

BENJAMIN R. TEITELBAUM

LIONS OF THE NORTH

SOUNDS OF THE NEW
NORDIC RADICAL
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For Kaja

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Prologue

I TRAVELED BY train in eastern Sweden on July 28, 2012. For over two years I had been following circles of anti-immigrant activists in the region, and gatherings I visited on this day revealed why they were transforming themselves and how they were using music, of all things, to do it. I'll describe my day in reverse order, starting where it ended—late at night in a muddy countryside field fifty miles south of Stockholm that was the site of Kuggnäs Festival, the largest annual skinhead gathering in the Nordic countries.

I arrived at Kuggnäs to find a crowd of about 2,500—more than double that of the previous years as I recall—and these people had come for a special event. At midnight, punk-metal band Ultima Thule would give their final performance. Ultima Thule shook Sweden's cultural landscape during the 1990s by rallying opponents of immigration and multiculturalism in ways no politician could. But in 2012, nearly twenty years beyond their heyday, the members of Ultima Thule decided to disband. The rise of illegal downloading had made music less profitable for groups like themselves, and the skinhead subculture they played to had begun to age and fade. Further, as singer Jan Thörnblom stated in newspaper interviews, band members felt they were no longer needed following the breakthrough election of the nationalist, anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats party to parliament in 2010.

Band members always denied that they were racists. At Kuggnäs, singer Thörnblom declared on stage that they were only “patriots” seeking the protection and celebration of Swedish identity rather than hatred of minorities. Those statements resonated with some: leaders of the Sweden Democrats—even as they struggle to counter accusations of racism directed at themselves—have never felt the

need to hide the fact that Ultima Thule was instrumental in inspiring their political activism. But the band's relationship with white activism and neo-Nazism has always been dubious, and outsiders have often suspected that what is said on stage is not always felt beyond.

Ultima Thule's denunciation of racism during their final concert did not receive unanimous applause. I saw that coming. T-shirts in the crowd told the story: "White Pride World Wide," "Weisse Macht" (White Power), "Blod och ära" (Blood and Honor), and everywhere the name of the flagship British white-power band "Skrewdriver." Tattoos featured swastikas and images of Adolf Hitler mixed with messages in Old Norse runic script. And walking through the parking lot and campgrounds adjacent to the concert area, I heard the music of classic Swedish white-power bands like Storm, Odium, and Pluton Svea blasting from car radios.

Though they sing in Swedish, Ultima Thule enjoys considerable renown among skinheads globally. Visitors at Kuggnäs that year had come from throughout the Nordic countries, as well as Germany, England, Australia, the United States, Italy, Poland, and Hungary. At the youth hostel where I slept, "skins" from Spain surrounded me on nearly all sides. And looking out at the audience that evening, I wondered if there wasn't more hair on my head than on the heads of all other men combined. And yes, they were mostly men; I guessed there were five to six for every woman.

Though previous festivals erupted in brawls, this year was relatively calm, with only a handful of reported assaults. There were still confrontations here and there—I nearly found myself in one after having accidentally knocked four cups of beer out of a Finnish skinhead's arms and onto a middle-aged German couple. Violence aside, the atmosphere was far from reverent. At the lower edges of the field, attracting the audience's attention as much as what was happening on stage, men took turns urinating through the fence, occasionally dropping their pants to the ground so as to moon all onlookers.

Everything about Kuggnäs seemed so different from the gathering I attended earlier that same day in Stockholm. It began when I arrived a little after noon outside of a subway station in the central city district, at a meeting place designated for participants in a seminar called "Identitarian Ideas." We were to congregate and await a representative who would lead us on foot to the site of the event. This was a standard exercise intended to prevent attacks from left-wing groups.

Participants in the seminar condemned non-European immigration and, with varying degrees of reservation, identified as nationalists. Still, they were hardly a homogeneous bunch. Some were openly anti-Semitic, some feared the arrival of Islam, some worked to protect white racial purity, and some advocated the assimilation of immigrants for the sake of preserving Nordic national cultures. They aligned

with different, sometimes obscure subcategories of radical nationalism, be it Nazism, race materialism, pan-Aryanism, white nationalism, ethnopluralism, traditionalism, right-wing anarchism, counterjihad, or ultraconservatism. The individuals hosting the event called themselves “identitarians”—adherents of a French-inspired school of thought seeking the establishment of subnational, ethnically homogenous communities across the continent.

Clad as I was in a polo shirt, tidy jeans, and loafers, my attire seemed formal. But those waiting at the preseminar gathering place had thoroughly outdressed me. Pressed khakis, wingtips, suits, and cherry-red sweaters on top of button-up shirts: the dress code here was nothing like that in the muddy field to the south. After a long wait in the sun, our guide finally got the call and began walking us to the seminar location. It was only after the roughly ninety-person procession entered the hall that we were able to have a good look at each other.

Everyone was there: notorious former leaders of National Socialist street gangs and militant groups, founders of ethnic separatist propaganda organizations, editors of far-right media outlets, and celebrity authors from antiliberal blog portals. Active members of semimainstream, anti-immigration parties in the region knew about the meeting and wanted to attend, but most refrained for fear of association with anti-Semites and race ideologues. Save those absences, nearly every major Nordic nationalist organization, party, club, and think tank was represented in that room.

The seminar theme was “Identity and Geopolitics: Towards a Multi-Polar World.” The half-dozen speakers highlighted what they predicted was a fast-approaching breakdown of modern American hegemony in global affairs; the rise of political and military power in the East; and the possible ramifications this change could have for racial, ethnic, and cultural pluralism throughout the world. Prominent Russian intellectual and purported mastermind of Vladimir Putin’s expansionist foreign policy, Alexander Dugin, gave the keynote address.

Participants mingled and bought refreshments between lectures. As I worked my way through the hall, others noticed that I was wearing a Kuggnäs Festival wristband. I had kept it on from earlier, and would need it to get back into the festival later that night. They had few kind words for Kuggnäs, even though most had been passionate Ultima Thule fans during the 1990s. A member of a youth activist group saw my wristband and said proudly, “Ah, Kuggnäs—that’s not my scene.” A famous blogger in attendance, whose writings often lampoon skinheads as culturally bankrupt, later expressed that same sentiment to me in harsher tones.

I asked seminar organizer Daniel Friberg to describe the people at Identitarian Ideas, and he characterized them as “intellectuals and academics.” While that was true of a portion of attendees, the atmosphere was not one of a standard academic gathering. Many at the seminar had once moved in nationalist skinhead

circles, and that legacy continued to mark them in subtle ways. The overwhelmingly male assembly, dapper as it was, featured what seemed to me a disproportionate number of close-cropped haircuts and tattoos, and many listened to lectures while downing lavish servings of beer and wine. No, Daniel Friberg's response to me would have been more valid as a mission statement rather than a description: he and others like him hoped to refine radical nationalism in the Nordic countries, and they created Identitarian Ideas for that purpose. Seeking utmost distance from events like Kuggnäs, they attempted to replace muddy fields, boots, and decadence with seminar rooms, wingtips, and decency. Above all, whereas Kuggnäs was a concert, Identitarian Ideas featured lectures rather than music. This, Friberg said, was far more appropriate for serious political activism.

But the outward appearance of nationalists rallying around a single vision for the future concealed deeper complexities, as well as an enduring commitment to the very artform excluded from the seminar. The newspaper editor who greeted me at the door had been waging a multiyear campaign to champion Scandinavian folk music through his publications. Former members of the Sweden Democrats in attendance had also devoted part of their political careers to promoting folk music, and the seminar's official photographer had just started taking fiddle lessons—all with the goal of refocusing nationalism on the uniquely Swedish. The famous woman author who cast a suspecting glance at me between lectures was also a vocalist in multiple acoustic singer-songwriter acts that aimed to project a more mainstream sound and image of anti-immigrant campaigning. The wine-drinking former skinheads in attendance had made some of their most notable contributions as activists by writing about white power music and its alleged perversion of the nationalist message. The peppy youths who sold me a sandwich at the refreshments counter were part of a controversial initiative to produce nationalist reggae and rebrand their cause as a fight against oppression. The blogger who commented on my Kuggnäs wristband was better known to insiders as rapper Zyklon Boom, whose rhymes savaged liberalism and multiculturalism while showcasing bookish smarts and wit. Even organizer Daniel Friberg was a music producer involved in some of the most innovative and celebrated nationalist albums in the Nordic countries.

Music, in other words, saturated the activism of Nordic nationalists in muddy fields and seminar rooms alike. And the hidden music in Stockholm had a story to tell, namely, that those attending the seminar differed in their visions of themselves and their cause. Through music they identified variously as wholesome, down-to-earth, victimized and oppressed, or learned and intellectual. What they held in common was their shared antithesis: none at the seminar were interested in associating with the music others expected them to like, the music featured in the muddy field to the south—skinhead music.

As I sat on the train heading from Stockholm to the night performances at Kuggnäs, it seemed as though I traveled between eras. Most of the individuals in Stockholm had their nationalist awakenings in settings like that at Kuggnäs, inspired by the very artists who would perform on that stage. They were moving on, however. Through creative expression they were inventing new selves and finding new nations to defend. They are the reformers, the anti-skinheads, the New Nationalists. Their organizations and initiatives exploded during the past decade to fundamentally and forever change Nordic society. Skinheadism, on the other hand, had crumbled. Yes, the numbers at the festival were far greater than those in Stockholm. But the skinheads did not gather in that field to sing of brighter futures. They were there to say goodbye.

Sitting on the train, it seemed I was ideally positioned to present what follows: a story about music and the transformation of Nordic radical nationalism in the early twenty-first century. The transition I study is unreconciled and incomplete, and it remains a movement of processes rather than conclusions. My focus lies therefore not in the muddy fields of nationalism's past, nor in the halls it is preparing for its future, but rather on the spaces and tracks in between, where anxiety reigns and new music resounds.

LIONS OF THE NORTH

1

INTRODUCTION

OUTSIDERS CALL THEM “right-wing extremists,” “organized racists,” or “neofascists,” but they call themselves “nationalists.” They are a fractured and chaotic population of activists who see themselves as struggling for the survival of European societies. Some advocate white racial or ethnic purity, while others claim to be defending cultural or religious norms. Despite intense ideological differences among nationalists, all fight against the growth of immigration and multiculturalism. And since World War II, theirs has been the most reviled political cause in the west.

Though certain nationalists consider themselves heirs of the Third Reich, their activism often has far more recent roots. Skinhead subculture seized and rebranded opposition to immigration during the late twentieth century. Its fashion, literature, and—above all—punk and metal music mobilized masses of white working-class youths across Europe, making what was officially a political rebellion also an engine of expressive culture. Record labels became key sources for fundraising, songs voiced core beliefs, music magazines served as core media organs, concerts hosted the largest nationalist gatherings, and musicians rather than politicians emerged as the cause’s foremost celebrities (Brown 2004; Pieslak 2015).

Nordics—and Swedes in particular—always held an exceptional status in this global scene. Revolutionary white nationalists and neo-Nazis throughout the world have long showcased imagery of the North in their artwork, myths, and

songs, praising Swedes as the quintessential members of the community they championed—as the “whitest of all whites” (Hübinette 2012:45). However, Sweden rejected even the most tempered and politically effective expressions of Europe’s late-twentieth-century nationalist explosion. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, anti-immigrant political parties entered parliaments in France, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, and Italy, as well as in Denmark and Norway. Yet no such party could establish itself in Sweden (Green-Pedersen and Odalm 2008);¹ this was vital to the country’s cherished reputation as a global beacon of tolerance (Andersson and Hilson 2009; Hübinette and Lundström 2011). Having kept anti-immigrant forces out of its government, Sweden would by 2013 become the recipient of more refugees per capita than any other country in Europe.²

Although nationalists failed to enter Sweden’s parliament, they flourished in the country’s underground. Sweden became a center for skinhead subculture and militant neo-Nazism during the 1980s and 1990s, and the bedrock of this movement was the growth of a peerless nationalist skinhead music industry (Löow 1998a; Lagerlöf 2012). By 2005, the country had nearly three times the number of nationalist bands that could be found in all the other Nordic countries combined and a higher rate of bands per capita than any other country worldwide.³ The fortunes of Sweden’s skinheads and anti-immigration politicians, however, would soon reverse.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the country’s once-mighty skinhead culture came undone as its militant leaders were imprisoned, its gatherings were prohibited, and its many record labels were liquidated. On the heels of this downfall, in 2010, a political party called the Sweden Democrats earned 5.7 percent of the national vote, thereby gaining representation in parliament. The Sweden Democrats weren’t just an anti-immigrant party. Unlike most of their counterparts in Western Europe, they were also self-identified nationalists, born in part from the same skinhead movement that fueled militant Nordic neo-Nazism. Their meager but symbolic share of the electorate would more than double in the 2014 elections, and by early 2016 opinion polls showed them contending to become the largest party in the country. They had not only tarnished Sweden’s reputation as a global liberal flagship—the party threatened to dismantle that reputation entirely.

The collapse of skinheadism and the rapid rise of the Sweden Democrats have a common impetus. As long as skinhead subculture and anti-immigrant activism have been synonymous in the North, there have been disgruntled insiders claiming that their movement’s brutish image was counterproductive. Visions for an alternative to skinheadism were as numerous as the insider critics themselves. The push to cultivate an ideologically moderate, democratic nationalist force—which

eventually found expression in the Sweden Democrats—was but one of multiple sites in a mass exodus from nationalism’s hooliganistic stereotype. These reformist efforts ushered in a new era of anti-immigrant, antiliberal activism in Sweden and, by extension, the wider Nordic region. Further, just as skinheadism was forged through style, so too did reformers negotiate and craft their new identities via creative expression.

In this book, I offer a glimpse into Nordic radical nationalism during this process of change, and I do so focusing on an artform with peculiar importance to the anti-immigrant, antiliberal cause. The transformation of nationalism in the North has been perpetuated by a dramatic shift in activists’ musical practices. Organizations seeking to rebrand their cause as a fight against alleged white oppression now spread this message through hip-hop and reggae. Others refashion themselves as wholesome champions of an idyllic Nordic past, rallying behind traditional folk music. Still others seeking to portray themselves as victims turn to sorrowful pop ballads to express their fear and desperation. More importantly, these unorthodox projects sparked extensive controversy and discussion among nationalists and prompted insiders to reflect upon their essence and declare their dreams for the future. Music and the discourses surrounding it thus offer insight into this shrouded population as it transitions from a marginal subculture into a powerful political and cultural force.

This book diverges from standard scholarship on European nationalists in both its interest in music and its research methods. It is based on several years of ethnographic fieldwork I conducted among nationalists in Sweden and the surrounding Nordic countries. From 2010 until 2012, and later during the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015, I traveled throughout the region interviewing and observing ideologues, politicians, activists, and musicians. Various watershed events in Nordic radical nationalism punctuated this timespan. I was in the field during the Sweden Democrats’ entry into parliament as well as when Anders Behring Breivik carried out a pair of racially motivated (Teitelbaum 2016) terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya, Norway that left seventy-seven people—most of them children—dead. My fieldwork provided experiences that were compelling, electrifying, and horrifying, along with a host of unresolved ethical dilemmas. But they also left me astounded at music’s awesome potential to forge new identities for people and social movements alike (Frith 1996; Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000).

In what follows I introduce the actors at the center of this work, the techniques I used to study them, and the antecedents and agendas shaping their current moment of transformation.

Terms and Concepts

I don't know if you were quoted correctly in today's *Aftonbladet*, but if you were, I must question your use of the term "nationalist pop" to describe Saga. From what I can see, she is an outspoken Nazi who sings white power music. I don't know what in the world that has to do with nationalism. Nazism is an anti-nationalist ideology. (electronic message, August 7, 2011)⁴

The Sweden Democrats' chief ideologue, Mattias Karlsson, sent me this message following an interview I gave to the newspaper *Aftonbladet*. The interview dealt with Saga, a Swedish singer whose core audience consists of self-identified National Socialists, whose lyrics express sympathy for historic Nazism, and whose stage performances often include right-arm *Sieg Heil!* salutes. The relatively moderate Karlsson rejects all association with Saga, arguing that the singer's manifest racialism and overtures to the Third Reich—which he considers an imperialist movement that violated the national sovereignty of others—mark an irreconcilable opposition between his and her worldviews. But, like Saga, Karlsson insists on calling himself a "nationalist." If actors so different can adopt this label, then what does it mean?

The population I study in this book is difficult to define. A subset of all anti-immigrant forces in the Nordic region, its boundaries do not follow those of any organization or voting bloc. Nationalists diverge over issues as fundamental as the nature of identity, the origins and consequences of immigration to the North, and the lineage of their cause. At times, disagreements lead them to deny affiliation with each other, and occasionally lead to acts of violence. Given such discord, one can reasonably question whether these actors ought to be treated as an integrated whole—whether the affinities among nationalists go any deeper than their shared name.

Broadly speaking, nationalism in the Nordic countries is aligned among three ideological and methodological camps: race revolutionaries, cultural nationalists, and identitarians.⁵ The three camps, represented in Figure 1.1, are seldom equal to each other in terms of size or influence, and their relationships have long been in flux. The first camp, race revolutionaries, encompasses individuals who often call themselves "white nationalists" or "National Socialists." Typically celebrating the cause and mythology of historical Nazism, these actors rally behind a racial community—conceived along national ethnic lines or as transnational Nordic, Aryan, or white populations—and tend to identify Jews as the ultimate enemies of their people. Operating in a postwar west in which their ideals are banished from mainstream politics, many race revolutionaries abandon hope of creating a populist mass movement through democratic processes, and instead opt to form violent paramilitary groups or youth street gangs. Having been at the center of the nationalist skinhead

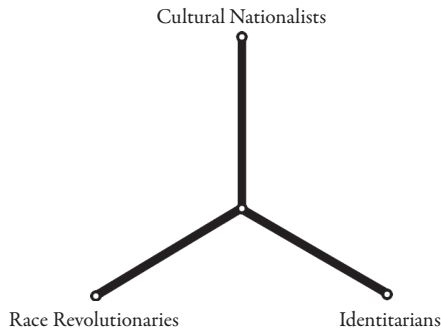


FIGURE 1.1 Three-part map of the contemporary Nordic radical nationalist scene.

movement during the 1980s and 1990s, they are now highly marginalized and few in number. The foremost Nordic race revolutionary organization today is the Sweden-based Nordic Resistance Movement.⁶

Whereas race revolutionaries declare national identity to be a matter of blood, the second camp of nationalists—cultural nationalists—claim that one’s status as a Swede, Dane, or Norwegian derives from cultural practices that can be adopted by any individual regardless of their ethnicity. Often philosemitic and pro-Israel, they train their criticisms on Muslim immigration in addition to social liberalism, alleging that Islam poses the greatest threat to the cultural integrity of the national people. With this comparatively mainstream agenda, cultural nationalists are poised to achieve wider appeal than race revolutionaries, and most of them operate in democratic political parties. Cultural nationalists are the most numerous of all nationalist camps in the Nordic countries today, and they find their chief representation in the leadership of the Sweden Democrats.

Activists associating with a school called “identitarianism” make up the third, most complicated camp. These actors often assert that race and ethnicity are indispensable elements of identity—a position that places them opposite cultural nationalists in a broad ethnonationalist field, together with race revolutionaries. However, and in contrast with white nationalists and National Socialists, identitarians do not strive toward racial or ethnic purity as an end in itself. Their aim to preserve biological fellowship is one piece of a larger campaign to promote social diversity in nearly all ways imaginable. Rather than opposing any particular ethnic or religious Other, they claim to oppose movements that homogenize human society, such as liberalism, Marxism, capitalism, or evangelical monotheism. Identitarians often dismiss the possibility of affecting change through revolution or parliamentary politics. Instead, they commit themselves to propagandizing and intellectual activism—to shaping ideas—often through media, expressive culture, or nonviolent public spectacles. Only handfuls of Nordic nationalists call themselves “identitarians”: numerically, it