

Julia Håkansson*

History as a Treasure Chest: Four Principles of Nationalist Historical Narration

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Abstract: This essay introduces four principles of nationalist historical narration by using the narrative strategies of the political parties the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party as examples. These narrative strategies follow the following four principles: 1. Nationalists cannot invent historical narratives solely out of figments of their imaginations. The Sweden Democrats, for example, can use Charles XII as a symbol of national resistance because he existed in real life. 2. Nationalist narratives must resonate, or at least relate, to other traditions of historical narration. This second principle explains why the Danish People's Party, which operates in a context where the defeatist nationalism characterizes the standard Danish view on history, favors the people instead of kings as heroes of old. 3. A nationalist grammar guides nationalist principles for narration, meaning that a nationalist sentiment as a historical driving force is used whenever possible to show the value of national cohesion in the face of the threats posed by multiculturalism. 4. Ideas from previous generations of cultural nationalists can return to contemporary imagination, as is the case when the parties honor earlier generations of nationalists and their deeds in celebrating the nation and its history.

Keywords: the Sweden democrats; the Danish People's party; nationalism; historical narratives; history culture; narrative strategies

1 Introduction

History is as irresistible to nationalists as shiny objects are to magpies. To political parties like the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party, national history is a treasure chest

filled with alluring precious metals and gems for their meaning-making needs in the present. From these valuables, they create and retell national narratives that testify to the existence of a national community as the reason for historical impulsion.

The Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party have many similarities, not least in their interest in history and ideological designation, which political scientists have described as nationalist, populist, and conservative.¹ The Sweden Democrats were founded in 1988 by members from parties with racist foundations. Today, they are the second largest party in Sweden and the supporting party of the right-wing government. The Danish People's Party, founded in 1995 by established politicians, held a similar position as a supporting party from 2001 to 2011 and 2015–2019 but is now but one of many smaller parties with nationalist and xenophobic views in Denmark. Both parties emphasize the importance of the nation by using narrative strategies which look to the past. By studying archaeological finds and historical sources, preserving the indigenous language, recording and rediscovering customs, and searching for a national character, nationalists provide material for their historical narratives about the nation.² With nationalism on the rise globally, and considering this tendency's close ties to populism, it is not surprising that we simultaneously also witness an onrush in the use of history for meaning-making purposes. In this context, conservatism is apparent in the nationalists' claims to want to preserve traditional cultural expressions and values and oppose change. Even though there are differences in how nationalists deploy history depending on their different national contexts, based on an extensive study of the Sweden Democrats and the Danish

*Corresponding author: Julia Håkansson, Department of Cultural Sciences, Lund University, LUX, Box 192, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, E-mail: julia.hakansson@kultur.lu.se. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7571-269X>

¹ See, for example, Ann-Cathrine Jungar, *Populism in the Nordic Region: From the Margin to the Political Mainstream* (Helsinki: Agenda 2017 Think Tank, 2017), 11.

² Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 152.

People's Party use of history, I suggest that there are four principles that govern nationalist historical narration.³

2 The Four Principles of Nationalist Historical Narration

The narrative strategies deployed by nationalist political parties abide by the following four principles: 1. Nationalists cannot simply invent historical narratives. Those depicted as national heroes preferably should have existed in real life, even if their actual deeds and qualities might be far removed from how the nationalist community would interpret them. 2. Nationalists and their history cultures exist within and alongside the rest of society – and their narratives must resonate with, or at least relate to, other traditions of historical narration. 3. A transnational, nationalist grammar guides nationalist principles for narration based on nationalism as an ideology. 4. Ideas from previous generations of cultural nationalists can be reinterpreted and thus brought back to life, meaning that ideas that have seemingly lost their stance can return to popular imagination, sometimes quite unexpectedly. I will demonstrate how these four principles work in practice using examples from official, publicly distributed party material produced between 1988 and 2022. These examples reveal how historical symbols were variously deployed over time while also identifying coherent aspects such as the importance of preserving national cultural heritage.

The principles are based on the understanding that people make sense of their existence through narratives. These accounts must follow a structure recognizable by the recipient to provide an understanding of the connections between the past, present, and future.⁴ The ability to recognize and understand the world through histories is made possible by a narrative understanding, according to Paul Ricœur.⁵ The identity of the recipient may be affected, depending on whether a narrative succeeds in conveying what the recipient perceives as a meaningful context. Thus,

identities are malleable. However, a narrative must abide by terms set in their history culture to resonate with a community.⁶

History cultures, like cultures in general, exist in the plural, meaning that everyone is simultaneously part of several communities. These history cultures constitute delimited worlds of meaning related to other delimited contexts. The way members of a group communicate, and what they communicate, about the past constitutes a history culture. Depending on the composition of the group, specific narrative strategies that members of that community deploy may be successful or unsuccessful in their attempts at meaning-making.⁷

3 The First Principle: Subscribing to the Cult of the Glorious Dead

Nationalists want to identify former members of the nation who allowed themselves to be sacrificed for the greater good of the nation. The ancestors with the most significant impact are those who “remove themselves from history with minimal fuss,” according to Steven J. Mock.⁸ Historical heroes are worshipped for their death-defying actions and are used to instill the same willingness to sacrifice in the nation's citizens today, in a manner strongly reminiscent of exemplary history writing. Anthony D. Smith calls the presence of self-sacrificing heroes in nationalist narratives the “cult of the ‘glorious dead.’”⁹

According to the Sweden Democrats in 1992, the foremost among these heroes is King Charles XII (1682–1718), a skilled warrior king who died young on the battlefield and whose death marked the end of Sweden as a great power: “we would be unworthy of the memory of Charles XII if we allowed ourselves to be subdued into silence and submission. No, the enemy's terror shows that Charles XII's spirit is

3 Julia Håkansson, *Historia och Nationalism: Sverigedemokraternas och Dansk Folkepartis historiska berättelser* [History and Nationalism: The Sweden Democrats' and the Danish People's Party's Historical Narratives] (Malmö: Malmö University Press, 2023).

4 Jörn Rüsen, *Berättande och förnuft: Historieteoretiska texter* [Narrative and Reason: Texts on Historical Theory] (Gothenburg: Daidalos, 2004), 98.

5 Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative: Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 54–57.

6 Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative. Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957–2007* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 122, 124; Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9; Håkansson, *Historia och nationalism* [History and Nationalism], 27–28, 39, 42–49.

7 Håkansson, *Historia och nationalism* [History and Nationalism], 38–42.

8 Steven Mock, *Symbols of Defeat in the Construction of National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 223.

9 Smith, *Nationalism*, 155.

more important than ever if our Sweden is to be able to rise again.”¹⁰ Thus, this narrative strategy compares Charles XII’s bravery and sacrifice to what is needed in the present.

The national narratives of Charles XII – and other heroic kings – endure because they are based on real historical figures. This is despite the fact that centuries of historiography have ascribed different meanings to these individuals. They have, nonetheless, become symbols within Swedish history culture. In this way, the stories of these kings, in which they became champions for the good of the nation, have survived throughout the centuries because they fulfil a function. This narrative strategy relates to the first principle introduced in this essay: nationalists cannot simply invent historical narratives as needed. Rather, stronger narratives rely on heroes who existed in real life. The fact that this figure is royalty in this Swedish example is due to a long-standing tradition in the country’s history culture which views royalty and the people as being closely knit together. By this notion, kings are thought to act alongside the people.¹¹ This is in sharp contrast to the Danish People’s Party, who prefer to champion ordinary men who have risen from the ranks instead of royalty. This is due to the defeatist nationalism that characterizes the party’s historical narration.

4 The Second Principle: Relating to History Cultures

If the historical heroes can be found by scrutinizing the royal family tree, Danish nationalists, who boast of having the oldest existing kingdom in the world, would find many examples. The fact that they seldom look to the old monarchs for inspiration is related to the first and the second principle of nationalist historical narration. First and foremost, they cannot change history itself. Secondly, their historical narratives must resonate with, or at least relate to, other existing historical traditions. Since Danish national identity is built mainly on a defeatist nationalism, the narrative strategy of celebrating kings of old would not ring true in the Danish People’s Party’s context.

The party consistently expresses defeatist nationalism in their historical accounts that deal with the loss of provinces. Thus, it views the Danish monarchy to have been incompetent historically, considering its many failures to keep the country intact. Few monarchs from the past are said to have been fit to have ruled Denmark, despite the party’s support for the monarchy in present time.¹² In an appraisal of the Queen Margrethe II, who ruled from 1972 to 2024 and of whom they are fond, an article in the party magazine from 2020 states the differences between her and: “the frankly somewhat incapacitated kings Denmark had to make do with in the 1700s and well into the 1800s. With slightly wiser rulers in the 1600s and 1700s, Denmark would hardly have been robbed of the arch-Danish provinces of Scania, Halland and Blekinge.”¹³

National narratives dealing with historical defeats are often transformed, representing the events as a moral and spiritual victory over the enemy rather than focusing on the loss itself.¹⁴ Such stories depict Denmark as a nation that has survived despite severe defeats in the past; and that it can, therefore, do so again. The Danish People’s Party’s narrative strategy does not include kings, like we see in Sweden; instead, it says that the people must show the same courage as these historic heroes who sacrificed themselves for the nation’s welfare in the past.

The second principle is also why the Sweden Democrats let Charles XII retreat from their historical narratives at the turn of the millennium. At this time, the party wanted to move away from its reputation as a racist party. Some of the symbolic language they had used previously included the celebration of historic kings, which they had utilized in a violent struggle against the proponents of multiculturalism. This language carried historical-cultural connotations that the party wanted to rid themselves of, and proves that changes occur in history cultures over time.¹⁵

Thus, nationalists are intricately bound by the first and second principles of nationalist historical narration, which decide what kind of history can be used, for which purposes, and when. At the same time, their account must abide by nationalist grammar.

¹⁰ “Kul kultur,” [“Fun Culture”] *SD-Kuriren*, no. 19, 1992, 6. (Author’s translation.)

¹¹ Hanna Enefalk, *En patriotisk drömvärld: Musik, nationalism och genus under det långa 1800-talet [A Patriotic Dream World: Music, Nationalism, and Gender during the long 19th Century]* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2008), 84.

¹² Håkansson, *Historia och nationalism [History and Nationalism]*, 182–85.

¹³ Ole Hyltoft, “Friheden som Margrethe bruger” [“The Freedom Margrethe uses”], *Dansk Folkeblad*, no. 2, 2020, 11. (Author’s translation.)

¹⁴ Mock, *Symbols of Defeat*, 184.

¹⁵ Håkansson, *Historia och nationalism [History and Nationalism]*, 133.

5 The Third Principle: Proving National Sentiment is a Historical Driving Force

Nationalistic grammar, the governing principles of symbolic meaning-making, determines how historical figures, events, and processes are portrayed by nationalists. National sentiment is presented as crucial to dealing with both successes and setbacks, i.e. as a historical driving force in both the Sweden Democrats' and the Danish People's Party's interpretations of history. Parallels between the past and the present are articulated in such a way that the times when the country's community has been threatened – but survived due to national mobilization – are placed in relation to an ongoing unfolding of events. The interplay between the creation of commonality and the denunciation of its threats is closely intertwined in the nationalist narrative grammar. The importance of national sentiment is the omnipresent moral of the narratives: the threats towards the national community and how nationalists face these challenges constitute the glue that connects the past to the present and the future.

Therefore, the parties portray history, cultural heritage, and values such as democracy and freedom as critical for the national community. This narrative strategy is twofold. When the aspects above have been established as important to the nation, they immediately mention the threats to them.

The following quote is from the Sweden Democrats' program of principles in 1989: "Swedes have a rich cultural heritage that must not be lost to future generations."¹⁶ The same narrative strategy is used when foreigners and migrants are presented as threats. In 2020, a historical account of Muslim immigration to Denmark was made in their party magazine, *Dansk Folkeblad*: "Over the past 30 years, Denmark has received far too many refugees and immigrants with a Muslim background. It puts our cohesion under pressure and creates insecurity – and Danish young people are exposed to rape and gratuitous assaults by immigrant youth."¹⁷ Thus, even though the nationalist grammar of the third principle is, in fact, transnational, the message of an imminent threat consequently relates to various topics on the nationalist agenda.

The historical narration illustrates that a national sentiment as a guiding principle for the people previously has saved the nation. The search for evidence of a national feeling among previous generations governs the kind of history that nationalists look for in the past, for example, when turning to previous generations of cultural nationalists.

6 The Fourth Principle: Reverberating Ideas

The attitudes of the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People's Party towards history – as a toolbox for nationalist use – resonate with the ideas of the national romanticists of the nineteenth century. In a narrative strategy that brings attention to the national romanticists and their actions, the old romanticists are referenced as heroes of old. The Sweden Democrats like to point towards the works of the Gothic League at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a source of inspiration for the party's nationalist endeavors. The League's activities are described as follows: "[t]he main task would be to develop morally patriotic aspirations and practice Nordic antiquities."¹⁸ The poetry of historian Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783–1847), one of the founders of the Gothic League, has had a lasting effect on the dominant image of the Viking Age and is particularly praised.¹⁹ This acknowledgment is unsurprising as Geijer views the Swedish people as bound together by fate, a sentiment that aligns with the Sweden Democrats' historical narratives.²⁰

Similarly, the Danish People's Party is inspired by the works of the historical writer N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), so much so that the party named him the Dane of the Millennium in 1999. The choice to honor Grundtvig in this way was motivated by the fact that his work changed the nature of Danish self-awareness, as explained in the party magazine: "Grundtvig came like a lush spring over the Danish people with his Christian and Danish love of the people. It was not a new moral theory that he set up; it was a new moral source of power that he brought to the spring. It was

¹⁶ *The Sweden Democrats' Party Program*, 1989, 10. (Author's translation.)

¹⁷ Danish People's Party, *I 25 år har vi kæmpet for Danmark – og det bliver vi ved med* [For 25 Years We have Been Fighting for Denmark – And We Will Continue to Do So], 2020, 2. (Author's translation.)

¹⁸ Signature "Balder," "Götiska förbundet" ["The Gothic League"], *Sverige-Kuriren*, no. 7/8, 1989, 17. (Author's translation.)

¹⁹ See Lars Lönnroth, "The Vikings in History and Legend," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 225–49, 236–38.

²⁰ Torkel Molin, *Den rätta tidens mått: Göthiska förbundet, fornforskningen och det antikvariska landskapet* [The Measure of the Right Time: The Gothic League, Antiquity Research, and the Antiquarian Landscape] (Umeå: Umeå universitet, 2003), 263.

the joy of Denmark, its people, language, and history.”²¹ Grundtvig’s most significant contribution was providing a cohesive force for his people; a goal which the Danish People’s Party strives to achieve today.

While the works of Geijer cannot be said to be as widely known in Sweden as Grundtvig is in Denmark, both have contributed to shaping historical narratives in their respective countries. Significantly, both Sweden Democrats and the Danish People’s Party draw attention to the results and the efforts of these earlier generations of nationalists, creating a dual sense of importance and, ultimately, the message that it is imperative to continue their work. As Eric Hobsbawm states, borrowing what has accrued in the historical culture over time is part of the invention of tradition, either by repeating already constructed narratives or by inventing new ones out of the old.²²

The ideas of cultural nationalists have had the potential to reverberate across time. It is misleading to consider them irrelevant, as has been done previously, just because of their limited political influence in their own time.²³ Later generations of nationalists may reach down the treasure chest of history, polish up their nationalist ancestors, and once again put them to use; thus building upon their predecessors’ ideological ideas by representing a similar view of history and, most importantly, reusing their historical narratives and narrative strategies.

7 Concluding Thoughts: Nationalists Choosing from the Treasure Chest of History

The narrative strategies used by the Sweden Democrats and the Danish People’s Party in their publicly distributed historical narratives resemble the metaphor of choosing from the treasure chest of history. However, comparison between the two parties shows that they use different kinds of repositories, depending on their national contexts. The Sweden Democrats favor jewels with a monarchic gleam. At the same time, the Danish People’s Party’s chest is filled with dull

base metals and simple glass beads, making them choose another type of jewel – the people – as the centerpiece of the Danish national sentiment. However, the pieces can also be put back into the treasure chest, such as the now-discontinued use of Charles XII by the Sweden Democrats. Thus, relating to the first and second principles discussed in this article, historical narratives cannot be construed by need alone; and the culture of nationalist history must constantly relate to other history cultures, even though – conservative as they are – they would prefer continuing to emphasize traditional cultural expressions. Sometimes, the contents of the treasure chest are brought out to highlight the dullness of other objects, such as the national compared to the multicultural. Such an example relates to the third principle, namely the transnational grammar that governs all nationalist historical narration and focuses on the importance of dichotomizing the national versus the other threatening cultures, thus resisting change. Sometimes gems long forgotten at the bottom of the treasure chest can be polished and put back into use. An example of this fourth principle is the Sweden Democrats’ depiction of the Gothic League, showing that ideas from previous generations of nationalists can be brought back into the limelight to fulfil new meaning-making needs in the present.

Nationalists are not alone in deploying narrative strategies in their use of history. Many people, especially politicians, treat history in this manner – picking, polishing, and rejecting content from the treasure chest of the past. But what separates nationalism from other ideologies is the consistency with which this selective historical lens is applied and the ideological purposefulness that drives this process.

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²¹ Søren Krarup, “Årtusindets Dansker” [“The Dane of the Millennium”] *Dansk Folkeblad*, no. 6, 1999, 9. Here, the priest and author Jakob Knudsen, who was active around 1900, is quoted. (Author’s translation.)

²² Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition.” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–14, 6.

²³ Håkansson, *Historia och nationalism [History and Nationalism]*, 125–26.