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Exile and Migration (Sweden)

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Migration to and from Sweden has always occurred, but since emigration was larger than immigration, there was no need for immigration control. The outbreak of the war changed that. Although few refugees sought shelter in Sweden, immigration control was introduced. The authorities saw immigration legislation as something temporary, but it remained and even expanded after 1918. Although neutrality shaped the self-image of the country as a humanitarian outsider, the war also led to an increasing suspicion of “foreigners” and racist stereotyping. This article describes migration to and from Sweden around the First World War, with a special focus on immigration control and legislation.

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Migration to and from Sweden before and after 1914

[Migration to Sweden](#) is not a new phenomenon. Already in the middle ages, [German](#) merchants and artisans enjoyed political and economic influence in Sweden. Many languages were heard in the

streets of the capital of Stockholm, not only German and Swedish but also [Finnish](#) and Latin. [Dutch](#) and [Englishmen](#) influenced the second largest city, Gothenburg, during the 17th century. Migration took place within the kingdom of Sweden, which up until 1809 also included Finland. Finns involved in burn-beating (*svedjebruk*) were important for the forestry in Mid-Sweden, whereas French-speaking smiths, [Walloon](#)s, resided in the counties of Östergötland and Uppland. The newcomers had different backgrounds, ranging from farmers to the economic elite, and they contributed their skills and expertise.^[1]

Foreigners of a creed other than [Protestantism](#), mostly Catholics and Jews, were generally not welcomed in Sweden. This changed only in 1774 when Jews were allowed to settle in the country. The Edict of Tolerance was passed in the Parliament in 1779, and from 1781 foreigners of a different creed were allowed to practice their [religion](#) and were given some, but not full, civil rights.

The 19th century was the great emigration era in Sweden, just like in the rest of Europe. A total of 1.5 million Swedes sought better life opportunities, primarily in [America](#). During this period, immigration was small and consisted mostly of returning Swedes, but also of [Eastern European Jews](#) and farm workers from Polish Galicia.^[2]

The period between 1860 and 1914 is usually described as a liberal era when Sweden, like most countries in Europe, applied the principle of free movement and had no border regulations. The self-image of Sweden as a country of emigration, not immigration, naturally affected legislation. However, new research has questioned this one-sided image of Sweden as solely a country of emigration, arguing that this is only correct if we look at the national level. Taking into account the effects of industrialization on the regional and local level, another picture emerges. Sweden was not as homogenous and unitary in this period as it is usually considered. Industrialization required investors and entrepreneurs as well as money and technical knowledge, which had to be imported. Thus, historian Dick Harrison concludes that this led to a paradox: “while the country had a record high emigration, at the same time workers and capital was imported from abroad”.^[3]

In the wake of the First World War, immigration legislation changed and led to a halt both of emigration to the United States and [labor](#) force immigration to Sweden. The authorities viewed wartime legislation as something temporary. The perception was that when the geopolitical situation improved, restrictive legislation would no longer be needed and free movement could be restored again. Instead, the legislation lasted throughout the war. During the 1920s, the system was even expanded to include the issuance of work permits. At this point, the labor unions were in a position to influence decisions, and this had a further restricting effect that lasted until the end of the Second World War. Tomas Hammar has argued that the Swedish immigration control after 1917 followed the slogan “Sweden for the Swedes”, coined by protectionist groups with nationalistic ideas.^[4]

Refugees and Aliens Legislation

As already mentioned, Sweden considered itself a country of emigration and therefore had no need to control free movement, although there was an inner control on the granting of Swedish citizenship. These conditions were not exceptional, but rather characteristic of most countries in Europe. At the end of the 1880s, a mass emigration of Jews fleeing persecution and pogroms in Tsarist Russia occurred, but this did not lead to a refugee crisis in Europe. Michael Marrus argues that as long as the United States accepted these refugees, there was no need for European states to change their immigration policies.^[5]

It was not until 1906 when Russian political refugees started to arrive to Sweden that a restrictive control was introduced whereby the migrant was requested to report his/her whereabouts. Because most refugees decided to reside in Stockholm, a special department within the city police was established and assigned the task of establishing a migrant registry.

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914, measures were taken for the extended surveillance of foreign nationals. A special department within the police (*särskild polisbyrå*) was established under the auspices of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (*Generalstaben*) with the task of investigating espionage. Police officers from the city of Stockholm were employed in this mission. But in February 1918, this special police department was separated from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and instead organized under the Chief of the Police (*polischefen*) in Stockholm. Due to further reorganizations in the 1920s, the department's task was broadened to an overall surveillance of foreigners on a national level and keeping the records of the general registers of all foreigners residing in Sweden. The department was renamed The National Police Bureau for Surveillance of Foreigners within the Country (*Statens polisbyrå för övervakning av utlänningar i riket*). In its new national capacity, the Bureau was informed of permits given to foreigners.^[6]

Previous research has argued that Sweden followed a general trend in post-war Western Europe where the task of the Security Police shifted from surveillance of espionage to political surveillance in general. Historian Jenny Lankjaer has shown that Sweden deviated from this trend in practice. Instead, the Police Bureau already had an extensive political surveillance of groups suspected of revolutionary socialist ideas within Sweden. Thus, “the already existing surveillance of the labor movement merged with the surveillance of foreign persons”, Lankjaer concludes.^[7]

In the first decade of the 20th century, there were proponents in Sweden who demanded the regulation of immigration. These demands were founded in prejudice and fear, not in actual numbers of immigrants entering the Swedish borders. Sweden was not, as it was sometimes stated in contemporary debate, “flooded” by immigrants. For example, in 1910, less than one percent of the population of then 5.5 million living in Sweden was born abroad (around 50,000 persons). Of these, one fifth had foreign citizenship. Hammar writes: “The immigration from East Europe after 1904–1905 which provoked definite demands for Swedish immigration legislation, totaled a few thousand immigrants – partly Jewish merchants from Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, partly Galician farm laborers.”^[8]

It took until the outbreak of the war before these demands on immigration control were met. On 14 September 1914, the Deportation Act was adopted, which prohibited foreigners from staying in Sweden (*Utvisningslagen*, SFS 1914:196). The law stated regulations on rejection (*avvisning*) and removal (*förpassning*) for so-called unwanted foreigners, but did not regulate passports or other general rules of immigration. Thus, it was still possible for foreigners who were not specifically targeted by the law to travel to Sweden and stay or work within the country.^[9]

On 17 August 1914, the King of County (*länsstyrelsen*) was given the task of making sure that every foreigner reported his or her location, occupation, and employer. In 1918 the task of maintaining the central registry of these reports was given to the Police Bureau.^[10]

In 1917, a passport decree (*passkungörelse*, SFS 1917:552) re-established the request for a passport and visa for all foreigners entering Sweden. The police could refuse any foreigner who lacked such documents. The law of 1917 was sharpened in 1918 into a regulation regarding general surveillance of foreigners within Sweden. Foreigners had to carry a passport with a valid visa or a Swedish residence book (*uppehållsbok*).^[11] At the extreme end of immigration restriction, a group of Finnish soldiers who had fought on the Red side in the [Finnish Civil War of 1918](#) fled to Sweden and were [interned](#) in special camps in the north. Their numbers were small but officials feared they would stir up revolutionary sentiment in Sweden if they were allowed to move freely.^[12]

The Aliens Act of 1927 (*1927 års utlänningslag*) was the first coherent law which regulated foreigners' right to reside in Sweden. The first Aliens Acts were also introduced in other European countries as well as in the U.S. at this time.

Border Politics and Detention

As already mentioned, before the Deportation Act of 1914, no legislation restricted foreigners' rights to reside in Sweden. Despite this, there were cases when foreigners could be deported (*utvisade*), for example if they became a financial burden or if they were vagrants. In 1889, a regulation regarding deportations of the poor (*hemsändande av fattiga*) came into use. But already in 1861, a bilateral agreement with Russia made it possible to deport criminals and vagrants. Quite a few such cases regarded [Armenian](#) beggars, though researchers point out the randomness in the rulings in these cases prior to 1914.^[13]

The Deportation Act of 1914 gave the state (*Kungl. Maj:t*) the right to reject (*avvisa*) foreigners at the border if they were Roma people (*romer*/"*zigenare*"), travelling [musicians](#) (*kringvandrande musiker*), or beggars (*bettlare*). People suspected of [prostitution](#) or gambling could also be rejected. A foreigner already residing in the country could also be expelled (*utvisas*) on the same grounds. On top of this, the vague argument of "national security" could be invoked as yet another reason for expulsion.^[14]

Racist and Ethnic Stereotypes in Wartime

Tomas Hammar points out that group interests and racist stereotypes were reflected in Swedish immigration law. The Swedish labor movement safeguarded the interest of their members; this was perhaps most energetically done by the Swedish Musicians' Union, which actively worked to exclude foreign musicians. Swedish merchants targeted Jewish peddlers with explicitly [antisemitic](#) arguments. The demands for an immigration law were accepted by Social Democratic politicians, though antisemitism was not. Later, the same fear of immigration of Eastern European Jews influenced the first immigration law in 1927.^[15]

At the end of the 1800s, nationalistic ideas swept over Europe, and [nationalism](#) brought ideas of "one people, one language, one nation". As a consequence, the Swede became Swedish and the immigrant became "a foreigner" (*en främmande*). The nationalistic spirit pinpointed groups of "foreign elements" (*främmande element*), which the Swedish state wanted to get rid of. This referred to a heterogeneous group of people who could not support themselves or were criminals. But it also included groups, such as the Roma people and Eastern European Jews, for "racial" reasons.^[16]

Legislators most certainly saw immigration as a threat to the Swedish "race", and it was therefore one of the motives which characterized immigration policy from the First World War onwards. Other important motives were a wish to safeguard the Swedish labor market and also fear of espionage and criminals. "The threatening immigration was often opposed to the bleeding emigration", argue Ingvar Svanberg and Mattias Tydén.^[17]

The hardships of the war led to [food](#) shortage and this, in turn, increased racist and nationalistic [stereotypes](#) which varied depending on ideas of fellowship and enmity. While German soldiers were portrayed as "family", Russian soldiers were described as "others" and often as primitive.^[18] The war as such, but also an increasing suspicion of "foreigners", led to the need to find scapegoats, and Jews were often the targets. "The wandering Jew" was described as rootless and thus regarded as nationally unreliable. In the [comic press](#), Jews were depicted as "profiteers" (*gulaschbaroner*) and such attacks intensified in 1916 and continued until the end of the war.^[19]

The perception of "degenerated elements" was connected to racist and eugenic ideas, but mostly only after the war in the 1920s. In 1922, Sweden opened a national institute of racial biology at Uppsala University. The first director, Professor [Herman Lundborg \(1868-1943\)](#), argued in the 1920s that some "human races" were "deficient" (*undermåliga*) and that immigration should be controlled in order to prevent "racial blending". Amongst those who were regarded "deficient" by Lundborg were Roma people and Jews. Antisemitism was, since the beginning of the 20th century, connected to the perception of a "Jewish race".^[20]

The Swedish Emigrant Communities in Wartime

Due to Sweden's [neutral](#) status, no Swedes fled during the war and therefore no exile groups emerged. Certainly, there were Swedish emigrant communities in the U.S. and there are a few examples of Swedish emigrants who fought for the U.S. in [France](#), but they had not fled Sweden due to the war.^[21] Two other groups could perhaps count as Swedes in exile. One such group was the Ålanders (*ålänningarna*) on the islands of Åland, between Finland and Sweden, and the other was the so-called Estonian-Swedes (*estlandssvenskarna*) living in Estonia, but the latter group were not considered "Swedes" in Sweden.

The Legacy of the War on Immigration Control

[Neutrality](#) is crucial in understanding the construction of the Swedish self-image in wartime. For the Swedes, the war was an "imagined war", as Lina Sturfelt puts it, because the country never entered the [battlefield](#).^[22] Monika Janfelt characterizes the Swedes as "neither winners or losers, but outsiders", and this role as a small state that managed to stay neutral impacted Sweden's engagement in [international politics](#) in the post-war period when the Swedes experienced a kind of "humanitarian awakening".^[23]

The war put a halt to emigration and earlier ideas of free movement. When it came to immigration control, the restrictive laws implemented during wartime remained. Quite paradoxically, Sweden on the one hand engaged in international politics and [humanitarian](#) issues, while on the other hand increased its border control and restricted immigration.

After the war, immigration laws were even expanded and, in 1927, Sweden introduced its first Aliens Act. Its purpose was to protect the labor market and "the purity of the Swedish race". Although ideas of "race" became illegitimate in the public debate already in the 1930s, these notions continued to influence the actions of the Swedish immigration authorities into the 1940s.^[24]

Conclusion

Migration has always taken place to and from Sweden. The largest wave took place during the era of industrialization, where on the one hand 1.5 million Swedes emigrated to America, while on the other hand immigrants with special skills and expertise were imported as a needed work force to build up Swedish industry.

Sweden considered itself a country of emigration, and therefore there was no need to control free movement, although foreigners of a different creed than Protestant Christianity, for example Catholics and Jews, were generally not welcome in Sweden. When the First World War broke out in 1914, Sweden declared its neutrality. Following the actions of other countries in Europe, Sweden introduced new legislation in 1914. The Deportation Act prohibited foreigners from staying in Sweden and gave the authorities the ability to deport "unwanted elements". Further regulations were introduced during the war.

The demand for immigration control was founded in prejudice and fear, which had its roots in nationalistic ideas. Even though Sweden was never “flooded” by immigrants, the proponents of these ideas won out. Immigration was seen as a “threat” to the Swedish “race”, which motivated immigration policy from the First World War onwards. Although the authorities first viewed immigration legislation as temporary, it remained after the end of the war and was even expanded.

The concept of neutrality is essential when considering the legacy of the First World War in Sweden. Since Sweden stood outside the war, the Swedes understood it as an “imagined war”. This shaped Sweden’s self-image as a small state with humanitarian ambitions vis-à-vis international politics in the post-war period. At the same time, however, Sweden also increased its border control and restricted immigration.

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Notes

1. ↑ Previous research in this field is not vast, but two overviews should be mentioned here: Hallberg, Lars: *Källor till invandringens historia 1840–2000* [Sources to the History of Immigration 1840–2000], Stockholm 2017 and Harrison, Dick: *Alla tiders migration* [Immigration of all times!], *Kunskapsöversikt 1* (2016), available online: <http://www.delmi.se/publikationer-seminarier#!/alla-tiders-migration-kunskapsoversikt-20161> (retrieved: 20 June 2019).
2. ↑ Hallberg, *Källor till invandringens historia* 2017, p. 15. Statistics on emigration can be found on the website of the Government Agency Statistiska Centralbyrån (SCB, Statistics Sweden), see: <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/artiklar/2013/sa-paverkade-utvandringen-till-amerika-sveriges-befolkning/> (retrieved: 20 June 2019).
3. ↑ Harrison, *Alla tiders migration!* 2016, p. 48.
4. ↑ Hammar, Tomas: *Sverige åt svenskarna. Invandringspolitik, utlänningskontroll och asylrätt 1900–1932* [Sweden for the Swedes. Immigration Policy, Foreigner’s Control and the Right to Asylum 1900–1932], Stockholm 1964, p. 385.
5. ↑ Marrus, Michael: *The Unwanted. European Refugees from the First World War through the Cold War*, Philadelphia 2002, pp. 27, 39.
6. ↑ Hallberg, *Källor till invandringens historia* 2017, p. 33.
7. ↑ Lankjaer, Jenny: *Övervakning för rikets säkerhet. Svensk säkerhetspolisiär övervakning av utländska personer och inhemsk politisk aktivitet, 1885–1922* [Surveillance for National Security. The Swedish Security Police and the Monitoring of Foreign Citizens and Domestic Political Activity, 1885–1922], Stockholm 2011, p. 213.
8. ↑ Hammar, *Sverige åt svenskarna* 1964, p. 386.

9. † Hallberg, Källor till invandringens historia 2017, pp. 33-35.
10. † Ibid.
11. † Ibid.
12. † Näsman, Jan Olov: De röda Finlandsflyktingarna i Sverige 1918–21 [The Red Finnish Refugees in Sweden 1918–21], in: Den röda våren 1918. Finska inbördeskriget i nordisk samhällsutveckling [The Red Spring of 1918. The Finnish Civil War in a Nordic Context], Kjersti Bosdotter/Lars Ekdahl/Anne Hedén/Aapo Roselius (eds.), Stockholm 2018, p. 295.
13. † Hallberg, Källor till invandringens historia 2017, p. 192.
14. † Hammar, Sverige åt svenskarna 1964, p. 193.
15. † Ibid., pp. 398-400.
16. † Kvist Geverts, Karin: Ett främmande element i nationen. Svensk flyktingpolitik och de judiska flyktingarna 1938–1944 [A Foreign Element within the Nation. Swedish Refugee Policy and the Jewish refugees 1938–1944], Uppsala 2008, p. 49.
17. † Svanberg, Ingvar/Tydén, Mattias: Tusen år av invandring. En svensk kulturhistoria [A Thousand Years of Immigration. A Cultural History of Sweden], Stockholm 1992, p. 266.
18. † Sturfelt, Lina: Eldens återsken. Första världskriget i svensk föreställningsvärld [Reflections of Fire. Images of the First World War in Sweden], Lund 2008, pp. 210, 215.
19. † Andersson, Lars M.: En jude är en jude är en jude... Representationer av "juden" i svensk skämtpress omkring 1900-1930 [A Jew is a Jew is a Jew... Representations of "the Jew" in Swedish Comic Press around 1900-1930], Lund 2000, pp. 278-9.
20. † Kvist Geverts, Ett främmande element 2008, pp. 23-4. See also Ericsson, Martin: Anti-fascist race biology. Gunnar Dahlberg and the long farewell to the Nordic `master race`, in: Braskén, Kasper / Copsey, Nigel / Lundin, Johan A. (eds): Anti-fascism in the Nordic countries. New perspectives, comparisons and transnational connections, London 2019: Routledge, pp. 146-7.
21. † Fabiansson, Nils: Svenskarna i första världskriget [The Swedes in the First World War], Stockholm 2018.
22. † Sturfelt, Eldens återsken 2008, p. 362.
23. † Janfelt, Monika: Stormakter i människokärlek. Svensk och dansk krigsbarnshjälp 1917–1924 [Humanitarian Great Powers. Swedish and Danish War Child Relief 1917–1924], Åbo 1998, p. 61. For on the humanitarian awakening, see Sturfelt, Eldens återsken 2008, p. 54.
24. † Kvist Geverts, Ett främmande element 2008.

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