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European History as a Nationalist and Post-Nationalist Project

Pasi Ihalainen

European history in Finland

Finland is rather exceptional in that, for decades, history students in major universities were allowed to choose between the disciplines of Finnish (national) and General (European/World) History as their major or in some cases Cultural, Economic, Intellectual, Political or Social History instead. Such a selection has been removed recently with the integration of the master's programmes of Finnish and General History in most universities. It is hoped that this integration will lead to an increased internationalisation and Europeanisation of all academic history teaching and research, supporting the development of comparative, transnational and global perspectives. It remains to be seen, however, whether the merging of national and international history might actually support a neo-nationalist turn to nation-state-centred history, reflecting current right populist tendencies in public discourse. Concentration on the nation state remains mainstream in historical research in practically every European country, and there are signs that students are favouring national over international history again after years when many prioritised the European over the Finnish.

Paradoxically, the first Finnish chair in General History was created in the Imperial Alexander University of Helsinki in 1863 for Georg Zacharias Forsman and was soon passed on to Zachris Topelius, a sympathiser of the House of Romanov and the imperial interests of Russia.[1] The geopolitical idea was to support teaching the history of the Russian Empire to the Finns who, after separation from Sweden, had started to construct their national past. Inspired by the national romantic trends of the time, Finns often found historic moments defining Finnish national identity in heroic wars on the Swedish side. For example defining episodes included fighting against Catholics under Gustavus Adolphus in the Thirty Years' War, or defending the motherland against Russians in the Finnish War (1808–1809), a side episode in the Napoleonic Wars.

In research and teaching, however, the holders of the chair turned General History not to one promoting Russian imperial history but to a nationalistic project integrating Finnish history to that of Scandinavia and Western Europe and using historical arguments to defend Finnish autonomy against Russification.[2] General History had a revival during the Cold War when historians aimed at explaining Finnish policies during the Second World War,[3] relating the history of the Finnish nation to that of broader Western Europe,[4] or explaining Lenin's strategy in recognising Finnish independence.[5] Contributions to the history of common Western European phenomena were believed to win international

visibility for Finnish historical research.[6] This often led to a focus on the intellectual history of great powers.[7]

Courses on the construction of Europe, funded by the European Commission at the time of negotiations on Finnish membership (1995), were another temporary phase. The global turn has remained modest due to the minor role which Finns played in the Swedish colonial projects and the generally held conception of Finland as an object, rather than subject, of colonialism. Some historians have wished to contribute to the comparative history of political cultures and political key concepts in Europe, drawing benefit from the paradox that as speakers of a non-Indo-European language, in a country long governed in foreign languages, Finnish historians need to command several foreign languages. Finnish historians also launched an organisation called Historians without Borders (https://www.historianswithoutborders.fi/en/), which aims at constructive discussions between parties in conflicts in which divergent interpretations of the past are an issue.

Nationalist and internationalist historiography

There are divisions between 'nationalists' and 'internationalists' among historians in every country. In a recent history of the Finnish Historical Society – a society that was founded in 1875 but until 1962 was dedicated to scholars of Finnish history only[8] – historical research not actively engaged in constructing the master narrative of the Finnish nation has been left to the margins.[9] This reflects the dominant way of prioritising the national to the inter- and transnational in a small nation state, despite the existence of a tradition of research contributing to European history. Even if I identify myself as a reasonably patriotic Finn, I still consider European history a timely post-nationalist antidote to nation-state-centredness. It not only helps the historian to understand the common and peculiar features of individual nation states better but also challenges methodological nationalism and narratives of national exceptionalism.

Historiography from any country provides examples of a historical phenomenon or development in a nation state being presented as unique simply because parallel and entangled phenomena elsewhere have been ignored. Methodological nationalism has been characteristic of practically every doctoral dissertation I have examined in Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Thinking outside the national box and established interpretations in the national narrative is obviously difficult for PhD candidates and perhaps might even be considered unpatriotic by their audiences. Whenever working on a comparative topic in the history of political discourse and studying parallel debates in several countries, one often encounters research carried out in national isolation. One may consequently feel obliged to ask challenging questions rising from other national contexts and to point to comparisons that might have deepened the understanding of the national case and created a better international understanding of common European history as well.

National histories are rarely entirely understandable without European comparisons and the consideration of transnational interaction unless we historians wish to continue to carry on the construction of separate nation states in the 21st century. Concentration on the national continues to dominate historical research everywhere and there is no denying the legitimacy of nation state as a unit of historical analysis. There is some variation, however, as to how much conflicting interpretations of national history and historiographic

interventions by foreigners are tolerated. Historians from Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands are more used to foreigners writing their history, which of course does not mean that the outsiders are always considered competent to do that. Historians from smaller states may be particularly critical if the foreign historian does not include sufficient admiration towards the studied country and join its established narratives. Even if we are all foreigners to the distant past, and coming from outside the history-cultural socialisation of the country may help in thinking outside the box of the national, there are still 'natives' who may be offended by such intrusions. Any historian, native or foreign, dealing with delicate or central issues of national history with established interpretations and challenging them with cross-national comparisons runs the risk of being questioned, rejected, or simply ignored.

Narratives of Nordic exceptionalism

Let me take up three examples from Nordic history which, despite the outspoken international orientation of the Scandinavian societies and academia, continues to focus mainly on the histories of respective nation states. Nordic history would benefit from comparative history within and beyond Scandinavian. Since the Second World War, Nordic history has tended to avoid potentially unpleasant comparisons with German history due to both methodological nationalism and for ideological reasons.[10] Furthermore, Scandinavian historians may remain surprisingly unaware of relevant research carried out in a neighbouring Nordic country. Concentration on the nation state easily produces narratives of particularity. This leads to the consensual disregard of findings of European history that do not fit the established national paradigms – whether studies of the welfare state, democracy or violent national conflicts, for instance.

In all Nordic countries, the *welfare state* has become the universal concept dominating every aspect of social life. Explaining the welfare state as a product of mid-twentieth-century cooperation between social democrats and liberals or agrarians and later on even conservatives has not sufficed for some Nordic historians. There has been a political need to emphasise the indigenous structural nature of the Nordic welfare states, the favourite explanatory factor being Lutheranism that created ethics supportive of welfare states. The extreme interpretation, reinforced by an American liberal fan of the Nordic model, presents Luther as a revolutionary, democrat, socialist and feminist, and Nordic social democracy and welfare states as Lutheranism put into practice in a secular form.[11] A close reading and contextualisation of Luther's original writings and comparisons with other Lutheran countries – not least Germany – would have helped in relativizing such claims supportive of self-sufficient attitudes among Scandinavians and Finns. There is no doubt that Lutheranism has played a major role in the formation of Nordic national identities, education, culture, and social practices,[12] but excessive claims on Nordic welfare states as simply secularised Lutheranism are an example of the need for twentieth-century European history as a context.

Another concept shared by all Scandinavians is *democracy*. Every Nordic political party supports democracy, even though the exact meaning of democracy varies significantly from party to party. Democracy often appears as a synonym for the established political system based on a strong sovereign nation state executing the will of the people. As the Danish Jeppe Nevers (2018) has shown, Nordic critics of European integration have typically emphasised national democracy and sovereignty as opposed to any transnational

democracy developed within the European Union – similar to British brexiteers. Illustrative also is the provocation in calling a leading right populist party ‘Sweden Democrats’. The use of ‘Democrats’ is an attempt to take over a central universalist concept of Swedish national identity by redefining it in ways that challenge the dominant tolerant, multicultural and social democratic understanding of Swedishness.

Historians and political scientists have demonstrated how the narratives of Denmark and Sweden as birthplaces of democracy and parliamentarism developed since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First conservatives maintained these narratives to counter reform as foreign innovation and later reformists took over the narratives to redefine their demands as the mere restoration of a golden past of democracy and parliamentarism. Once the reformists won and universal and equal suffrage was introduced in Sweden in the aftermath of the First World War, and as Sweden was defined as the safe haven of democracy by all major parties as a reaction to Nazi Germany in the 1930s, the narrative of native democracy became mainstream.[13]

During the struggles for universal suffrage, the political scientist Fredrik Lagerroth[14] interpreted the Age of Liberty (1719–1772) – when the Diet played a major role in Swedish politics – as the revival of ancient Swedish democracy and the anticipation of modern parliamentary democracy. This narrative was echoed in Anglophone accounts of the Swedish Age of Liberty most famously by Michael Roberts[15] which was received as reinforcement of the validity of the narrative of pioneering Swedish democracy.[16] European comparisons, however, point at the contingent nature of democracy in the Nordic countries, demonstrating the typically early modern nature of the Swedish eighteenth-century estate representation and the dependency of Nordic democratisation on the common European experiences of the First World War as well as on transnational connections, not least to Germany and Russia.[17] European history is needed to relativize our historical arguments about the natural, self-evident and unproblematic rise of Nordic democracy. It helps to understand the entangled and transnational character of our democracies, in the past, today, and in the future.

Civil wars have frequently caused the deepest scars in national historical consciousness. Finland’s Civil War of 1918 between Whites who defended a republican constitution with strong executive powers, allying with Imperial Germany, and Reds who, after having lost a parliamentary majority, launched a socialist revolution with support from Bolshevik Russia, is not an exception. Parliamentary government based on broad suffrage since 1906 consequently failed and 30,000 casualties during the war and post-war terror created lasting bitterness. In the interwar era and until the 1960s, a White narrative dominated, associating the Red rebellion with Russian Bolshevism. Since the 1960s, at first popular authors, and later historians, constructed an alternative narrative sympathetic to the socio-economic demands of the socialists. This narrative often ended up with emphasis on an exceptionally repressive bourgeoisie opposed by a moderate reformist labour movement.[18] Since the 1970s, a national consensus has been constructed in cultural products and mainstream historiography around this latter narrative.

Challenging this dominant narrative is difficult. Suggestions have been made – on the basis of comparative research considering transnational entanglements – that many of the Finnish non-socialist parties were reformist in comparison to their German and Swedish counterparts and that violent revolutionary rhetoric took over the Finnish Social Democratic

Party during 1917 in ways that cannot be found in Britain, Germany or Sweden. While transfers from Petrograd are obvious,[19] denial may follow.[20] Some historians continue to emphasise Finnish social confrontations unavoidably leading to a civil war, denying the role of polarised, transnational and entangled discourses in deepening the conflict. We need European history with consideration of the national and transnational dynamics of political discourse in 1917 to better understand why the Finnish parliamentary system – called the most democratic in Europe before the First World War including women's suffrage – failed. Comparative European history also helps to explain how the Finnish system recovered, gradually developing towards a stable polity.

Challenges and possibilities of comparative and transnational history

Comparative history also has its blind spots. The choice of the objects of comparisons can easily determine the conclusions. For example, it seems to be the rule in German historiography that Germany is compared with other great European nations while comparisons with the culturally much closer Scandinavian countries may be considered irrelevant. Finland appears as a progressive nation when compared to Russia, the Baltic States, or Eastern Central Europe[21] but is seen as on the fringes of Western civilisation when compared to 'Protestant', 'constitutional' and 'parliamentary' Northwestern Europe.[22] Volumes consisting of separate national narratives by 'natives' unwilling to analyse similar sources from other countries or consider points of transnational interaction hardly constitute proper comparative history if only the editors attempt to carry out comparisons. Much remains to be done among historians to relativize an isolated nation state as the dominant unit of analysis. In order to write European history we must be ready to treat our home country as an interesting case among others, to learn several languages, to read parallel sources from countries of comparison and to question national narratives, no matter how painful that may be. Such critical review of national historiographies is needed in the present-day world of revived discourses of national exceptionalism.

One possibility to write comparative and transnational European history might be to focus on parliaments as predominantly national institutions that have encountered similar challenges at about the same time in history. They have dealt with reform needs with rather similar procedures and produced exceptionally coherent, structured, comparable extensive sources. As institutions in which multi-sited and transnational political discourses have intersected in same space and time, parliaments constitute ideal fora for the analysis of transformations in ideologically charged political concepts such as the people, nation, sovereignty, representation, democracy, parliamentarism, politician and internationalism, as well as a significant variety of policy questions common to most European states.

Computer-assisted analyses of the corpora of digitised parliamentary records can be used to locate ideological confrontations, some of which may previously have gone unnoticed. Quantitative analyses of extensive digital datasets can document temporal evolution and enable the selection of cases for qualitative, contextual, content analysis. They help to detect patterns and anomalies and enable the formulation of new research questions. Contextualising close reading of micro-level cases needs to focus on the dynamic relationship between intra- and extra-parliamentary political discourses in national contexts and to consider cross-national transfers. Digitisation and such amalgamation of national

histories now enable contextually sensitive big data analyses of the long-term history of transnational *European* political discourse.

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