bolshevik takeover in the autumn, the declaration of Estonian independence in February 1918, and the German occupation that began immediately afterwards. It was first in autumn 1918 that the Estonian Temporary Government could finally start governing Estonia, but then only in the desperate conditions of the War of Independence, fought against the Red Army. Estonian statehood remained an uncertain prospect at least until peace was made with Soviet Russia in February 1920, and in some ways even longer.⁴

Why focus on Estonia and the Estonian Swedes in particular?

Estonia was amongst the most ethno-nationally homogeneous of the successor states that emerged out of World War I,⁵ meaning that the Estonians had perhaps less of a reason to accommodate minority needs and wishes. Yet Estonia is also known for perhaps the most generous piece of national minority rights legislation adopted anywhere in interwar Europe: the 1925 cultural autonomy law of national minorities. As a result, Estonian national minority politics have been studied rather extensively, not least by the scholars mentioned above and elsewhere in this article.

However, unlike the other numerically more significant national minorities of Estonia in the interwar period – the Baltic Germans,⁶ the Russians⁷ and the Jews⁸ – the political experiences of the Swedish minority have thus far largely escaped scholarly attention. With just a few exceptions,⁹ the only studies where Estonian Swedish experiences are brought up at all tend to be those explicitly dealing with the 1925 Estonian cultural autonomy law, but even there, the Swedes are accorded a passing mention at best.¹⁰ In other discussions of Estonian political history, including of its minority politics, they are only notable only for their absence.

This is a significant deficiency in several ways. For example, the recent debates on the applicability of the concept of ‘national indifference’ in the Baltic region,¹¹ could benefit from closer attention to what one author has characterised as ‘the poorest and most isolated ethnic group in Estonia’ along with the Roma (Weiss-Wendt, 2008, p. 99). However, where I think the Estonian Swedish case study could make its most useful contribution is in our understanding of Estonian national minority politics – a term used here with the deliberate ambiguousness of denoting both politics targeting the national minorities,

and the politics of the national minorities themselves. National minority politics is a politics of negotiation, involving the agency of the titular nationality, that of the national minority or minorities, and in some cases also that of international organisations (The League of Nations, in the case of interwar Estonia) and other states.

By looking at the way that the Estonian Swedes were treated by the Estonians, and, at the same time, taking into consideration what the Swedes themselves were aiming and hoping for, we can arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the context into which the better-known 'post-imperial' Estonian-Baltic German and Estonian-Russian relationships should be placed. Unlike the Germans and the Russians, the Swedes were in many ways like the Estonians – as they themselves were fully aware – and it is likely that without this fact, the celebrated 1925 cultural autonomy law would never have come into being.

Furthermore, several broader questions emerge out of this case study. How did other successor states deal with minorities who were NOT perceived as members of the previous ruling elites (like the Germans or the Russians in the case of Estonia), who were not victims of long-held negative stereotypes and persecution (like the Jews and the Roma), and who had national and cultural aims comparable to those of the titular nationality itself? What did these minorities themselves hope and aim for, and how did they accordingly influence (or fail to influence) the process of state formation? Did they play a role in its political life after the period of state formation was over? The story of the Estonian Swedes could provide some inspiration for further research.

Limitations of the study, sources and methodology

The earlier development of Estonian Swedish national identity and the formation of their national movement starting in the nineteenth century, while certainly not exhaustively researched subjects, have been studied before.¹² Here, they will be dealt with only cursorily, with a closer focus on Estonian Swedish politics during the run-up to and the earliest stage of Estonian independence. The cut-off date for this most detailed portion of this study is in autumn 1920, around the elections into the first Estonian parliament (*Riigikogu*). I would argue that at that point, as the first Estonian parliament began its work, a certain solidification of Estonian political life had set in, establishing patterns of party-political allegiance and structures of public authority that were to remain influential at least until Konstantin Päts's *coup d'état* in March 1934. The first stage of Estonian state formation – full of confusion, but also of political opportunity – was over. As I will argue below, this was also the time from which onwards Estonian Swedish politics began to decline, experiencing setbacks in the form of failure to influence legislation and electoral defeats. The exact course of this decline over the following years cannot be fully explored here but suffice it to say that the successes of the pivotal years 1917–1920 would never again be repeated.

My analysis of the evolution, significance and, ultimately, decline, of national-level Estonian Swedish politics is based on a range of primary sources including archival materials, newspaper articles and official publications (printed minutes of the proceedings of early Estonian parliamentary bodies). The source situation concerning this topic is far from good, not least owing to the destruction of the Estonian Swedish community and its archives during World War II, but some material nevertheless survives. Perhaps

most crucially, old issues of the Estonian Swedish newspaper *Kustbon* and some of the personal papers of Hans Pöhl – the undisputed leader of the Estonian Swedish national movement¹³ – provide the main source material for this study.

This article is a traditional study of political history, and while it does try to be analytic, it is not afraid of being descriptive. Perhaps most fundamentally, it is my conviction that the Estonian Swedish experience deserves to be better known for all the various reasons outlined above. A historian of marginal groups and phenomena is not entirely unlike a detective, reliant on locating surviving scraps of evidence in an attempt to reconstruct what happened and why. In the end, it is up to the court of the opinion of readers and colleagues to decide whether the endeavour had been successful.

Historical background and early achievements of the Estonian Swedish national movement

The Estonian Swedes were a small ethnic minority settled on the north-western coast of Estonia and the Estonian islands. By the early twentieth century, they numbered around 8000 people. The origins of the Swedish settlement in Estonia are obscure but possibly related to the depopulation of certain villages on the Swedish island of Öland in the year 1206, during the so-called Northern Crusades to the Baltics. The relocation of Christian peasants to pagan territories might have been a part of the war effort, meant to establish friendly presence in the contested lands (see Lindström, 2015).

It seems that the Swedish settlement early on concentrated in the areas that would also subsequently remain fully or partially Swedish-speaking. Sometimes referred to as Aiboland ('the land of the island-dwellers'), the Swedish-populated territories included the islands of Vormsi (in Swedish, Ormsö), Noarootsi (Nuckö, later a peninsula), Suur- and Väike-Pakri (Stora and Lilla Rågö), Naissaar (Nargö), Hiiumaa (Dagö), Ruhnu (Runö) and the north-western coastal areas of Läänemaa (Vik).

Our earliest surviving evidence of the Estonian Swedes being under special 'Swedish law' originates in the 14th century. Unlike ethnic Estonians who were reduced to serfdom under their German-speaking feudal overlords (the Baltic German nobility), the Swedish-speaking peasants remained personally free and could not be dispossessed of their land. However, their privileges were attached to concrete settlements, and could be retained only if people remained in their ancestral villages (Blumfeldt, 1961, p. 101). This was likely an important factor in ensuring the survival of the Swedish minority as a distinct, territorially delimited group.

Although serfdom was abolished in Estonia in 1816, the Swedish peasants initially remained unaffected, since they were already 'free.' However, the new peasant laws gave Estonians certain privileges, such as the right to participate in local government institutions and the right to establish schools, which the Swedes had never enjoyed. Consequently, they remained at a disadvantage, until a new set of peasant laws in 1856 equalised their status to that of the Estonians (Kranking, 2009, p. 16). This finally facilitated some important cultural and economic advancements, which ultimately led to Estonian Swedish national awakening. A landmark event for the latter occurred in 1873, when the Evangelical Patriotic Mission of Sweden (*Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsen*) dispatched two Swedish pastors to Estonian Swedish settlements. In the same autumn, one of them, Thure Emmanuel Thorén (1843–1930), founded a teachers' seminary

(Aman, 1992, pp. 43–82), which has been regarded as the cradle of the Estonian Swedish nationalism (Kranking, 2009, pp. 63–64). By the turn of the century, two Swedish schoolteachers, Thorén's assistant Johan Nymann (1859–1933) and Hans Pöhl (1876–1930), had formulated the Swedish national movement's political programme. This, as put by Nymann, was 'to unite the Swedes [in Russia], to make them feel pride in their language and nationality, to advance their spiritual and material well-being.' Some early successes included the founding of the first Estonian Swedish organisation, the Noarootsi Temperance Society (*Nuckö Nykterhetsförening*), which also served as a platform for spreading nationalist ideas, and the publication of the first Estonian Swedish almanac (calendar) in 1903. The almanac, which went on to be published for decades, was probably the first Swedish printed publication in Estonia since the end of the Great Northern War (Kranking, 2009, pp. 60–61; Nyman, 1971, pp. 10, 15–18).

Estonian Swedish nationalism, as it came to be, was similar to other 'diaspora nationalisms' (see e.g. Shanes, 2012, pp. 1–2) in that its primary concern was to make yet 'unconverted' Swedish-speakers identify with the Swedish national community, and to keep the Swedes from being assimilated by the dominant national groups (above all the Estonians, but also the Baltic Germans). The Estonian Swedish leadership naturally also looked to Sweden for both intellectual inspiration and material assistance. However, the circumstances of Estonian Swedish life in the Russian Empire were too different, and the Swedish interest in their small kindred nationality too limited for the Estonian Swedish movement to become meaningfully embedded in Swedish nationalism more broadly. The only exception to this were their close contacts with the State Union for the Preservation of Swedishness Abroad (*Riksföreningen för Svenskhetens Bevarande i Utlandet*, established in 1908), a major pan-Swedish organisation and the only grouping of Swedish nationalists with more than a passing interest in the Estonian Swedes. The State Union's material assistance was significant, if intermittent (see Kummel, 1994, pp. 231–232). However, the sort of radical conservatism and romantic nationalism that The State Union represented in Sweden was on the wane already by the early 1920s, doing ultimately little to make the Estonian Swedish cause more popular in Sweden itself.

The first instances of explicitly political Estonian Swedish activism occurred during the 1905 Russian revolution. In 1904, Pöhl had moved to Tallinn to work as a clerk of the Swedish St Michael's Church and the caretaker of Sailors' Home of Tallinn. The acquaintances he made in radical circles inspired him and another schoolteacher, Joel Nyman (1882–1961), to organise a few political meetings in Noarootsi and Riguldi (Rickul). Johan Nymann, who thought of himself as liberal, found Pöhl's speeches 'rather red-tinted' and was dismayed at his friend's 'social revolutionary' tendencies. Disagreements in questions such as the advisable attitude towards general strikes, or what to think of the reactionary Baltic German nobles, led to a split between the two men and thus also between the (so to say) radical and conservative wings of Estonian Swedish nationalism (see Nyman, 1971, pp. 18–19) – repeating on a micro-level the tensions that were characteristic of the larger Estonian movement at the time (see e.g. Raun, 1980).

Nevertheless, the split soon healed, probably thanks to Pöhl moderating his views. As Elmar Nyman points out, the Swedish national consensus thereafter remained rather moderate; not dissimilar to that of the circle around the Estonian liberal nationalist leader Jaan Tõnisson (1868–1941?) and his newspaper *Postimees* in Tartu. Just like the liberal Estonians, the Estonian Swedish leaders opposed Russification policies, supported

the use of mother-tongue in classrooms, argued for the establishment of new institutions of agricultural and trade education, and propagated the temperance movement (Nyman, 1971, p. 19). This shared horizon of expectations on part of the Estonian and the Estonian Swedish national mainstream would facilitate cooperation between the two movements.

In terms of further activities, the impact of the unsuccessful 1905 revolution was twofold. On the one hand, it led to a conservative backlash with many activists imprisoned, deported or escaping abroad. The latter included Joel Nyman who spent the year 1906–1907 in exile in Sweden (Nyman, 1971, p. 19). Further political activities were thereby impeded. On the other, although most civic concessions granted by the Tsarist administration in autumn 1905 were soon reversed, they did lead to some softening of the autocratic Russian system of governance and its anti-nationalist restrictions. More culturally oriented efforts could thus continue, which led to the founding of the first general Estonian Swedish organisation – and one that survives to this day – the Friends of Swedish Education (*Svenska Odlingens Vänner*, SOV) in 1909.

Initiated by Nymann and the Swedish-friendly Baltic German pastor Eduard August Maass (1875–1958) in February 1907, SOV's intended purpose was carefully worded as to 'work for the education and culture amongst the Swedish population.' However, the Tsarist authorities remained suspicious and the official permission to found SOV was granted only in autumn 1908, with inaugural meeting held in early February 1909. Soon, local chapters were established in all Swedish settlements, and their chairmen included in a central council. In addition, three members of the Tallinn chapter constituted the executive team, with the Finnish-Swedish pastor of St Michael's church, John Waldemar Gustafsson (1865–1941), as the Chairman, Hans Pöhl as the Secretary and the businessman and Swedish-Danish-Norwegian consul Erik Gahlnbäck (1868–?) as the Treasurer (Aman, 1992, pp. 247–250).

Although SOV remained under suspicion by the authorities, much was achieved in the following years in advancing Swedish primary and agricultural education, organising language courses for teachers, finding study opportunities abroad etc. However, shortly before Christmas 1913, when SOV had come close to establishing a Swedish agricultural folk high school, the authorities had had enough: SOV's headquarters was raided and documents confiscated. SOV itself was not banned, but the beginning of the war soon afterwards made serious work impossible anyway, as many of its members were conscripted, censorship strengthened and public meetings forbidden. The Swedish settlements also suffered, particularly Naissaar, which in 1913–1914 was fortified with coastal batteries and had its population evacuated to the mainland. A further reason to keep a low profile was the serious concern that the Swedish minority might be subjected to the same wartime persecution as the Baltic Germans, who saw their organisations shut down, public use of German forbidden and many of their leaders deported.¹⁴ The Swedes escaped this fate, but fear of repressions had a paralysing effect on SOV's activities (Nyman, 1971, pp. 26–27).

The beginnings of Estonian Swedish political activism in 1917

New, entirely unprecedented opportunities for Russian nationalities to take part in the political life arose after the Russian February Revolution in spring 1917. The abdication of the Tsar on 15 March and the installation of a liberal Provisional Government

immediately thereafter made it for the first time feasible for the national minorities of Russia to try to negotiate some form of cultural and political autonomy for themselves.

The Estonians did not wait long. A draft of Estonian temporary autonomy law was submitted to the Provisional Government already on 30 March, followed on 8 April by a major demonstration of about 40 000 Estonians in Petrograd. Largely under the impression of this display of mass support, the new law of the temporary administration of the Estonian governorate was signed off on 12 April. In consequence, the whole Estonian-speaking area (Estonia and northern Livonia) was now politically united, establishing Estonia in a modern territorial sense. Furthermore, the Estonian politician Jaan Poska (1886–1920) was appointed the Commissar (equivalent to Governor) of this united Estonian Governorate, and an advisory council, the Estonian Temporary Diet (*Ajutine Maanõukogu*) was elected on 5 June. This gave Estonia its first-ever national assembly with policy-making powers.

Unable to put on mass demonstrations, but nevertheless sensing a political opportunity, the Estonian Swedish leadership attempted to run their own auxiliary negotiations. Already on 25 March, a group headed by Hans Pöhl petitioned the Russian Temporary Government for Swedish linguistic and cultural rights under the upcoming Estonian autonomy law (Nyman, 1958, pp. 2–5). A similar address was also sent to Jaan Poska, pleading that ‘the Swedish race, be accorded the right to freely develop the Swedish culture and to make use of their native tongue in schools, churches and local government institutions’ (Nyman 1976, p. 6).

Pöhl and the others simultaneously sought to ensure the backing of these aims by the Estonian Swedish community at large. At a meeting of 30 representatives from various Swedish settlements on 15 April, Pöhl advocated the establishment of a permanent Swedish political organisation, which could negotiate with Estonian political parties and petition the government, ensuring the Swedes’ ability to defend and advance their vital interests regarding language and culture, as well as political and citizens’ rights. More broadly, Pöhl argued, the Swedes – ‘the indigenous population in Estonia and Ruhnu’¹⁵ – must participate in the regeneration of Russia and in the preparations for Estonia’s autonomy, and be represented where important political and social questions are being discussed. His proposal to establish such a political organisation under the name The League of the Swedish People in the Baltic Sea Provinces (*Svenska Folkförbundet i Östersjöprovinserna*, SFF)¹⁶ was unanimously approved (SE/RA/721030/~ /11: A summary ...).

The founding process of SFF was not dissimilar of that of SOV – Pöhl even reused what had been his original name suggestion for SOV. The difference, however, was SFF’s explicitly political focus, which meant that it now supplanted SOV as the most important Estonian Swedish organisation.¹⁷ Its establishment meant that the Estonian Swedes were now brought into the same fold as other politically active nationalities in post-Tsarist Russia, seeking to defend and advance their own cultural and political rights and to contribute to Russia’s political renewal. In a longer-term view, the early founding of an Estonian Swedish political organisation enabled Estonian Swedish politics to exist – at least for a while – as a factor in Estonian public life in this crucial period, and therefore to influence the course of Estonian history.

The more concrete Swedish political aims were decided at SFF’s constitutive meeting, held on 2 May. The political resolution that was passed called for complete equality

between Swedish and the other local languages (Estonian, Russian and German) in local schools, local government institutions and churches, and mandatory knowledge of Swedish by local government officials in the Swedish settlement area. SFF also wanted the permission to establish a Swedish folk high school, and a Swedish representative included in the coming Estonian self-government and in the Soldiers' and Workers' Soviets in Haapsalu and Tallinn. The economic aims included guaranteed fishing rights for the Swedish coastal population and distribution of land to landless Swedes. Most immediately, SFF decided to open a Swedish primary school in Tallinn, attempt to repatriate the population of Naissaar, and convene a general meeting in Haapsalu on 24 June (SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary ...).

At this general meeting, in the presence of what is described as 'numerous participants', Hans Pöhl suggested that SFF also start publishing a monthly journal to bring important information to all the Swedish settlements in Estonia, as well as to Finland and Sweden. Pöhl's proposal was approved, and Nikolaus (Nils) Blees (1883–1941) from Vormsi was appointed the editor of the new publication. There is also evidence of a new political address, sent in SFF's name at some point from late July onwards to the second Russian Temporary Government headed by Alexander Kerensky. While its contents are unknown, they were likely in the spirit of the political aims described above (SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary ... ; Description of the establishment ...).

Meanwhile, Hans Pöhl had been elected one of the 66 members of the Estonian Temporary Diet, which met for the first time on 14 July. In the indirect elections conducted through local parish and town councils, one member of the Diet was normally elected per 20 000 people. The Swedish minority were not even half as many, but for some reason – likely thanks to the Estonian politicians' unwillingness to exclude a Swedish representative, when the Baltic German ones were to be included – an exception was made and special 'Swedish seats' allocated in both provincial and county level elections. In Pöhl, the Swedes thus gained their first representative in what was to become national-level politics, while Nikolaus Blees took the seat in the county council of Läänemaa (Võru Teataja, 'Maa-omavalitsuse valimised,' 4 July 1917, p. 4).

Hans Pöhl's tenure in the Diet, where he joined the right-liberal Democratic group, was remarkably successful and bears evidence of his excellent personal qualities as a politician. He was elected a member of several important committees, and, on 13 October, appointed to the Diet's Council of Elders (*Maanõukogu Vanematekogu*), the executive-oriented branch of the Diet that was active also between the meetings.

On 7 September, Pöhl made a noteworthy contribution to the debate on Estonia's future foreign policy in face of the threat of imminent German occupation. He was amongst the few who immediately supported Jaan Tõnisson's idea that to avoid being annexed by Germany, Estonia should separate from Russia and instead endeavour to join some sort of a Nordic-Baltic federation of nations, which would hopefully ensure that its interests would be respected at the coming peace conference. In his statement, Pöhl suggested that the creation of such a federation, later known as the Baltic League, would indeed be feasible (*Maanõukogu protokollid*, p. 110) – thereby indicating SFF's support for the idea of a Nordic orientation for Estonia. This was the first time a public statement on foreign policy had been made by an Estonian Swedish leader.

Pöhl also attempted to achieve guaranteed Swedish representation in the Estonian self-government. On 15 October, when the Diet discussed future election law, Pöhl

proposed that the Swedish settlements be made into a separate constituency, meaning that a Swedish candidate would likely always be elected. The leader of the Diet, Konstantin Päts (1874–1956), replied that since there were several national minorities in Estonia, they would also need similar guarantees, making the law needlessly complicated (Maanõukogu protokollid, p. 184). Other requests for special Swedish rights would elicit similar responses in the future, highlighting the need to retain a level playing field for all national minorities.

In the meantime, no decision was taken in the matter, as attention shifted to more pressing issues. A day after the October Revolution in Petrograd, the Estonian Bolsheviks disposed Jaan Poska from power. On 26 November, the executive committee of Estonian soviets called for elections to the Estonian Constitutive Assembly and announced that the Temporary Diet would be dissolved. In response, the Diet declared itself the supreme authority in the country, after which it was indeed disbanded, and the Council of Elders had to continue its activities underground.

It would be fair to say that by autumn 1917, Estonian Swedish politics had been through an impressive spurt of formative development. Starting from humble origins in purely cultural activities under the aegis of SOV, the Estonian Swedish national movement under Hans Pöhl's leadership had succeeded in establishing their own political organisation, agreeing on both longer-term and more immediate political aims, and gaining in Pöhl a suitable representative in what were then rapidly turning into national-level Estonian politics.

The 1918 German occupation

The euphoria over the end of Tsarist rule and enthusiasm about Russia's future democratisation had significantly subsided by the end of 1917. This was the case not only because of the Bolshevik takeover in November, but also because of the imminent German threat to Estonian mainland, which had become acute after German troops captured Riga in September and the Estonian islands in the following month. As the future of the Russia as a whole and its Baltic provinces in particular had become very uncertain, the Swedish Estonian political strategy was to an extent reconsidered and its aims decoupled from the presumption that Estonia would continue to exist as a part of the Russian state. A similar rethinking of national aims took place at the same time amongst Estonian politicians.¹⁸

In January and February 1918, the first issues of SFF's journal *Kustbon* ('The Coast Dweller') were published. In a programmatic article on 14 February, Hans Pöhl stated that irrespective of how Estonia's future was to turn out, 'the Swedish population's aim will be cultural autonomy for the Swedes in Estonia' (*Kustbon*, 'Vår framtid', 14 February 1918, pp. 1–2), thereby introducing his readership to a term that would soon become important in the Swedish political discourse. It was unclear exactly which rights Estonia's Swedish minority expected to secure for itself, but for the time, it seems to have been interpreted as the right to freely pick one's political allegiance in the best interests of the Swedish national programme, established over the preceding months. No longer bound by the failed prospect of Russia's democratic renewal under its Provisional Government, the Swedish leadership cast its net more widely.

At some point, probably soon after the October revolution, SFF petitioned the new Soviet government in Petrograd (SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary ...). The contents of

this address are not known, but it seems likely that they related to the 'Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia' which Lenin and Stalin had signed on November 15 1917, proclaiming 'the right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state' (Fisch, 2015, p. 130). While this largely tactical move on part of the Bolsheviks was certainly not intended to encourage the separatism of tiny national minorities (see Housden, 2005, p. 229), it is not surprising that SFF would seize the opportunity to claim the right of self-determination even for the Swedish nation.

Estonian Swedish engagement with the idea of national self-determination is also evident in another, surviving petition, which SFF on 31 January 1918 dispatched to the Swedish ambassador Edvard Brändström in Petrograd. The Swedish representatives asked for the Swedish government's help in future peace negotiations:

Since we do not want to melt together with other nations, but want to remain Swedes, it is vital that guarantees be prepared for us and our Swedish culture now, when the fate of the Baltic Sea Provinces is most likely going to be decided for the future. In accordance with the right of self-determination that has been awarded to Russian nationalities, a unification with Sweden, Finland or autonomous Åland would be the most desirable solution for us, but, if such a proposal cannot be put into practice, our wish would be cultural autonomy (quoted in Kummel, 1994, p. 214; see also Alenius, 2006, pp. 310–311).

The political flexibility shown by the Estonian Swedish movement in this period – perhaps most explicitly expressed in their address to Brändström – was the outcome of highly uncertain times where few future scenarios could be ruled out. At the same time, such uncertainty allowed for a freer expression of the innermost wishes of the Swedish leadership, temporarily less constrained by the pragmatic concern of staying in the boundaries of what was politically realistic. The petition to Brändström thus offers a fascinating glimpse into what might have been SFF's 'actual' political desires.

In early February 1918, elections were held to the Estonian Constitutive Assembly, the parliamentary body that was to replace the Temporary Diet and put the ongoing discussions about Estonia's future on a more democratic footing. Pöhl ran as SFF's candidate on the list of a right-centrist alliance (Ristirahva Pühapäevalaht, 'Omalt maalt', 5 January 1918, pp. 3–4). However, this Constituent Assembly was never able to convene, as the elections were cut short by the Bolsheviks on 10 February, ostensibly due to the discovery of a Baltic German plot (see Kuldkepp, 2016, pp. 419–420). On the same day the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations ended in failure, sparking on 17 February a renewed German offensive.

In response to the German threat, the Council of Elders put into action its contingency plan to declare Estonia an independent republic. This was meant to give the Estonian leadership legal grounds of protesting against the German occupation and to facilitate some form of negotiations with the occupiers. On 24 February, right before German troops reached Tallinn, a three-man Salvation Committee declared Estonian independence and formed the first Estonian Temporary Government headed by Konstantin Päts.

The Estonian independence manifesto included the promise of cultural autonomy for the national minorities, probably with the most immediate intention of appeasing the Baltic German supporters of German occupation. Furthermore, three ministerial posts in the Temporary Government were allocated to the representatives of the largest national minorities in Estonia: the Germans, the Russians and the Swedes (Laaman

1964, p. 355). For the time being, however, such Estonian benevolence to the national minorities remained highly theoretical, as German military authorities soon showed themselves completely unwilling to reach any compromise with the Estonians. The activities of the Temporary Diet, the Temporary Government and all political parties – including SFF – were forbidden.

Nevertheless, the Estonian Swedish leadership persisted in their attempts to accomplish something for the Swedish minority in what now looked like a future German province. In April 1918, a delegation of Pöhl and four others was received by the head of the German military administration in Estonia, Adolf von Seckendorff. The Swedes handed him an address stating that the Swedes who had lived in Estonia for more than 900 years, were a ‘Germanic race’ and now looking forward to a future in which ‘Estonia, with the help of the mighty German state, is completely freed from all Russian political influence and the Swedes are allowed to freely advance their national and cultural aspirations’ (PAAA, R 21769, pp. 130–131). Verbally, they also raised the issue of the deported inhabitants of Naissaar and the status of Ruhnu, which had been returned to Livonia at the beginning of the occupation (SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary ... ; Nyman 1976, p. 7).

Through several intermediaries, SFF’s address eventually ended up in the Foreign Office in Berlin, where it was kept on file for possible use in negotiations with Russia, as evidence of the German-friendliness of Estonia’s Swedish population (PAAA, R 21769, pp. 128–129). Beyond that, it seems the visit had few consequences until the very last weeks of the occupation, when Estonian Swedish activities suddenly became a matter of interest for the occupation authorities (Tallinna Teataja, ‘Saksa okkupatsioon ja Eesti rootslased’, 5 November 1919, p. 2). This was most likely in connection to the attempts to establish the United Baltic Duchy (*Vereinigtes Baltisches Herzogtum*), a German puppet state comprising of all the Baltic provinces (Estonia, Livonia, Curonia).

Going against the wishes of the Latvian and Estonian majority population, this Baltic German plan to ensure permanent German control over the Baltic provinces had succeeded insofar as the ‘independence’ of their new state was recognised by Emperor Wilhelm II on 22 September 1918 (Laaman, 1964, p. 226) and a German prince, Adolf Friedrich of Mecklenburg, (1873–1969), had at the end of October agreed to be elected its head. By that point, however, time was running out. A meeting of the *Vereinigte Landesrat* – a German-dominated unelected Diet claiming to act in the name of the whole population of the three Baltic provinces – was convened in Riga for 5–9 November (Piip, 1966, p. 175). In addition to appointing the Duke, it elected a ‘Regency Council’ (*Regentschaftsrat*), as the Duchy’s first temporary government, and a ‘Land Committee’ (*Landesausschuss*), tasked with formulating the Duchy’s future constitution. In addition to Baltic Germans, Estonians and Latvians, the latter was meant to include representatives of the national minorities of the future state: the Swedes, the Russians, the Lithuanians and the Jews (Dellingshausen, 1930, pp. 341–345).

Since the *Landesrat* itself did not include any Swedish members, it seems that its leadership sought the advice of Estonian Swedish organisations to find a suitable Swedish person who could be elected into the Land Committee. Unlike the Estonian leaders of the Temporary Diet period who refused the dubious honour of participating in this German-led initiative, ‘the clerk of the Tallinn Swedish congregation, Pöhl’ was indeed set up as a Swedish candidate and duly elected at the meeting in Riga (Dellingshausen, 1930, p. 229, 341–345).

Of course, the Compiegne Armistice (11 November) was merely days away at that point, so Pöhl's involvement had probably no practical importance. Nevertheless, it was still a source of discomfort. An account of the early activities of SFF, found amongst Pöhl's papers, keeps entirely silent about the Land Committee episode. As for the visit to Seckendorff, it states defensively that had been necessary 'in a certain sense' (*i en viss mening*, later corrected to read *i många avseenden* – 'in many ways'), but the conduct of the Swedish minority during the occupation had been 'in all ways correct, Swedish, national and fatherland-oriented (*fosterländsk*) in the best sense of the word' (SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary ...).

However, what SFF's actions actually indicate is that even though Hans Pöhl was an elected member of the Temporary Diet and its Council of Elders, and a candidate in the 1918 elections to the Estonian Constitutive Assembly, the loyalty of the Estonian Swedish leadership to the young Estonian state was far from certain. Rather, they continued to use all available opportunities to defend and advance their 'Swedish' interests, no matter the current political regime.

Hans Pöhl as the Swedish national minister

The Estonian Temporary Government was able to resume its activities in November 1918, when the occupation came to an end after Germany's defeat in the world war. However, the forces of the Red Army had been amassing behind the country's eastern border and began their advance even before the occupation troops had retreated. Scrambling to organise resistance, the Temporary Government needed all possible support it could muster, including that of the national minorities (see Smith, 2016, p. 93).

Several authors have argued that the Estonian political elites probably realised that due to their limited resources and Estonia's own history of national repression by the others, they could not afford to be arrogant or egoistic in their treatment of the national minorities (Alenius, 2004, pp. 33–35, 2007, pp. 449–450; Housden, 2005, p. 228). The best example of this attitude was Konstantin Päts. Himself a member of the Orthodox religious minority, he was a known advocate of building a coalition of national interests, rather than relying on a narrowly ethnic conception of the Estonian state (Alenius, 2004, p. 39, 2007, p. 455; Smith & Hiden, 2012, p. 34).

The Temporary Government furthermore had to defuse dangerous separatist and annexationist sentiments, which included not only the pro-German ambitions of the Baltic Germans, but also the fledgling loyalty of the Estonian Swedes, whose preferred (if unrealistic) future scenario was still unification with Sweden (see also Alenius, 2006, pp. 316–317). Finally, the Estonian leadership was anxious to secure the cooperation of the retreating German forces, for which they needed to demonstrate that their German countrymen would be treated well in independent Estonia (Laaman, 1964, pp. 366–367). This concern soon led to a broader recognition that the handling of minority rights was important for Estonia's international reputation – not least in Sweden, which was considered a possible future partner in the projected Baltic League initiative.

In this climate of relative benevolence towards the national minorities,¹⁹ the national minister posts were allocated at the end of November. SFF put forward Hans Pöhl as the only Swedish candidate (SE/RA/721030/~11: Hans Pöhl's letter to Konstantin Päts, 09.12.1918), and in December 1918, he was duly elected and took office. Besides him,

the Swedish National Ministry (*Rootsi Rahvusministeerium*) also came to employ SFF's secretary Nikolaus Blees (ERA.1108.8.3: Blees's letter to Pöhl, 23.01.1919).

During its five months of existence, the Swedish National Ministry indeed functioned as an important link between the Estonian Swedish community and national-level Estonian politics and was probably rather important for winning Swedish sympathies for the young Estonian state. Instead of having to deal with new and unfamiliar Estonian authorities, the Swedes could in first instance turn to Hans Pöhl with their various questions and problems, which he then attempted to answer and solve to the best of his ability. As Pöhl put it in an informational dispatch sent out on 11 February, he was 'in all matters that pertain to the Swedish population in Estonia [...] always ready to provide information or help' (ERA 1108.8.99: Register, pp. 3–4).

Pöhl's most significant concerns included the evacuated population of Naissaar and the international status of the island of Ruhnu. He succeeded in getting appointed a special committee solve the Naissaar question (ERA.1108.8.4: Temporary Government's letter to Hans Pöhl 19.02.1919, p. 10), but no immediate solution was forthcoming. Meanwhile, Ruhnu, which had belonged to the old province of Livonia, had turned into a matter of dispute between Estonia and Latvia. Since Ruhnu's inhabitants were entirely Swedish, it was not necessarily obvious that the island, which for centuries had been administered from Riga, should in future be a part of Estonia. On 14 June 1919, the Temporary Government dispatched to Ruhnu a special expedition headed by the Swedish National Secretary Nikolaus Blees. At a meeting with the islanders, Blees read out the Estonian declaration of independence and, after making it clear that unification with Sweden would not be possible, Ruhnu was with the consent of the inhabitants declared a part of the Republic of Estonia (ERA 1108.8.4: Report ... , p. 46; Alenius, 2006, pp. 313–314). In this way, the Estonian Swedish leadership made an important territorial contribution to the Estonian state. Without their assistance in securing the 'self-determination' of the local population, the matter between Estonia and Latvia could well have dragged on for years.

During the time the National Ministry existed, *Kustbon* devoted much space to the printing of all sorts of regulations, notifications and official announcements from the Temporary Government and the Swedish National Ministry. This was another indication of the Swedish leadership's increasing integration with Estonian political life. It seems that following a low point of trust in the viability of Estonian-led state-building immediately before and during the German occupation, things had turned around significantly. At least under the short period that the Swedish National Ministry existed, the Estonian Swedish leaders considered their national future to be rather bright.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Pöhl's interviews for Swedish newspapers. After only a few days in his new ministerial position, he was appointed a member of a delegation that on 24 December set off to Sweden to recruit Swedish volunteers for the Estonian War of Independence. Pöhl's role was to be something of a public relations persona of the delegation: facilitating contacts with various officials and institutions and informing the Swedish public about the situation in Estonia.

Thanks to his efforts, several positive articles appeared in Swedish press about Estonia's struggle for freedom and the situation of the Estonian Swedes (SE/RA/721030/~11: Draft of Pöhl's report ...). It was also good for the recruitment effort to show that Estonians and (Estonian) Swedes were already fighting together against the Red Army, while Pöhl's

position as the Swedish National Minister was put forward as proof that Estonians had shown great benevolence to the Swedish minority. As he stated to liberal *Dagens Nyheter*:

That what has been the aim of our struggle – cultural autonomy – has mostly been achieved. Swedish churches existed already before; Swedish is now spoken in the fourteen Swedish primary schools, and Swedish is also used in the local government. We have full freedom of association, unlimited right to establish enterprises and so on. [...] The rights enjoyed by the people are seen to be well-motivated: the Swedes are an indigenous element and amongst of the oldest inhabitants of Estonia, an old, well-rooted race of farmers that wants to live their national life in the borders of the state – not an unruly or untrustworthy clique of emigrants (*Dagens Nyheter*, 'Estlandssvenskarnas läge', 28 December 1918, p. 1).

Elections to the Estonian Constituent Assembly

In spring 1919, Hans Pöhl and Joel Nyman were put forward as SFF's candidates in the elections to the Estonian Constituent Assembly, taking place on 5–7 April 1919. The most important tasks of this successor body to the Temporary Diet were to adopt the first Estonian constitution – including any clauses protecting national minority rights – and to pass the long-awaited land law, nationalising the large private land holdings mostly belonging to members of the Baltic German nobility. As the Constituent Assembly was elected directly by the people, SFF now for the first time needed to engage in campaigning and electoral propaganda and formulate a new political programme.

At SFF's general congress on 22 March 1919, the two main questions put up to debate were 'the political situation of Swedes in Estonia,' and 'the cultural autonomy.' Nikolaus Blees explained to the delegates that since political parties with different views had emerged in Estonia, the Estonian Swedes – politically represented by SFF – also needed to take a stance in the discussions of the day. Concerning the land question, and particularly the issue of whether former landowners should be compensated for their requisitioned property, the view adopted by the congress was 'compensation according to circumstances' (i.e. in principle, but not necessarily immediately), a stand-point close to that of the centre-right Estonian parties. Furthermore, the congress decided that all land requisitioned in Swedish settlements should in the first instance go to local landless Swedes (*Kustbon*, 'Protokoll', 9 April 1919, pp. 21–22).

Regarding the other important topic – Swedish expectations for cultural autonomy – Joel Nyman proposed that the Swedes should attempt to secure a national minister post in future Estonian governments, as well as guaranteed Swedish representation in the parliament through the establishment of a separate Swedish constituency. Furthermore, Nyman presented several aims related to Swedish education and the public use of the Swedish language, including the introduction of Swedish lectures at University of Tartu, establishment of Swedish folk high schools and a secondary school, abolishment of schools with two working languages, and use of Swedish in local government institutions and courts. With small modifications, these were all adopted by the congress (*Kustbon*, 'Protokoll', 9 April 1919, pp. 23; 16 April 1919, pp. 25–26).

The elections to the Constituent Assembly also heralded the beginning of cooperation between SFF and the Christian People's Party (*Kristlik Rahvaerakond*), another new small party in need of allies. The two concluded an electoral alliance, and Hans Pöhl – the head of SFF – was elected a member of the Christian People's Party's central committee

(SE/RA/721030/~11: Hans Pöhl's letter to Heinrich Anniko, 1923), forming a personal link between the two organisations. In other ways, the arrangement was much looser: SFF was guaranteed a free vote in both the land question and Swedish national matters (Blumfeldt, 1961, p. 160), and full cooperation was expected only in questions of religion, i.e. religious education and the relationship between the church and the state (*Kustbon*, 'Svenskarnas plikt', 26 March 1919, pp. 13–14).

Kustbon was also used for election propaganda, as there was a reason to be concerned about the political sympathies of the rural Swedish voters. At a time when much of the landless population had been influenced by left-wing promises of land and peace, it was not altogether obvious that they would vote for the rather conservative alliance of SFF and Christian People's Party. Furthermore, collaboration with an Estonian party was itself seen with some suspicion. For its part, *Kustbon* assured prospective voters that SFF's candidates would stand up for Swedish interests, that the electoral alliance existed only for pragmatic reasons, and that the Swedish movement had not been hijacked by party politics (*Kustbon*, 'Upprop', 19 February 1919, p. 12). Even after the elections, Hans Pöhl again had to insist that 'we have not merged with any Estonian party [...] we want to continue without veering either left or right,' (*Kustbon*, 'Till landsmännen!', 23 July 1919, p. 57) while Nikolaus Blees emphasised that *Kustbon* keeps to the programme of SFF and only 'unwillingly occupies itself with the party political questions of the day and has all the time and in general been impartial' (*Kustbon*, 'Vår standpunkt', 27 August 1919, p. 73).

These arguments point to an increasingly serious problem for SFF. While it had been very successful as an organisation formulating and expressing the political wishes of the Estonian Swedish minority in times of tumultuous political change, it was rapidly becoming less effective in conditions of democratic normalisation, with the numerical strength of its electoral base becoming a primary determining factor in its success. Only by getting nearly every Swedish vote in Estonia could it hope to remain relevant, but members of the Estonian Swedish community, just like anyone else, held various political views and could well vote for another political party. The alternative idea – to reject democratisation – was impossible because of the liberal character of Estonian Swedish nationalism. It was thus unclear whether the ambition to represent the national interests of the whole Estonian Swedish community would remain compatible with a public life dominated by political parties. Would a national cohesion ticket be enough to override political fragmentation?

The short-term solution was to frame the situation as an emergency that required national consolidation. Nikolaus Blees declared that at these elections, it would be decided 'whether our people will be lucky or unlucky, whether they will show themselves capable of preserving their ancestral language and noble mindset, or whether they will slowly disappear.' He also put in a word of warning against the other parties tempting the Swedish voters, asking whether 'those, who are now so eager to collect votes against our Swedish champions,' had previously 'done anything for the Swedish people' (*Kustbon*, 'Svenskarnas plikt', 26 March 1919, pp. 13–14).

In spite of such concerns, Hans Pöhl was duly elected to the Constituent Assembly with results that according to *Kustbon* were 'extremely good' (*Kustbon*, 'Svenska-Estland', 9 April 1919, p. 23).

Hans Pöhl in the Estonian Constituent Assembly

As the Constitutive Assembly convened on 23 April 1919, all temporary institutions, including the National Ministries, were abolished. This was the topic of Pöhl's first speech on 21 May, where he expressed a pessimistic view of the future of Estonian Swedes, lamenting the National Ministry's short lifespan and arguing that the Swedes deserved better treatment since they had together with Estonians suffered and fought for a better future (Asutawa Kogu I istungjärg, pp. 525–527). However, the representatives of the Estonian parties felt that the idea of National Ministries was not fully democratic. As Jaan Tõnisson put it, 'if the Swedes with their 8000 citizens had their own special minister, our Swedish countrymen would have more extensive rights than us, who we have 10 ministers per one and a half million people' (Asutawa Kogu I istungjärg, p. 536).²⁰

Nevertheless, the abolished ministries were to have a replacement in the 'National Secretariats' (*Rahvussekretariaat*) dealing with mostly the same issues. A long discussion followed over which institution these should be subordinated to, with Hans Pöhl and other national minority representatives arguing that they should be attached to the government itself (Asutawa Kogu I istungjärg, pp. 783–788, 817–823, 878–894), which the other parties thought inappropriate. In the end, the constitutional committee settled on Ministry of Education, while giving the National Secretaries the right to participate in government meetings when questions of vital interest for the minorities were being discussed (Asutawa Kogu I istungjärg, pp. 1005–1008).

National minorities were thereby excluded from the highest level of political representation in Estonia. While the National Ministers had had at least the theoretical right to issue a variety of decrees and ordinances, the National Secretaries had to limit their activities to cultural, primarily educational matters (*Kustbon*, 'Om svenskarnas rättigheter', 14 January 1920, p. 5). However, the everyday work continued much the same, now with Nikolaus Blees in the role of a mediator between the Swedish minority and the Estonian authorities. Blees remained the Swedish National Secretary for the whole of the interwar period, while also being the Secretary and Treasurer of SOV, the Secretary of SFF (and later its Vice-Chairman) and the editor of *Kustbon*.

Pöhl also actively participated in the formation of the future Estonian constitution. Together with the Baltic German representatives, he was successful – by majority of just one vote – in including in it the famous paragraph 21, which stated that minorities have in their 'national cultural and welfare interests' the right to establish 'corresponding autonomous institutions' (Asutawa Kogu IV istungjärg, p. 903). Although this did not grant cultural autonomy outright, it kept it open as more than just a theoretical possibility. Hans Pöhl also managed to push through SFF's resolution that requisitioned land in the Swedish settlements would in the first instance be distributed to landless Swedes (Blumfeldt, 1961, p. 161).

In summary, the Constituent Assembly led to several disappointments for the Estonian Swedes: National Secretariats did not fully replace the National Ministries, and no guarantee was achieved for the future representation of Swedes in the Estonian parliament. At the same time, the Estonian majority parties still showed enough understanding of the wishes of the national minorities, with the 1920 constitution guaranteeing the larger minorities their own National Secretaries, cultural rights in areas where they constituted majority of the population, and at least the promise of cultural autonomy. Together

with representatives of other national minorities, the Swedish leadership was still pushing well above its strength, but not for that much longer.

Elections to the first Estonian Parliament

After the Constituent Assembly had passed the land law and the permanent constitution, it was time for elections to the first Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) for the mandate period 1921–1923. Ahead of elections on 27–29 November 1920, the Swedish leadership again had to take a stance on the issues of the day, which were now increasingly many and diverse (*Kustbon*, 'De stundande valen', 15 September 1920, p. 99).

However, SFF's main interest remained in the 'national' questions: 'our language rights, our schools, our community unified on our turf, not spread out and mixed in with foreign nationalities, which is our death' (*Kustbon*, 'De stundande valen', 15 September 1920, p. 99). More concretely, it was argued that while certain guarantees of linguistic and cultural rights had been achieved, it was now time to make sure that these were fulfilled. Problems had also become apparent with enactment of the land law in the Swedish settlements and the Naissaar question still remained unsolved (*Kustbon*, 'Våra närmaste uppgifter', 22 September 1920, p. 101).

SFF continued their alliance with the Christian People's Party and *Kustbon* was used to print electoral propaganda in much the same spirit as before. Again, it was emphasised that the electoral alliance had only limited significance, and warnings were issued against 'foreign voices' (i.e. Estonian left-wing parties), trying to tempt Swedes 'over to their side.' *Kustbon* asked:

Do you not want to have your own little farmstead, do you not want to preserve your Swedish language and religious education in our schools? How could you then think of something as foolish as to vote for a party that opposes all such things. No, we, the Swedes, know what we want. We will formulate a firm programme, which we demand that our elected representatives put into practice. They are willing to do everything that we demand. This, we have already seen. How could we then think of something as foolish as to turn to strangers, if we have our own reliable men, who we always, in all times, turn to, when we have something on our hearts. At least no sensible Swede would ever do that (*Kustbon*, 'Till våra svenska väljare', 27 October 1920, p. 113).

By appealing to the 'Swedishness' of the voters, the rather right-wing alliance of SFF and Christian People's Party was thus presented as something of a Swedish national consensus. However, SFF's track record now explicitly came under criticism from voices even further to the right. Interestingly, their views were given a public platform in *Kustbon*, possibly with the intention of defusing this type of critique.

Writing under the title 'We demand,' signature M. K. argued that the leading men of the Estonian Swedes, while 'hoping' for various improvements to the circumstances of the Swedes (the distribution of land, Swedish schools, a National Secretariat and so on), had not actually served the vital security needs of their people, because 'as long as we do not stop Estonian immigration into Swedish settlements, we have no national security.' Therefore, Estonian Swedish politics had to be rethought, with politically autonomous Aiboland as the main goal (*Kustbon*, 'Vi fordra', 3 March 1920, p. 29; Alenius, 2006, pp. 314–315). A few weeks later, the same author called for the convening of 'Aibolands landsting' which he envisioned as the institution of highest Estonian Swedish political

authority, with Åland's Diet and its pro-Swedish separatist campaign as a shining example (*Kustbon*, 'Åbolands landsting', 14 April 1920, pp. 49–50).

In a reply to M. K., Hans Pöhl unequivocally stated that all Estonian Swedes belong under the authority of SFF, which is a 'national association', to which are attached the Swedish National Secretariat and a representative in the Constituent Assembly (*Kustbon*, 'Vår nationella organisation', 10 March 1920, p. 34). Blees added in a somewhat more conciliatory tone that even the Baltic Germans, numbering about 50 000, had not achieved political autonomy. The Swedes were certainly far too few for this to be possible, and as a nation of farmers and fishermen perhaps not even mature enough. Their settlements were also supposedly too isolated and spread out to be able to be governed from one central point, and the population was mixed with Estonians (*Kustbon*, 'Vårt närmaste mål', 17 March 1920, p. 37).

Hans Pöhl tenure in the first Estonian Parliament and the decline of Estonian Swedish politics

Despite signs of brewing political controversy, the 1920 national elections were again a success for SFF, and Hans Pöhl was duly elected to the first Estonian Parliament, which had its first meeting on 4 January 1921. His activities as an MP came to be increasingly focused on collaboration with other national minority representatives, particularly the Baltic Germans. Most importantly, they worked together on the first draft for the Estonian cultural autonomy law that was meant to give substance to the previous year's constitutional declaration of minority rights. However, the discussions over the draft dragged on, with the Estonian parties' benevolence towards their national minorities seemingly running out, and the law failed to pass before the parliament was dissolved in 1923 (Nyman, 1976, pp. 8–9; Garleff, 1978, p. 90). When the law eventually did pass in a modified form in 1925, it happened without Pöhl's involvement, since SFF's subsequent two electoral campaigns in 1923 and 1926 both ended in failure due to SFF's inability to mobilise enough Swedish voters. In 1926, the problem was made worse by disadvantageous changes to the Estonian electoral law (Kuldkepp, 2011, pp. 250–256).

The parliamentary elections of 1920 therefore remained the last victory in the remarkable streak of Swedish successes that had begun in 1917. In hindsight, this success was tarnished by some setbacks already in 1919; particularly the abolition of the Swedish National Ministry. Pöhl's experience as an MP in the first Estonian parliament in 1920–1923 was characterised by further disappointments in the dilatory tactics of the Estonian parties, seemingly unwilling to make good of their constitutional promise to the minorities. Instead, Pöhl had come to increasingly focus on working with the Baltic German representatives, who were widely seen as defending the interests of the traditional societal elites in Estonia (Kuldkepp, 2011, pp. 246–250).

This inter-minority cooperation set an example for the future and encouraged those voices who had already cautioned against over-reliance on the benevolence of the Estonians. Signature M. K. who in the previous year had made a case for Åboland's national security, now called for 'cooperation with the other national minorities of the country in order to achieve Swedish local autonomy' as a possible way forward (*Kustbon*, 'Svenska krav', 15 February 1923, pp. 14–15). Combined with parliamentary disappointments, such rhetoric undermined the alliance between the Estonian Swedish leadership and

moderate Estonian politicians that had existed already in 1917, and, after the partial exception of the 1918 German occupation, again from autumn 1918 onwards.

However, the Swedish predicament was more serious than simply frustration with Estonian political parties and their diminishing willingness to accommodate national minority interests. A deeper, structural problem was the political fracturing of the Swedish community. SFF would have liked to constitute the political wing of the Estonian Swedish national movement, representing the national interests of the whole of the Swedish population. However, the politicisation of the Swedish voter base, visible already during the electoral campaign in 1920, highlighted their probably unavoidable failure not to alienate at least some of the possible voters. SFF therefore increasingly came to lose its broader 'national' role and become more like one political party amongst others. This was particularly the case during the election campaigns, when SFF was at its most visible to the Swedish electorate. Compounded with stricter Estonian electoral laws and probably some turnout-hindering 'national indifference' on the part of potential voters, it soon became very hard for them to cross the electoral threshold again.

The Baltic German parties in the Baltic states faced a similar problem, even though they represented a more numerous national minority and could therefore afford to lose at least some votes. In Latvia, a special umbrella organisation was set up to coordinate the messaging between different political groupings and prevent the splitting of the German vote. In Estonia, such troubles experienced by both the Baltic German party and SFF eventually led to the formation of a German-Swedish electoral alliance in 1929 and Hans Pöhl's final tenure in the Estonian parliament before his death in 1930 (Garleff, 1978, pp. 85, 88–89). How this was achieved and how SFF struggled to remain relevant between 1920 and 1929 is a topic worthy of further research.

Finally, it is notable how the number of political notices and articles in *Kustbon* decreased significantly in the years after 1920. To an extent, this can be interpreted as a sign of normalisation after years of turbulence and political struggle, but probably should not be regarded as an indication of any greater unity of opinion. More likely, those who disagreed with SFF's policies found an outlet for their views elsewhere, or just refrained from expressing them publicly. Ultimately, *Kustbon's* turn away from national-level politics reflected the fact that Estonian Swedish representation and participation in it was becoming increasingly unfeasible.

Conclusions

During the early years of what started out as an autonomous Russian province and became the independent Republic of Estonia, the Estonian Swedish leadership was faced with the task of formulating and carrying out a political strategy that would have their Swedish national interests represented and safeguarded. Taking advantage of the various opportunities afforded by turbulent times, their leadership managed this probably as well as possible in the circumstances. By creating early on their own political organisation, SFF, the Estonian Swedes were well-disposed to push above their numerical weight; not least thanks to the remarkable personal qualities of their leader Hans Pöhl.

The Swedes also found that their national aspirations were, for the most part, not rejected by the Estonian majority parties. From the decision to guarantee 'Swedish seats' in the 1917 elections to the addition of a section on national minority rights into

the Estonian constitution in 1920, the Estonian political leadership showed remarkable sympathy for – if not always total agreement with – the interests of their Swedish compatriots. As a small, non-threatening and generally Estonian-like minority, the Swedes enjoyed the goodwill of Estonians who themselves had been in the position of disadvantaged national minority just shortly before. Crucially, the Swedes and Estonians were fighting for very similar national aims, at the same time, and through the same institutions, both nationalities making a contribution to the building of the Estonian state.

However, the Estonian benevolence towards their national minorities was far from boundless. As Estonian statehood achieved a degree of consolidation, the very generous early political concessions that had been granted – the National Ministries in particular – were not turned into permanent institutions. Furthermore, even though the national minority representatives succeeded in inserting a section on minority rights into the 1920 Estonian constitution, getting the necessary follow-up legislation through the parliament proved to be an arduous process that was only completed in 1925, by that point without Swedish participation.

This change – if not in positive attitudes, then at least in actual policies – needs to be seen in the larger framework of national minority politics in Estonia, dominated by the strained relations between the Estonians and the Baltic Germans. This meant that Swedish politicians could play a positive role in moderating Estonian attitudes, but their aspirations (such as guaranteed representation in the parliament) could also be frustrated due to Estonian unwillingness to extend the same rights to Germans.

At the same time, Swedish leadership had also come to face an internal political problem. Already by the end of 1920, there is evidence of Swedish political consensus around Pöhl and SFF being fractured. Although SFF's own journal *Kustbon*, the only Estonian Swedish political publication, is obviously not a great source for criticism of SFF's policies, it nevertheless seems that already by the 1920 elections, the mainstream of Estonian Swedish politics had come under attack from both the left – due to their cooperation with the Christian People's Party and their generally right-wing policies – and from the right, due to their moderate and accommodating attitude towards the Estonian state, which meant that demands for real political autonomy had been shelved as unworkable. The almost unequivocal Swedish backing behind SFF and Hans Pöhl in 1917–1920, the years immediately before and after the achievement of Estonian independence would not be repeated, and national-level Estonian Swedish politics never again reached the same position of influence in Estonian political life.

Notes

1. For an overview of state formation in former Russian borderlands in these years, see Gatrell (2004, pp. 16–23).
2. See e.g. Nötzold (1998, p. 194).
3. (Smith, 2016; Smith & Hiden, 2006; Alenius, 2007, 2012; Housden, 2005).
4. For an English-language concise treatment of this period of Estonian history, see Raun (2001, pp. 81–112).
5. Smith (2016, p. 91).
6. The various studies are far too numerous to list here, but the current landmark publication on the rights of Estonian (and other Baltic) national minorities in the interwar period is (Smith & Hiden, 2012).
7. On the Russian minority, see (Alenius, 2012).

8. On the Jews, see Weiss-Wendt (2008).
9. (See Alenius, 2004; Alenius, 2006; Kummel, 1994; Kuldkepp, 2011). There is also an important unpublished doctoral dissertation (Kranking, 2009) and an extensively researched MA dissertation (Laidmets, 2005).
10. See e.g. (Smith & Hiden, 2012, p. 33, 112; Weiss-Wendt, 2008, p. 99; Housden, 2005, p. 233).
11. See *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 20:1, Winter 2019; and Special Issue of *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 48:1, 2017: *Baltic German Perceptions of Belonging in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*.
12. Most significantly in Kranking (2009) and in Laidmets (2005) (applying Miroslav Hroch's terminology).
13. For a more person-focused political biography of Pöhl, see Kuldkepp (2011).
14. About the repressions against the Baltic Germans, see Must (2014).
15. Ruhnu having been the only Swedish settlement in the old province of Livonia.
16. Later renamed the League of the Swedish People in Estonia (*Svenska Folkförbundet i Estland*).
17. This did not seem to have led to any conflicts between the two, as both were, in the end, run by the exact same small circle of men.
18. See (Laaman, 1964, pp. 131–141).
19. In terms of ethnic relations, Estonia in the early 1920s has even been characterised as being 'among most peaceful and tolerant countries in Europe' (Alenius, 2004, p. 32).
20. This is yet more evidence supporting the argument of Kari Alenius that Estonian policy towards the minorities had been most tolerant (or perhaps opportunistic?) in the first months of the independence, while the possible dangers of their autonomy had become more apparent by the spring and summer of 1919 (Alenius, 2004, pp. 35–36).

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