

## 2. Fluctuating Dynastic and National Affiliation: The Impact of War and Unrest on Bornholm, Åland, and Saaremaa

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Experiences of war and foreign occupation have often been used to strengthen national identity, both during the actual conflict and in later history writing. This chapter illustrates how the geographic location and insularity of three islands in the Baltic Sea – Bornholm, Åland, and Saaremaa – have caused the islanders to experience the conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth century differently from the populations in the main parts of the states to which they today belong: Denmark, Finland, and Estonia. The islanders' isolation and their particular experience of history have contributed to making the construction of national identity and its relationship to regional identity problematic. Because of specific geographic, historical, and political preconditions, this issue has been handled differently on each island. However, in all cases, the construction of identity has been characterised by an underlying quest for security.

Scholars have argued that islands are ideal geographic locations for the formation of a common identity among their inhabitants. Geographers, anthropologists, and social scientists have maintained that island populations share a feeling of belonging and affinity that is a consequence of 'islandness', the specific characteristics of islands – isolation and boundedness (e.g. White 1995: 4; Olausson 2007: 29; Hay 2006: 22; Royle 2001: 11; Baldacchino 2004: 272f). Islandness is often used as an alternative to the negatively connoted term 'insularity'.

However, the sea does not only function as a natural delimiter, it is also a means of communication and transport. Today it is a common assumption that "connectedness describes the island condition better than isolation" (Hay 2006: 4f). Their small hinterlands forces islands to trade in order to

gain access to vital goods; the smaller the islands are, the more dependent they tend to be upon trade. The extent to which an island is isolated or connected is not exclusively a consequence of geographical factors. Political and historical circumstances influence the balance between the separating and the connective properties of the surrounding sea. Border changes, custom regulations, and developments in shipping affect the islanders' possibility and propensity to interconnect with the surrounding world.

War is perhaps the factor that has the greatest potential to disrupt and alter existing patterns of trade and communication. During periods of war and unrest islands have often become more secluded from the mainland – due, for example, to piracy and privateering, travel restrictions, or minefields. The geographical situation makes the islanders' experience of war different from that of the mainlanders. Fortifications, foreign occupations, and a great influx or outflow of refugees have affected islands in particular ways. These experiences have played a vital role in the formation of regional identities on the islands.

It has been claimed that small island states are exceptionally vulnerable to unconventional security threats; there are several examples of islands that have been captured by a few dozen mercenary soldiers (Bartmann 2007: 300). However, small military forces on islands are equally vulnerable to popular uprisings, and such uprisings have, in turn, affected the formation of regional identities.

This chapter investigates how war and unrest have contributed to the formation of regional identities and how they have affected the relationship between regional and national identity in the three Baltic island regions of Bornholm, Åland, and Saaremaa. Referring to the islands as regions emphasises that they constitute – or have until recently constituted – provinces or counties, units of administration directly under the state. The method of research used is an investigation of regional history writing from the three islands, that is, of publications either written by an inhabitant or former inhabitant of the island, or published with the help of an institution on the island. Regarding content, regional history writing is understood as publications that cover the history of the entire island region, rather than only single municipalities or secondary islands. This selection of sources provides a picture of how leading groups and individuals on the islands perceive their history and use it to construct a regional identity.

*Bornholm*

Bornholm is part of Denmark, and with a few interruptions has been so ever since the late tenth century, although this contention has been highly contested. In the Middle Ages, Bornholm was the scene of a power struggle between the Danish kings and the archbishops of Lund in Scania. From 1525 until 1575 the island was leased to Lübeck, and in 1658 it was ceded to Sweden. An uprising in December that year brought the island back under the control of the Danish king. Scania and the rest of eastern Denmark, however, were permanently lost to Sweden, which meant that Bornholm became situated far (135 km) from Denmark, while Sweden was only 35 km away. From 1940 to 1945, the island, like the rest of Denmark, was under German occupation. In contrast to the rest of the country, Bornholm also experienced a year of Soviet occupation from May 1945 until April 1946. In 2012 the total population of the island was 41,000, and it is steadily shrinking (Statistics Denmark). Bornholm was a Danish county (*amt*) until 1 January 2007, when it became part of *Region Hovedstaden*, which comprises Copenhagen and parts of Sjælland.

Regional history writing on Bornholm portrays the islanders as a breed of devout Danes, who have repeatedly been let down by the Danish crown in times of crisis. In 1525 Frederick I leased the island for 50 years to Lübeck, which in return promised to leave Gotland that it had invaded in an attempt to remove Christian II from the Danish throne. In the opinion of the Bornholmian physician and amateur historian Marius Kofoed Zahrtmann, who published an extensive history of the island in 1934–35, this meant that Fredrik I traded Danish Bornholm for Swedish Gotland, thus selling the islanders to their worst enemy. During the peace negotiations in Brömsebro, 1645 Christian IV was faced with a similar dilemma. The Danish Council was in favour of ceding Bornholm to Sweden, and Carl Gustaf Wrangel of Sweden invaded the island in order to increase the pressure. However, the Danish king preferred to cede some Norwegian counties and the two “un-Danish” islands of Gotland and Saaremaa rather than Bornholm, according to Zahrtmann (1934: 111–14, 237–9, 251). His eagerness to differentiate between Bornholm and un-Danish areas within the Danish realm was fuelled by his conviction that for long Bornholm had mistakenly not been considered part of Denmark proper.

In the treaty of Roskilde in 1658, Denmark ceded Bornholm to Sweden. The peace did not last long as the Swedish king Charles X Gustav attacked Denmark again later that year. The Bornholmians remained loyal to their

new masters until the Danish king encouraged them to attempt an uprising. A conspiracy to kidnap the Swedish governor, Johan Printzenskiöld, failed as Printzenskiöld was shot in the head while trying to escape. This forced the conspirators to launch a full rebellion, and 9 December 1658 the Swedish garrison of 60 soldiers at the medieval castle Hammershus capitulated (Rasmussen 2000: 97, 102f, 116, 121).

When the Bornholmians were in control of their island they sent a delegation to Copenhagen to formally return it to the Danish king. This is one of the most central points of regional Bornholmian history writing: the islanders were Danes by their own choice and efforts, and they were therefore the most Danish of all Danes (e.g. Jørgensen 1900: 255; Zahrtmann 1934: 298; Rasmussen 2000: 125; Bøggild 2004: 140). Since the Danish king promised the Bornholmians never to hand over their island to Sweden and promised the Swedes never to give it to any foreign power, Zahrtmann (1934: 299f) concluded that the uprising in 1658 forever tied Bornholm to Denmark. The confidence in Denmark's willingness and ability to defend Bornholm that Zahrtmann displayed in 1934, however, was soon to be shaken.

The most important difference between the Bornholmian authors who wrote before the Second World War and the ones active after it is that the latter group continuously repeat that Denmark abandoned Bornholm, a tendency which has been exacerbated in the last decades. Both the journalist Hansaage Bøggild and the teacher Ebbe Gert Rasmussen, who had written a doctoral dissertation on the uprising, lamented that Denmark at the turn of the millennium withdrew all military from Bornholm, which they describe as the most Danish and defence-friendly part of Denmark. To Rasmussen, 1658 was not the year when Bornholm was forever tied to Denmark. Instead he stressed that the generation of 1658 knew Bornholm could manage itself, and acted accordingly. In his book about the 1658 uprising, Rasmussen also mentions the Russian bombings in 1945 as an example of how Denmark again turned its back to the island (Bøggild 2004: 42f; Rasmussen 2000: 159–61). The bombings seem to have meant the end to the enthusiastic patriotism and faith in 300-year old royal promises expressed by Zahrtmann and his contemporaries.

Bornholmian history writing has for centuries elaborated upon the privileges which the Danish king Christian IV granted as reward for the successful uprising. Only in the late 1900s did Ebbe Gert Rasmussen (1982: 274) complement this picture with the notion that the king also used the opportunity to establish autocracy on the island two years earlier than in the rest of Denmark. According to Rasmussen, the Bornholmians did not

understand the implication of the fact that they had given Bornholm to the king as a personal, hereditary gift.

Another problem with the privileges was that Christian IV did not specify their exact nature, or whether they should apply to all islanders or only to active participants in the uprising. This led to centuries of disputes between the monarchy and the islanders until the last remnants of the privileges disappeared in 1867. In 1770, the Bornholmiens' refusal to pay taxes almost prompted the Council in Copenhagen to send armed forces against the islanders (Zahrtmann 1935: 180f).

The most important privileges were the reductions on certain taxes and the right of Bornholmiens to do military service on their home island. The latter meant that the islanders became members of the Bornholmiens militia, which was supposed to defend the island and could not be forced to fight elsewhere. As a consequence, the Schleswig Wars in 1848–51 and in 1864, which were major events in Danish history and became important constituents of Danish national consciousness, involved Bornholm only tangentially. Nationalist Bornholmiens history writers highlighted, however, the Bornholmiens volunteers, primarily the war hero Johan Ancher, and used their actions as proof that the Bornholmiens supported the Danish war effort (Jørgensen 1901: 282–4; Zahrtmann 1935: 238; Klindt-Jensen 1957: 315).

After the Bornholmiens militia was dissolved in 1867, the islanders received military instruction in central Denmark. Bornholmiens history writers who witnessed this change were quite positive towards its effects; Zahrtmann believed it brought the island closer to the motherland, while the teacher and amateur archaeologist J.A. Jørgensen (1901: 306) claimed it allowed the islanders to widen their horizons. He was of the opinion that the militia's officers understood the need for military training, and that the end of absolute monarchy brought enlightenment, something that made the Bornholmiens willing to accept the change rather than referring to Bornholm's privileges, as had always been the case in the past. According to Zahrtmann (1935: 238f) a more Danish and less Bornholmiens generation grew up on the island after 1867. Between the Schleswig Wars and the Second World War Bornholmiens history writing was more permeated by Danish nationalism than at any other time. During this period it was evidently believed that greater integration with Denmark could alleviate the negative effects of the isolation from which the island had suffered.

A consequence of the Bornholmiens uprising in 1658 was that it had increased the island's isolation and made it a distant outpost of the Danish realm. The island is situated close to Scania, which together with Blekinge

and Halland had formed Eastern Denmark from the early middle Ages. It was to these areas the island had its strongest economic and cultural ties. But while these areas were permanently conquered by Sweden in the wars of the mid-1600s, the Bornholmian rebellion against Swedish power made the island a last remnant of Eastern Denmark, detached from the rest of the Danish kingdom.

This isolation contributed to the fact that the Second World War in many respects became a different experience for the islanders than for most Danes. The Germans on Bornholm were not under the same command as the troops in Denmark, and Bornholm was not included when the German forces in Denmark capitulated on 4 May 1945. The island's strategic location was vital in the German attempts to rescue their refugees from the eastern front, and therefore leading officers on the islands were instructed to keep up resistance against Soviet troops for as long as possible. This led to the Soviet bombings of Bornholm on 8 and 9 May 1945, after which almost a year of Soviet occupation followed. Research in Soviet archives after the end of the Cold War has revealed that the occupation was motivated by political considerations and the strategic location of the island (Jensen 2000).

The fact that Bornholm was bombed while the rest of Denmark celebrated the end of the war – and particularly the fact that the local resistance movement was unable to get the ministers in Copenhagen to answer the telephone while bombs were falling over Rønne and Nexø – led to strong feelings of abandonment on the island. Considering that regional history writing, in general, stresses the island's Danish patriotism, the depictions of the 1945 bombings illustrate how rapidly dramatic events of war might affect expressions of affinity and identity. Several history writers state that the islanders were so disappointed with the Danish government's inability to help during the Soviet bombings and occupation of the island that they were contemplating joining Sweden. This brief shift of sentiment was influenced by the fear that Bornholm would become permanently occupied by the Soviet Union (Kure 1981: 17; Barfod 1976: 327).

The memory of the uprising in 1658 was used by both the underground resistance and the regional authorities during the Second World War. The illegal newspaper, *Pro Patria*, first published in January 1944, featured a seventeenth century freedom fighter on its front page. In March 1945, Bornholm's *amtmand* (governor), Paul Christian Stemann, admonished the German commander Gerhard von Kamptz to handle the local population gently, as the islanders had once shot a Swedish commander (Barfod 1976: 237).

Still today, regional history writers describe Bornholmians as the most Danish of all Danes, but nonetheless easily forgotten by Denmark due to their geographic location. They use the traditional model to interpret what they perceive as new errors of neglect by Copenhagen, and continue to maintain that Denmark neither understands nor cares about the needs of Bornholm. One example cited is transportation, an area claimed to be handled without understanding by the Danish authorities (Bøggild 2004: 16f, 41f; Rasmussen 2000: 159).

### *Åland*

Åland is an autonomous province (*landskap*) in Finland. The main island is situated 70 km from the Finnish mainland, and 36 km from the Swedish. However, the main island of Åland is connected to mainland Finland by an archipelago with the highest density of islands found anywhere in the world (Depraetre and Dahl 2007: 71). The Åland islands are composed of nearly 7000 islands larger than 0.25 ha, 60 of which are populated. If even the smaller islets and skerries are counted, Åland has around 27,000 islands, with a total land area of 1552 square kilometres. Åland had 28,500 inhabitants 31 December 2012. Åland and Finland were integrated parts of Sweden until 1809, when they came under Russian sovereignty. In 1921, Åland became an autonomous province of the now independent Finland, and this autonomy has since been extended on several occasions. The official language on Åland is Swedish, the mother tongue of 90 per cent of Åland's population, but spoken by only 5 per cent of mainland Finns (ÅSUB 2012).

The past two centuries of Åland's history have been dominated by international conflicts brought on by the island's strategic location. However, in the seventeenth century, Åland was located at the centre of the Swedish realm, was not subject to hostilities, and did not occupy a particularly important strategic position. The efforts of Czar Peter I to transform Russia into a maritime power made Åland accessible to Russian galleys, which advanced through the archipelago. The majority of Åland's population fled to mainland Sweden between 1714 and 1718, when the island was occupied by Russian troops. During the war between Sweden and Russia in 1742–43, the pattern was repeated, but the number of inhabitants that fled was smaller.

In the winter of 1808, Åland was again occupied by Russian troops. This time it was not Russian galleys that conquered the island, but army units

who crossed the ice between Finland and Åland. In spring, the ice generally melts earlier over the open waters between Sweden and Åland than in the archipelago between Åland and Finland. In the days before motorised shipping there was a period in spring when Åland could be reached by boat from Sweden while melting ice still obstructed travel to Finland. When the Russian troops realised this in April 1808, they feared that they might be attacked by the Swedish navy without hope of escape or assistance. They ordered the population to hand over their boats and clear the ice in the harbours within 24 hours – or their ears would be cut off and they would be sent to Siberia. According to Bomansson, an Ålander who later wrote Finland's first doctoral dissertation in archaeology and would become the first head of the Finnish national archives, the islanders took the threats literally, although the Russians had probably intended them only as a scare tactic. The fact that the Russians ordered the islanders to gather in the harbours made it easy to organise an uprising (Bomansson 1852: 44–9). Many Russians were caught by a surprise attack. The rest were defeated in one battle on the main island of Åland and one in the Archipelago, with small Swedish naval ships aiding the insurgents in the latter battle.

In the twentieth century the 1808 uprising was claimed to be a manifestation of the Ålanders' Swedish patriotism. However, during recent decades, local identity on autonomous Åland has developed in the direction of a national identity, which has been paralleled by a more Ålandic and less Swedish interpretation. The 1808 uprising is now seen as an example of the islanders' preparedness to take their destiny in their own hands (Hakala 2006; Holmén 2009b: 34).

During the Crimean War, French and British troops destroyed the Russian fortress in Bomarsund on Åland, and the islands became demilitarised. This was the first time the Åland islands achieved any form of exceptional status. The demilitarisation was confirmed in later peace treaties in the twentieth century and was complemented by a declaration of neutrality. As a consequence of Åland's law of autonomy, military service is not mandatory for the islanders. Since military service has been an important vehicle for promoting nationalism, this exception has probably made it more difficult for Finnish nationalism to gain a foothold on Åland. In the twentieth century, especially in the late 1930s when there were plans to fortify Åland, regional political leaders used anti-militaristic rhetoric. Their major fear, however, was that an influx of Finnish military personnel would threaten the islands' monolingual Swedish status, which was the *raison d'être* for Åland's autonomy (e.g. Eriksson and Virgin 1961: 83). However,

since the 1980s, demilitarisation has become more ideologically and symbolically significant on Åland (e.g. Eriksson, Johansson and Sundback 2006: 108 f).

According to the Swedish historian, Martin Hårdstedt, who was assigned to author part of the volume about the nineteenth century in the series, *Det åländska folkets historia* (History of the Ålandic People), the island's strategic location was a curse, and he claimed that disputes about what state Åland should belong to have been a characteristic trait of Åland's history in the past 200 years. From having been located at the centre of the Swedish kingdom, in 1809 the islands became the western outpost of the Russian empire. On the Finnish mainland, the separation from Sweden caused debates about language, but these debates did not initially greatly affect Åland where the transition manifested itself mainly with regard to the housing of Russian troops and the construction of the fortress of Bomarsund (Kuvaja, Hårdstedt, and Hakala 2006: 140–2, 207). The large military presence was heavily taxing on the local population, and according to Martin Isaksson, an Ålandic politician and amateur historian, this was the reason why demilitarisation after the Crimean War was perceived as such a relief. Isaksson (1981: 213) is of the opinion that it is impossible to understand *åländskhet* (Ålandicness) without taking this into consideration.

The most important war for the formation of Ålandic identity was arguably the First World War, which led to the revolutions that ended the Russian empire. On 6 December 1918 Finland declared independence from Russia. However, Åland had been isolated from the developments on the mainland during the war, and even earlier that autumn, leading Ålanders had initiated a process to reunite the islands with Sweden. It is believed that it was not until the winter of 1918 that the majority of Åland's population came to support the thought of reunification with Sweden (Högman 1986: 126–8). An important factor behind this shift of loyalty was that the regional newspaper *Åland* had switched from espousing Finnish nationalism, and now took a pro-Swedish stance. A dispute over Åland between Sweden and Finland followed, with each side claiming that the islands had historically been considered part of its country. However, since what is now independent Finland had been a fully integrated part of Sweden until 1809, the question was anachronistic, a fact pointed out already by contemporary historians such as Harald Hjärne (Nordman 1986: 154f).

To appease the Ålanders, Finland offered the island autonomy, something the population initially refused to accept. However, in 1921, the League of Nations granted Finland sovereignty over Åland, on condition that the lan-

guage and culture of the inhabitants would be protected. The islands were thus granted autonomy in line with the earlier Finnish proposal.

The few Ålanders who had written history before the First World War, such as Bomansson and Reinhold Hausen, had done so from a Finnish nationalist point of view. Some members of the provincial government that was formed on Åland realised the importance of history writing in shaping the identity of the islanders. As a consequence of this, in the early 1930s, the regional authorities hired an archaeologist, Matts Dreijer, who came to have a profound influence on Ålandic history writing in the twentieth century. Initially, he portrayed Åland as a province closely tied to Sweden, in line with the arguments put forward by Swedish historians in the struggle for Åland in 1918–21. After the Second World War, when hopes of reunification with Sweden finally disappeared and local politicians started to focus on developing Ålandic autonomy, Dreijer began to accord Åland in the Viking and Middle Ages a more significant and independent role. He downplayed Åland's ties to ancient Sweden, and suggested that Åland had been a base for Danish crusades to Finland in the twelfth century. His theories were fully developed in the first volume of *Det åländska folkets historia* (Dreijer 1979). In recent decades regional history writers have distanced themselves from Dreijers' attempts to construct an ancient foundation for Åland's present autonomy, as they maintain his grandiose interpretation of scarce historical and archaeological sources has damaged the reputation of Ålandic history writing. (Holmén 2009a: 313f, 319f). The latest volume of *Det åländska folkets historia*, the multi volume work that was initiated by Dreijer, is also critical of his perspective (Kuvaja, Hårdstedt, and Hakala 2006).

During the period of the peace movement in the 1980s, some writers saw Åland's demilitarisation and neutrality as something more than just a means of protecting the island's autonomy and monolingual status. For example, Salminen (1979: 181) claimed that pacifism had become second nature to the Ålanders, while Eriksson, Johansson, and Sundback (2006: 78) considered the settlement of Åland's status by the League of Nations an example of successful conflict resolution that should be exported to other disputed zones. The Åland Island Peace Institute, the publisher behind Eriksson, Johansson, and Sundback's book, indeed tries to export "the Åland example", for example by hosting visitors who want to study Åland's autonomy, demilitarisation, and neutralisation. This line of thought is connected to a relatively positive view of Åland's relationship to Finland.

Such interpretations implied a break with then dominant hegemonic perception, which still prevails, that Åland's gains were the result of a hard, continuous struggle against the reluctant, and sometimes hostile, parliament in Helsinki. In the late 1990s, politicians who held a negative view of Finnish attitudes towards Åland founded a party that favours complete independence. This party, *Ålands framtid* (Future of Åland), however, has failed to garner more than 11 per cent of votes in regional elections, and all other parties are in support of continued autonomy as part of Finland.

### *Saaremaa*

Saaremaa is an Estonian county (*maakond*) with a surface area of 2922 square kilometres and a population of 34,527, down from around 40,000 in the early 1990s. The county constitutes 6.5 per cent of Estonia's land area and is home to 2.6 per cent of the population of that country. This makes it the island in this study with the largest area relative to the total area of the state to which it belongs. Prior to the Second World War, 60,000 persons, representing 5 per cent of the country's total population, lived on Saaremaa. In addition to main Saaremaa and adjacent small islands, the county consists of the sizeable island of Muhu and more distant Ruhnu in the Bay of Riga. Kuressaare is situated on the southern coast of Saaremaa and has had good connections to Riga, which was the centre of Livonia. The distance from the southern tip of Sõrve peninsula on Saaremaa to Latvia is less than 30 km. Today 98 per cent speak Estonian on Saaremaa, but German was common until the Second World War. It was the language of the landed aristocracy and of the merchants in Arensburg (modern day Kuressaare). Ruhnu had a Swedish speaking population that deserted the island for Sweden during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

Saaremaa was invaded by German crusaders in 1227, and the island, like Hiiumaa, was divided between the Brothers of the Sword (known as the Livonian Order after 1237) and the bishopric of Oesel-Wiek, which also comprised present day Läänemaa on the mainland. In 1559, Saaremaa became tied to Denmark, which handed the island over to Sweden in 1645. In 1710, Russian troops gained control over the island, and it remained part of the Russian Empire until the end of the First World War, when Estonia gained independence.

<sup>1</sup> The population statistics for Saaremaa and Hiiumaa have been determined by searches of the of Statistics Estonia database (<http://pub.stat.ee>) for 2012.

While successful rebellions play an important role in Bornholm's and Åland's regional history writing, the historians of Saaremaa tell a tale of uprisings that have been bloodily put down. Due to its geographic location, Saaremaa was the last Estonian province to be conquered by German crusaders. In the Middle Ages there were several uprisings, such as the Great Uprising in 1343, which left the island in the hands of the rebels for almost a year. History on Saaremaa in the nineteenth century was written by Baltic Germans like Pastor Martin Körber who saw these rebellions as something indicative of the freedom-loving islanders, whom he considered superior to the Estonians and Livonians on the mainland (Körber 1885: 54). However, twentieth century professional Estonian historians, such as Enn Tarvel (2007: 96–8), instead stressed the island's links to mainland Estonia. For example, they considered the Great Uprising on Saaremaa as part of a larger uprising on the Estonian mainland.

In the sixteenth century, the Estonian and Livonian mainland was ravaged by wars that involved Polish-Lithuanian and Russian troops. During the battles between these land-based powers, Saaremaa functioned as a refuge at sea, and the influx of refugees fuelled the development of a town around Arensburg castle.

Saaremaa then underwent periods of Danish, Swedish, and Russian rule. As a consequence of developments on the Eastern Front during the First World War, the island was invaded by German forces in October 1917. According to Kersti Lust's article in the post-Soviet anthology, *Saaremaa 2*, the Germans restricted personal liberty and stressed the importance of the German language in schools. The pupils were educated to revere the ruling German class and the German army. The Baltic German nobility on Saaremaa wanted to tie the island to Germany as soon as possible, and after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Livonian nobility tried to join Germany as an independent duchy. This caused the animosity on Saaremaa against the Germans, which was further increased by the quartering of troops, in particular as the harvest of 1918 had failed (Lust 2007: 239–40). The combination of these factors caused an explosive situation on the island.

The new Estonian government tried to conscript troops to fight the Red Army, whose advance westwards was perceived as a serious threat against the young country's independence. In February 1919, a rebellion broke out on Muhu among men from Saaremaa drafted for military service. They marched towards Saaremaa's main city, Kuressaare, recruiting followers primarily from Muhu and eastern Saaremaa. However, since it was February and the straits were frozen, the government in Tallinn managed to

send troops over the ice. They massacred the rebels to ease their entry into Kuressaare.

Before the First World War, all regional history writing on Saaremaa had been penned in German by members of the Baltic German elite. The most prominent Baltic German history writers were Johan Wilhelm Ludvig von Luce, Peter Wilhelm von Buxhöwden, Jean Baptiste Holzmeyer, and Martin Körber. After Estonia's first independence, the regional authorities became dominated by ethnic Estonians, but it took some time before this resulted in Estonian-minded regional history writing on Saaremaa. The only major work from the inter-war period was the volume about Saaremaa in the monumental series *Eesti*, which covered entire Estonia. There the uprising was mentioned very briefly (Luha, Blumfeldt, and Tammekann 1934: 348–9), probably because this conflict between Estonians was difficult to harmonise with the nation-building intentions of the work. In 1940 Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union, which lost it to Germany in 1941 but regained it in 1944. In the 1950s, a new strand of regional history writing started to emerge, in which the 1919 uprising was used to illustrate the revolutionary spirit of the islanders. In exile, Baltic Germans and nationalist Estonians gave different versions of the event. Thus, there exist three fundamentally different interpretations of the uprising: the Communist perspective, the most prolific proponent of which was Vassili Riis, the Baltic German perspective of Baron Oscar von Buxhoeveden, and the national Estonian perspective adopted by writers in exile during the Soviet era and at home during Estonia's periods of independence. Riis and von Buxhoeveden lived on Saaremaa as children at the time of the uprising. Riis's father was among the insurgents and two members of the Buxhoeveden family were among the first to be killed by the rebels. Riis was a leading figure in the local secret police (NKVD) during the Soviet occupation of 1940–41, and was responsible for the mass executions committed towards the end of this period, while von Buxhoeveden lived most of his life in Germany (G. Buxhoeveden 2009; *Postimees*; *Saaremaa ülelostust* 1919: 210).

Riis was of the opinion that the uprising was directed against German landlords and capitalists, and that bourgeois Estonia was the successor of the Germans. According to von Buxhoeveden, this version of history was a deliberate falsification intended to place blame on the Baltic Germans. He saw the uprising as a premeditated Communist attempt to create a Soviet republic, and believed it was enabled by the lack of communication between the Baltic Germans and the Estonian authorities, as well as by problems caused by the rapidity with which new Estonian institutions replaced the

old institutions of the nobility. According to the Saaremaa Defence League's (*Kaitseliit*) history writing, the rebellion broke out when a drunken crowd from the most unstable parts of the island came under the influence of agitators. In his article in the post-Soviet anthology, *Saaremaa 2*,<sup>2</sup> Jüri Ant argued that sailors and soldiers who had returned from the war were unwilling to be mobilised again; they had seen great empires collapse and had difficulties believing in the feasibility of Estonian statehood (Buxhoeveden 1969: 91f, 94, 102; Riis 1960: 43, 54, 121, 138–40, 184, 308; *Kaitseliidu* 1998: 11–13, Ant 2007: 268–9).

The latest and most detailed study of the uprising, Piret Hiie's *1919: Aasta mäss Muhu- ja Saaremaal*, based on her Masters' thesis, claims that the lack of land reform on Saaremaa was a major reason for the rebellion. Hiie (2010: 49, 112–14), however, also believes that the economic problems following the German occupation, and the weakness of the regional government contributed to the uprising, as did Bolshevik agitation and the island's isolation from the mainland, which resulted in a lack of accurate information.

The uprising of 1919 has been a highly divisive issue. Buxhoeveden and Riis were writing from the respective viewpoints of the Baltic Germans and the rebels. The Defence League's account from 1998 was closely tied to another one of the parties in the conflict, the Estonian government. In the book, *Saaremaa 2*, published in 2007, and in Hiie's work in 2010, the parties were no longer portrayed as heroes or villains. Instead, the whole course of events is described as a terrible accident brought on by extreme circumstances. This is similar to how the event is portrayed by Blumfeldt (Luha, Blumfeldt, and Tammekann 1934: 348–9) and by the ethnologist Gustav Ränk (1979: 223–37). This strand of moderate national history writing, however, is also supportive of the Estonian government's version. The supposition that the islanders rebelled due to having received incorrect information implies that had they only been correctly informed they would have acted as good patriots. National identity is thus still seen as a natural, rather than a constructed, phenomenon.

In 1939 the Estonian government was forced to permit Soviet military bases in Estonia, including on Saaremaa. When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 and approached Estonia, the Soviet authorities started mass executions of political prisoners. These killings continued longer on

<sup>2</sup> Like *Saaremaa* from 1934, the two post-Soviet volumes, *Saaremaa 1* and *Saaremaa 2* were written and published through a combination of regional and national efforts.

Saaremaa than on the mainland, since it took time for the Germans to conquer the island, in part because their naval ships were too large to navigate the surrounding shallow waters. Among the units that eventually liberated the island was a Finnish motor boat expedition. In 1941, Finland reconquered territory it had lost in the Winter War 1939–40 and occupied additional land in Karelia. Circles among the extreme right in Finland had for decades nurtured ideas of a ‘Greater Finland’ that would include territories outside the country’s borders. Some of these plans also included Estonia. The advance of Finnish troops in 1941 made the idea of a Greater Finland seem more realistic.

This idea was not without support on Saaremaa. A secret society named *Suur-Soome Riik* had been organised already in the spring of 1941 (*Saaremaa 1940–1941* 1996: 5). The German police estimated that one to two per cent of the island’s population supported a Communist society, while three to five per cent was in favour of a union with Greater Germany. However, 80 per cent of the islanders were estimated to support joining Greater Finland (Meripuu 2007: 324–5).

The idea had surfaced earlier under similar political circumstances. Gustav Ränk (1979: 216) recalled in his memoirs that his father heard talk about a merger between Estonia and Finland during the German occupation in 1917–18. As illustrated by Zetterberg (1984: 519), these plans were associated with the idea that a union with Finland was the only alternative for Estonia to achieve independence without tying the country to Germany or Russia.

In a time when great powers repeatedly overran smaller nations, the relative security provided by a supposedly strong Greater Finland seemed attractive. Unlike the brief Bornholmian flirt with the thought of joining Sweden in 1945, and the Ålandic quest for reunification with Sweden, the attraction of Greater Finland on Saaremaa was probably not unique to the island but shared by many mainlanders as well. At least German leaders were worried that Finnish propaganda would affect the Estonians (Werther 2012: 139).

### *Conclusions*

The memory of how islanders through collective action liberated and briefly took control over their own islands has played an important role in the construction of regional identity on Åland and Bornholm. It has been used as a manifestation of the islanders’ patriotism and their self-determination.

In contrast, the uprising on Saaremaa in 1919 is today considered to have been a tragic accident. During the period of Soviet rule, however, Communist history writing used the incident to illustrate the revolutionary spirit of the islanders, and interpreted it as a result of their identification with fellow peasants and workers in the Soviet Union.

The comparison between the three islands illustrates how feelings of loyalty towards a nation-state might be altered in times of war, if that state seems incapable of providing security. When Finland seemed to be slipping into civil war and Bolshevism, Ålanders turned their eyes to Sweden, as some Bornholmians did when Danish authorities seemed to have abandoned the island during the bombings in 1945. After Estonia was erased from the map in 1940, Greater Finland seemed attractive to many on Saaremaa. Of these shifts in allegiance, only the Swedish orientation on Åland had permanent consequences. The most important explanation for this is no doubt Åland's acquisition of autonomy within Finland in 1921. Although autonomy was forced upon the Ålanders against their will at the time, as most were in favour of joining Sweden, it did create regional authorities with some real influence. The elected members of these political bodies attempted to defend Åland's autonomy by developing the islanders' regional identity, and they intentionally used history writing as a means to this end. Through this processes, the sentiments of 1918 – and the view of history with which they were associated – became firmly rooted in Ålandic society.

Åland's intermediary position between Sweden and Finland has contributed to its acquisition of autonomy. An interpretation close at hand is that the autonomy is a result of the fact that Ålanders, contrary to what is the case on other islands in the Baltic Sea, speak a language different from that spoken by the majority population on the mainland. However, it was rather the strategic aspect of Åland's location that aroused the attention of the European powers who decided the island's fate in the League of Nations in 1921. They legitimised their decision in the Wilsonian principles of national self-determination, which was then the prevailing ideology. The initially unwanted autonomy gradually developed into the backbone of Ålandic identity, no doubt aided by the fact that it has helped Åland avoid the negative economic and demographic developments experienced by other islands in the Baltic Sea. Since this autonomy was devised as a protection of an ethnic minority, Ålandic history writers have supported it by emphasising the islanders' cultural and linguistic Swedishness.

Bornholm, Åland, and Saaremaa, due to their strategic locations, have been fortified in times of war. During the First World War, Åland and Saaremaa were isolated from the mainland due to travel restrictions imposed by the military. It is possible that this relative isolation during the nationally formative period that preceded the Finnish and Estonian declarations of independence might have contributed to the fact that islanders from Åland and Saaremaa found themselves on a collision course with the new national governments in Helsinki and Tallinn, respectively. The stress caused by the quartering of troops has been raised as an important factor in the development of Ålandic identity, as well as an underlying cause of the 1919 uprising on Saaremaa.

On Åland and Bornholm, exemption from military service (and on Bornholm, reintegration into the national military in 1867) has affected regional and national identity. Resentment towards military service also played an important role in the outbreak of the uprising on Saaremaa in 1919.

The military history of these three islands in the Baltic Sea illustrates how identity has been formed in interplay between geographic and political factors. Although identity on the islands is influenced by their insularity – which has imposed a certain isolation that has been heightened in times of war – identity is by no means static. Expressions of identity and national affiliation have been heavily influenced by the islanders' shifting security concerns. Bornholmian history writers have applied a dual strategy. On one hand, they refer to the islanders' patriotism in order to garner increased support from Denmark, while on the other hand, they remind the Bornholmians that through their history, they have repeatedly been forced to take responsibility for their own island in times of crises. Ålandic history writers underwent several shifts of national identity in the twentieth century, abandoning Finnish nationalism in favour of Swedish nationalism, when the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War raised concerns about the island's security as a part of Finland. After the Second World War, Swedish nationalism was replaced by a more independent Ålandic interpretation of history, which is ripening into a kind of Ålandic nationalism. After the end of the Cold War, when the security threats in the Baltic Sea appeared smaller than for centuries, some Ålanders even started to advocate independence, denouncing the idea that their islands needed any support from a larger nation state.

While Ålandic and Bornholmian history writing have their own character and have developed on somewhat different paths as compared to mainland history writing, on Saaremaa the development of history writing

in the twentieth century has followed the same pattern as on the mainland. A Baltic German interpretation of history was succeeded by a national Estonian, Soviet Age and then a second wave of national Estonian, history writing, just as on the mainland. This is probably partially a result of the fact that Saaremaa predominantly shares its experience of twentieth century history with the Estonian mainland, although the island's slightly detached position has delayed or exacerbated certain trends and events. The greatest anomaly, the 1919 uprising, was swiftly resolved, aided by the island's relative proximity to the mainland. However, the locations of Åland and Bornholm as strategic outposts in relative proximity to other nation states have resulted in experiences of war that are qualitatively different from the national commemoration of the same events – as the feeling of abandonment that the bombings of Bornholm caused and the international interventions that gave Åland autonomy and demilitarisation. Since integrating these events into the larger Danish or Finnish national historical narratives is associated with insurmountable difficulties, Bornholmian and Ålandic history writing have acquired an independent characteristic – something that, in turn, has most likely contributed to a strengthened regional identity.



The Baltic Sea and its islands (Image: base map from Wikimedia Commons, edited by Janne Holmén)

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