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REFORM AND REVOLUTION IN SCANDINAVIA, 1917–1919

Entangled histories and visions of the future

The articles in this special issue, entitled Reform and Revolution in Scandinavia, 1917–1919: Entangled Histories and Visions of the Future, deal with the political turmoil in Scandinavia in the late 1910s, accelerated by the First World War and the revolutions in Russia in February/March and October/November 1917 and eventually in Germany in the autumn of 1918. Their special focus is on the political debates about reform and revolution and the related visions of the future of political order and social structures in national contexts and across borders. The articles examine how actors with different agendas in different contexts exploited the opportunities opened up by a window of change. None of the Scandinavian countries were directly involved in the theatre of war, but the whole of Scandinavia was associated with the hostilities in many other ways. The revolutionary processes in Russia affected Finland directly but – reflecting the events spreading from Petrograd – the debates about the legitimacy of the established political order intensified in all Scandinavian countries. The articles demonstrate how the debates and political processes took diverse forms in varying national contexts but were often more dependent on international relations, transnationally interconnected and entangled, than has traditionally been recognized in nation-state-centred historiographies.

Keywords Russian Revolution, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, transnational history

The critique of ‘methodological nationalism’ has been a recurrent feature of Scandinavian historical research in the 21st century, Finnish scholarship included.¹ Comparative and transnational perspectives help us to rethink and relativize national histories, revealing certain unique national features but also demonstrating the

entangled nature of many national experiences.² In Finland, the nationalistic underpinning of Finnish historiography of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century and its fundamental role in nation building have been brought to light,³ and the idea of a unique and uniform nation spanning the centuries has been profoundly challenged. The processes involved in the formation of the national identity have been deconstructed,⁴ and, as a result, present-day historical analyses typically emphasize the multivocality of Finnishness.⁵ Within the field of political history, the critical moments in the history of the nation, such as the obtaining of independence in 1917–1918 and the war years of 1939–1945, have increasingly been seen as part of, and influenced by, the political turmoil in other parts of Europe and the related transnational interaction.⁶

To reflect this scholarly development, rather than merely recycling national narratives on the process of gaining independence, the Finnish Historical Society decided to celebrate the centennial anniversary of Finnish independence by organizing an international conference on the political, cultural, intellectual, and societal influences of the First World War in Europe as a whole, focusing especially on the emergence of new nation states. This conference, entitled ‘Reform and Revolution in Europe, 1917–1919: Entangled and Transnational Histories’, was held at the University of Tampere, Finland, on 16–18 March 2017, a date that marked the centenary of the news of Nicholas II’s abdication and reactions to it. It was organized in cooperation with the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Society and the University of Tampere and was generously supported by the Prime Minister’s Office and the Finnish Delegation of Learned Societies.⁷

The purpose of the conference was to better understand both the formation of new independent states and the reforms and revolutions of established polities in international, comparative and transnational contexts. The conference extended the discussion from the fall of the Romanov dynasty to cover a longer period of inter- and transnational reform and revolution in Europe during the second half of the First World War and its immediate aftermath. Instead of a mere review of national historiographies, the conference focused on international, comparative, and transnational approaches that consider the interconnectedness of processes, events, and discourses of reform and revolution in different countries, and particularly in northern Europe.

The First World War and the Russian February/March Revolution accelerated already-existing national calls for political reforms. Debates were intensified as a consequence of the unprecedented challenges that the war caused to all the societies affected by it, leading to questions about the legitimacy of the established political order and the limited opportunities of the people at large to participate in politics.⁸ The processes of reform and revolution took on different forms in different national contexts, but they were often more dependent on international relations, transnationally interconnected and entangled, than has traditionally been recognized in nation-state-centred historiographies.

Two out of the over 40 specialist panels in the conference focused on the impact of the First World War and the Russian Revolution in Scandinavia, with the title ‘Reform and Revolution in Scandinavia, 1917–1919: Entangled Histories and Visions of the Future’. The starting point for these panels was a theoretical suggestion by Jonas Harvard that revolutionary events serve as catalysts, and their broad-ranging impact accelerates the course of events across national frontiers. Although it is true that the

dynamics of political change exhibit slow periods alternating with periods of rapid change, the notion of a one-way revolutionary impact spreading from an epicentre, compressing years of change into perhaps months or days of intense reform, can easily be overstated. Rather, we need to analyse systematically how the opportunities opened up by a window of change were consciously exploited by actors with different agendas in very different contexts. Revolutionary events could change various things, from the contested meanings of political concepts used to describe change to visions of the future and to actual power relations. Depending on the balance of power, these openings could serve both to facilitate reform and, conversely, to motivate reactionary legislation or changes.

In Scandinavia, first the Russian and then the German Revolution opened windows of opportunity for advancing a number of competing political agendas, thanks to the pre-war and wartime cross-border mobility of the actors involved and the resulting cultural transfers, the activities of cross-national media, and the existence of competing transnational networks of the Left, the Right and the Centre. These entanglements produced transfers not only from the great powers to minor states but sometimes also the other way around, which illustrates the complexity of the transnational dynamics. The papers published here discuss, among other things, short-term changes in national political systems that had significant long-term consequences for the development of the Nordic parliamentary democracies.

In her article, 'Ellen Key and Rudolf Kjellén on War, and Peace and the Future of Post-First World War Europe', Tiina Kinnunen addresses the effects of the dividing lines of the First World War on contemporary leading Swedish intellectuals: Ellen Key, a Left-liberal feminist writer with a global reputation, and Rudolf Kjellén, an internationally recognized conservative political scientist. Kinnunen demonstrates how both of these intellectuals addressed key themes of nationalism versus patriotism and gender relations in wartime and describes their conflicting views, especially on Imperial Germany. The transnational debates in which they participated influenced their political and social thinking in general and their mutual intellectual confrontation in particular. Key participated in the transnational discussion against war and envisioned the establishment of a sustainable peace through the promotion of democracy and social progress. For this Left-wing liberal, joint political action by socialists, feminists, and pacifists was the only conceivable way to achieve these goals. For Key, the fate of Europe depended on the political course to be taken by Germany with regard to the outcome of the struggle between progressive and conservative forces. Kjellén offered a competing vision of the future of Europe, based on power politics and a different understanding of the state and society. Whereas Kjellén welcomed the German 'ideas of 1914', Key hoped for the victory of the 'ideas of 1789', both in Germany and internationally.

Jonas Harvard's 'Socialist Communication Strategies and the Spring of 1917: Managing Revolutionary Opinion Through the Media System' addresses the ways in which the opportunities opened up by the Russian February Revolution contributed to political change, particularly through its impact on public opinion. The Revolution created the impetus for strong Leftist opinion in Sweden, influencing the elections of that year and further leading to the suffrage reforms of 1918 and 1919. Harvard argues that the wave of revolutionary opinion sweeping over Sweden in the spring of 1917

was the result of the conscious media management strategies of the Left, mainly the Social Democrats. The workers' movement adopted a systematic approach to influencing opinion through agitation and public manifestations. Using the concept of a media system, Harvard shows how the circulation of key arguments in many different media forms contributed to the impression of a strong national opinion and put pressure on the king, the government, and the parliament.

Katarina Leppänen's article, 'The Swedish Journal *Morgonbris* on Political Violence in Finland 1917–1918', asks to what extent women were willing to use violence in order to gain political change. The First World War constituted a dividing line for many feminists and women's movements with regard to the choice between nationalism and internationalism. Leppänen offers an analysis of how violence, in the service of revolutionary change, was characterized in the socialist women's press in Sweden, with particular reference to the Finnish Civil War. *Morgonbris* had problems dealing with the revolution and the use of violence in Finland in 1917–1918 in an ideological revolutionary framework. Leppänen's analysis sees the journal as belonging to a discourse that sought to create and uphold a gendered order and to direct gendered expectations by offering images of women's subjectivity and actions.

Pasi Ihalainen's 'Transnational Constructors of Parliamentary Democracy in Swedish and Finnish Constitutional Controversies, 1917–1919' focuses on the role of individual Swedish and Finnish parliamentarians as transnational actors in the national crises of legitimacy which the First World War and the connected Russian and German Revolutions initiated. Not only great powers but also smaller states witnessed the revival of constitutional disputes and competing ideological conceptualizations of revolution and reform, rule by the people, democracy, and parliamentarism. While these controversies focused primarily on the future of national polities, historical experiences and discourses accelerated by the war and the revolutions were transnationally entangled and contributed to transfers between political cultures. This involved not only socialists linked by their internationals but also liberals connected by transnational debates for and against 'Western' democracy and parliamentarism, and conservative professors and politicians belonging to ideologically oriented academic networks with Imperial Germany as the centre. Ihalainen reconstructs the transnational links and discourses involved in order to better understand the exceptionally confrontational dynamics (which contributed, in the Finnish case, to a civil war) and the outcomes of the Swedish and Finnish constitutional debates in 1917–1919 in both national and transnational contexts.

Finally, in his 'The Great War and the Regulatory State: Danish Experiences and Expectations', Jeppe Nevers addresses the Danish case, pointing to shifts in competing liberal understandings of the economic role of the state during and after the First World War. While this subject has been discussed fairly extensively in previous research, with reference to the great powers involved in the war, changes related to wartime circumstances and international debates of the period in small neutral countries have previously received little systematic attention. Taking as his starting point observations about increasing state intervention in European great powers, Nevers describes the redefinition of attitudes to state regulation in Denmark. He demonstrates how the need to regulate the economy in order to maintain neutrality gave the leading politicians positive experiences of state regulation and resulted in the concept assuming a strong economic dimension. Together

with the impact of the Russian Revolution, the concept of regulation affected liberal and conservative ideas of the state. New lines emerged in the ideological division between Left and Right, socialism and liberalism and social liberalism and conservatism, and the Social Liberals in particular strove to achieve a balanced development through reconciliation in an era of threatening revolution.

Clearly the Scandinavian states were significantly affected and transformed by a variety of transnational processes following the First World War and the Russian Revolution. An analytical focus on inter- and transnational interaction and connected transfers, side by side with a comparative perspective, yields a deeper understanding of both general European and national developments.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

- 1 Fur, *Colonialism in the Margins*; Marjanen, 'Undermining Methodological Nationalism'; Berger, 'The Comparative History of National Historiographies'; Kettunen, 'The Transnational Construction', 17; Lundqvist, 'Fångad i nationen?'; Naum and Nordin, 'Introduction: Situating Scandinavian Colonialism', 4; Larsson, Jalava, and Haapala, 'Nordic Historiography', 5–8; Marjanen, 'Transnational Conceptual History'.
- 2 Kocka, 'Comparisons and Beyond', 40–1; Cohen and O'Connor, 'Comparative History', ix–xii; Sluga, 'The Nation and the Comparative Imagination', 103, 109; Miller, 'Comparative and Cross-National History', 126; Kocka and Haupt, 'Comparison and Beyond', 20–1.
- 3 Fewster, *Visions of Past Glory*; Sulkunen, 'Biography, Gender and Deconstruction', 65–77; *Kirjoitettu kansakunta; Kansallisten instituutioiden muotoutuminen*; Sarviaho, *Ikuinen rauha*.
- 4 Ihalainen, *Protestant Nations Redefined*; Katajisto, *Isänmaamme keisari*.
- 5 E.g. Engman, *Språkfrågan*; Meinander, *Nationalstaten*.
- 6 *Finland in World War II*; Kekkonen, *Kun aseet puhuvat*; Ihalainen, *Springs of Democracy*.
- 7 University of Tampere, 'Reform and Revolution in Europe, 1917–19: Entangled and Transnational Histories', accessed 1 August 2018: <http://www.uta.fi/yky/en/his/conference/1917/index.html>
- 8 Müller, *Contesting Democracy*, 16–19; Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, 11, 14; Bessel, 'Revolution', 126–7, 144.

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