

How Norwegian war refugees changed Swedish politics

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When Norwegian refugees first sought sanctuary in neighbouring Sweden, they were sent back. But in the last years of the war, Sweden opened its arms to refugees. What happened?

Many who fled from Norway to Sweden during the first years of World War II ended up in a German concentration camp in Germany or in German captivity on Norwegian soil instead.

Swedish neutrality policy initially favoured Germany. But during the war years – and especially in 1943 – Swedish politics swung toward the Allies.

Rejected refugees

Historian Lars Hansson has researched Norwegian refugees and Swedish refugee politics during the war years. His study turned into a doctorate at the University of Gothenburg.

From 1940 to 1942, many refugees from Norway were stopped right after they crossed the Swedish border.

Nor did Sweden want to deal with German deserters. Some ended up in German concentration camps and others ended up in POW camps in Norway. The punishment for deserters in Germany was severe: execution, imprisonment or service in German penal companies on the Eastern front.

Locals took over

Hansson's research builds on previous studies of 33 000 interrogation protocols relating to refugees from Norway who came to the three Swedish border counties of Värmland, Dalsland and Bohuslän.

"The Swedish refugee policy went from being very restrictive at the beginning of the war, to eventually unconditionally admitting refugees from Norway during the later war years," says Hansson in a University of Gothenburg article.

Until the attack on Norway in April 1940, Swedish refugee policy had been a matter for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and other central authorities in Stockholm. The Ministry had primarily been concerned with asylum for people who fled Germany and German-occupied countries further south.

But when the Norwegian refugees began to cross the border in the west, the decision-making authority shifted to local representatives of the Swedish authorities along the border with Norway.

Crucial importance

The border between Sweden and Norway is 1630 kilometres long.

The refugees came across the border all the way from northern Norway and south to Eastern Norway. Significant resources were used in the 26 rural police districts on the Swedish side that were given responsibility for receiving refugees.

Local Swedish police officers along the border areas and public officials with police powers admitted the refugees when they crossed the border from Norway.

The Norwegian refugees were sent to transit centres and camps that the Swedes created for them during the war years.

Hansson believes that the many face-to-face meetings between the local Swedes and Norwegian refugees might explain why Swedish refugee policy changed so dramatically during the war years.

"These encounters were probably of crucial importance in opening up the restrictive policy," says Hansson.

The historian points out that the experience the Swedes gained from managing the Norwegian refugees enabled Sweden to handle the large refugee influx from Denmark, Finland and the Baltic states towards the end of the war.

Search for names

In the digital National Archives of Norway you can now find the names of Norwegian refugees in Sweden, which contain over 40 000 names. Perhaps you'll discover some family members? You can read more at the [National Archives](#) [7].

[Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no](#) [8]

 [About 60,000 people tried to escape from Norway to Sweden in the years 1940-1945. This photo shows Norwegians who escaped from the forced evacuation of Northern Norway by German forces in October 1944. Civilians fled over the mountains to Sweden, where Swedish authorities helped the refugees with airdrops of clothing, food and skis. \(Photo: The National Archives\)](#) [9]

 [The refugee traffic was greatest through the forests in Eastern Norway. At the end of the war 43 000 Norwegian refugees were in Sweden. Here, a small Norwegian refugee family has reached the reception centre at Kjesäter Castle in southern Sweden and are welcomed by one of the camp officials. \(Photo from Norwegian News Agency's war archive\)](#) [10]

 [Norwegian police soldiers run shooting exercises in Färnabruk in Västmanland province in July 1944. At first, the Swedes did not allow any active Norwegian use of Swedish territory in the fight against the Germans. But from 1943 on, a Norwegian military force was built on Swedish soil that would contribute to liberating Norway from the Germans. These "police troops" consisted of about 14 000 men at the end of the war. All Norwegian male refugees entering Sweden who were of compulsory age were sent directly to one of the sixteen Norwegian military camps that were created. \(Photo from Norwegian News Agency's war archive\)](#) [11]

 [Historian Lars Hansson has researched Norwegian refugees during the war years. In his doctoral thesis he shows how the mass exodus from Norway has influenced the formulation of Swedish refugee policy. \(Photo: University of Gothenburg\)](#) [12]

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[How young people today view the Second World War](#) [14]

[Read more about Norwegian refugees at Norgeshistorie.no \(in Norwegian\) \[15\]](#)
[Lars Hansson: Vid gränsen. Mottagningen av flyktingar från Norge 1940-1945 \(At the Frontier. Sweden's reception of refugees from Norway 1940-1945\), book and doctoral thesis at the University of Gothenburg. Summary. \[16\]](#)

[Ingrid P. Nuse \[17\]](#) based on an article by [Bård Amundsen \[18\]](#)

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