

Looking for a Refuge: Balts in Sweden

During the Second World war the Baltic states lost a big part of their population; some of them set up for a dangerous journey across the sea to Sweden to find peace and security. What had to be a temporary refuge became a new homeland for many families. Why did they leave, what did they experience and how were they received?

Teaching ideas

We propose to combine both written sources and oral (filmed) testimonies in order to explore the motivations of the Baltic refugees, the circumstances of their journey and their lives in their new homeland - Sweden. Teachers can adjust these proposals to the actual situation in their classrooms or include only some of the sources in their lessons.

Introduction: Video

Demonstrate the closing part of the documentary „Across the Sea. Flight to Sweden“ to the class. Collect your students' first ideas – who are the people and why do they stress their multiple identities?

Source analysis

Divide your class into groups of 3 and provide each group with all the sources and a chance to watch the documentary. Invite each group to explore the sources and discuss:

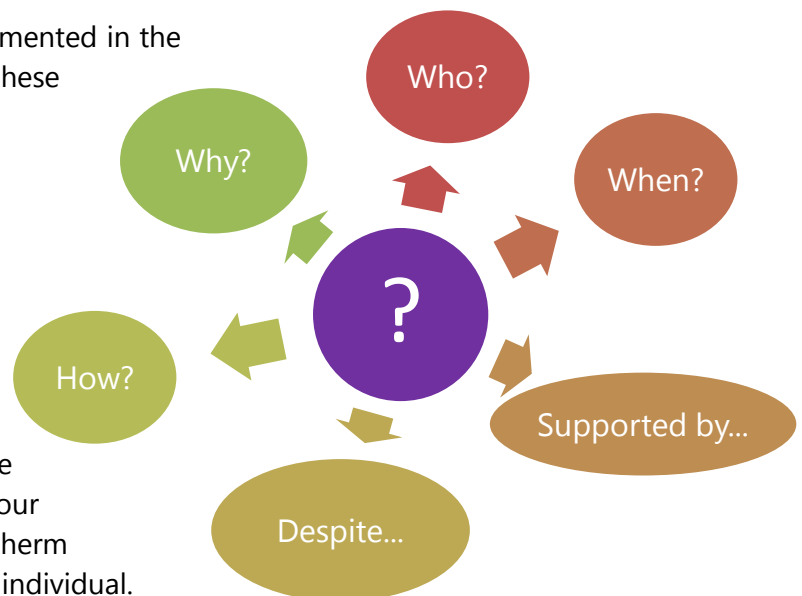
- Who were the refugees? What kinds of different motivations to flee did you notice in the sources?
- What reactions of Swedes are documented in the sources? How would you explain these reactions?
- How did the refugees feel in the new situation? How did they do to adjust to the new situation?

Discuss the answers with your class.

Reflection

At the end of the documentary Daina says: “My Homeland is Sweden, but the Homeland of my soul is Latvia”. Invite your students to think about the long-term consequences of a forced migration for an individual.

Ask your students to come up with an image that (symbolically) represents the most important learning point in this unit. Invite your students to draw the symbol on a separate sheet. Everybody has a maximum of one minute to present their symbol, explaining the learning point and its relation to the picture.



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Baltic Refugees to Sweden

While the Baltic States were alternately occupied by the Soviet Union and Germany many Balts left their homeland. People fled from the Red Army, which was gradually re-invading the territory of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This process culminated in the Great Escape in the summer and autumn of 1944. The Great Escape mainly occurred across the sea to Sweden, but also towards Germany.

Towards the end of the German occupation as Soviet troops were approaching the Baltics, and the three countries were finally incorporated into the Soviet Union, the US government facilitated, mainly through its embassy in Stockholm, the emigration of the Baltic elite. The Swedish government also assisted in the emigration of a Swedish minority in Estonia, and about 2,000 Estonian Swedes used this opportunity to move to Sweden.

Majority of the Baltic refugees came from Estonian coastal areas, islands and bigger towns. The journey was undertaken, either on a small fishing boat or a bigger vessel. Many lives were lost on the dangerous journey due to the raging warfare and the difficulties of the journey. There were bombings from aircrafts, the sea was full of mines and submarines, the small fishing boats were often in a bad state of repair and the autumn storms further exacerbated the situation. An estimate of as many as 6 to 9 per cent of the them died on the journey.

The people escaping to Sweden belonged to different social groups: refugees, soldiers trying to avoid recruitment or already serving in the German army, those recruited as labour force in the German rear, and others. The refugees represented all social and age groups, although the majority of them were made up of people in early middle age and children. Their main reason for escaping was fear of Soviet persecution. Many hoped that the situation would normalise and they could soon return.



It is difficult to estimate the total number of those who left during that great exodus, because there is little certainty about the number who died on the journey, the number of children, the effect of the manipulation of personal identification documents, etc. Nonetheless, gross estimates can still be provided; it is believed that about 26,000 Estonians, 4000 Latvians and 500 Lithuanians made it to Sweden.

Initially the Baltic exodus led to a great will of civilian population and the authorities to help. The Balts were depicted as miserable, poorly dressed, malnourished and chilled to the bone people who had fled in substandard, overcrowded boats. Therefore, they were given food, clothing, warmth and sympathy. However, pretty soon the communists began to voice other viewpoints in the press and parliament. In their opinion Balts had so much to fear from the Soviet invasion because they were quislings, Nazis and war criminals. In January 1946 in response to the Soviet appeal 146 interned Baltic soldiers were extradicted. Within a few years a considerable number of the refugees settled in other countries all over the world. Nevertheless until this very moment Sweden hosts rather large and well-organised Estonian and Latvian diaspora.

Motivations

Extracts from a police questioning protocols in the district of Slite

Protocols, held during police questioning in Fårösund on November 6, 1943.

Nine Latvian refugees arrived with the motor boat "Ange" from Windau to Gotska Sandön at 12:30 today. The refugees were transferred to Fårösund, and arrived there at 8:15 PM, after which the physical examination and interrogation immediately took place.

Fisherman Hans Peterson, born on January 5, 1895 in Windau (Ventspils), now living in Mikelbaka, Riga. The direct reason for his escape was his son Herbert, born in 1923, who had been mobilized by the Germans to active service at the front. Around the November 1, the German authorities had proclamations put up in all the streets with messages that all young men born between 1923 and 1924 were to appear in November 3 for enlistment and travel to boot camp the following day. Each man had also received personal call-up with a ticket and their orders. Military service would be performed with the so called Volunteer Legion. Voluntary action, however, was only an illusion. Each one had to appear at the risk of otherwise being picked up by armed soldiers. They had therefore agreed to flee to Sweden. He considered himself to be of an old Swedish lineage from the time when the Swedes still reigned in Kurland.

Sailor **Peteris Jansons Paulis**, born on November 5, 1922 in Palazu and now living in Riga. He was called up for military service in the Volunteer Legion and would appear before Wainoden Kaserne on October 20, 1943, but he had been hiding in Riga. He had fled to Sweden to escape military service in Germany. His call-up orders had the following appearance: [cited a German draft order].

The mechanic **Alfreds Sveiders**, born on October 5, 1922 in Windau, now living in Riga. He had served 3 months at the Wolchow-front as a conscript. During night post duty, he had received a stray machine gun bullet in the chest, and it is still lodged there. After hospitalization, he had received a 30 day furlough which had now come to an end. Instead of returning to active service at the front, he fled to Sweden.

Smithworker **Fricis – Emil Korse**, born on June 20, 1920 in Windau, now living in Riga. He worked at Riga Shipyard as a repair man of steamships. He was mobilized as a worker at the yard, but feared that the next time he would be called out for active service.

The student **Edvins Blumbergs**, born on November 5, 1924 in Windau, where he still resides. He had been conscripted as it was called a "volunteer" to work service and would have reported in Libau on the October 5. However, he had fallen ill and been admitted to the hospital in Windau and convalesced there until October 9, after which he was nursed at home. Around November 1, decrees were put up on all the street corners with orders that all male youths born in 1923 or 1924 would be mobilized for active service. To avoid this, he fled to Sweden. He had obtained maturity graduation on May 3, 1943.

As above

Berthil Bonde, District police
superintendent



Extracts from a police questioning protocols in the district of Slite

Protocols, held during police interrogation in Slite on November 15, 1945

On November 13, at 12:30 the administrator at Smöjen Limestone was notified that two Estonian refugees had just arrived. One of them was in poor condition and probably had frostbitten feet. The refugees were collected by the undersigned, in which they uttered that they were political refugees, who, because of the current conditions in Estonia, had to flee to save their lives. The boat refugees had used consisted of an old, fragile open sailboat and was leaking despite the waterproofing work. The older of the refugees had remained hidden since September 1944 and had been wandering in the woods in April of this year with both feet frostbitten. During the trip he had been gotten soaking wet once more, and his frostbitten feet had become worse and because of this (and exhaustion in general) he could not move on his own.

Public school teacher **Jacob Tõnissoo**. He was born on October 19, 1891 in Seeliste parish, Estonia, and since 1924 he had been living in Pernau and working as a full time school teacher. He got married on 1930 and they had three children. The family was still living in Pernau. From 1913 to 1917 he studied at the Faculty of Theology in Petrograd, and the last two years of this period he specialized in archeology.

During the Russian occupation the communist authorities demanded that the employees would buy Russian bonds for a fraction of their salary. Erstwhile the director of the school requested him to invest 250 rubles, but he only wanted to buy bonds for 50 rubles. He was then reported by phone to a political inspector in the presence of the director. Two female teachers then told him, that he was regarded as the "alte Geist" and therefore a suspect. This was done just before the German forces arrival and because of this, he managed to avoid being arrested and taken to Siberia. Throughout the German occupation, he was still working as a teacher. He had not collaborated with the German occupation forces. They demanded tributes of food and arrested many people who did not fulfill what they were required of, but they did not impose such a lawless state as the Russian occupation authorities had done.

In September 1944 the Bolsheviks returned to Pernau. Out of fear and terror his family fled to the countryside. The family had previously been deported to the south by the Germans, but they had now been captured and returned to Pernau by the Bolsheviks who had been advancing further. He kept himself constantly hidden among friends in the countryside. He never showed himself outside and was hidden when anyone outside the family came to visit the house where he lived. During this time, when he had also hid out in the woods at times, he had gone astray. For three days he wandered around in the cold and dampness and his feet were frostbitten. He was nursed in a farmhouse but did not dare to send for a doctor. His feet were badly frozen and three outer toes were lost. He had been in bed for a month and had not been able to walk since then. He has been able to move only for the last month. He had had contact with his family, who did not wish him to flee, since they feared that with his frostbitten feet he would not be able to support them in Sweden. He had not dared to visit his family and to stay in Estonia, but when there was such an opportunity, he took the risk to flee. There was no opportunity to write letters, since all mail, even local mail was censored. He was forced to abandon his family. He made a living by selling their belongings and the things their relatives have given them.

As above *Berthil Bonde* District police superintendent



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Reactions of Swedish society

Displaced Balts are a problematic issue. Svenska Dagbladet October 10, 1944

While the Danish, Norwegian and Finnish refugees in our country could expect to return home eventually, the future of the approximately 25 000 Baltic refugees remain uncertain. The Baltic refugees could only rely on the Swedish host's humanity and sense of justice, and we have a moral obligation to help the innocent victims of the storm traveling past our dominions, said Associate Professor Adolf Schück, in radio talk show on Monday. He talked about the flow of refugees from the Baltic States.

The 6500 Estonian Swedes have hardly come over here as rootless refugees in their return to the land that their ancestors left some 700 years ago. Much more difficult is the other Baltic refugees' problems. There are about 19,000 refugees now - few hundred Lithuanians, 2000 Latvians and almost 17,000 Estonians. The Baltic refugee problem is thus almost an Estonian problem. The refugees represent different kinds of folk life. Most are manual workers, who are relatively easily employed, and to a lesser extent intellectuals, who are more difficult to place.



The small boat Triina left Tallinn on 19 September, with about 450 Estonians and 80 coastal Swedes on board. Photographer: Sigurd Roove. Photo of *Estonica*.

Baltic racial haters driven out by workers at Helios. The shop union demands action against the Baltic refugees who are taking work from Swedes. [Ny Dag, October 26, 1944](#)

Some of the anti-fascist refugees who had come to Sweden during the war have been placed in concentration camps, others are assigned to logging, domestic service or working as dishwashers in restaurants. Although many have been prominent special workers, it was not considered appropriate to place them in the industry or prepare them for other skilled work, even though there was a shortage of labour.

Difficulties of this kind do not affect certain Baltic refugees, who are now transported over the Baltic Sea in a growing stream. But there are people with a patent hate for socialism and understanding of the Nazi new order principles. Even though it is not opportune to demonstrate this openly. Many of these Balts, among which there are several pure quislings, are appearing at their work in a way that forces the Swedish workers to take a stand. [..]

The atmosphere in the workplace is against them, as they often represent a serious nuisance, say workers at the factory. They agree on any piece of fixed rate and there have been several cases where they have worked eight and a half hours without a break. In principal, they show pure hostility to the labour movement.

But what particularly upsets workers is that Swedish workers who sought employment are seeing Estonians getting the job. We welcome antifascist colleagues among us, say the Swedish workers. However, when collaborators and anti-Semites are receiving better treatment than Swedish workers, we sound the alarm. Send them back to their countries and let them be accountable to their people. Here in Sweden they just make a mess.

3 out of 5 people have left camps. [Dagens Nyheter, February 14th, 1945](#)

The Baltic refugee camps are being considerably depopulated, and the process will progress when the agricultural work begins in earnest, says assistant Brother Ryden from the foreign commission in an interview with Dagens Nyheter. Currently, no more than 40 per cent of the Balts remain in the camps.[..]

Many have been placed in forestry or agricultural works, and when the season starts there will of course be more of them going into the agriculture sector. Generally they become farm workers and not tenants, but what kind of future plans they have is not easy to foretell. Often their families follow them to the farm.

Also many of them have been employed in the industry, especially the textile industry has taken on a lot of men and women, and also the workshops have taken their shared part of the labour force, but as of now there is an ongoing strike. Some became fishermen, and some women have become domestic servants, though the language barrier is a hampering factor, and it's really only the ones who do speak German that are hired.

Finding places for the intellectuals is a more difficult task. You cannot send them out in the woods, for they usually have their families with them. Some dentists from the Baltic States have found employment with the national dental health service, and physicians have been exempted and been provided with a limited license to work as physicians among the Baltic people here. But what can we do, for example, with a lawyer or a journalist from the Baltic States? Well, some have been positioned to handle the archival work at hospitals in Stockholm, at the Medical Board and various scientific institutions, including our universities, but it cannot be anything more than temporary work. Many of the intellectuals are now trying to learn Swedish, because without all the knowledge they are of course severely hampered by it.

Attempts to settle

Extracts from a letter Anne-Marie S. (born on 1914)

In the autumn of 1944 we fled (me, my husband and two little children) from Saaremaa to Sweden in a fisherman's boat. Our escape was successful thanks to several lucky coincidences. Near the Swedish coast, we were picked up by a ship and taken to land. Yes, it was like arriving in a different world. While at home we were used to blackouts and the lack of food and clothing and all kinds of restrictions, Stockholm was like a sea of lights. People wore cheerful, colourful and light clothes. I remember that when we rode the bus from the ship through the city on that Sunday morning, several hundreds of people were riding their bikes towards the beach. That was an odd image at that time, because in Estonia bicycles were not such a common means of transport as in Sweden back then.

That was the beginning of a new period in our life and it was not easy. We did not have anything apart from the clothes we were wearing and the war-time money had not value here. I could speak a little bit of Swedish, which I had learnt from a Swedish pastor while we lived in evacuation on the coast.

The Swedish State had organised many things very properly. We were sent to a quarantine camp and quickly put to work from there. There was a great inflow of refugees from everywhere. That had not been taken into account and no language studies were provided. I quickly started to read newspapers and magazines.

Our quarantine camp was located at a boarding house by the bay of Mälaren (a big lake near Stockholm). It was a very beautiful place. Every family was given a room and we gathered for meals in a common dining hall. The main problem with the food was that it was too sweet. The Swedes are very fond of sugar and in an attempt to be kind to us they added extra sugar. The result was that nobody ate. When the Swedes learnt of the problem they were quite astonished.

I used the entire time we spent at the quarantine camp for learning the language. I read everything I could lay my hands on.

As more and more war refugees kept coming, people (men) were quickly put to work. My husband was sent to a woodwork factory that produced doors and windows.

We managed to rent a house for six months and in October 1944 we moved in.

In the evenings, after my husband came back from work, we made wooden ABC blocks. We lived near Uppsala, where my husband found a printing house and had the Swedish alphabet printed in six colours. He cut the blocks at the workshop and I glued the letters on them at home. Indeed, it was the woodworking skill that helped us a lot.

We also made some wooden plates and painted them and burnt patterns on them. My husband took some samples and went to Stockholm, where he visited a large department store and got a very good order. People all around us were amazed at how someone who does not speak the language and is not familiar with the city manages to do business.

At the same time, the woodwork factory was visited by someone from the north, who took great interest in our work. He invited us to live in the north and work together with him. As we had the apartment for only half a year and it was impossible to find apartments, we accepted the offer and moved to the north in March 1945.

It was as if we were going into an unknown future. We did not know the language, did not know anyone – we only had our own two hands, our will to live and the Estonians' persistence.

We founded a little company with that Swedish gentleman. We produced ABC blocks, wooden plates and other wooden items. With that work, we saved up enough to buy a piece of land and start building our own house.

Yes, it was a great transition back then and I still remember it clearly even now.

Notification about Public University lectures

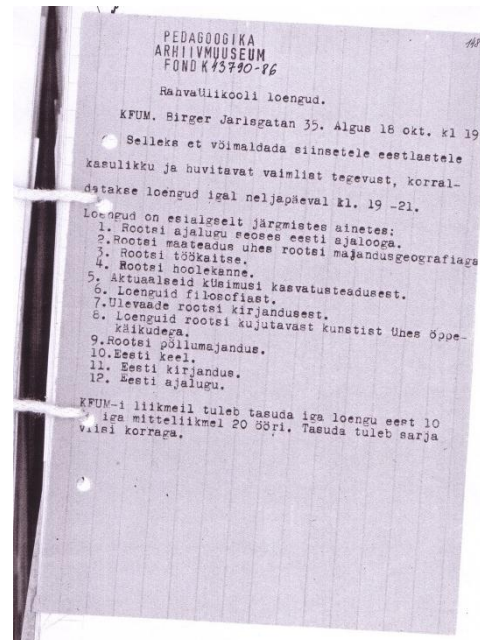


KFUM. Burger Jarlsgatan 35. Beginning at 19:00 on October 18.

In order to offer useful and interesting intellectual activities to the local Estonians, lectures will be organised from 19:00 to 21:00 every Thursday.

According to initial plans, lectures will be given on the following topics:

1. Links between the history of Sweden and the history of Estonia
2. The geography of Sweden, including the economic geography of Sweden
3. Swedish labour protection
4. Swedish welfare
5. Topical issues in the area of education science
6. Lectures on philosophy
7. An overview of Swedish literature
8. Lectures on Swedish graphic art, including study visits
9. Swedish agriculture
10. Estonian language
11. Estonian literature
12. The history of Estonia



The members of KFUM shall pay 10 öre for every lecture and non-members - 20 öre. Payments shall be made in lump sum for lecture series.

Postcard from an Estonian refugee in Lund to another in Vadstena

Furn.
Vet. Kraner
Storgatan 34, Vadstena

Lund
July 3, 1948



Many thanks for the best wishes. This time, it was sunny and we picked strawberries between Vadstena and Motala. Today, an ordinary skåne wind is blowing outside the house. It is cold and cloudy. I cannot even remember it being so like autumn on my birthday as this year.

Many thanks to you for the last year's beautiful trip.

A. Kangro

Many greetings! When are you coming down here? Or are you still going on a trip to Lapland?



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Esti Komitee Koolitoimkonnale,
Stockholm.

Algkooliõpetaja Ernst Jürisoo,
aadress: LAK 1073 Uppsala slot, Uppsala,

palve.

Soovin töötada oma kutsealal ükskõik kus kohal Rootsis. Eriti soovin tööle asuda Uppsalas, kus praegu elan. Olen nõus töötama ka poola normaalsel tundidega, s.o. poola tööteravusega, kui see osutub vajalikuks nende kolleegide rahuldamiseks kutsealalise tööga, kes ei taha sellest kõrvalt jääda. Palun mind mitte kõrvalt jätta koolitööst. Tahaks elada ja töötada oma rahva kasvava põlvkonna kasuks. Praegu olen mulle mitteresolval raskel füüsilisel tööel Uppsalas lossijuuris.

Uppsalas, 6. sept. 1945. a. Ernst Jürisoo.

To the School Board of the Estonian Committee,
Stockholm

Primary school teacher Ernst Jürisoo
Address: LAK 1073 Uppsala slot, Uppsala

Application

I would like to work in my area of specialisation anywhere in Sweden. I would particularly like to work in Uppsala, where I am currently living. I would be happy to work part-time, i.e. at half a salary, if that is necessary in order to ensure professional work for those colleagues who do not want to lose employment. I hereby ask you to not exclude me from school work. I wish to live and work for the benefit of the growing generation of our people. I am currently working at the Uppsala Castle, doing hard physical work not suitable for me.

Uppsala, September 6, 1945

Ernst Jürisoo



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