

# Proclaiming a “Swedish” Identity among Estonia’s Swedish Minority Population, 1920-1940

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## **Introduction**

For more than seven centuries, a minority population of Swedish-speakers lived in relative isolation on islands and along the coast of present-day Estonia, on the periphery of those controlling the region. The arrival of missionaries from Sweden in the 1870s reconnected these diasporic Swedish communities with their ancient homeland as well as with each other. In the following 60 years, the Estonian-Swedes developed increased connections with Sweden, established cultural and political organizations, founded schools, and regularly published newspapers and calendars until the arrival of the Second World War and the occupations by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. By the end of 1944, the majority of the Swedish-speaking population relocated to Sweden.

For minority groups in border regions, the intersection of domestic and international politics play a significant role on the development of a local culture, and the relationship between internal and external identification. The paper will explore the history of Estonia’s Swedish minority based on three components during the period of independent Estonia between the two world wars: the nature of their cultural development, the relationship between the minority and those in power, and the relationship of a minority to a distant homeland. The relationship between the minority and their ancient homeland over the course of the 1920s and 1930s would prove to be significant in laying a strong foundation for advocacy and diplomacy from Sweden when the region was occupied during the Second World War – in large part because those in Sweden viewed this population as connected to their own nationality.

## Inspiring the pan-Swedish Movement

In the 1870s, the Evangelical Native Land Foundation (*Evangeliska Fosterandsstiftelse*) in Sweden sent a couple of missionaries to Estland Province in the Russian Empire to increase literacy and attempt to train a few local Swedes to become teachers. This marked the start of more regularized contact between the Swedish-speaking minority and those in Sweden. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tourists and ethnographers from Sweden (and Swedish communities in Finland) visited Estland Province, believing that the isolated, rural settlements had preserved an ancient Swedish culture and language that had been lost in the urbanization and modernization of Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

Vilhelm Lundström, the central figure in the soon-to-be-developed pan-Swedish movement, first visited Estland Province in 1892, around the same time one of the missionaries was writing his memoirs back in Sweden. While missionary Lars Johan Österblom identified the people as wretched Swedes in need of salvation,<sup>2</sup> Lundström's trip left an awareness of the cultural and linguistic struggle for the Swedes in Estland, which he felt called for greater interconnectedness among Swedes. As he wrote in his 1930 memoir:

It was first Reval, Nargö, and Nuckö [Tallinn, Naissaar, Noarootsi] that would give my first sense of the national awakening... I saw houses where Estonians moved in and Swedes were wiped out, but I also saw others that preserved their Swedish dialect like their only great possession... But overall I saw poverty, ignorance, and an abandonment that left me hopeless.<sup>3</sup>

He found a community of Swedes that valued their heritage and held on to their culture and their language to the best of their ability, but one that needed assistance in that effort. The trip in northwestern Estland Province demonstrated for Lundström the need for a pan-Swedish movement to unite the larger Swedish community in supporting and preserving Swedish culture against competing regional influences. In 1908 Lundström founded the National Association for the Preservation of Swedish Language and Culture Abroad (*Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet*, hereafter referred to as the National Association), based in Gothenburg.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sigrid Rausing. *History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96-109.

<sup>2</sup> L.J. Österblom. *Svenskarne i Östersjö-provincerna och missionen på de Estländska öarna: Minnen från min 13-åriga verksamhet som missionär på Wormsö* (Stockholm: 1894),

<sup>3</sup> Vilhelm Lunström, *Allsvenska Linjer* (Göteborg: Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet, 1930), 6-9.

<sup>4</sup> The organization, still based in Gothenburg, changed its name to "Riksföreningen Sverigekontakt" in 1979. Although not a direct translation, the organization provides the name in English as "The Royal Society for Swedish Culture Abroad."

Lundström took particular interest in the Swedish regions of Estland Province, arguing that it was one of the most important regions needing outside assistance to preserve, protect, and further Swedish language and culture against the constant pressure of assimilation.<sup>5</sup> Lundström identified the people as foreign Swedes (*utlandssvenskar*), although belonging to the Swedish “tribe” (*stam*). In doing so, he placed the Estonian-Swedes at the forefront of the pan-Swedish movement of the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> While concurrent with growing racialized views of the “Swedish nation” at the early twentieth century,<sup>7</sup> stereotypical descriptions were also applied to Swedes living outside the Swedish political borders, and one can view some of these efforts through a lens of the foreign Swedes needing saving. In the decades to follow, the National Association played a vital role in connecting the Estonian-Swedes with individuals and organizations in Sweden. It also raised and coordinated significant financial resources for the cultural development of Swedishness across the Swedish communities.<sup>8</sup>

### **Establishing an Estonian-Swedish Identity**

Initially separate from developments of the pan-Swedish movement, the Swedish-speakers worked to develop their culture through religion, Swedish-language schools, publications that unified the Swedish-speakers in the region, a political party, and furthering contact with individuals in Sweden. They began regular publications, first with an almanac beginning in 1903 and later with a newspaper, *Kustbon* (The Coastal Resident). A cultural organization founded in 1909, the Swedish Cultivation Friends (*Svenska Odlingens Vänner*, or SOV) sought to unite the various communities, increase secular educational opportunities, further religious instruction, and protect Swedish culture against what they considered the rising threat of Estonian nationalism.

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<sup>5</sup> The Swedes in Estland and other parts of the Russian Empire also influenced another Swedish nationalist. Carl Sundbeck had stronger ties with Swedes in America, and will therefore not be heavily discussed here. Historian H. Arnold Barton writes, “Sundbeck had been deeply moved by the unshakable loyalty through the centuries of this ethnic minority, surrounded by alien peoples, to their ancestral language, religion, and culture. To him it seemed natural that the same sentiments must prevail among the far flung Swedish element across the Atlantic, especially if nurtured by understanding and encouragement from the old homeland.” See *A Folk Divided: Homeland Swedes and Swedish Americans, 1840-1940* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), 140.

<sup>6</sup> Bengt Kummel, *Svenskar i all världen förenen eder!: Vilhelm Lundström och den allsvenska rörelsen* (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 1994), 4.

<sup>7</sup> See for example J. Guinchard, ed. *Sweden: Historical and Statistical Handbook, Land and People*. Government Printing Office (Stockholm 1914) pp.146-150. Such views can also be seen in the ethnographic study of the Estonian-Swedish island of Runö by Ernst Klein, *Runö: Folklivet i ett gammalsvensk samhälle*. J.A. Lindblads Förlag/Nordiska Museet, (Uppsala 1924). See also Ernst Gordon, *Runö: Svenskön i Rigaviken*. Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, (Stockholm 1921).

<sup>8</sup> See *Ibid.*, 193-232.

Contact with Sweden strengthened as pastors and teachers from Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finland regularly spent years among the population, and as the National Association grew in size and influence.

The changing political circumstances at the end of the First World War provided new opportunities for the Swedish population in the region; the Russian Revolution led to the establishment of an Estland Provisional Government and numerous groups across Estland Province organized into political parties. Estonian-Swede Hans Pöhl felt a need to protect the Swedish language and saw an opportunity for political rights for the Swedish minority in Estland Province and he appealed to the Russian Provisional Government for authority to develop Swedish culture, protect Swedish-language schools, and protect minority rights within the region for the Swedes through a political organization. The Russian Provisional Government gave its approval, and Pöhl soon after formed the Swedish People's Alliance in the Baltic Provinces (*Swenska Folkförbundet i Östersjöprovincerna*). As a representative to the Estonian Constitutional Committee, Pöhl was an outspoken advocate for minority rights in the new republic.

In this revolutionary time, the Swedish People's Alliance established a Swedish-language newspaper to communicate, inform, and rally the Swedish minority, *Kustbon* (*The Coastal Resident*), which first appeared 1 January 1918. Like the political party, the focus was “for Swedes in the Baltic Provinces,” meaning Estland Province and the island of Runö/Ruhnu (which would later be incorporated into the Estonian state). Based in Reval with Pöhl as the publisher (“utgivare”), the participants were spread out across the Swedish regions. It was clear that the focus of the paper was to unite the Estonian-Swedes culturally, and not simply promote the political motivations of the Swedish People's Alliance. While officially an organ of the political party, from its beginning *Kustbon* focused as much (if not more) on education, agriculture, cultural, and religious activities in the Swedish communities. But 1918 was a challenging year. Estonia declared independence on February 24 (after *Kustbon*'s second issue was published), followed by the Estonian War of Independence. The third issue of *Kustbon* did not appear until eight months later on 25 October with a hopeful outlook: “Still the war is not yet over and the country's fate is unknown, but we have no reason for doubt, rather with a healthy courage we look ahead towards a bright future.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Kustbon*, 25 October 1918.

The editorial in the first issue in 1919 proclaimed their view on the purpose of the newspaper and the civic and cultural obligations of the Estonian-Swedish minority:

In the struggle for existence, solidarity is the greatest necessity. *Kustbon* is published to further this objective. It is to be a harbinger for compatriots out here – to remind us of our obligations, promote our political and civic rights, and according to our capacity contribute to the greater public good and our individual needs.<sup>10</sup>

Desiring *Kustbon* to play a prominent role across the region with widespread support and appeal, the editors encouraged participation from all the villages and always sought to increase subscriptions. While initial issues focused on political changes and articulated the political posture of the Swedish People's Alliance, the cultural and educational component of the Swedish-language newspaper dominated. As Nikolai Blees wrote, *Kustbon* should do everything possible to raise the Swedes “in spirit and in body.”<sup>11</sup>

The new Estonian state initially offered unprecedented minority protections (particularly as compared to minorities in other states that emerged from the First World War) and an environment for greater cultural development. The 1920 constitution protected minorities specifically in paragraphs 20 and 21. However, while the Estonian constitution considered all citizen equal under the law, in practice the interests of the Estonian majority took precedence in any nationality-based conflict. In the following two decades, no member of a minority held a cabinet position.<sup>12</sup> Loyalty questions concerning the Baltic Germans and the Russians largely shaped minority policies, although in contrast to other groups, the Swedish minority posed no such loyalty threat to the Estonians. The Interwar Period is largely marked by amiable relations between the Estonians and the Swedes, although minor disagreements certainly arose.

In the two decades that followed its founding, the editors of *Kustbon* attempted to use the periodical as a catalyst to strengthen a Swedish identity and create a united Swedish community within Estonia. *Kustbon* had a small-town feel more closely resembling a newsletter, with emphases on culture, education, language, religion, and politics, as well as advertisements to financially support the publication and announce deaths, births, weddings, and other events. *Kustbon* was also the primary literary avenue for the Estonian-Swedes, often publishing poetry in

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<sup>10</sup> Redaktionen, “Kustbon” in *Kustbon*, 10 February 1919.

<sup>11</sup> *Kustbon*, 19 February 1919.

<sup>12</sup> Kasekamp notes, “The minority parties never played an important role in the *Riigikogu* and were never invited to participate in any cabinet. Nevertheless, they were quite active in *Riigikogu* committees.” See *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, 20.

addition to the news content. The third dominant focus for *Kustbon* was connecting the Swedish communities to Sweden and the pan-Swedish movement, emphasizing their Swedish nationality.

The 18 December 1923 issue underscored the role of nationality of the Estonian-Swedes. The newspaper masthead was redesigned and featured a sketch of a small cottage on one of many islands. There was also a flagpole, and a Swedish flag proudly blowing in the wind. For those familiar with Sweden, it looked like a typical Swedish cottage out in the middle of the Stockholm archipelago - quite unlike the landscape of Estonia. Under the sketch was the phrase “*Varer Svenske*” or “Be Swedish” (see illustration 3).<sup>13</sup> There was no mention of the sketch or the artist in that issue; articles focused largely on the Christmas season, with poetry and portions of sermons, as well as the typical content of news items from around the region.

As a newspaper published by a political party in Estonia, *Kustbon* certainly tread a fine line. The editors and contributors long urged Estonian-Swedes to proudly proclaim their Swedish heritage, embrace the Swedish language, and to see and think of themselves as proud Swedes, but also promoted the idea of active participation and civic responsibility as citizens of Estonia, creating a dual identification for the Estonian-Swedes. The new masthead challenged that dual identification by clearly flying the political flag of the Swedish state, and providing no discernible connection to Estonia.

The Swedish flag and the “Be Swedish” text subhead only lasted that one single issue.<sup>14</sup> In the following issue, the basic sketch of the cottage and the base of the flagpole were the same. However, the top of the flagpole and the flag it was flying were absent, leaving it ambiguous whose flag it was flying.<sup>15</sup> The masthead replaced “*Varer Svenske*” with the generic statement “Newspaper for the Swedes in Estonia,” making it more in line with the dual identification of the community. The rallying call to “Be Swedish” did not completely go away, however, and periodically emerged in commentary in later articles, such as a 1924 article by Hans Pöhl. As a side note, the top of the flagpole and the Swedish flag returned to the masthead in 1944 when the

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<sup>13</sup> See *Kustbon*, 18 December 1923.

<sup>14</sup> There was no clear explanation for why the newspaper changed the design, either with the original 18 December 1923 issue or with subsequent issues that removed the Swedish flag.

<sup>15</sup> At the end of the Second World War, *Kustbon* reemerged as a publication for the Estonian-Swedes in Sweden, and used the same drawing of the cottage, adding a new Swedish flag in its masthead from 1944 until December 1949. In 1950 along with a redesign of the front page, the drawing moved to the second page above the editorial staff box, where it remains.

publication was relaunched from Stockholm for the refugee community with the tagline “Newspaper for the Estonian-Swedes in Sweden.”

*Kustbon* connected the Swedish minority to the larger pan-Swedish movement. More than a quarter of the subscriptions (accounting for half of the subscription income) came from abroad, as did the majority of advertisements in the newspaper. Additionally, the National Association provided monetary support, such as a 50,000 Mark donation in 1923 to cover budgetary shortfalls.<sup>16</sup> The National Association encouraged its local affiliates around Sweden to subscribe to the publication, seeing the publication as crucial in fostering and encouraging the Swedish identity of the minority. In terms of content, this connection was a two-way street. *Kustbon* included significant coverage of events of relevance in Estonia, but also covered news from Sweden, fostering among the Estonian-Swedes the idea of a pan-Swedish bond.

The Estonian government passed the Law of Cultural Self-Government and Nationalities (also referred to as the Cultural Autonomy Law) in 1925. While the law was heralded for going further in protecting minorities, it also required additional taxation, which the poorer Swedish community could not afford.<sup>17</sup> The Cultural Autonomy law received praise in the 11 February 1925 issue of *Kustbon* as a significant advancement in minority protection rights. The article commended the Estonians for taking such a step, but argued that for the moment the Swedes would be best not to take advantage of the new law to create a cultural council. The unsigned article stated, “For now it would perhaps be most prudent for us to take a wait-and-see policy, until we are economically and intellectually stronger and more mature for such self-governance; the basic rights in this new law are not lost, even if we do not utilize them for a long period.”<sup>18</sup>

Politically, the Estonian-Swedes were on the outside, with the Swedish People’s Alliance failing to get enough votes for a parliamentary representative, making them reliant on the Estonian government to protect their interests. In 1929 the Swedish People’s Alliance decided to split from their voting bloc with the Christian People’s Party and instead form a voting bloc with the Baltic Germans – a move that angered some in the Estonian-Swedish community.<sup>19</sup> Yet, the new

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<sup>16</sup> Eesti Riigiarhiiv: ERA.1108.8.19. See the letter of gratitude from Blee to Vilhelm Lunström dated 5 February 1923 (nr. 958).

<sup>17</sup> The Baltic Germans and the Jews established autonomous ministries under the law, while the Swedes and Russians remained under the Ministry of Culture.

<sup>18</sup> “Politiskt.” *Kustbon*, 11 February 1925.

<sup>19</sup> The coalition with the Baltic Germans caused considerable controversy among the Swedish communities, who saw the Baltic Germans as former exploiters.

coalition offered conditions far more favorable to the Estonian-Swedes. Although the Swedish People's Alliance maintained an almost decade-long voting bloc with the Christian People's Party, it never resulted in the Swedes gaining a seat in the *Riigikogu*. In contrast, the Baltic Germans, and Werner Hasselblatt (author of the 1924 Cultural Autonomy Law) in particular, ensured that one of the parliamentarians would be Hans Pöhl.

Pöhl's position, however, was short-lived. On 22 January 1930, the uncontested leader of the Estonian-Swedes and the newly elected parliamentarian died of sepsis. In one of his final submissions to *Kustbon*, to commemorate the celebration of Swedish Day (Gustav Adolf Day), Pöhl wrote that while the Estonian-Swedes were but a small portion of the larger Swedish family, and a group that has faced significant challenges, the founding of the Estonian Republic offered important possibilities for the population to develop their nationality:

If we remain faithful to ourselves, our race, our language, the future is ours... May we always, in connection with Swedish Day, feel the inner strength which is always there, that we are not few, spread out, alone, and abandoned Swedes but rather members of a strong, lively nation that can confidently look toward the future. May we all feel the uplifting thoughts and ennobling power of Swedish Day.<sup>20</sup>

In the decade after Pöhl's death, the Estonian-Swedish community splintered and floundered, struggling to find a suitable heir that could live up to Pöhl's legacy and leadership skills. Mathias Westerblom took over Pöhl's parliamentary seat, which the Swedes held until 1934. While in the parliament, Westerblom distinguished himself from other minority-population politicians by speaking in Estonian – in contrast, the Baltic German parliamentarians spoke in German and the Russians spoke in Russian in the *Riigikogu*.

Economic challenges from the Great Depression had an immediate effect on *Kustbon*, which had been on shaky financial ground since 1918. Blees referenced the lack of sufficient funding in a May 1930 article that recognized the important role of a newspaper within their community, writing:

No cultural work is possible without a modern newspaper. The work for the Estonian-Swedish culture suffers enormously by not having an effective newspaper at its disposal. The editor is the first to understand how insufficient *Kustbon* is in its present condition.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> H.P. "Svenska dagen," *Kustbon*, 31 October 1929.

<sup>21</sup> Redaktionen, "Den nya tiden," *Kustbon*, 2 May 1930.

Outside observers were also in agreement on the relative weakness of the newspaper. But they also recognized its importance for community development. In a letter to Patrik Reuterswård in the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Swedish consul Anders Koskull wrote, “*Kustbon* is a black sheep, which drains considerable money, but its continued publication should be a question of prestige, and one cannot think of discontinuing it.”<sup>22</sup> The National Association encouraged its supporters in the pan-Swedish movement to subscribe to *Kustbon* as a demonstration of Swedish solidarity with the Swedish minority in Estonia.<sup>23</sup>

The biggest challenge to keeping the newspaper in business was its week-to-week expenses, particularly as the cost of paper rose. By the end of 1932, continued economic difficulties led to the publishers’ decision to close the newspaper. They still saw the value of having the newspaper and regretted its loss, but saw no viable financial option. “The step is desperate and constitutes at the same time a deathblow for the work of ‘Swedishness’ with us,” they wrote, “because a people that lack a newspaper is like an animal whose eyes have been gouged out – it thrashes around helpless, however intense its physical strength may be.”<sup>24</sup> However, the pan-Swedish community abroad gathered around the publication, and minimal funds were found – although the budget was still tight – to allow the newspaper to resume publishing the following year.

### **Under a Nationalistic Government**

The next challenge to the Estonian-Swedish minority was not economic, but political. On 12 March 1934, Konstantin Päts staged a coup d’etat, consolidating power and pushing nationalized policies, bringing immediate consequences for the Estonian-Swedes that shaped the progression of their cultural development for the remainder of independent Estonia. The policies disadvantaged all of Estonia’s minorities, including the Swedish minority, on a political and educational level by instituting increasingly nationalistic policies that placed Estonian language and culture in a dominant position. While the Estonian-Swedes attempted to work within the new system, they increasingly turned to Sweden, both in terms of funding opportunities and work

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<sup>22</sup> Riksarkivet: SE/RA/230/23032 Beskickningsarkiv Tallinn, F1:51 Birkas. Letter from A. Koskull to Reuterswård dated 20 March 1931.

<sup>23</sup> See the notice encouraging support for *Kustbon* in the National Association’s newspaper, *Allsvensk Samling*, 10 February 1931.

<sup>24</sup> Redaktionen, “Till Kustbons Läsekrets,” *Kustbon*, 16 December 1932.

possibilities; conveniently for the population, the Swedish government and the National Society increasingly funded educational and cultural expenses. The Estonianization affected the Swedish minority most noticeably in their publications, religious practices, and their educational opportunities – all three of which were central components of their cultural development.<sup>25</sup>

Päts appointed Kaarl Eenpalu as the deputy prime minister and interior minister, which led to the disbanding of the Riigikogu in October 1934.<sup>26</sup> By the spring of 1935, the new government banned all political parties, including the Swedish People's Alliance. A consequence of the closing of the Estonian-Swedish political party was a prohibition against the continued publication of *Kustbon*. Despite the largely apolitical stance of the newspaper in the early 1930s, officially the Alliance had remained as the publisher, making it illegal under the new administration. *Kustbon* suddenly shut down.

There were quick attempts to salvage and reissue the newspaper. Nikolai Blees, the editor, obtained government permission and started publishing the newspaper under the name *Nya Kustbon* (The New Coastal Resident) as an individual, rather than the political party. But his move caught others in the community off-guard, and illustrated a significant split within the Estonian-Swedish leadership. Those on the other side of the split, led by former parliamentarian Mathias Westerbon, obtained permission from the government to resurrect *Kustbon*, this time with SOV as the publisher. For a year, a community that could barely support a single newspaper without significant outside financial backing suddenly had two competing newspapers, both arguing that they were the authentic voice of the community. By the end of 1936, Blees relented and shut down *Nya Kustbon*. He briefly, and publicly joined the editorial board of *Kustbon*, only to withdraw a few months later.

A second repercussion of the Päts government's nationalistic policies was felt in the Estonian-Swedish churches. In 1936, the government decided that all pastors in Estonia must be Estonian citizens; this measure clearly aimed at weakening the continued Baltic German

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<sup>25</sup> For an overview of Interwar politics, see Kasekamp, Andres. *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*. Palgrave Macmillan, (New York 2000).

<sup>26</sup> When the parliament reopened, the Estonian-Swedes no longer had a seat and were the only minority population to lack representation. At the same time, there were repeated visits to Swedish communities by government officials including Eenupalu who expressed words of support and appreciation from the community and their important role in linking Estonia and Sweden.

domination of rural parishes.<sup>27</sup> Yet within the Estonian-Swedish communities, almost all of the pastors came from Sweden; in order to remain with their congregations, the Swedish pastors would have to apply for Estonian citizenship. But to do this would mean the loss of their privileges with the Church of Sweden, and they were unwilling to lose their Swedish citizenship. Interestingly, the Estonian government ultimately allowed a compromise that enabled the pastors to remain on a temporary basis until several Estonian-Swedes finished their theological studies.<sup>28</sup> Such a compromise was surely a result of the strong connections between the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Church of Sweden; the Swedish archbishop had presided over the ordination of the Estonian bishop. However, it also symbolizes that the new policies were not aimed at the Swedish minority, and that the Estonian government was willing to make minor exceptions (so long as the Estonian communities were not negatively affected).

A third area affecting the Estonian-Swedes was in the area of education. Significant advances were made in Swedish-language education during the Interwar period; a high school opened, as well as a folk school and agricultural college. Funding largely came from Sweden, as did the instructors. In regions with mixed Estonian and Swedish populations, schools celebrated opening and graduation ceremonies in both Estonian and Swedish. However, during the 1930s in these ethnically mixed regions, Estonian took precedence, with educational opportunities in Swedish increasingly becoming restricted, even in areas where the Swedes were the majority. These measures sought to promote the Estonian language as the primary language and forced the Estonian-Swedes to assimilate into the majority culture, in some areas going so far as to even Estonianize names.

Instead of criticizing the new Estonian policies, the Estonian-Swedes more openly encouraged the development and continuation of their Swedish culture, particularly through the newspaper, *Kustbon*. The newspaper regularly encouraged increased cultural connections to Sweden and their Swedish heritage, particularly the strengthening of their Swedish language, while at the same time stressing the need for the Estonian-Swedes to overtly demonstrate their loyalty to and their role as citizens of Estonia. And they increasingly turned to Sweden for funding in education and healthcare. The National Association, and in particular the Stockholm division,

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<sup>27</sup> See Ketola, Mikko. *The Nationality Question in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1918-1939* Finnish Society of Church History, (Helsinki 2000).

<sup>28</sup> "Rikssvenska präster nekas arbetstillstånd i Estland," *Kustbon*, 16 May 1936, p. 1. "Ljusning i prästfrågan?" *Kustbon*, 28 May 1936, p. 2.

appealed to other organizations in Sweden (such as the the Swedish Academy, the Rotary Club of Sweden, the Swedish Red Cross, and even the Swedish royal family) and oversaw the distribution of funds. These appeals drew direct connections between the broader community and officials with significant influence and power in Sweden - connections that would later be vital in the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> In that regards, the feud between Blee and Westerblom brought greater oversight and involvement in the community from Sweden.

## **Second World War Repercussions**

The Second World War brought great challenges to all the people of Estonia. First the Soviet and then the Nazi occupations brought hardship and death - certainly topics that deserve far greater explanation than I have time for here. For the Estonian-Swedes, their focus shifted very quickly to Sweden. Already early on when much of the region they inhabited was to fall under the military base agreements, forcing them to relocate, they sought to argue a relocation to Sweden instead of the Estonian mainland. They argued that their reasons were not political, but that they feared relocation to the mainland would lead to a loss of their Swedish nationality as there would be greater pressures to assimilate. Mathias Westerblom, chairman of SOV, wrote in June 1940 to the Swedish consulate in Tallinn:

Regarding this Swedish folk group, that for hundreds of years faithfully preserved their national individuality, their language and culture, with such a turnaround now wish to emigrate to Sweden, it is not because of cowardice for the political situation or with hope for a more comfortable and carefree live, but rather in order to continue the struggle of existence as Swedes for future generations.<sup>30</sup>

These arguments resonated with the Foreign Office in Stockholm, and while they made no public statements on their position, they actively worked diplomatic channels for the repatriation of the population. Swedish Ambassador to the Soviet Union Vilhelm Assarsson brought it up at a meeting with Stalin, but while Assarsson presented the case on a nationality basis, Stalin viewed it as a labor issue, remarking that workers were needed in Estonia. However, the diplomatic efforts were far more successful with the Nazi government, which viewed the issue through their racialized lens, which was far more receptive to Sweden's arguments. About half of the Estonian-Swedish population relocated to Sweden on ships flying the Nazi flag in 1944 (children, women, and

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<sup>29</sup> Riksarkivet (Swedish National Archives) 730610, A1:1. Riksföreningen Sverigecontact Stockholms lokalförening: Estlandsutskottet.

<sup>30</sup> Riksarkivet, Beskickningsarkiv Tallinn, F1:12. Letter dated 30.6.40.

elderly); the other half (the men of drafting age) fled illegally, either directly to Sweden or by way of Finland. The Swedish government did all they could to help them arrive in Sweden, and their resettlement. And because they were viewed part of the Swedish nationality, King Gustav V intervened and put them on the fast-track for Swedish citizenship.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Estonian-Swedish community actively worked to increase and strengthen their sense of Swedishness, both internally and through connections to the pan-Swedish movement. Working within the political structures, they published their newspaper (which was never a profit-making venture), established schools, and worked to improve their economic circumstances. These efforts would largely have failed without the encouragement, and certainly the financial backing, of the National Association, the Swedish government, and the numerous individuals that were motivated to help their kin across the Baltic Sea. The struggles of the 1930s - political, economic, and even the feud in leadership - brought an even closer involvement in the community from those in Sweden. Considering the Second World War occupations of the region, these connections motivated the Swedish government to remain involved, and work for diplomatic solutions to repatriate the population. While initially reluctant, by 1944, they actively worked to repatriate and resettle almost the entire community.