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Between restrictivity and generosity: refugees and the Swedish welfare state, 1930-2015

Let me start in 1945, but with a brief look at the 1930s and the war years. Sweden had pursued a *very restrictive policy* towards *refugees from Nazi Germany*. One aim was to hinder Jews and Communists – the Social Democratic government had preferred to give Social democratic political refugees asylum.

The government had persistently *protected its sovereignty* and therefore *stayed away from international refugee agreements*.

The *turning point* came in the fall of 1943 when Sweden officially invited the Danish Jews to come and some 8.000 persons came to Sweden. From this point refugees were no longer stopped at the borders.

During the last war year large groups of *war refugees* arrived; mainly Balts. So in January 1945 there were 200.000 refugees and Finnish evacuees in Sweden. This should be compared with less than 5.000 refugees in the summer of 1939.

Out of *humanitarian reasons*, but also in order to restore the *country's good-will* in the eyes of the Western Allies, the Swedish government undertook some large rescue actions to rescue Jews at the end of the war.

It is important to notice that the state gave *full material support* to the war refugees. *Before the war* there was *no state support* at all and the refugees then were dependent on NGOs. The refugees also got full *access to social welfare*, a track chosen that became crucial for the future. At the same time it must be underlined that the Swedish state kept a close track of all individual refugees, and this has since remained the case.

The two decades from 1954 to the beginning of the 1970s constitutes a distinct period:

In 1954 a new Aliens Act was passed that fundamentally changed the legal frames for the refugee immigration. The decisive norms from the Geneva convention were incorporated in the new act.

The policy of keeping outside of international agreements was abandoned, and in effect Sweden became a *strong supporter of UN* and the *international refugee regime*.

So *convention refugees* were accepted in small numbers. The parliament took yearly quota decisions on figures and selected nationalities. Significantly, refugee issues were handled by the National

Labour Market Board. When presenting the policy in parliament and in the UN *humanitarian reasons* were stressed, and Sweden actually took in elderly and sick refugees.

Besides: when political crises occurred Sweden also accepted refugees: for example from Hungary. In this case it was clear that the prospects for the refugees on the Swedish labour market was important, both in the rhetoric and the selection.

In order to interpret the refugee immigration during this period one has to be aware that Sweden experienced a *substantive labour immigration*, mainly from the Nordic countries but also from Italy, Yugoslavia and Turkey. In these days there was no debate about how to meet the immigrants and it was clear but unexpressed that they should become Swedes. *Assimilation* was the goal.

An important change occurred from beginning/middle of the 1960s with an *activist foreign policy*: Sweden, staying outside the two antagonistic sides in the Cold war, at least officially, stressed international solidarity, supported liberation movements in the Third world, and didn't hesitate to criticise the superpowers.

In some cases it is possible to see a connection between this activist policy and the refugee policy. *Andreas Papandreou*, the leader of PASOK, the Socialist party in Greece, came to Sweden as a political refugee in 1967.

The next discernible period runs from 1972 to the fall of 1989.

Sweden was severely hit by the *oil crisis* and the deep *structural crisis* from the beginning of the 1970s. So in 1972 the government decided to *stop the non-Nordic labour immigration*. This was a major change, until this time some 370.000 labour migrants had arrived in Sweden, but only 24.000 refugees.

The immigration to Sweden from these years and onwards consisted of *family reunifications* and *refugees*. The increasing numbers of refugees must be judged against the global development.

The largest part of the refugees accepted were non-convention refugees, *de-facto refugees*. Asylum was mainly given due to *humanitarian reasons*.

The refugees during the 1970s and the 1980s to a large part consisted of *non-European nationalities*. Latin Americans – here the several thousand Chileans who came from 1973 is a clear example of a connection between an activist, leftist, foreign policy and the reception of refugees. But it must be underlined that this connection wasn't present in most cases

Larger groups of refugees came from the Middle East: Assyrians seeking protection from persecution, and Iranian and Iraqi men escaping the long bloody war.

During these years Sweden chose a much more *generous asylum* policy than before, as many other countries did. But the *refugee policy was inconsistent*. The government always remained in control - in situations when large groups came in a short time and the reception facilities were put under pressure – the government issued decrees about visas and temporary rights of abode. The criticism from the media and leftist political groups, and organisations representing the refugees, was harsh. So after some time the decrees were abolished and there are also examples of refugee amnesties.

From around 1970 there was also an important change in the immigrant policy away from assimilation to *integration, multiculturalism* and support for different ethnic cultures.

During the 1980s there turned up some examples of criticism from the local provincial level against the generous refugee policy as many of the refugees were put into housings against the will of local communities.

Fall of 1989 – until today

With the fall of the wall in 1989 a fear of an invasion of East European refugees spread. The Social democratic government in December took an infamous decision only to accept refugees according to the refugee convention. Again the criticism was very harsh.

The inconsistent policies remained irrespective of the political colour of the governments. The rhetoric was clearly harsher than before. One example of more restrictive measures is the repatriation programmes aiming at certain ethnic groups. In general, though, not so much changed. When Yugoslavia was falling apart Sweden accepted large groups of Bosnians.

The general generous policy was maintained. In the “ranking” of the UNHCR in 1993 Sweden was the number 12 accepting refugees in relation to its population.

1989 – until today

In 1995 Sweden became a member of EU and had to adhere to new rules.

In the 1990s there occurred growing integration problems: many refugees didn't succeed to get a job, and some suburbs became strongly ethnically segregated where many were dependent of social allowances.

This was a fertile ground for the growing xenophobic mentalities in Sweden.

In 2010 the Sweden Democrats, a party with its roots in Neo-Nazi groups, succeeded to get into Parliament. Here is an election poster about helping the immigrants to return to their home countries. In 2014 the party got 13 % of the votes. The political landscape changed.

In the last years large groups of refugees have come from Iraq, Syria, Afganistan and Eritrea

These large immigration movements of the last decades has transformed Sweden's demography, in 2014: 16 % of the population was foreign born.

In 2015 160.000 asylum seekers came to Sweden which was the highest figure in Europe in relation to the population, the reception facilities, the housing and the Migration Board was put under heavy pressure

Then in *November 2015 came a U-turn* that would have been unthinkable only half a year before – the government decided that from now on Sweden would stay with the EU-minimum level for asylum, border controls were put into effect at the border to Denmark, ferry companies and airlines should take the full economical responsibilities for refugees entering Sweden illegally – the measures had effect and after that only few refugees succeeded getting into Sweden to seek for asylum.

Only a few weeks ago the Parliament confirmed these changes and also took decisions on temporary rights of abode and strong restrictions on family re-unification. The state was securing its sovereignty and control.

Thank you for your attention! I look forward to comments and questions.