Borderland Swedes: Minority Politics and Transnational Identification among Estonia’s Swedish Population

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Governments use identifications of groups – whether it is state-determined or self-identified – in formulating minority policies, while organizations and individuals often use forms of identification in searching for areas of sameness. In both cases, the classification used affects policies and actions. Identifications based on language, religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, and citizenship create borders in society, but simultaneously offer opportunities to transcend other forms of borders. From the 1870s until the Second World War, Estonia went through four governments, each with its own form of identification – tsarist Russia, independent Estonia, Soviet Estonia, and Nazi Germany. For the Swedish minority living in a borderland, subsequent minority policies shaped the direction of their cultural development, but it was the transnational connection with individuals and organizations in Sweden, and later the Swedish government (although the type of identification shifted over time) that transcended political borders and had the greatest impact on the population's cultural development.
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In November 1925 in the northwestern Estonian village of Vippal, the local Swedish-speaking townspeople learned to their surprise that the local town secretary had classified them as Estonian. The classification demonstrates a disjuncture between the individuals’ self-identification and the local administrator’s imposition of identification of the townspeople in the mixed community. The townspeople learned of the disjuncture as a result of school inspectors determining that there were too few Swedish-speaking students in the area, and the plan to close the Swedish school; students would need to attend the Estonian school in the town. However, according to the 1920 Estonian constitution, the Swedish-speaking minority were entitled to receive education in their native language. Their classification as Estonian meant that they were not entitled to a Swedish-language education. In a letter to the Swedish Folk Secretary in Tallinn, Swedish schoolteacher Karl Hammerman wrote:

It is pleasant to see that they want to maintain their native heritage. They say the secretary listed them as Estonians without even asking them. When they later noticed that it was not correct, he told them that it was better to belong to the majority.2

Multiple factors influence the formation of a people’s identity. Cultural geographer David Knight’s concept of identity extends from the individual outwards in ever-increasing levels.3 Through Knight’s view, one can simultaneously identify with a village and an international community. However, by shifting the focus from identity to identification one can gain clarity in determining the actors classifying the population. This paper will focus on two levels of actors in relation to a minority population – outsiders, such as the state or transnational organizations (which can also be termed a top-down process), and the individuals themselves (or a bottom-up process). As the above example demonstrates, the two levels do not always agree. The fluidity on “identity” is one of the reasons sociologist Rogers Brubaker argues that “identity” is a weak term for analysis; the terminology used by scholars varies considerably, making the terms irrelevant in scholarship. He suggests greater clarity in the language of academics, suggesting as one possibility shifting from “identity” to “identification” or “classification.” He states, “Identification – of oneself and of others – is intrinsic to social life… The modern state has been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization.”4 Identification can be based on multiple factors, including religion, language, culture, economic and social standing, ethnicity, race, and nationality, to name just a few. Which factors are used influences the development of the group’s identity, and perhaps more importantly, how the state or organizations view the people and shape minority policies.

The history of the Swedish population of Estonia, particularly from the 1870s through to the end of the Second World War, demonstrates the interplay between self-identification and how administrators of the region view and treated minority populations. As the region passed through various forms of government minority policy shifted; absolute monarchy, constitut-

1 In Estonian, Wihterpalu. Throughout this paper, Swedish place names will be used.
tional monarchy, a provisional government following revolution, parliamentary democracy, dictatorship, Soviet communism, and Nazi-occupation all approached minorities from distinct positions with different categories of identification of the population. Living in a border region – on the islands and coastal regions of Estonia – the Swedish population also had ties to what they considered their ancient homeland, Sweden. Through this period, the role of Sweden changed from indifference to active participation in the welfare of the Swedes in Estonia. This transnational connection at times also influenced the minority policies of those controlling the region.

Minority populations are subject to those in power; governments can provide benefits or impose restrictions. Estonia’s Swedish community at times received greater consideration and exceptions than other minority groups, and arguably for a brief period greater consideration than even the majority population. A look at minority policies through the case study of the Estonian-Swedes can serve to highlight notions of minorities in society and shifting policies of assimilation or accommodation in terms of minority rights and protections.

Each government, and many of the organizations involved with the so-called Estonian-Swedes, had certain ways of viewing the population, using labels to classify the group – which Brubaker refers to as external identification. These labels included religion, language, culture, economic and social standing, nationality, and race. Complementing these labels, one can also look at the labels the people used themselves – internal identification – and in particular the different occasions one would use when communicating. For the Swedish population of Estonia, identification took on various forms; some of the labels were geographical, some linguistic. Labels include: Swede, “Estwede” (estsvensk), Estonian-Swede, “aibofolke” (a colloquial expression meaning island or coastal people), coastal Swede (in Estonian, ran-narootsi), Swedish-speaker, and Rågö-Swede, etc. (with the various village names). Additionally, some governments or organizations classified the people on a broader category such as social status (peasants) or religion (Lutheran or Protestant).

Ideologies of the state influence which form of classification is used, and can vary considerably from state to state (or even within states or empires, such as within tsarist Russia), as well as vary over time. The state can classify individuals and groups from above, such as based on legal categories of nobility or peasantry, or allow for self-identification of the individual, such as language categorization, particularly prevalent in mixed marriages. The ideology of the state can play an important role in the classification of individuals and groups in society. On one extreme, for example, Nazi ideology led to the classification of groups based upon a hierarchy of race. The pre-Second World War Soviet Union, on the other hand, classified groups based on “nationality”.

Swedish settlement along the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea began during the Viking era when overpopulation in Sweden led to expansion and colonization. This settlement occurred almost simultaneously in what is present-day Estonia and Finland along coastlines and island regions. The Swedes in Estonia settled along the northwestern coast and island regions with large concentrations on Dagö, Ormsö, Odensholm, Nargö, Nuckö, Runö, and Rågö. Their arrival dates back to at least 1294, when they were first mentioned in the town by-laws of Hapsal. Sweden’s control over Estonia (1583-1710) brought some noble resettlement, although the nobility did not remain after the region was lost to Russia. The Swedes were often

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7 In Estonian, these regions are called Hiiumaa, Vormsi, Osmussaare, Naissaar, Noarootsi, Ruhnu, and Pakri.

farmers, fishermen, hunters, or sailors, or most often a combination. August Tammekann, an Estonian-Swedish historian, writes, “The Estonian-Swedes’ settlement area is characterized completely by its nearness to the sea. Remarkably there was also a considerable distance between the settlements, which in some places caused a certain isolation with disastrous consequences for Swedishness.”\(^9\) It was not until the early 1900s that the isolation diminished, with greater contacts between the villages – and equally important, with Sweden.

From the Swedish period through tsarist Russian control, the Swedish peasants were legally distinct from their Estonian neighbors. However, the rights and privileges were communal, based on the villages or islands rather than covering the entire Swedish population across the region, a factor that kept the various communities isolated from each other; each community held different legal protections and each developed distinct customs and dialects.\(^10\) Some of the privileges dated back to 1341 and the establishment of “Swedish Law” which gave them limited financial responsibility and individual freedoms.\(^11\) While some regions, such as Ormsö, were under a Baltic German landlord, others such as Runö had no landlord and operated under a communal system. Each tsar, from Peter the Great to Nicholas II reconfirmed the privileges of the Swedes, which included the right to petition the tsar. Of particular note are the privileges that originated during the Swedish period, which led the people to view the Swedish kings as protectors of their rights.\(^12\)

A cultural awakening developed among the Swedish population in the late nineteenth century, following in the footsteps of the Estonian national movement of the mid-nineteenth century. The cultural awakening is directly linked to contact with Sweden; two missionaries, Thore Emanuel Thorén and Lars Johan Österblom from the Stockholm-based Evangelical Native Land Foundation (Evangeliska Fosterlandsstiftelse, or EFS) arrived in 1873. While EFS held clear religious goals for their missionaries, the Russian government granted permission based on the need to raise the level of education in the Swedish-speaking regions.\(^13\) Österblom established primary schools on Ormsö while Thorén opened a pedagogical seminar in Nuckö to train future teachers. The education they brought left a lasting legacy: their students became the leaders of the Swedes’ cultural awakening, while beginning regular contact between the population and organizations in Sweden.

While the tsarist government recognized the population as peasants, Lutherans, and Swedish-speakers, the missionaries based their identification on religious and moral levels, noting the lack of civilization and the poor hygiene among the population. Although the people spoke ancient dialects of Swedish, Österblom did not refer to them as “Swedes” in his memoirs.\(^14\) Österblom blamed the barbarous habits (such as drunkenness, thievery, and laziness) on the Russian rule of the region.\(^15\) The missionaries were there to improve the literacy of the people (according to the regulations from the Russian government), but more important

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11 “Swedish Law” is first mentioned in a letter to the Bishop of Curland in 1341, with privileges reaffirmed by later rulers. Some scholars believe that “Swedish Law” related to privileges based on the Swedes status as Christians, while the Estonians were still largely pagans. See Blumfeldt, p. 101.
12 For example, a group of men from Ormsö travelled to Sweden in 1861 to protest to the Swedish king against violations of their privileges by the Baltic German landlord.
13 Emancipation of the Estonian serfs also entailed a right to Estonian-language education. While the Swedes enjoyed the same right, there were few qualified to teach, and literacy rates among the Swedes was quite low.
15 One can also argue that Österblom exaggerated his early depictions of the population in order to highlight his own successes at “civilizing” the people.
from EFS’ perspective was the religious aspect – which put the missionaries, and the outspoken Österblom in particular, at odds with the local church officials and eventually led to his expulsion from the Russian empire in 1887.\textsuperscript{16}

In the decades that followed, the Swedish-speaking continued to develop their culture through Swedish-language schools and further contact with individuals in Sweden. They began regular publications, first with an almanac beginning in 1903 and later with a newspaper, \textit{Kustbon} (The Coastal Resident), which first appeared in 1918 as an organ for the Swedish People’s Alliance, a political party. 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 the rising threat of Estonian nationalism. Contact with Sweden strengthened as pastors and teachers regularly spent years among the population.

The founding of SOV coincided with Vilhelm Lundström’s establishment in Sweden of the National Society for the Preservation of Swedish Culture Abroad (Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet) in 1907, based in Gothenburg. Lundström toured through Estonia and around the various Swedish villages in 1892, and credits his time there as the founding moment of his pan-Swedish (\textit{allsvensk}) movement. He saw the educational and cultural difficulties of the Swedes in Estonia as a reason to strengthen an international movement to protect Swedish language and culture, particularly in places like Estonia where it was threatened by a strengthening Estonian nationalism. Lundström identified the people as foreign Swedes (\textit{utlandssvenskar}), although belonging to a Swedish “tribe” (\textit{stam}). During the Interwar period, the National Society provided considerable funding for cultural, religious, and educational aspects within Estonia, and Lundström made several trips to the region.\textsuperscript{17}

From the late 1890s and through the 1930s, a number of Swedes and Swedish-speaking Finns visited the Swedish areas of Estonia. While some of these individuals were tourists, many came to conduct research – ethnographic studies as well as racial studies. Runö – isolated in the Bay of Riga – proved to be one of the more popular areas of study, with many scholars believing the isolation to have preserved an ancient Swedish culture with only limited foreign influence.\textsuperscript{18} The study of the Swedes in Estonia sought to illuminate the historical attributes of “Swedes.” However, racial studies on Runö from this period led researchers to conclude that the people comprised a mix of two racial groups: the dominant Nordic and elements of an East Baltic race.\textsuperscript{19} According to the 1914 Swedish government-sponsored report \textit{Sweden: Historical and Statistical Handbook, Land and People}:

The Swedish race is of pure Germanic origin, as is attested by the very \textit{appearance} of the Swede… The art of reading has been general in Sweden for many generations; and hence a certain intellectual maturity has been attained by the people at large… The most deeply-seated feature of the Swedish character, the key to all the rest, is the passionate \textit{love of nature}… But this feeling for nature has diverted attention from psychological spheres; hence the nature-loving Swede is too often a poor judge of character.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16} Thorén left the region earlier due to his poor health. \\
\textsuperscript{17} See Lundström, Vilhelm. \textit{Allsvensk Linjer}. Riksföreningen för svenskhetens bevarande i utlandet (Göteborg, 1930). \\
\textsuperscript{18} For example, Klein, Ernst. \textit{Runö: Folklivet i ett gammalsvensk samhälle}. J.A. Lindblads Förlag/Nordiska Museet, (Uppsala 1924). See also Gordon, Ernst. \textit{Runö: Svenskön i Rigaviken}. Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelsens Bokförlag, (Stockholm 1921). \\
\textsuperscript{19} See Steffensson, Jakob. \textit{Runöborna och deras invandring till Sverige}. Uppsala Verd (Uppsala 1972) p.36-40. \\
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While reflecting the growing racial views of the Swedish nation at the early twentieth century, these stereotypical descriptions were also applied to Swedes living outside the Swedish political borders.

The changing political circumstances at the end of the First World War provided new opportunities for the Swedish population of Estonia; the Russian Revolution led to the establishment of an Estonian Provisional Government, followed by an independent Estonian state. The new Estonian state initially offered minority protections and an environment for greater cultural development; the Estonian Provisional Government gave cabinet-level positions to each of the minority groups, including the Swedes, and Hans Pöhl (leader of the Swedish People’s Alliance) participated in the constitutional convention. However, the 1920 constitution eliminated the cabinet posts for minorities, instead placing these ministers under the Ministry of Culture. The 1920 constitution protected minorities specifically in paragraphs 20 and 21, though. The Estonian government allowed for self-identification, however one had to be categorized as a member of a minority for the protections to be in effect, particularly education in the native language. Loyalty questions concerning the Baltic Germans, the Russians, and the Jews 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.

Estonia’s 1925 Law on Cultural Self-Government and National Minorities, also referred to as the Cultural Autonomy Law, provided additional protections and a level of self-rule in cultural matters to minority groups of at least 3,000 people. Going further than the 1920 constitution’s minority protections, the Cultural Autonomy Law is regularly touted as a high-point in minority protection and it became an international model. Yet it also demonstrates the struggle of a newly independent nation attempting to gain international legitimacy; it is frequently overlooked that the law passed by only a single vote. While the new law intended to offer greater opportunities for Estonia’s minorities, the Estonian-Swedes did not utilize the new law. One argument is that the Swedish minority lived in such concentrated regions, making it unnecessary. However, a more realistic argument is that the costs for implementing the legislation was to come from the minorities themselves, and as poor peasants, the Estonian-Swedes could not afford the extra taxes necessary.

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. The Swedish People’s Alliance only held a seat in Parliament from 1930-1934 by joining into a coalition with the Baltic Germans. While in the parliament, Mathias Westerblom distinguished himself from other minority politicians by speaking in Estonian – in contrast, the Baltic German parliamentarians spoke in German and the Russians spoke in Russian.

In March 1934, Konstantin Päts came to power through a coup d'état, bringing immediate consequences for the Estonian-Swedes that shaped the progression of their cultural develop-

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21 The change is also noticed in the first Estonian currency from the Provisional Government, the Estonian “Mark”, which had text in Estonian on the front and on the back in German, Swedish, and Russian. The Estonian “Kroon” only had text in Estonian.

22 The Baltic Germans and the Jews established autonomous ministries under the law, while the Swedes and Russians remained under the Ministry of Culture.

23 The coalition with the Baltic Germans caused considerable controversy among the Swedish communities, who saw the Baltic Germans as former exploiters.

24 Hans Pöhl gained the seat in the 1929 elections. However, Pöhl died in 1930 and was replaced by Westerblom.
ment 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 possibilities; conveniently for the population, the Swedish government and the National Society increasingly funded educational and cultural expenses through the mid-to-late 1930s. 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.

One of the repercussions of the nationalistic government policies was felt in the church. In 1936, the government decided that all pastors in Estonia must be Estonian citizens; this measure clearly aimed at weakening the continued Baltic German control of rural parishes. 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. 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 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 second 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. Legislation also dictated that children born to mixed parents (where one parent was Swedish and the other Estonian) were to be educated in Estonian.

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*. In a 1935 article, Carl Mothander wrote, “We always see the concept of ‘Swedishness’ in a fairly narrow point of view. We completely forget that Swedishness

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26 Edward C. Thaden delineates Russification into three aspects: unplanned, cultural, and administrative Russification. If one were to draw parallels with Estonianization, it can be argued administrative Estonianization began in 1920 with the elimination of cabin-level positions for minorities, and cultural Estonianization began with the coup d’état by Konstantine Päts in 1932. See Thaden. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland*. Princeton University Press, (Princeton, NJ 1981).


doesn’t merely consist of Swedish language and Swedish schools, but also disposition, character, and action.” 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.

During the 1930s, Sweden played an increasing role in the Estonian-Swedish communities. The National Society (and specifically the society’s Estonian Committee) located funding for education and healthcare – appealing to organizations such as the Swedish Academy, the Rotary Club of Sweden, the Swedish Red Cross, but also to the royal family; Count Folke Bernadotte provided considerable funding for the Swedish school in Hapsal. Increasingly, the Swedish government got involved with funding, although the Estonian Committee oversaw the collection and distribution of funds. The pastors were typically the Swedish representatives in Estonia to convey needs of the community and oversee the local distribution of funds, and as such, regularly received correspondence from individuals in need of financial assistance. Aid from Sweden increasingly played a larger role within the community.

Developments in Estonia took a dramatic turn with the arrival of the Second World War and the Soviet takeover of the Baltic States in June 1940. The transition from Estonianization to the Soviet political and military advance into the region was abrupt. Soviet ideology changed minority policies in radical ways, leading to an arguably privileged position for the Estonian-Swedes. However, Soviet policies – largely economic and cultural – simultaneously alienated the Swedish minority, with many seeing the occupation as the forerunner to the end of the Swedish minority in Estonia; living on islands and along coastal regions which were deemed to be of strategic military importance to the Soviet Union meant that fishing waters were often off-limits, depriving the Estonian-Swedes of their economic livelihood.

Following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbontrop pact and leading up to the Soviet occupation, the Soviet government forced Estonia into making concessions such as the establishment of Soviet military bases on Estonian territory. The forced evacuation of several islands occurred in areas where Estonian-Swedes were in the majority, forcing approximately ten percent of Estonia’s Swedish population to abandon their homes and move inland. The evacuation caused considerable concern for the economic and cultural welfare of those displaced, as there were no assurances that they would be placed in Swedish areas or have access to fishing areas. The displaced, together with the leaders of SOV, turned to Sweden as a possible solution, appealing to authorities as a Swedish tribe in trouble. 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 life, but rather in order to continue the struggle of existence as Swedes for future generations.

32 Another argument can be made regarding the role of Kustbon within the community. The majority of subscribers resided in Sweden (and Finland), and the majority of ad-revenue came from companies and individuals outside Estonia. Considering this, can Kustbon really be viewed as a representation of views within the Estonian-Swedish community, or would it better represent the role of Swedes in Estonia in the larger pan-Swedish movement and the need for increased funding to preserve Swedish culture?
Of those displaced, a group of 110 from Rågö applied for a collective passport to emigrate to Sweden. While tentatively approved by the Estonian government, final approval required authorization from Moscow; this group was the only group to receive legal permission to emigrate during the 1940-1941 Soviet occupation.

Soviet propaganda attempted to counter emigration thoughts, oftentimes indirectly. The principle propaganda organ for the Estonian-Swedes was the weekly newspaper Sovjet-Estland, published by the Soviet government. Over the course of the year-long occupation, the newspaper attempted to persuade the Estonian-Swedes toward Soviet ideology, encouraging a Soviet-based Estonian-Swedish culture and identity, and by reporting on domestic successes and promises contrasted with foreign horrors and instability. Soviet policy, as explained in Sovjet-Estland, identified the population based on “nationality” – a categorization comprised of a common language, common territory, common economic background, and a common culture. However, the Swedes were a minority within a minority in the larger Soviet Union. Soviet propaganda attempted to place the Swedes on equal footing with the Soviet Union’s other nationalities. Sovjet-Estland regularly drew sharp contrasts between their minority-friendly policies (including the usage of Swedish place names in the newspaper) with the nationalist (and bourgeois) policies of Estonianization of the 1930s. However, the newspaper and other forms of persuasion by agitators traveling in the local communities proved to be largely unsuccessful for the Soviets, with the Estonian-Swedes overwhelmingly and publicly expressing their discontent and their desire to leave.34

While the Estonian-Swedes were not alone in their opposition to the Soviets, nationality was a factor in Soviet actions towards the minority. The Soviet-Estonian government encouraged the Swedes to develop their culture in ways as never before available to them – although necessarily now socialist in content. Methods included the government covering costs for the publication of a Swedish-language newspaper, development in the arts, and repeatedly articulating the equal status of the ethnic group in the Soviet brotherhood of nations. No longer would the community need to appeal to Sweden for funds; now the local government actively offered greater opportunities and excessive funding to develop cultural programs. However, the government, rather than the individuals themselves maintained control over these areas. Sovjet-Estland, for example, had an Estonian editor – Anton Vaarandi.

Discontent with Soviet policies within the Estonian-Swedish communities soared, and the “Swedish question” plagued the local Läänemaa province communist party. While attempting to appeal to the Estonian-Swedes on a cultural level, the Soviet ideology and the minority policies negatively affected many of those very areas where the Estonian-Swedes had developed their culture in the past: their strong connection to the land was severed with the Soviet redistributions, the Soviet ideology ridiculed and restricted the church, and severing contact with Sweden and the larger pan-Swedish movement. Several communities openly indicated their desire to emigrate to Sweden – in several villages, 90 to 100 percent of the population signed lists stating their desire to leave.

The Soviet government attempted to reach out to the minority, giving the Estonian-Swedes privileges unavailable previously and even giving them a more privileged position than the majority population received. In May 1941, the Estonian Central Committee discussed the Estonian-Swedes specifically, reporting that work among the minority was “unsatisfactory.” Shortcomings of Swedish-language offerings needed to be solved. The report called for more agitators speaking Swedish (particularly targeting the youth), increased subscriptions and expanding content for Sovjet-Estland, improving radio programs, and more translations of literature and movies. The May report pointed to certain areas where the Esto-

nian-Swedes should, in theory, receive extra protections or attention not available for ethnic Estonians. For example, the report suggested adequate compensation for those Estonian-Swedes displaced for the military regions on the islands, lowering the harvest norms due to the poor quality of the soil of the region, and delaying any mobilization efforts among the Estonian-Swedes for a year. The Central Committee also wanted to explore the possibilities of reducing or eliminating the debts of all farmers in the Estonian-Swedish communities owning less than 5 hectares of land. In practice, however, these actions were not implemented, largely because of the sudden development of war with Germany and the need to shift their attention elsewhere.35

The abrupt rejection of two major foundations of the Estonian-Swedish identity in Soviet Estonia – connections to Sweden and the role of the church – irreparably damaged attempts at converting the minority to a socialist-driven identity. Additionally, policies such as the forced evacuations and land reform led to devastating economic catastrophes in the Estonian-Swedish communities. While the Central Committee attempted to alleviate many of these concerns, the German declaration of war delayed any attempts at implementation. Discontent among the Estonian-Swedes soared and thoughts of emigration strengthened; Fridolf Isberg, principle of the top Estonian-Swedish school, recognized in 1940 that the end of the Swedish settlement was inevitable and actively began documenting the local culture, drawing sketches of buildings and farmsteads, and recording family histories for preservation.36

The transfer of power in 1941 from the Soviet control to the Nazi German occupation also occurred quickly. The German administrators held vastly different positions in minority policies, obviously influenced by the racial ideology of the Nazis. However, unlike the Soviets, there was no attempt to push a government-sponsored cultural development among the Estonian-Swedes. Additionally, the Soviet occupation’s mobilization and deportation (as well as the early emigration of some Estonian-Swedes to Sweden) deprived the Estonian-Swedish community of a number of their cultural leaders. There was no Swedish-language newspaper officially published during the Nazi occupation; only a 1942 almanac came out.37 While Swedish-language schools continued operation, enrollment declined as attention shifted in the community toward renewed contact with Sweden and thoughts of emigration.

Although there was little cultural development during this period, Nazi German policies privileged the Estonian-Swedes. In December 1941 a German delegation, including a Dr. Ludwig Lienhard, visited Swedish-language schools. The delegation stripped several of the students and faculty and took body measurements, determining that the minority was Germanic with Baltic features – a racial rank that placed the Estonian-Swedes higher than the Estonians.38 This racial ranking later allowed for greater opportunities, particularly as it related to contact with Sweden and potential legal emigration.

Throughout the Nazi occupation, contact between the Estonian-Swedish community and organizations in Sweden resumed with the National Society’s Estonia Committee in Sweden taking an active role in coordinating between Sweden and the Estonian-Swedes. The local government no longer funded programs aimed at the Estonian-Swedes, and the community once again relied on funding from Sweden for Swedish-language education and healthcare. Sweden’s neutrality and pro-German stance (at least early in the war) eased such connections.

35 Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal (Estonian National Archives) 1-4-71, Центральный Комитет КП (б) Эстонии Особый Сестор. 36-39. Minutes no. 8 of the Seating of the Central Committee, dated 15, 21, and 22 May 1941.
36 Rikarkivet 721112, vol. 7. Fridolf Isberg’s samling gällande Nuckö, Kors och Stora Rågö.
37 There were unofficial publications, however, including the sports-themed newspaper Sandhamn produced (and handwritten) by six school boys in 1942 and 1943.
38 Isberg, Fridolf. “Birkas folkhög- och lantmannaskola under tiden 1939-1943,” in Birkas: Svensk folkhögskola i Estland. Svenska Odlingens Vänner, (Stockholm 1971), p. 178. This is a similar conclusion that Swedish racial scholars in the early 20th century found.
Lienhard in particular reached out to the Swedish government to establish contacts; as early as 1941 Lienhard considered the massive evacuation of the Estonian-Swedes and attempted to coordinate plans with the Swedish Foreign Ministry.\(^{39}\)

Throughout the Nazi occupation, Berlin allowed several groups from Sweden to visit Estonian-Swedish communities, bringing medical supplies, farming and fishing equipment, and books. Leaders of the Rågō-Swedes that emigrated in 1940 and the Rågō Foundation (the organization tasked with overseeing the Rågō-Swedes’ transition into Swedish society) spearheaded these visits, re-establishing contact between Sweden and the Estonian-Swedes and instilling hope in the repatriation of all the ethnic Swedes. Starting in 1943, Berlin authorized the emigration of sick or elderly Estonian-Swedes. As Germany’s position in the war weakened, local SS officers in Estonia including Lienhard expanded the repatriation, perhaps with the intent of gaining a favorable reputation with the Allies at the war’s end.\(^{40}\) The cultural organization for the Estonian-Swedes was put in charge of determining ethnicity, and membership in SOV quickly soared. Many viewed membership in the organization as a guarantee of their ability to leave, and in some instances, ethnic Estonians successfully emigrated through this process. By the end of the war, approximately 7,900 Estonian-Swedes had fled to Sweden – 4,357 legally. The Swedish state covered all transportation and relocation costs for those traveling legally.

The role of Sweden is of particular importance during this period. The Swedish government specifically made distinctions between the Estonian-Swedes and other refugees from the region, referring to their resettlement in Sweden as “colonization” of “Estonian citizens of Swedish origin.”\(^{41}\) The Estonian-Swedes received medical care, assistance in relocating, finding housing, and finding employment, as well as given special consideration to speed-up the residency requirement to acquire Swedish citizenship.

From the 1870s until the Second World War, the Estonian-Swedes passed through numerous forms of governments and various forms of classifications. Under the Tsarist period, government officials classified the population on the basis of legal social status, religion, and language. At the same time, groups in Sweden started to view the people first from a linguistic and religious standpoint, but later with an ethnic and racial bond among scholars and ministers. After 1920, the Estonian government classified the population according to “culture,” primarily through linguistic identification. Attention from Sweden continued to increase, with ethnographers, linguists, and racial scientists investigating the population, and culminating in the 1930s with financial resources from the Swedish government. The most trying time for the Estonian-Swedes was arguably the Second World War, and principally the Soviet government when economic opportunities threatened the viability of the communities. The Soviet government classified the population based on “nationality,” promising the Swedes greater cultural and economic possibilities. In contrast, the Nazi administrators classified the people based on race, placing the Estonian-Swedes in a higher category than their Estonian neighbors. During the war in Sweden, the Estonian-Swedes increasingly were viewed as having Swedish descent, and individuals and government committees worked on the emigration and resettlement of the population in the ancient homeland.

Governments, organizations, and individuals classify populations in a variety of methods. Regardless of the form of government, each form of classification influences minority policies. Yet as the development of the Estonian-Swedes demonstrates, none of these policies...
eliminated or assimilated the minority population; the minority worked within each government situation while attempting to further their own identification and cultural development.