

# The Estonian Swedish National Minority and the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law of 1925

Mart Kuldkepp 

Department of Scandinavian Studies/European and International Social and Political Studies, University College London, UK  
Email: m.kuldkepp@ucl.ac.uk

## Abstract

The 1925 Estonian cultural autonomy law is a rare example of the idea of nonterritorial national minority rights officially adopted in the interwar period. Scholarly interest in this legislation, however, has so far overwhelmingly concentrated on the case of the Baltic Germans. This article is intended to make a contribution toward a broader understanding of the 1925 law and the “cultural autonomy” discourse in Estonia altogether by examining the Estonian Swedish minority’s political leadership’s understanding of cultural autonomy: how it changed and developed up to 1925, and what the subsequent Swedish attitudes toward the 1925 Estonian cultural autonomy law were. I demonstrate that although the Swedish leaders had been closely involved in the long process leading up to the law’s passing in 1925, it ended up seen as being of little substantive relevance from the Swedish perspective. Furthermore, by being strongly associated with the term “cultural autonomy,” the law also deprived the Estonian Swedish national movement of an important slogan that had long functioned as the overarching goal of Estonian Swedish nationalism.

**Keywords:** minorities; Baltics; nationalism

Studies of national minority politics in interwar-era Europe have often paid some – and sometimes considerable – attention to the 1925 Estonian law of the cultural autonomy of national minorities. Uniquely, this law entitled Estonian national minorities of at least 3,000 in strength to establish institutions of national self-government in order to manage their own educational, cultural, and (to a degree) social affairs. The law built on the principle of individual citizens being able to freely determine their nationality, and – in the event that the respective minority had enacted their cultural self-government – to enjoy the benefits of associated autonomous rights. The cost of cultural autonomy was covered through special taxation of the minority group in question, except for minority-language public schools up to the upper secondary level, which were supported from the state budget (Smith 2016, 89–90; Housden 2004, 231–232).

The 1925 Estonian law is also the primary example of the idea of nonterritorial national minority rights officially adopted in this period (Smith 2016, 89). Although Estonia already had long-standing protections of territorial minority rights, such as the right to basic education in the native language of the majority of pupils in class, the cultural autonomy law went a significant step farther: its provisions were valid not only in certain regions of the country but in the whole of Estonia, and they could be enjoyed by members of the minority community wherever they happened to live. Nevertheless, there were only two national minorities that ended up making use of the law’s provisions in the interwar period: the Baltic Germans (beginning in 1925) and the Jews (beginning in 1926), both of which were nonterritorial minorities. Estonia’s other larger minority groups failed

to make use of these rights. This held true for the Estonian Russians, as well as for the Estonian Swedes – the subject of this article.

### Previous Research and the Estonian Swedish Perspective

Scholarly interest in the 1925 Estonian cultural autonomy law has traditionally, and overwhelmingly, concentrated on the case of the Baltic Germans: the influential, nonterritorial national minority group (about 1.7% of the population of Estonia, according to the 1922 census) that was the main campaigning force behind the law, and almost the only one to eventually make use of its provisions (see Laurits 2008 for a detailed treatment).

In recent decades, it has come to be recognized that this was not the whole story. Some authors, such as Martyn Housden (2004, 233–234), have continued to emphasize the role of Baltic German politicians and intellectuals (notably Werner Hasselblatt and Ewald Ammende) behind the law, while also recognizing a degree of Estonian influence. Others, such as Kari Alenius (2003, 335; 2007, 448–449) and David Smith (2005, 216–217), have preferred to see the law as more of a combined effort between Baltic German politicians and certain Estonian ones, notably Konstantin Päts and Karl Einbund (later known as Kaarel Eenpalu). Some have also pointed out the importance of the broader minority rights discourse in the interwar period, especially as promoted by the League of Nations (see the references in Alenius 2007, 450–451). Alenius (2007, 450–451) has argued that although there is no evidence of direct external pressure, the international interest in national minority rights certainly influenced the Estonian discussion. As shown below, the possibility that international pressure might eventually be applied would occasionally lead to petitions or other similar steps taken by national minority representatives.

All of these recent perspectives on the Estonian cultural autonomy law have their merit, and it is not my intention to attempt to invalidate any of them. Rather, I would like to take the broader point – that the history of the Estonian cultural autonomy law is complex and multifaceted – and try to complement the existing research findings with yet another perspective: that of the Estonian Swedes, a small and overwhelmingly territorial national minority of about 8,000 people (about 0.73% of Estonia's total population of about 1,090,000 in 1918) that was composed of mostly poor peasants and fishermen whose ancestors had settled in the coastal areas of northwest Estonia and on the Estonian islands in the Middle Ages (a short overview of the origins of the Swedish settlements in Estonia can be found in Kranking 2009, 11–16).

It is readily apparent that in most ways, the Swedes had little in common with Baltic Germans, the pre-1918 societal elites of Estonia and Latvia. The Swedes have also attracted almost no attention in studies of Estonian national minority politics, including in previous research on the 1925 legislation. If the Swedish case is mentioned at all in the latter context, it is treated as a very marginal one, and one can easily get the impression that Swedish engagement with the idea of cultural autonomy was limited to its rejection after some cost-benefit calculation (for examples, see Smith 2016, 91, 101; Weiss-Wendt 2008, 99). Although there is truth to this point – the Swedish leadership did indeed reject the provisions of the 1925 law for well-known reasons – there is more to the story of the Estonian Swedes and cultural autonomy than this fact alone.

In fact, it was the Swedes, rather than the Germans, who launched an early campaign for cultural autonomy already before the Estonian independence declaration in February 1918. Subsequently, the Swedish leader Hans Pöhl (1876–1930) made a significant contribution toward getting the necessary constitutional provisions through the Estonian Constituent Assembly in 1920 and was involved in the preparations for the 1925 law itself. Indeed, for a good number of years, some form of cultural autonomy was the overarching goal of the Estonian Swedish national movement. This means that the Swedish understanding of cultural autonomy needs to be studied in order to place the 1925 Estonian legislation in its proper context. Furthermore, the law's nonterritorial emphasis is worth examining from the point of view of the Estonian Swedes as a territorial minority group. How, if at all, did they engage with the law's famous nonterritoriality?

To answer these questions, I will trace how the Estonian Swedish understanding of cultural autonomy changed and developed over the years, and what the Swedish attitudes were toward the 1925 law before and after its passing by the Estonian parliament.

Due to the cataclysmic events that affected Estonia (and its Swedish minority) in the 20th century, the available primary sources on this topic are unfortunately limited. In addition to a few official publications and archival documents, my main source has been the Estonian Swedish journal *Kustbon* (The Coast Dweller), published in Tallinn from 1918 onward. Despite frequent financial difficulties, *Kustbon* continued to be published throughout the interwar period and was probably reasonably widely read in the Estonian Swedish community. It had the character of a semi-informal newsletter and outlet for local news, but it also published editorials, opinion pieces, and occasional political content, such as election propaganda. In this latter respect, *Kustbon* reflected the views of the Estonian Swedish political leadership—that is, the circle around Hans Pöhl. In 1918, Pöhl was also *Kustbon*'s editor, a task that was soon taken over by his close ally Nikolaus Blees (1883–1941). For a detailed account of *Kustbon*'s history, see Nyman (1958, 2–11).

### The Estonian Swedish National Movement before 1917

An Estonian Swedish national movement had scarcely existed before the final decades of the 19th century. By the turn of the 20th, however, a small circle of pastors and schoolteachers had taken up the Estonian Swedish national cause. Johan Nymann (1859–1933) and Hans Pöhl, both teachers from Noarootsi (*Nuckö* in Swedish), soon made themselves known as the most energetic activists of the movement. They were behind the first Swedish organization in Estonia (a Noarootsi temperance society, officially founded in 1903), the first Swedish periodical published in Estonia (an annual almanac, also from 1903 onward), and several other early national initiatives (Nyman 1971, 10, 15–18; Kranking 2009, 60–61).

This burgeoning Swedish movement was primarily preoccupied with the threat that the Swedes might soon be assimilated by the dominant national groups around them: the Estonians, but also the Baltic Germans (Nyman 1971, 28; 1976, 4; Kranking 2009, 63, 65, 70). The Swedish leaders therefore felt that action was needed to preserve and advance the Swedish language and culture in Estonia. Their most immediate objective was to carry the message of national awakening to the whole Swedish national community, bringing the yet-unconverted Swedes into the national fold and educating them about the inherent value of their Swedishness. To make this possible, organizations and initiatives had to be in place to ensure the sustainability and expansion of primary (if possible, also secondary) education in Swedish, the availability of Swedish religious services, and the use of Swedish in institutions of local government in the Swedish settlement area (sometimes called Aiboland). Finally, the Estonian Swedish leadership attempted to establish and keep up contacts with Sweden, where it relied on conservative nationalist circles for support and inspiration (Kummel 1994, 231–232; Kuldkepp 2021, 412–413).

The early Swedish national activism was almost entirely cultural and educational in scope, with no outright engagement with contentious political matters. Thanks to this restraint (but still after years of waiting), the Swedish leaders managed in 1909 to secure permission to establish the first and initially the only general Estonian Swedish organization, the Friends of Swedish Education (*Svenska Odlingens Vänner*, SOV) (Aman 1992, 247–250). In the following five years, SOV, impressively, managed to achieve a great deal, particularly in advancing Swedish primary education. At the same time, SOV increasingly attracted the suspicions of Tsarist authorities, who surmised that it might adopt a program of Swedish autonomy in Russia, or even separatism from Russia and reunification with Sweden. Shortly before Christmas 1913, SOV's offices were raided, and documents were confiscated. The organization itself was not banned, but the wartime conditions, which soon followed, had a debilitating effect on Swedish national activities in Estonia (Nyman 1971, 26–27). These could only properly continue after the 1917 Russian February Revolution, but now already in entirely new circumstances.

Out of the original Pöhl-Nymann tandem, it was the younger and better-educated Pöhl who had assumed the position of the leader of the Swedish movement by the beginning of the war. Having visited Sweden for the first time in 1903 – a trip that left an unforgettable impression – Pöhl moved a year later to the provincial capital Tallinn to work as a clerk at the Swedish St. Michael's Church and a caretaker at Sailors' Home. At the same time, he took correspondence courses in English language and literature at Oxford and Cambridge Universities and graduated in 1912 as a licenced high school teacher from a pedagogical institute in St. Petersburg. Pöhl was also one of the founders and, subsequently, one of the three executive officers of SOV (Nyman 1976, 3–5). When opportunities for political activism appeared in 1917, he was also the first to take advantage of them, and he remained the undisputed leader of the Swedish national movement until his death in 1930.

### The Beginnings of Estonian Swedish Political Activism in 1917

Soon after the abdication of the tsar, the Estonian political elites started negotiations with the Russian Provisional Government, with the goal of achieving political autonomy for Estonia in the future Russian state. At the same time, the Estonian Swedish leadership attempted to run their own auxiliary negotiations. In March and April 1917, on Pöhl's initiative, the Swedish activists directed dispatches to the Estonian leaders and to the Provisional Government in Petrograd, pointing out that the national aspirations of the Swedes in Russia should not be forgotten when those of other nationalities were being taken into consideration. Outright political autonomy for the tiny Swedish minority was not in the cards, but Pöhl and others wanted to see an explicit guarantee of Swedish linguistic and cultural rights under the coming Estonian autonomy law (Kuldkepp 2021, 414–415; Nyman 1958, 2–5; Nyman 1976, 6).

In the second half of April 1917, Pöhl took the initiative of establishing a more permanent political organization that could speak on behalf of the Swedish national community. It was named The League of the Swedish People in the Baltic Sea Provinces (*Svenska Folkförbundet i Östersjö-provinserna* [SFF]), later renamed The League of the Swedish People in Estonia (*Svenska Folkförbundet i Estland*), and its purpose was to ensure that the Swedes would have the ability to defend and advance their vital interests regarding the Swedish language and culture, as well as political and citizens' rights. Pöhl also thought it was more generally important that the Swedes participate in the process of the political and social renewal of the Russian state, just like the other Russian nationalities at the time.<sup>1</sup>

The principal Swedish policy aims were decided at SFF's constitutive meeting on May 2, 1917. These included complete equality between Swedish and the other local languages (Estonian, Russian, and German) in local schools, local government institutions, and churches, as well as mandatory knowledge of Swedish by local government officials in the Swedish settlement area. SFF also wanted permission to establish a Swedish folk high school (*folkhögskola*) and the inclusion of a Swedish representative in both the future Estonian self-government and in the Soldiers' and Workers' Soviets in Haapsalu and Tallinn. Finally, SFF decided to initiate the publication of its own journal, which eventually came to be titled *Kustbon*.<sup>2</sup>

In early summer 1917, Pöhl was elected as one of the 66 members of the new Estonian institution of autonomous self-government, the Estonian Provisional Diet (*Ajutine Maanõukogu*). There, he joined the liberal-centrist Democratic bloc and quickly rose to some prominence, being elected into some influential committees and the Diet's Council of Elders (the executive branch of the Diet). However, Pöhl's attempts to achieve guaranteed Swedish representation in similar future institutions remained fruitless (see *Maanõukogu protokollid*, 184) as discussions were soon overtaken by events. Following the Russian October Revolution, the Temporary Diet was disbanded by the Bolsheviks, and its activities were forced underground (Kuldkepp 2021, 416–417).

## The Swedish Political Program in 1918

In early 1918, the Estonian Swedish national ambitions came to be explicitly and publicly worded for the first time in terms of cultural autonomy. In a programmatic article that Pöhl published in *Kustbon* in mid-February, he wrote that “irrespective of how Estonia’s future was to turn out, the Swedish population’s aim will be cultural autonomy for the Swedes in Estonia” (“*Huru än Estlands framtid kommer att avgöras är den svenska befolkningens syftemål: Kulturell autonomi för svenskarna i Estland*”) (Pöhl, “Vår framtid,” *Kustbon*, February 14, 1918). He did not explain what cultural autonomy would entail, but his words nevertheless suggest that the Swedish (that is, SFF’s) aspirations for autonomy were cultural – as opposed to political – and that the Swedish national program was flexible in terms of SFF’s state-level political allegiance but uncompromising with the respect to the question of Swedish linguistic and cultural rights. It seems likely that the concrete expectations regarding the latter were in the spirit of SFF’s resolutions passed in the previous spring.

With the German occupation of Estonia all but certain in near future, the prospect of a democratic Russia doubtful after the Bolshevik takeover, and any independent Estonian statehood a highly uncertain prospect, such political flexibility was in fact already being practiced. At some point after the October Revolution, SFF petitioned the new Russian Soviet government,<sup>3</sup> probably evoking the right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, which Lenin and Stalin had declared in mid-November 1917. Unfortunately, no copy of this petition is known to exist. Another petition from the end of January 1918, sent to the Swedish minister in Petrograd, luckily survives in Swedish archives (Kuldkepp 2021, 417–418).

In this latter document, Pöhl and the others describe the Estonian Swedish national ambitions as follows: “[i]n accordance with the right of self-determination that has been awarded to Russian nationalities, a unification with Sweden, Finland, or autonomous Åland would be the most desirable solution for us, but, if such a proposal cannot be put into practice, our wish would be cultural autonomy” (quoted in Kummel 1994, 214; see also Alenius 2006, 310–311). This statement went farther than what the Swedish leadership was willing to publicly state in *Kustbon*, but its scepticism about the actual feasibility of transferring the Estonian Swedish settlement territory from Russia to another state was visible even there: if need be, the Swedish leadership was willing to settle for cultural autonomy in (Soviet) Russia.

All political flexibility aside, the Swedish ambitions had by that point become most closely aligned with the Estonian ones. No doubt, this was encouraged by the benevolent attitude toward national minorities shown by some of the most senior Estonian leaders, notably Konstantin Päts. It was also facilitated by Hans Pöhl’s involvement in what was rapidly becoming national-level Estonian politics. His inclusion in the Provisional Diet had been a sign of respect shown by Estonian politicians to Swedish interests, given that a special electoral exception had to be made for Pöhl (one member of the Diet was normally elected per 20,000 people, and the Swedish minority comprised not even half as many). Although Swedish attempts to find support for their national program in the Russian Provisional Government and then the Soviet Government seem to not have led to any concrete results, the Estonian independence manifesto, issued in conjunction with the Estonian independence declaration on February 24, indeed contained an explicit promise of cultural autonomy for Estonia’s national minorities. Furthermore, in the first Estonian Provisional Government, which was formed at the same time, three ministerial posts were allocated to the representatives of the largest national minorities in Estonia: the Germans, the Russians, and the Swedes (Laaman 1964, 355; Kuldkepp 2021, 418–419).

In practice, this benevolence made little difference initially. The activities of the Estonian Provisional Diet, the Provisional Government, and all political organizations (including SFF) were forbidden under the German occupation, which began almost immediately after the Estonian independence declaration. The occupation regime remained in place until Autumn 1918, when Germany’s defeat in the First World War led to its troops being pulled out of the Baltics.



Nonetheless, even during the occupation, Pöhl and the other Swedish leaders continued to bargain for Swedish cultural rights. In April 1918, a Swedish delegation met with the head of German military administration in Estonia, General Adolf von Seckendorff, to whom they gave assurances about the German-friendliness of the Estonian Swedes and their wish to pursue their national and cultural interests with the help of the mighty German state. In the autumn, Pöhl was also peripherally involved in the efforts to draw up a constitution for the United Baltic Duchy, a projected German puppet state in the region.<sup>4</sup> Later, these Swedish actions came to attract accusations of treachery in Estonian newspapers (“Saksa okkupatsioon ja Eesti rootslased,” *Tallinna Teataja*, November 5, 1919).

Nonetheless, when the occupation ended, the Swedish leadership immediately resumed its cooperation with Estonian politicians. As the Estonian Provisional Government took power into its own hands, Pöhl was appointed as the only candidate to the still vacant post of Swedish national minister, and he was duly elected. Swedish representation was thereby established on the highest level of Estonian politics, where Pöhl now functioned as a middleman between the Swedish national community and the Estonian government. SFF clearly had a reason to be happy with the way things were progressing. In December 1918, when Pöhl was dispatched to Sweden as a member of an Estonian delegation,<sup>5</sup> he stated in an interview in a Swedish newspaper that “[t]he aim of our struggle – cultural autonomy – has mostly been achieved. Swedish churches existed already before; Swedish is now spoken in the fourteen Swedish primary schools, and Swedish is also used in the local government. We have full freedom of association, unlimited right to establish enterprises and so on” (“Estlandssvenskarnas läge,” *Dagens Nyheter*, December 28, 1918).

### Elections to the Estonian Constituent Assembly and the Revised Swedish Political Program

It therefore seems that in the period of about five months when the Swedish National Ministry existed, the Estonian Swedish leadership considered its ambitions for cultural autonomy already satisfied. However, this situation, like the provisional system of Estonia’s governance, was a temporary one. The future direction of the Estonian state and its constitutional setup were to be decided by the Estonian Constituent Assembly. Until then, the footing of Swedish national rights in Estonia was far from firm and stable.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly were the first elections in which SFF participated as one political party among others. For the purposes of the election campaign – and more generally, in the face of changed political circumstances – the Swedish political strategy had to be revised. This was done at SFF’s general congress on March 22, 1919, described in a notice in *Kustbon* as “dealing with questions relevant to the cultural autonomy of the Estonian Swedes” (*Kustbon*, March 26, 1919). An emphasis on cultural autonomy was indeed prominent: in his opening speech to his one-hundred-strong audience, Pöhl highlighted the importance of defending Swedish national interests at a time when “the cultural autonomy of the Swedes is the order of the day” (“Protokoll,” *Kustbon*, April 9, 1919), clearly expecting the Constituent Assembly to soon make good on the promise given in the independence manifesto.

What exactly did the revised Swedish program include? Some of the resolutions passed by the congress focused on political aims: that the Swedes should attempt to secure a national minister post in future Estonian governments and find guaranteed Swedish representation in the Estonian parliament through the establishment of a separate Swedish constituency. Such political goals, however, were merely meant to serve a set of cultural aims relating to the securing and expansion of Swedish education and the public use of the Swedish language. Formulated by activist and schoolteacher Joel Nyman (1882–1961), the linguistic and educational aims included future expansion of Swedish education (including into secondary education), the abolition of mixed-language (that is, Estonian and Swedish) schools, and the securing of state support for the Swedish schools on the same basis as for the Estonian ones. Nyman also envisioned the establishment of an

autonomous cultural institution: a Swedish school administration with full decision-making rights in Swedish educational matters presiding over all Swedish schools. In *Kustbon*, these functions were described with the formulation “i.e., full cultural autonomy,” giving this term, which previously had not been associated with any concrete institutions, a novel connotation (“Protokoll,” *Kustbon*, April 9, 1919; “Protokoll,” April 16, 1919).

From the revised Swedish program, it is evident that the Swedish leadership believed the political conditions in the country to have been stabilized – the ongoing War of Independence notwithstanding – and considered the Swedish ambitions to some extent already satisfied by the young Estonian state. The previous emphasis on political flexibility in terms of state allegiance had thereby receded in the background: one political party among the others, SFF was ready to work in the confines of the Estonian system. Cultural autonomy, however, continued as the overarching arm of the Swedish national movement. At that stage, it was a broad concept that entailed some form of guaranteed Swedish educational and linguistic rights in Estonia. Its more concrete aspects, however, were up for debate and could include innovations, such as Nyman’s idea of a separate Swedish school administration. Furthermore, the broader Swedish program still included the clearly political aims of legally guaranteed Swedish representation in the Estonian institutions of governance, envisioned as a political muscle behind future cultural autonomy.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly also heralded the beginning of an electoral alliance between SFF and the Christian People’s Party (*Kristlik Rahvaerakond*), another new small party in need of allies. Hans Pöhl, who was the head of SFF, became a member of the Christian People’s Party’s central committee, thereby forming a personal link between the two organizations.<sup>6</sup>

The elections went well, and Pöhl was duly elected to the Constituent Assembly as the sole Swedish representative. At the same time, he lost his ministerial post, given that National Ministries, together with all other temporary governance institutions, were abolished when the Constituent Assembly met for the first time. This was also the topic of Pöhl’s first and slightly acrimonious speech in the Constituent Assembly on May 21, 1919. Although he expressed appreciation of the fact that the promise of cultural autonomy had been included in the Estonian independence manifesto, and that the Provisional Government had shown benevolence to the Swedish national minority, Pöhl now articulated a more pessimistic view of the future of the Estonian Swedes. He lamented the National Ministry’s short lifespan and argued that the Swedes deserved better treatment from Estonians, together with whom they had suffered and fought for a better future: “cultural autonomy is a vital question for us. We also want to live” (*Asutava Kogu I istungjärk*, 525–527).<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the idea that the Estonian Swedes needed cultural autonomy began to be accepted somewhat more broadly. Optimistic articles appeared in Swedish press, stating that the Estonian Swedes now had “every reason to hope for the cultural autonomy that until now had seemed to be a hopeless utopia” (“Nyheter från de baltiska svenskarna,” *Aftonbladet*, January 7, 1919). Carl Mangård, an editor of a Swedish provincial newspaper who had visited the Estonian Swedish settlements and been briefed by Pöhl, published a long letter in *Kustbon*, in which he expressed his warm hope that the Estonian Swedes would “achieve cultural autonomy, which is a vital condition for your free development” (“En hälsning från Sverige,” *Kustbon*, August 20, 1919). These well-wishers might have had only a vague idea of what Swedish cultural autonomy would entail, but the term certainly seemed to catch on.

The Swedish program, however, continued to experience setbacks. Pöhl’s appeals to the Estonians’ conscience notwithstanding, it proved to be impossible to reinstate the post of the Swedish national minister or to establish a separate Swedish constituency – primarily because of the unwillingness of the Estonian parties to extend the same rights to the other national minorities, particularly the Baltic Germans. The explicitly political goals adopted at SFF’s congress were thereby frustrated. True, the National Ministries did not disappear altogether, but the so-called National Secretariats that replaced them had much more limited power and influence, working under the Ministry of Education and not as a part of the government itself (Kuldkepp 2021, 424).

Writing about this disappointment in *Kustbon*, the new Swedish National Secretary (and *Kustbon*'s editor) Nikolaus Blees still struck an optimistic note, claiming that the opportunities for the Swedes to protect their cultural interests were still good, if they only mustered up the necessary energy ("Om svenskarnas rättigheter," *Kustbon*, January 14, 1920). Indeed, the fact that the institution of National Secretary existed – and that the Swedish-speaking schools, churches, and local government institutions in the settlement area continued to function – indicates that Estonian Swedes were, in practice, still perhaps not very far from what they had campaigned for. Yet, they still lacked guarantees for the future, and not everyone agreed that what had been achieved was sufficient.

### Cultural or Political Autonomy – and the Baltic German Influence

SFF's failure to achieve its more ambitious political goals came exactly at a time when the future status of the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands was a topic of much international discussion. One member of *Kustbon*'s readership therefore found it expedient to call out Pöhl and the rest of SFF's leadership for its lacking assertiveness. Under the title "We demand," a writer who went by the initials M. K. stated that the leading men of the Estonian Swedes, although "hoping" for various improvements to the circumstances of the Swedes, had not actually served the vital security needs of their people, because "as long as we do not stop Estonian immigration into Swedish settlements, we have no national security." Therefore, in M. K.'s opinion, Estonian Swedish politics had to be rethought, with politically autonomous Aiboland as the main goal (M. K., "Vi fordra," *Kustbon*, March 3, 1920; Alenius 2006, 314–315).

In a follow-up article, M. K. called for the convening of "Aibolands landsting," envisioned as the institution of highest Estonian Swedish political authority, with Åland's Diet and its pro-Swedish separatist campaign as a shining example. The main goal of this Diet, democratically elected by the Swedish settlements, was supposed to be the establishment of full self-rule for Aiboland, guaranteeing the right of the Swedes to inhabit its territory perpetually. To make this possible, M. K. intended to rely on the principle of self-determination of nations – "the highest law" of the day – and to enlist the help of "the council in Paris" if the Estonian authorities proved to be a hindrance (M. K., "Aibolands landsting," *Kustbon*, April 14, 1920; Kuldkepp 2021, 425–426).

A new and alternative Swedish political program had thereby been thrown into the discussion: the idea that in the interest of their "national security," the Swedes needed to achieve political and territorial – not merely cultural – autonomy through the establishment of corresponding territorially defined institutions. M. K. was even willing to bypass the wishes of Estonians, if necessary, by appealing to the principle of national self-determination and the international community.

In his two responses, Nikolaus Blees made the point that even the Baltic Germans, numbering about 50,000, had not achieved political autonomy in Estonia. The Swedes were certainly far too few for this to be a possibility, and as a nation of farmers and fishermen, perhaps not even up to the task. The Swedish settlements were also too isolated and spread out to be able to be governed from one central point, and the population was mixed with Estonians ("Vårt närmaste mål," *Kustbon*, March 17, 1920). However, although noting, "we should not fly higher than our wings carry," Blees was nevertheless ready to entertain the idea of "setting the sights higher" and going beyond cultural autonomy, which had always been "the Swedish aim" ("Aibolands självstyrelse," *Kustbon*, April 24, 1920; Kuldkepp 2021, 426).

The discussion in *Kustbon* attracted the attention of Estonian newspapers, with left-wing *Sotsialdemokraat* interpreting M. K.'s proposal as a Swedish demand for "absolute self-governance under the protection of the League of Nations." Although *Sotsialdemokraat* declared itself to be in favor of the national self-determination principle, it cautioned the Swedes to deliberate the matter thoroughly before embarking on the objective of establishing their own state ("Även estniska pressen uppmärksammar 'M. K.:s' artikel i Kustbon nr 8 'Vi fordra,'" *Kustbon*, April 21, 1920). Even other Swedes cast doubt on the practical feasibility of such ambitious political prospects, with Joel



Nyman writing that what might be necessary for Åland could well be totally inappropriate in Estonia, and that national freedom and self-determination, while good principles, “require a capability to take care of such jewels.” In Nyman’s opinion, the Swedes “will do best and get furthest with their cultural autonomy” if they kept to the laws that applied to the whole of the country (Farbror Svenske [Joel Nyman], “Uttalanden från de blandspråkiga bygderna,” *Kustbon*, April 21, 1920).

Hans Pöhl, who had the last word in the discussion, declared that the question of Estonian Swedish territorial self-governance inside the Estonian state was worth considering, but it had to be thought about carefully, because a ready-made solution could not be imported from elsewhere. Pöhl also made the argument that it was not possible to make a joint case with the Germans, who were spread out all over the country and therefore had different (that is, nonterritorial) needs. At the same time, Pöhl agreed that more could be done politically: the Swedes should not go against their Estonian neighbors, but they did need guarantees that would enable them to move toward what had been their goal since early 1917 – cultural autonomy (Pöhl, “Om estlandssvenskarnas självstyrelse,” *Kustbon*, April 28, 1920; Kuldkepp 2021, 426).

What this exchange shows is that although the mainstream members of the Swedish national movement (that is, SFF) rejected M. K.’s plan as practically unfeasible, and certainly disagreed with the notion that cultural autonomy should be replaced by political autonomy as the new Swedish aim, they were willing to consider further auxiliary political initiatives in service of the cultural autonomy objective. This, in fact, is what happened. With their original plans of achieving guaranteed Swedish representation in the Estonian government and parliament frustrated, the Swedish leadership instead turned to seeking constitutional guarantees in order to make sure that the promise of cultural autonomy would be kept and concretized in future legislation.

Initially, as the constitutional debates in the Constituent Assembly proceeded, the prospect of including minority rights provisions gave little cause for optimism. On June 2, 1919, *Kustbon* complained that the constitutional committee had left the question of national minorities’ cultural autonomy entirely by the wayside. Not dissuaded, however, it stated that the goal of the Swedes – to organize their internal cultural and national affairs (*inre kulturella och nationella angelägenheter*) by themselves – had remained unchanged, and that the minority representatives’ point of view about the necessity of such constitutional provisions had found the support of some prominent Estonian politicians, notably, the former premier Konstantin Päts (“Lokala meddelanden. Från Konstituanten,” *Kustbon*, June 2, 1920). A related concern was that the constitutional protections of minority rights might be watered down by the Estonian majority parties. It was pointed out in *Kustbon* that what Estonian parties would have liked to give to the national minorities – the right to establish associations and to petition authorities – was something that all citizens had the right to do anyway and did not amount to a guaranteed right to organize one’s own cultural and educational life and to collect taxes for this purpose (“Lokala meddelanden. Estlands grundlag,” *Kustbon*, June 9, 1920).

This emphasis on taxes was entirely new in the Swedish discourse and indicates that it had come under the influence of a constitutional proposal on national minority rights that had been authored by the Constituent Assembly’s Baltic German representatives. The German proposal still did not explicitly use the term “cultural autonomy,” but it outlined a much more concrete understanding of what the Estonian minority rights legislation should entail than had ever been formulated by the Swedes. It specified, among other things, that all Estonian citizens should be able to freely determine their nationality, and that the national minorities should have the right to self-government in “educational, national-cultural, welfare and other national interests,” the right to elect a representative institution to enact this right, and the right to collect taxes from the members of the national community, especially to support minority-language schools.<sup>8</sup>

As recognized by the Estonian politicians, the German proposal was “put together on the principle of extraterritorial national autonomy” – a fact that they did not appreciate, since, as the

Labour Party politician and former Prime Minister Otto Strandman put it, “we are integrating Estonia’s people through the state and cannot give it rights that can be enacted separately from the state.”<sup>9</sup> The issue of whether the national minority community would be allowed to collect separate taxes was particularly contentious, drawing repeated accusations that the Germans were trying to create “a state within a state.”<sup>10</sup>

Given that the Estonian Swedish community was not wealthy enough to pay extra taxes for the upkeep of the Swedish schools, it is not immediately obvious what interest the Swedish leadership had in advancing the issue of minorities’ tax-collecting rights. However, it certainly had a reason to support the German minority-rights package as whole, given that the minority representatives had a clear incentive to present a united front in light of Estonian skepticism. As pointed out by Alenius, the representatives of the other national minorities in the Constituent Assembly, and later in the parliament, would usually support all proposals made by the Germans (Alenius 2007, 447). The Swedes also participated in other actions to promote minority rights. On June 5, for example, a deputation of national minority representatives visited the speaker of the Constituent Assembly, August Rei, and the premier, Jaan Tõnisson, with the Swedes represented by Mathias Westerblom (1888–1942) (“Lokala meddelanden. Estlands grundlag,” *Kustbon*, June 9, 1920).

These joint efforts were crowned with success because the Baltic German representatives and Pöhl jointly managed to insert into the 1920 Estonian constitution the famous paragraph 21, which stated that minorities had the right to establish institutions that were in their “national cultural and welfare interests” (*Asutava Kogu poolt 15. Juunil 1920 vastu võetud [esimene] Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*, 69; *Asutava Kogu IV istungjäärk*, 903).<sup>11</sup> Although the contentious issue of tax-collecting rights had been dropped, and even the paragraph that remained in the constitution did not grant outright cultural autonomy, it now kept it open as more than just a theoretical possibility. The constitution furthermore affirmed the right to use Swedish when dealing with the central authorities of the state, as well as the guaranteed territorial use of national minority languages in institutions of local government if the majority of the local population belonged to a national minority.<sup>12</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable that Baltic German nonterritorial interests, which Pöhl had only recently characterized in *Kustbon* as “different” from those of the Swedes, would over time come to influence the Swedish understanding of cultural autonomy. In fact, Pöhl and the Germans had entered a form of mutually beneficial cooperation in the Constituent Assembly. On the one hand, any idea of separate Swedish minority rights (different from those allocated to the Germans) was probably a chimera: as Pöhl had already experienced, the Estonian legislature would treat all the numerically more significant minorities of the country the same. Supporting certain German wishes that would, at worst, be useless for the Swedes made political sense for the Swedish leadership, since it could still enjoy the other and more relevant rights.

On the other hand, it is almost certain that without Pöhl’s help, the constitutional proposal would not have passed. Reading the meeting minutes of the Constituent Assembly, it is evident that Pöhl’s views had generally more support than those of the Russian or German representatives.<sup>13</sup> This might have been partially due to fact that Pöhl, unlike the others, spoke in Estonian. More significantly, however, the perception of the Estonian Swedes as a small, harmless and generally Estonian-like minority must have given legitimacy to the whole idea of guaranteed national minority rights in this early stage of the development of Estonian statehood.<sup>14</sup> As later argued also in *Kustbon*, Pöhl found the ear of the Estonian parties more easily than the German and Russian representatives, who were seen as representing the interests of oppressive powers that had previously ruled over Estonia (“Riksdagsvalen,” *Kustbon*, May 16, 1923). Without Pöhl’s presence counterbalancing Estonian anxieties, a statement on minority rights would perhaps not have made it into the 1920 constitution at all, with the possible result that the famous Estonian cultural autonomy law of 1925 would never have come into being.

### Hans Pöhl and the First Draft of the Cultural Autonomy Law, 1921–1923

After the Constituent Assembly passed the land law, followed by the temporary and then the permanent Estonian constitution, its functions had been exhausted, and it was time for elections to the first Estonian Parliament (*Riigikogu*) for the term 1921–1923. Ahead of the elections, which took place November 27–29, 1920, SFF's leadership yet again had to decide its stance on the issues of the day, which were now increasingly numerous and diverse. Nevertheless, SFF's main interest remained squarely on "national" questions: "our language rights, our schools, our community unified on our turf, not spread out and mixed in with foreign nationalities, which is our death" ("De stundande valen," *Kustbon*, September 15, 1920). More concretely, the Swedish leadership argued that although certain guarantees of linguistic and cultural rights had been achieved, it was now time to make sure that these were fulfilled ("Våra närmaste uppgifter," *Kustbon*, September 22, 1920).

SFF's cooperation with the Christian People's Party continued, with Hans Pöhl again successfully elected on the strength of Swedish votes. Even more than in the Constituent Assembly, however, his subsequent activities in the first Estonian parliament came to be focused on collaboration with the Baltic German representatives. Most importantly, Pöhl and the Germans collaborated on the first draft for the Estonian cultural autonomy law, which was meant to give substance to the previous year's constitutional declaration of minority rights (Nyman 1976, 8–9; Garleff 1978, 90).

In line with its practical needs – but also its self-image – the approach of the Baltic German minority, which was dispersed all over Estonia, to cultural autonomy would continue to be personal rather than territorial. This corresponded to the thinking of Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, the Austro-Marxist originators of the idea (Alenius 2004, 41; Feest 1996, 514–515). The Swedes as an overwhelmingly territorial national minority had no particular use for this nonterritorial emphasis, nor did they have anything particular to lose from it. Furthermore, although Pöhl's explicit attitude to nonterritoriality is difficult to ascertain due to lack of sources, it might have well also included the consideration that Swedish nonterritorial rights could become important in the future, because it was likely that an increasing number of Swedes would come to settle outside of their traditional settlement area.

Already on April 28, 1921, the national minority representatives jointly submitted the first draft of the cultural autonomy law proposal for discussion in the parliament ("Vähemusrahvuste õiguste kindlustamine," *Postimees*, April 29, 1921; "Svenska Folkförbundets årsmöte," *Kustbon*, May 4, 1921). Probably in anticipation of the law being passed soon, Pöhl proposed to a meeting of SFF officers on May 25 that SFF start the process of registering all members of the Swedish minority and adopt an Estonian Swedish flag ("Svenska Folkförbundets styrelsesammanträde," *Kustbon*, June 1, 1921).

Nevertheless, the proposal, contentious as it was, did not proceed quickly through the parliament, and cooperation between Pöhl and his German colleagues continued. Their efforts received a further boost when Estonia, on becoming a member of the League of Nations on September 22, 1921, made the promise to "enter into negotiations with League of Nations concerning a more detailed formulation of its international obligations regarding the protection of minorities" ("Minoriteternas skydd," *Kustbon*, March 1, 1922).<sup>15</sup> This resulted in an address, which Swedish and Baltic German delegates together with the Russian and Jewish representatives submitted to the Estonian State Elder Konstantin Päts on January 20, 1922. It requested the government's support for their proposed law, which, they argued, would satisfy the League of Nations' demands regarding the protection of national minority rights ("Estlands nationella minoriteter och folkförbundet," *Kustbon*, February 15, 1922).

*Kustbon's* readership was provided with a description of the proposed law in March 1922. It explained that its purpose was to ensure the minorities' rights to manage their national culture autonomously, particularly in educational and welfare matters. The minority community was to be

defined as a corporate body, which every member of the minority above 20 years of age could join. Self-government was to be practiced through a National Diet, with 60 members who would be elected for a three-year term. Funds for the maintenance of schools and other services would be acquired partially as a percentage of general taxation, and partially through special taxes paid by the minority itself. In exchange for the cultural autonomy, the minority community would be obliged to refrain from all interference in politics (“Minoriteternas skydd,” *Kustbon*, March 1, 1922).

*Kustbon*'s early discussion of the law proposal engaged little with the substance of the law. Rather, it focused on the slow pace with which it was proceeding through the Estonian parliament. Almost two years after the draft had first been submitted, *Kustbon*'s first 1923 issue stated that although the Estonian state was developing well and the future was looking good, there were still unresolved questions, including the cultural autonomy law. This meant that the Swedes and other minorities could not yet feel completely satisfied, because they were waiting for their promised privileges (“Återblick vid årsskiftet,” *Kustbon*, January 10, 1923). The question of whether these privileges would make any practical difference from the Swedish point of view was not raised, but there was probably no reason why *Kustbon* would not write positively about a law in which the Swedish leadership had already invested substantial political capital and that furthermore bore the title of “cultural autonomy,” the long-standing goal of Swedish national aspirations.

Not long afterward, in Spring 1923, the law indeed came close to passing, but it was then voted down at its second reading. This prompted an unprecedented joint declaration on the part of the minority delegates condemning the dilatory tactics of some of the Estonian parties (Garleff 1978, 90–91). There were to be still no further immediate developments, however, because the parliament was now dissolved for unrelated reasons – its majority had been defeated in a referendum held over whether to reintroduce religious education in primary schools. SFF and the Christian People's Party had supported the reintroduction of religious education, but their members, too, now found themselves unseated and having to fight another election campaign.

At that point, the author known as M. K. made a new appearance, again arguing for the establishment of a separate Estonian Swedish autonomous region, where the Swedes would “enjoy at least as much cultural autonomy as is now the case” (“Estlands nationella minoriteter och folkförbundet,” *Kustbon*, February 15, 1922), but where they would be able to develop their culture and use their language without dependence on local Estonian authorities. To realize this aim, M. K. called for cooperation with the other national minorities of the country, although he admitted that since the Germans, the Russians, and the Jews did not possess a territorially compact population like the Swedes, their autonomy requirements would naturally be of a different kind. But even so, in his opinion, the other nationalities were likely to support the Swedish aspirations, and interminority cooperation would be the only way to achieve this superior form of Swedish autonomy.

The idea of cooperating with other minorities was also supported by other voices, notably by Erik Gahlnbäck (1868–?), the former Swedish and Norwegian vice consul to Tallinn who had long been active in the Estonian Swedish national movement. Gahlnbäck approached the issue from the angle of parliamentary discussions, during which some members of the Christian People's Party had demonstrated their opposition to the cultural autonomy law. In Gahlnbäck's opinion, this suggested that “just as in Poland, Latvia and elsewhere,” the Estonian Swedes should rather cooperate with other national minorities than rely on Estonian political parties. The latter approach was supposedly unwise, because the Estonians, Gahlnbäck thought, even though they always complained about oppression in Tsarist times, had themselves started behaving in a way similar to the old Russian habits (“Vårt folks representant i estniska parlamentet,” *Kustbon*, March 16, 1923).

The degree of German-Swedish cooperation was indeed deepening in this period. Although there were no quick results and the Swedes were growing impatient, the parliamentary debates over the cultural autonomy law in 1921–1923 again benefited from Hans Pöhl's softening influence on the suspicion with which the Estonian parties regarded their former oppressors' demands for more extensive rights. As pointed out by Martyn Housden (2004, 244), the Baltic Germans had championed the law proposal so strongly that it was easy to assume that it was

merely a vehicle for Baltic German interests, and that other minorities with other historical experiences would scarcely make use of cultural autonomy. Pöhl attempted to undermine this line of thought by presenting the practical significance that nonterritorial cultural autonomy would have for the Swedes. Given that the various Swedish settlements were split between four separate school districts, Pöhl argued, they currently lacked a center from which the educational matters of the whole community could be directed – a problem that cultural autonomy would help to solve (*I Riigikogu: IX istungjärk*, 2439–2440). Nevertheless, it seems likely that Pöhl's main reason for supporting the German initiative was to not to split the ranks of the minority representatives. Although nonterritoriality was of little use for the Swedes, it was of no particular detriment either. Yet again, the Swedish interests were a bridge between the Germans and the suspicious Estonians.

### The Failed Elections to the Second Estonian Parliament and Their Aftermath, 1923–1924

The 1923 electoral campaign was the last one that SFF fought under the banner of cultural autonomy, and this time, unsuccessfully. The joint referendum success had not facilitated even closer cooperation between SFF and the Christian People's Party. In fact, the critical voices raised in *Kustbon*, especially Gahlnbäck's, had lent credence to the idea that the Swedes should distance themselves from the Estonian party altogether. Although Gahlnbäck was known for his personal German-friendliness, and although his views were perhaps more characteristic of the Swedish-German elites in Tallinn than of poor farmers in the Swedish settlements, the officers of SFF seemed to agree. A proposal from the Christian People's Party for continued cooperation was turned down,<sup>16</sup> but SFF would still not conclude an outright alliance with the Baltic German party, instead preferring to present its own separate lists of candidates.

SFF put up lists of candidates in six different constituencies, more than ever before or after. *Kustbon* published calls for Swedish national unity: because both religious education and cultural autonomy had been unpopular with the previous parliamentary majority, the Swedes could claim that the rights of the small nationalities were in danger (“Varer svenske!” *Kustbon*, April 11, 1923). This did not help. A missing few hundred votes quashed the hopes of SFF to be represented in Estonia's second parliament.

The electoral defeat was a great loss, not least because Hans Pöhl would no longer be involved in the final stages of preparations for the cultural autonomy law. *Kustbon* noted that even the newspaper of the Estonian Labour Party (*Tööerakond*), *Vaba Maa*, had voiced its disappointment that the new parliament had been left without a Swedish representative, “since the representative of the Swedes, Mr Pöhl, has thanks to his wise and objective contributions won general respect” (“Riksdagsvalen,” *Kustbon*, May 16, 1923). Interestingly, in *Vaba Maa*'s original, it had been rather Pöhl's “understanding and willingness to compromise” that was emphasised (“Valimised möödas. Senised kokkuvõtted,” *Vaba Maa*, May 10, 1923), making it appear as if SFF and *Kustbon* were still sensitive to possible accusations of conformism.

The Swedes nevertheless remained involved in some extra-parliamentary initiatives taken by national minority representatives. Because the cultural autonomy law had failed to advance, Pöhl, together with the other national minority representatives, submitted a plea for support to State Elder Konstantin Päts on August 30, 1923, ahead of the League of Nations summit, where the question of Estonia's national minority rights was to be discussed. Arguing that Estonia's protection of national minority rights should be subjected to the League's supervision, the minority leaders suggested that such an international guarantee would also be in the interests of the Estonians, given that people of Estonian origin made up a significant national minority in Russia. In response, Päts set up a special committee,<sup>17</sup> but this soon proved superfluous because the League indeed made a form of pledge to guarantee the protection of Estonia's minority rights (“Minoritetsfrågan inför folkförbundet,” *Kustbon*, September 20, 1923). This increased the government's interest in having the cultural autonomy law passed soon.



The law itself, however, was shaping up to be a disappointment for the Swedes. *Kustbon* complained in October 1923 that an amendment to the proposal put forward by the Estonian parties – that the autonomous institutions of the minorities be placed under the local governmental authorities – would have amounted to nothing more than the continuation of the same rights that had already existed in the Tsarist times: “it does not look like they are intending to give anything in particular to the national minorities, no matter how much they boast about it internationally” (“Frågan angående folkminoriteternas kulturella autonomi hänskjuten till stora utskottet,” *Kustbon*, October 10, 1923).

Over time, such critical sentiments deepened, but news about the law also grew rarer in *Kustbon* – no doubt because the Swedish leadership now felt less able to influence the course of events. In May 1924, *Kustbon* was resigned to the fact that even if the law were adopted, it would not be particularly significant for the Swedes, who already possessed their own Swedish-speaking local government institutions with authority over local primary education. Even if the new law expanded on these autonomous rights, better results could hardly be expected, given that such activities could not be monetarily supported by the Swedish population, which was neither numerous nor rich. The Swedish National Diet and its praesidium would cost great sums of money (“Autonomilagen,” *Kustbon*, May 7, 1924).

In September of the same year, Nikolaus Blees wrote in a somewhat exasperated tone that the proposed law had moved from one committee to another for years, and the national minorities’ interest in it had cooled in the meantime. It now looked as though the cost of self-governance would be solely covered by additional self-taxation – hard to bear for the poorer minorities. Even if voluntary donations could cover some of the expenditure, taxation would eventually become unavoidable. In other ways, Blees described the law as “not so bad” and as a kind of “higher local government institution in cultural questions” (“Utsikterna till kulturell självstyrelse,” *Kustbon*, September 17, 1924).

The formulation “not so bad” was a far cry from previous Swedish characterizations of cultural autonomy as a “vital question” and “the aim of our struggle.” The disparity between what had been promoted as the main Swedish national aim and what the Estonian cultural autonomy law was turning out to be had not just caused the Swedes to be disappointed in the concrete law proposal – it had turned them off of almost any discussion of cultural autonomy altogether.

### The Passing of the 1925 Cultural Autonomy Law and the Estonian Swedish Attitudes

After several more delays,<sup>18</sup> the law was finally passed in early 1925 with a small majority. *Kustbon* commented in a short article that it would doubtlessly be very meaningful for at least some of the Estonian national minorities, and a good guarantee for them all that their cultural interests were protected – something that might well be needed in the future. As for the Swedes, *Kustbon* thought that they might make use of autonomous rights in the future, but for the time being, it was smartest to wait “until we feel ourselves economically and intellectually strong enough to make use of such self-governance” (“Politiskt. Den gångna veckan. Inrikes,” *Kustbon*, February 11, 1925).

A similar wait-and-see attitude, albeit from a different angle, is visible in a letter to *Kustbon*’s editor from Joel Nyman. Complaining about an official who had shown little understanding toward Swedish linguistic rights in the settlement area, Nyman wrote that unless this person was replaced, the Swedes should make use of their cultural autonomy rights and organize their own Swedish system of primary education, because “then we would not need to have anything to do with officials who carry plans of Muscovite character in their back pockets” (“Från utkiken,” *Kustbon*, November 18, 1925). In Nyman’s view, the Swedish adoption of cultural autonomy was contingent on continuing Estonian benevolence toward the Swedish minority: if need be, they could make use of their autonomous rights, but not otherwise. It is tempting to think that the same argument might have resurfaced in the 1930s, when the Estonian state embarked on a more “nationalizing” course and targeted the national minorities in the process, but there is no evidence that this was the case.

Other than that, the passing of the cultural autonomy law went without public comment by the Swedish leadership. As already stated in May 1924, the law was unsuitable for the Swedes, partially because the minority itself was expected to cover the costs of cultural self-government, and partially because its nonterritorial character was largely irrelevant for the Swedes, who – thanks to their territoriality – already enjoyed most of the linguistic and educational privileges that the law was meant to provide.

Consequently, the Swedish leadership stopped mentioning cultural autonomy from that point onward. Only a few further references can be found in *Kustbon*. In February 1926, Nikolaus Blees wrote that situation of the Estonian national minorities was essentially good – the constitution had guaranteed their free cultural development and, on the basis of a separate law, the minorities had the right to organize their cultural self-governance, as the Germans had already done. The national laws did not at all hinder the work of Swedish-speaking schools and societies. Rather (Blees opined in the spirit of the Swedish national activists of the pre-SOV era), it was the indifference of the Swedes themselves that was the greatest danger to Swedishness. Even the often talked about “cultural autonomy,” Blees thought, would not help the Swedes much, if they themselves failed to appreciate their language and culture. And as long as they had not yet organized their cultural self-government (which, in Blees’s opinion, could not be expected in the near future, given that the process was long, complex, and laborious) the goal of Swedish national and cultural advancement had to be sought in other ways (Farbror Svenske, “Från utkiken,” *Kustbon*, August 25, 1926) – the introspective way being perhaps the least expensive one.

The lack of ambition regarding Swedish cultural autonomy was grounded either in skepticism, as in the case of Blees, or supported by the possibly widespread idea that the Swedish national minority was doing well enough even without it. This latter view was articulated in late August 1926 by Joel Nyman, who stated that Estonians had shown benevolence to the Swedes, who did not have to feel like second-rate citizens in the Estonian state. Recent national achievements had included the founding of a Swedish agricultural folk high school in Birkas with support from the Estonian Ministry of Agriculture and well-advanced plans to establish an Estonian Swedish gymnasium in Haapsalu. Nyman noted that the Swedes had not yet made use of their cultural autonomy rights, but no longer would he threaten to make use of them unless the Estonians treated the Swedes better. Reliance on public funds and private donations, instead of taxation of the Swedish community, was clearly preferable to cultural autonomy in the sense that had been prescribed by the 1925 law (Farbror Svenske, “Från utkiken,” *Kustbon*, August 25, 1926).

In 1927, Swedish cultural autonomy was mentioned in *Kustbon* only once, again to state that although the question had been discussed, the matter was still open and unlikely to be realized in the near future due to economic difficulties and the lack of dedicated activists (Aibolänning, “Våra självstyrelseorgan,” *Kustbon*, February 23, 1927). There were no mentions of cultural autonomy at all in 1928.

Only during Hans Pöhl’s final national election campaign in 1929 did cultural autonomy briefly resurface on the pages of *Kustbon*. By that stage, after yet another failed election campaign in 1926, SFF had finally come around to the decision of concluding an alliance with the Baltic German party and letting Pöhl run as a candidate of the German-Swedish electoral bloc. It was in this context of electoral propaganda that *Kustbon* thought it important to remind its readers that Hans Pöhl alone had fought hard for the articles in the Estonian constitution, which had laid the ground for the later law of cultural autonomy of national minorities – something that the Estonians were now putting forward as their example to the world (“Våra motståndare och vi,” *Kustbon*, April 24, 1929).

SFF’s decision to cooperate with the Baltic Germans was a controversial one and cannot be fully treated here. In any case, it worked. Pöhl was once again elected to the Estonian Parliament. There, he continued his close collaboration with the Baltic German representatives, particularly Werner Hasselblatt, until Pöhl’s unexpected death in 1930.

In a tribute to Pöhl by the rest of the Swedish leadership, which was published in *Kustbon* under the title “In service of Swedishness,” cultural autonomy was mentioned one last time before *Kustbon*

ceased publication in 1940. In this eulogy, Mathias Westerblom reminded the Swedish readers that it had been Hans Pöhl who “broke new ground under the banner of Swedishness and, amongst other things, founded The League of Swedish People to protect the rights of the Swedes in this country. In this way there was constructed a shipyard where the ship of Swedishness, ‘The Cultural Autonomy,’ will be built. The deceased himself was like a master builder, but he had only had time to lay the keel and install the ribs when the work was interrupted by his death” (“I svenskhetens tjänst,” *Kustbon*, February 20, 1930).

## Conclusions

When first launched in 1917–1918, the Swedish campaign for cultural autonomy, which was broadly defined as some form of Swedish linguistic, cultural, and educational self-rule, had been separate from any notion of Estonian statehood. In fact, its beginnings preceded the Estonian independence declaration. Initially, the Swedes were in principle ready to accept cultural autonomy in a wide array of states, including the democratic Russia of the Russian Provisional Government, the Soviet Russia of Lenin and Stalin, the Germany of Wilhelm II (or the “United Baltic Duchy”), Sweden, Finland, and some kind of an imaginary union with the independent Åland Islands. What was of principal importance for the Swedish leadership was not which state to belong to, but to achieve cultural autonomy – a phrase that was promoted as the main goal of the Swedish national movement in Estonia.

Nevertheless, by 1918, the Swedish goals had already come to be most closely aligned with the Estonian ones. By including the promise of cultural autonomy for national minorities in the Estonian independence manifesto, and a Swedish national minister in the Estonian Provisional Government, the young Estonian state largely ensured the loyalty of the Swedish elites and thereby of the Swedish citizens. During the elections to the Estonian Constituent Assembly in the spring of 1919, the Swedish leadership was already content with working inside the confines of the Estonian political system. The political side of the Swedish program was now strictly focused on achieving guaranteed Swedish representation in Estonia’s institutions of governance to ensure the achievement and maintenance of Swedish cultural autonomy.

This political goal was frustrated, but in collaboration with the Baltic German representatives in the Constituent Assembly, the Swedish leadership was nevertheless able to compensate for this failure by making sure that the Estonian constitution contained provisions of minority rights that kept open the possibility of a separate cultural autonomy law in the future. Through this process, the Swedish discourse on cultural autonomy came to be increasingly influenced by the Baltic German views. Both the constitutional proposal on minority rights and later the draft law of the cultural autonomy itself were formulated by the Baltic Germans and reflected their preoccupation with achieving nonterritorial autonomy.

As a territorial minority, the Swedes had little interest nonterritoriality, but the Swedish leadership’s increasing emphasis on working with other national minority representatives led to them promoting what were essentially German interests. Indeed, both in the Constituent Assembly and later in the first Estonian parliament, the Swedish leader Hans Pöhl fulfilled an important function of a bridge builder between the Estonian political parties and the Baltic Germans. This role ended with the Swedish defeat in the 1923 national elections, leaving the Swedish leadership without a chance of exerting any direct influence in the last stages of the passing of the law.

Up until the 1923 general election, “cultural autonomy” seems to have functioned well as a Swedish mobilizing slogan. Afterward, this would no longer be the case. Part of the reason was the general decline of Estonian Swedish politics in this period for other reasons (see Kuldkepp 2021). But more particularly, by appropriating this term and attaching it to the long-debated and (from the Swedish point of view) increasingly useless-looking law proposal, the national minority politicians had robbed the Swedish national movement of a unifying catchphrase. It must have seemed increasingly difficult to unite the Estonian Swedish community behind the title of a law that seemed

to provide little beyond what the Swedes had anyway – except for nonterritoriality, which was useless for the Swedish purposes. At the same time (and arguably with a good reason), SFF had also disassociated itself from M. K.’s alternative program of political autonomy, which might have well resonated with the Swedish voters, but it would have put the Swedish leadership on a collision course with Estonian political parties.

What the Estonian Swedish case study shows is that “cultural autonomy” in Estonia had a prehistory ahead of the 1925 law, when it existed as a broader and more varied concept. For the Estonian Swedish national movement, it fulfilled an important role by providing it with an overarching purpose. This is likely a part of what made cultural autonomy palatable also to Estonian politicians: it could not be equated narrowly with Baltic German interests. It therefore proved to be possible to establish a constitutional basis for national minority rights in the 1920 Estonian constitution, leading to the 1925 cultural autonomy law. Although the substantive contents of this law were unsuitable for the Swedes, they could rightly point at it as an example of Swedish political success. However, the fulfilment of the Estonian promise of “cultural autonomy” in this way also meant that Estonian Swedish politics, now deprived of a unifying slogan, would never quite find itself again – except perhaps as a junior partner of the Baltic Germans, which is already a different story.

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**Disclosure.** None.

## Notes

- 1 Swedish National Archives (SE/RA), SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary of the activities of SFF until March 1919; Kuldkepp 2021, 415.
- 2 SE/RA, SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary of the activities of SFF until March 1919; Description of the establishment of SFF; Kuldkepp 2021, 415–416.
- 3 See SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary of the activities of SFF until March 1919.
- 4 SE/RA/721030/~11: A summary of the activities of SFF until March 1919; Nyman 1976, 7; Kuldkepp 2021, 419–420.
- 5 SE/RA/721030/~11: Draft of Pöhl’s report on the trip to Sweden; Kuldkepp 2021, 420–421.
- 6 SE/RA/721030/~11: Hans Pöhl’s letter to Heinrich Anniko, 1923; Kuldkepp 2021, 422–423.
- 7 See also the summary in “Kampen för svenskhetens bevarande,” *Kustbon*, July 16, 1919; Kuldkepp 2021, 424.
- 8 Estonian National Archives (ERA), ERA.15.2.414, 248 (“Saksa rühma ettepanek”).
- 9 ERA.15.2.414, 196: “Protokoll nr. 47 Põhiseaduse komisjoni koosolekust 16.XII.1919.”
- 10 See the minutes of the meetings of the constitutional committee of the Constitutive Assembly from December 1919 and March 1920: ERA.15.2.414, 196, 202, 230, 313–314.
- 11 See also Kuldkepp 2021, 424.
- 12 Asutava Kogu poolt 15. Juunil 1920 vastu võetud (esimene) Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus, 69–70.
- 13 This point was originally made by Elmar Nyman (1976, 8).
- 14 On this point, see also Alenius 2004, 42.
- 15 See also Alenius 2004, 33; Housden 2005, 230–231.
- 16 SE/RA/721030/~11: Hans Pöhl’s letter to J. Jaanis.
- 17 ERA 31.4.881: The State Chancellery’s act on instructing Estonia’s representative at the League of Nations regarding the national minorities question.
- 18 “Den gångna veckan,” *Kustbon*, October 15, 1924; ”Politiskt,” *Kustbon*, October 29, 1924.

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