

Swedes under Stalin

The Stalinist Terror and Mapping of the Swedish Diaspora in the Interwar Soviet Union

ABSTRACT The article examines the Swedish diaspora in the interwar Soviet Union, focusing on dimensions that earlier research has treated only tangentially: the fate of Soviet-Swedes during the state-run terror against representatives of the so-called Western minorities. Combining quantitative analysis with a micro-historical approach, we refine knowledge not only of the composition of the Swedish diaspora but also of the individual trajectories of Soviet-Swedes during the period of mass repression. We argue that a systematic mapping of the Swedish diaspora is essential for understanding the nature and direction of Soviet terror against Nordic minorities: Who became victims and why, and who managed to survive and/or leave the country? Our principal finding is that the so-called Kiruna-Swedes were not a majority of Swedish residents in the Soviet Union. At the same time, this group was over-represented among Swedish victims of the Great Terror.

KEYWORDS Swedes in the interwar Soviet Union, Kiruna-Swedes, Great Terror, diaspora mapping, quantitative analysis, micro-historical approach

Introduction¹

Building on previous scholarship that underscored the importance of mapping Western diasporas in the interwar Soviet Union for understanding the scope, vectors and implementation of the Great Terror, specifically the NKVD's "national operations" against ethnic minorities (Kotliartchouk 2024), this article returns to a neglected case: Swedes.

The 1926 All-Union census recorded 2,495 Swedes on the basis of self-identification. This figure included non-Swedish immigrants (e.g. Finland-Swedes) as well as Swedish colonists in Ukraine. Conversely, the census likely excluded many bilingual

¹ The authors are grateful to associate professor Olle Sundström and to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, as well as to professor emeritus Torbjörn Nilsson (1954–2025), whose advice greatly contributed to improving the manuscript.

immigrants from northern Sweden who spoke both Swedish and Finnish and settled in the Finno-Ugric regions of Karelia, Kola and Ingria. As we discuss below, some of these Swedish citizens were classified by Soviet census takers, and later by the NKVD, as “Finns.” Consequently, only records from the National Archives of Sweden allow us to isolate citizens of Sweden and identify them across categories such as “Swedes,” “Finns” and other Scandinavians in Soviet statistics and security police files.

Methodologically, the article extends quantitative research on victims and survivors of the Great Terror (Ilic 2000; Holquist 2001; Kotljarchuk 2012; Kotljarchuk 2014b) by pairing it with a micro-historical approach. This combination, we contend, enables greater precision in reconstructing both the composition of the Swedish diaspora and the individual fates of Soviet-Swedes. In particular, we examine who became victims and why, and who survived or managed to leave the country. One of the principal aims is to map the Swedish diaspora in the interwar Soviet Union through analysis of the collected data, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the direction, composition and scale of the Great Terror as it affected Swedish immigrants. The personal trajectories of Swedish victims and survivors also allow us to assess the effectiveness and limits of the Swedish Foreign Office’s rescue operation conducted in 1937–1938.

Historical Background

From the eighteenth century onward, the European parts of the Russian Empire became home to numerous non-Russian minorities with origins in Western, Central and Northern Europe. Two processes drove this development: imperial expansion by the Russian army and an active migration policy which, until the First World War, encouraged “foreign colonists” (Ru. *иностранцы колонисты*) to settle in the empire, particularly in Ukraine, the Caucasus, the Kola Peninsula and the Volga region. According to the first Soviet census of 1926, there were 2,599,973 Jews, 1,238,549 Germans, 782,334 Poles, 398,998 Finns (including Karelians), 213,765 Greeks, 154,666 Estonians, 141,703 Latvians, 111,296 Bulgarians, 41,463 Lithuanians, 27,123 Czechs and Slovaks, 4,651 Romanians, 2,461 French, 2,328 Italians, and, as noted, 2,495 Swedes in the USSR.² In Soviet nomenclature, diaspora communities with European roots were designated as “Western minorities” (Ru. *западные меньшинства*). The Soviet Union was never entirely closed to foreigners, particularly members of the communist and labour movements labelled “political émigrés” (Ru. *политэмигранты*). The same census counted 390,385 foreign citizens residing in the country.

The 1926 census registered different categories of Swedes: persons born in the Russian Empire (notably in Saint Petersburg, Finland, Ukraine and Estonia) and Swedish emigrants. Most Swedes lived dispersed as individuals or family clusters, yet in certain regions small Swedish communities emerged. One of the largest groups of Swedish immigrants, known as the Kiruna-Swedes (Swe. *Kirunasvenskarna*), moved primarily to Eastern Karelia. In Swedish historiography, *Kiruna-Swedes* functions as a general term for working-class migrants from Norrland in northern Sweden (though not exclusively from that region) who immigrated to the Soviet Union between 1922

² Calculated by the authors on the basis of the 1926 All-Union Census; <http://demoscope.ru>, accessed on 23 January 2026.

and 1936 (Gustafson 2006). Multiple motives underpinned this movement. Unemployment and poverty were acute in Norrland, coinciding with rapid industrialisation in the north-western parts of the Soviet Union (Eneberg 2004; Kangaspuro 2004; Golubev & Takala 2014). For many Kiruna-Swedes, the first socialist state appeared as a “promised land.” Young people migrated to pursue free higher education at the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West or to engage in professional sports training. Many preferred to remain in Soviet Karelia, where Finnish was widely used. Monolingual Swedish leftists established a Swedish-language party cell and educational circles in Petrozavodsk (Gustafsson 2006: 47–50; Kotljarchuk & Nilsson 2021: 190–192). The fact that the leader of the Karelian autonomous republic, Edvard Gylling, was a Swede from North Savo in Finland, fluent in both Swedish and Finnish, mattered to Kiruna-Swedes. Trained as a historian, Gylling defended a doctoral dissertation in agrarian history of Scandinavia at the University of Helsinki in 1909 before entering politics. A prominent Social Democratic politician and member of the Finnish parliament, he went into exile after the defeat of the Red Guards in the Finnish Civil War, first settling in Stockholm and later moving to Soviet Russia to head a Nordic socialist republic in Karelia.

A second significant Swedish community existed in Ukraine. The villagers of Gammalsvenskby—known in Swedish as *svenskbyborna* and in Ukrainian as *старошведи* [‘Old-Swedes’]—had settled in the Kherson steppe in 1782, maintaining their identity, language and Lutheran confession, as well as regular ties to Sweden. In 1929, following an agreement between the Swedish and Soviet governments, the entire village (888 persons) emigrated to Sweden (Kotljarchuk 2014a). All received Swedish citizenship. However, around 250 individuals returned to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, joined by a group of Swedish communists.³ In the 1930s, an experiment to create the world’s first Swedish kolkhoz under the auspices of the Swedish Communist Party (SKP) was undertaken in Gammalsvenskby.⁴ The main promoter of the Gammalsvenskby experiment was Allan Wallenius, director of the Comintern Library and head of the Scandinavian Section at the Communist University of the National Minorities of the West (Kotljarchuk 2014c). Active in Swedish and American left-wing circles, Wallenius joined the Swedish Communist Party and later worked in the USA as editor-in-chief of *Ny Tid* [‘New time’], a Swedish-language newspaper of the American Communist Party (Mustelin 1984; Gardberg & Kaihovirta 2022). Detained by Swedish police in 1921 and expelled after publishing under a pseudonym a book on Gustaf Mannerheim (Grimlund 1919), Wallenius, born to a Swedish family in Dragsfjärd in the Grand Duchy of Finland (then part of the Russian Empire), was not a Swedish citizen despite his deep ties to Sweden.

³ The archival records reveal that the following communists from Sweden resided in Gammalsvenskby in the 1930s: Edvin Blom, Karl Andersson, Hugo Albert Lauenstein, Karl Ture Gräas, Kasper Gustafsson, Hildur Gustafsson, Karl Sigfrid Holmström, Gunnar Blomberg, Erik Karlsson, Paul Söderman, and Erik Petersson.

⁴ After the 1929 split, two major Communist parties existed in Sweden (Kennerström 1976). The first, the Swedish Communist Party (*Sverges kommunistiska parti*), led by Hugo Sillén, operated under the auspices of the Communist International in Moscow. The second, the Socialist Party of Sweden (*Socialistiska partiet*), led by Karl Kilbom, severed relations with Moscow and condemned Stalinism. In 1937, Kilbom was expelled as the leadership passed to Nils Flyg, under whom the Socialist Party adopted elements of German National Socialism. It was members of the Swedish Communist Party affiliated with the Communist International, known in Swedish historiography as *sillénare*, who actively travelled to the Soviet Union for work and study.

Two additional Swedish communities with tsarist-era roots existed in Baku and Saint Petersburg (renamed Leningrad in 1924). The so-called Baku-Swedes (Swe. *Baku-svenskarna*) were former employees at the Nobel oil enterprises in the Caucasus. Not all left Azerbaijan after the 1917 Revolution and the nationalisation of the Nobel company. Bengt Jangfeldt has claimed that only about twenty Swedes remained in Leningrad after 1924, the last being Alexander Tullander, who returned to Sweden with his family in 1937 (Jangfeldt 1998: 299). Our material indicates, however, that in 1937 around thirty Swedes from Sweden (including those who had accepted Soviet citizenship) lived in the city. Some suffered during the Great Terror; others managed to return to Sweden.

Gylling was arrested by the NKVD in 1937 and executed in Moscow in 1938; the site of his grave remains unknown. His wife Fanny Gylling, a Finland-Swede, was sentenced in 1938 as a “wife of an enemy of the people” to eight years’ imprisonment and died in the Gulag. Allan Wallenius was arrested in 1938 and died in prison in 1942. His second wife, Edith Rudquist, born in the USA to Swedish immigrant parents, survived the Great Terror but died in Moscow in 1943. The arrests of Gylling and Wallenius symbolised the end of Nordic socialist projects in the Soviet Union. Many ordinary Swedes in Gammalsvenskby and Karelia were arrested and murdered by the NKVD without trial (Takala 1998; Takala 2018; Kotljarchuk 2014a; Kotljarchuk & Nilsson 2021). At the same time, a substantial number of Swedes survived. This paper seeks to explain the factors that shaped death and survival among Soviet-Swedes in the interwar USSR.

Swedes in the National Operations of the NKVD

In the summer of 1937, the Politburo ordered the NKVD to initiate “national operations” targeting various ethnic minorities (Martin 1998; Nikolskiy 2001; Werth 2003). The largest was the Polish operation, in which 139,815 people were arrested and 111,071 executed (Morris 2004). During the German operation, 56,787 were arrested and 41,898 executed (Schafranek & Musienko 2003; Dönninghaus 2009). Its epicentre lay in borderland Ukraine rather than in the Volga-German Autonomous Republic. According to Ukrainian historians Volodymyr Semystyaha and Igor Tatarinov, Germans constituted around 10 per cent of all victims of the Great Terror in Ukraine, while the group made up only 1.5 per cent (c. 408,000) of the republic’s population in 1937 (Semystyaha & Tatarinov 2015). A further 17,851 Latvians were arrested, 13,444 of whom were executed (Kott 2007). The operation against Finns claimed over 12,000 victims, with 9,078 executed (Takala 2018). Additional national operations targeted Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian and Iranian diasporas. The NKVD also ran smaller “national lines,” such as an Estonian line within the Latvian operation and a Sami line within the Finnish operation.

In total, 335,513 people were arrested between July 1937 and November 1938 by the NKVD as a part of national operations, of whom more than 70 per cent were executed (Werth 2003: 232). State terror was devastating for small groups, especially those lacking diplomatic protection from a “homeland.” On the Kola Peninsula, mass arrests sharply reduced the tiny Sami population. A significant share (11.5%) of Sami victims belonged to the native intelligentsia fostered by the Bolsheviks during the

1920s (Kotljarchuk 2012), with long-term consequences for the present-day vulnerability of the Kola Sami (Kotljarchuk 2019).

No specific national operation or line targeted Swedes. Moreover, unlike indigenous Finno-Ugric peoples or Russian Greeks, Swedes with personal or family ties to Sweden could seek assistance from the Swedish diplomatic missions. In autumn 1937, the Swedish embassy in Moscow and the general consulate in Leningrad initiated a large-scale, discreet humanitarian action to:

- (a) provide consular aid to Swedes arrested by the NKVD across the USSR;
- (b) in cooperation with the Finnish embassy, evacuate Swedish citizens with valid passports by train from Moscow or Leningrad to Helsinki;
- (c) assist native Swedes with personal or family links to Sweden in restoring their Swedish citizenship and issuing new passports;
- (d) extend Swedish citizenship to non-Swedish spouses of Swedish citizens and to adult children, and to facilitate formal renunciation of Soviet citizenship;
- (e) purchase international train tickets in foreign currency (possession of which was prohibited for Soviet citizens);
- (f) escort Swedish subjects to the Moscow–Leningrad–Helsinki international express.⁵

This forgotten Swedish humanitarian operation, conducted at the height of the Great Terror, proved strikingly effective: hundreds of Swedes returned home or to their historical homeland with diplomatic assistance (Nilsson & Kotljarchuk 2022). In the process, the Swedish Foreign Office gathered substantial information on Soviet-Swedes, their partners and children, including many names previously unknown to scholarship. Yet several Swedes, including some who had contacted the embassy, were nonetheless caught in the maelstrom. This raises new questions: How did class, gender, personal background and geography affect the trajectories of Swedish citizens under Stalin's dictatorship? Who survived, who became victims, and why? We argue that mapping the interwar Swedish diaspora helps answer these questions.

About the Source Material

The dataset combines records from the National Archives of Sweden (Stockholm), the former Comintern Archives (Moscow), and several databases maintained by Memorial, the NGO founded in 1989 in the Soviet Union and dedicated to documenting victims of Stalinism. Although Memorial was banned in Russia in 2021, the organisation continues to operate internationally.

The archives of the Swedish Foreign Office (Swe. *Utrikesdepartementet*) contain several relevant collections, divided between the main repository in Stockholm and its branch in Täby, a municipality in Stockholm County. The material is also fragmented owing to differing transfer dates. The core of this study is formed by nationality

⁵ These diplomatic measures are summarised by the authors from source material in the National Archives of Sweden (Riksarkivet, Stockholm): Rättsavdelningen, 1918–1969 R 67; Avdelning HP 514, Grupp 1, vol. LXI (June–September 1937) and vol. LXII (1938).

registers (Swe. *nationalitetsmatriklar*) maintained by Swedish diplomats in Moscow and Leningrad. These registers, identified in the National Archives by Torbjörn Nilsson, professor of history at Södertörn University (Nilsson 2024), record only those Swedes who contacted Swedish diplomatic mission. Many individuals, e.g., a lot of Swedish communists, never did. Supplementary records include scattered files concerning Swedes who requested assistance, inquiries from relatives in Sweden, lists of returning citizens or missing persons, and applications for citizenship and/or passports.

We supplemented these sources with entries (in Russian) from Memorial's digital databases of victims of Soviet terror. Among the databases consulted were: (1) Victims of the Political Terror in the USSR (Ru. *Жертвы политического террора в СССР*; alphabetical search); (2) Victims of the Political Terror in the USSR (Ru. *Жертвы политического террора в СССР*; searchable by name, birthplace and year of birth); (3) Restored Names (Ru. *Возвращенные имена*), covering north-western Russia; and (4) the Memorial Book of Murmansk Oblast (Ru. *Книга памяти Мурманской области*).

Finally, we drew on inventories and extracts from personal files of Swedish communists in the Archives of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (now part of the Russian State Archive of Political History). One of the authors copied the inventory and did extracts in 2012.

Individual Trajectories and Methodological Challenges

Our research process proceeds in three directions. First, we conduct a quantitative analysis of the collected data. Second, we combine quantitative analysis with micro-historical reconstruction to increase the precision of general data. Third, we carry out a comparative reading of personal files in Swedish and Russian in order to identify and trace as many individual trajectories as possible. Language proved to be a persistent problem. In many instances it proved difficult to match persons recorded by the Swedish Foreign Office with entries in Memorial's databases (and vice versa). Since the Memorial databases draw on former NKVD-MGB-KGB archives, discrepancies are common: NKVD officers frequently transliterated Swedish names into Russian phonetically, and often poorly, leading to multiple misspellings of personal names and place names. We also identified many Kiruna-Swedes whom the NKVD categorised as "Finnish nationals" despite Swedish citizenship.

The following examples illustrate the problem. Ernst Eriksson, born in Saittarova (Pajala municipality in Sweden), a railway worker executed at Kem in 1938, appears in NKVD records as "a Finn born in Ruotsi" (*Ruotsi* is Finnish for Sweden). Carl Niemi, a SKP member executed in Karelia in 1938, was born in 1874 in Pajala, but his birthplace is rendered in Finnish-like form as Pojalan-Кюуля (Поялан-Кюля) from a Finnish name of Pajala, *Pajalan kylä*. Presumably interrogated in Finnish, Carl Niemi was classified as a Finn despite Swedish citizenship. Jakob Einar Passi born in the Swedish town of Luleå, a lumberjack executed in Karelia in 1938, appears as "a Finn from Lulaln," Ilmari Kunnunen (born 1913 in the Swedish town of Kiruna), a Swedish citizen executed in Karelia in 1938, is recorded as "a Finn from Kirup." Another "Finnish national," Helge Kensonen (a Swedish citizen born in Kiruna in 1915), is

recorded as Helge Karlovich Kenzhonen, born in “Kirgutsa.” Erik Janson (born 1897 in the Swedish village of Valbo), a sawmill worker and SKP member arrested in 1938, likewise appears as “a Finn.” Bertil Thörn, a mining engineer and SKP member sentenced in Murmansk to 10 years incommunicado, appears as Berl Antonovich Tern. Birger Seppälä, an SKP member and worker at the Petrozavodsk ski factory executed in 1938, appears in Soviet records as Berger Vilyamovich Seppelya.

Correlating Swedish and Russian language records often demanded extensive effort. A woman known in Swedish documents as Rika Gawatin appears in Soviet records as Riki Meerovna Gavatina-Ortman (Рики Мееровна Гаватина-Ортман). We established that she was born in 1886 to a Jewish family in Germany as Rika Baruch; she was a professional dentist and a member of the German Communist Party. Her first husband, Wolfgang Ortman, was a well-known German illustrator. In 1933, after Hitler’s rise to power, she emigrated to Sweden, divorced and remarried Leopold Gawatin, a Swedish citizen of Jewish descent. Professor Nilsson located records indicating that in the mid-1930s the Gawatins, as Swedish citizens, emigrated to the Soviet Union (Nilsson 2024: 44). Both were arrested by the NKVD in 1937 on charges of “Swedish espionage” and, despite diplomatic interventions from the Swedish embassy, were sent to the Gulag. Their fate remained unknown to Swedish authorities. We found that Rika Gawatin was executed in the NKVD prison in Orel in September 1941 on the eve of the Nazi assault on the city. As a Jew, a political émigré from Germany and a Swedish citizen, she had very limited chances of survival under either dictatorship.

Further examples abound. Per Yngve Åkerman, an SKP member and senior engineer in Arkhangelsk executed in Moscow in 1938, appears in Soviet files as Petr Petrovich Okerman. Hilda Petersson från Jämtland, an SKP member sentenced in 1937 to eight years’ imprisonment, appears as Hulda-Eugenia Aleksandrova-Peterson; her native region, Jämtland, is rendered in Russian as Оптиямб губ). “Yunis Yunasovich Yunson,” born 1875 in *Suisval*, turns out to be Jonas Jonsson, a Swedish citizen and SKP member born in Alnö near Sundsvall.

While such issues complicate verification and impose limits on our study, the comparative approach enabled substantial corrections to earlier data, especially concerning Swedish communists active in the Soviet Union. This pertains both to forgotten names and to instances where the same individual appears under multiple aliases. Access to the SKP archives shows that many communists operated in the Soviet Union under party pseudonyms. We discovered, for example, that two prominent SKP members: Erik Karlsson and Paul Söderman were known in the USSR as comrades Karl Johansson and Karl Lindroos. Consequently, the biographical list of Kiruna-Swedes published by journalist Kaa Eneberg contains serious errors, listing Paul Söderman, Karl Lindroos, Erik Karlsson and Karl Johansson as four different individuals (Eneberg 2003), when in fact there are two.

Transforming heterogeneous lists into a meaningful statistical overview posed further challenges. Consider the “class” variable. Most entries recorded a profession (and in rare cases a status such as “widow,” “maiden,” or “noble”). We therefore proxied “class” by occupational indicators, assigning spouses or family members without specified occupations to the class of the recorded family member. After weighing research usefulness against data availability, we employed seven categories plus “not

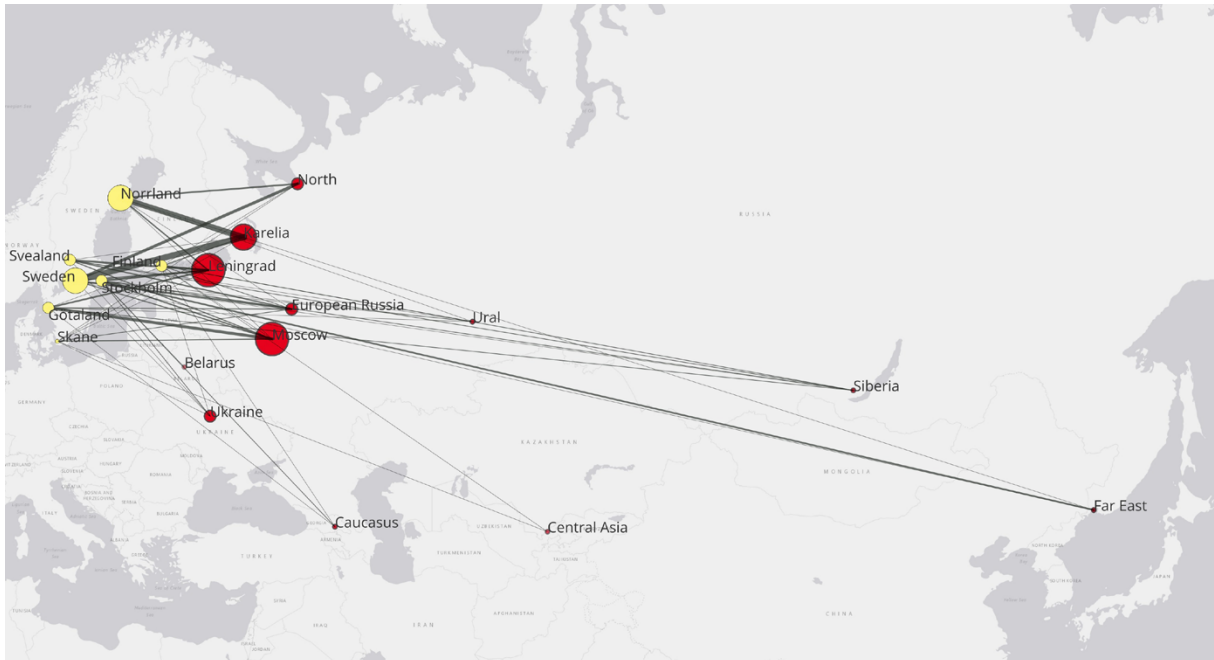
specified”: “working class,” “agricultural,” “intelligentsia/artist,” “professional/clerk/teacher/specialist,” “upper middle class,” “bureaucrat,” and “nobility.”

Inevitably, such categorisation removes nuance and may induce a kind of double translation. First, the initial data gathering (for instance by the Swedish Foreign Office or the NKVD) could be faulty. Beyond evident mis-renderings of names, places and nationalities, human error and institutional categories might have oversimplified complex realities. Second, our own aggregation into broad categories necessarily simplifies. This is not inherently problematic, provided that the limitations are acknowledged. The dataset presented here comprises 458 individuals; it is almost certainly not exhaustive of all Swedes in the USSR during the 1930s. Of the 2,495 Swedes recorded in the 1926 census, 1,874 reported Swedish as their first language (All-Union Population Census of 17 December 1926, 1928: 62). Strikingly, the 1937 census recorded only 20 Swedes (Zhiromskaya & Polyakov 2007: 90), whereas the 1939 census listed 1,519 (Polyakov 1992). This discrepancy cannot be explained by natural demographic change alone. A likely factor is changing methodology. In 1926, respondents were asked to state their *narodnost* (‘nationality/ethnicity’), with foreign nationals instructed to report their country of citizenship (TsSU SSSR 1928: III). The 1937 form asked for *natsionalnost*, instructing clerks simply to record the nationality the interviewee claimed (Zhiromskaya & Polyakov 2007: 277). The 1939 census retained *natsionalnost* but explicitly encouraged the recording of nationalities and languages beyond the USSR’s titular nationalities (Polyakov 1992: 14). Self-censorship likely also played a role: amid the 1937 peak of the Great Terror and a climate of suspicion toward foreigners, many may have avoided identifying as Swedish.

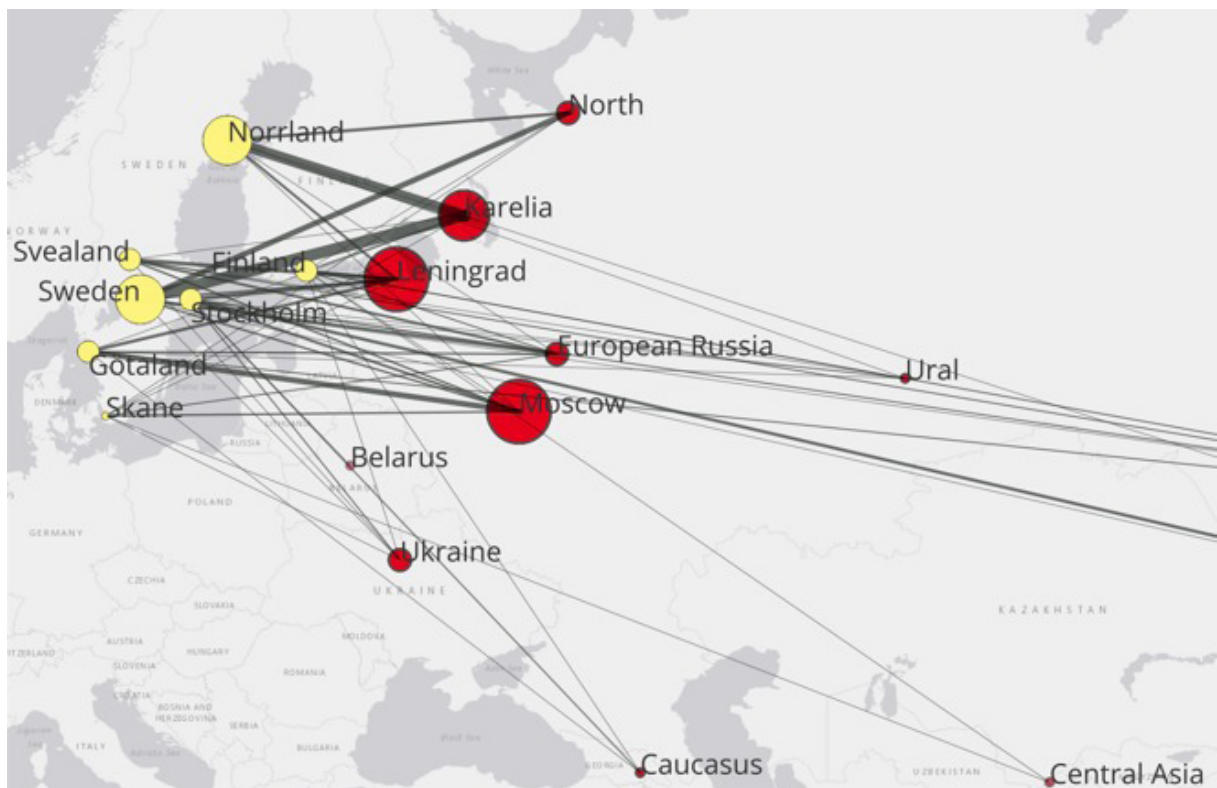
Given source plurality and sample size, we consider our dataset to represent a substantial share of Swedes in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Nilsson estimates that “nearly 700 adults of Swedish origin can be found in the archives as residents of the Soviet Union for shorter or longer periods in the 1920s and 1930s” (Nilsson 2024: 40). Focusing on the 1930s and excluding children, our sample of 458 persons fits well with this estimate, though sampling biases cannot be entirely excluded.

Quantitative Analysis of the Collected Data

As Map 1 indicates, the Swedish-born population is grouped into six regions: Norrland, Svealand, Götaland, Stockholm, Scania, and Sweden (unspecified). For those born outside Sweden (not represented on the map), we use nine categories: Russia, Finland, Poland, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltics, Norway, and the USA (single entry). Circle sizes indicate relative frequencies. Lines represent migration from place of birth (in Sweden or Finland) to place of residence in the USSR. Among those with a specified birthplace in Sweden, the largest contingent comes from Norrland (59 individuals). 68 individuals originated from unspecified locations in Sweden, and 144 were born in the Russian Empire.



Map 1. Routes of emigration and geographical composition of the Swedish diaspora in the Soviet Union. Location of birth (yellow) and habitation (red) within the USSR. Locations are approximate, based on categorical coding. Persons born in the Russian Empire are not represented in this map. Source: authors' calculations based on archival analysis. Maps were produced with the open-source software QGIS.

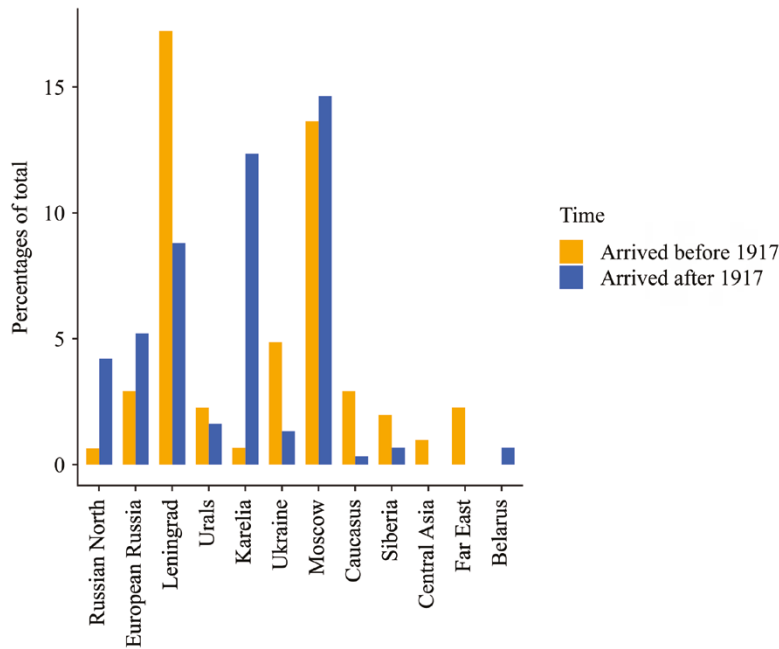


Map 2. Detail of the previous map (Map 1). Size of the lines is scaled to the amount of people.

The details clarify the migratory pattern: a majority of Swedish immigrants from Norrland settled in Karelia, with smaller numbers residing in the Russian North (e.g. around Arkhangelsk) and in Leningrad and Moscow. The sizeable flow from “Sweden (unspecified)” to Karelia likely includes a portion of the Kiruna-Swedes.

Below is a chart that further specifies the migratory patterns of Swedes in the Soviet Union. The chart distinguishes those who arrived before 1917 or were born in the Russian Empire (yellow) from those who arrived thereafter. Individuals for whom the timing could not be determined are excluded. Those residing in the Russian North and in Karelia arrived almost exclusively after the 1917 Revolution, whereas Leningrad and Moscow include relatively large shares of Swedes resident before 1917. This corroborates the picture of labour migrants settling in Karelia and the Russian North, while pre-revolutionary Swedish communities persisted mainly in Leningrad and Moscow.

Fig. 1. Chart of location and moment of arrival.



The chart below illustrates the professional and class composition associated with each location category. Particularly notable is the marked class homogeneity among Swedes in Karelia, who were predominantly of working-class origin. These findings from the quantitative analysis corroborate earlier qualitative research on Kiruna-Swedes in the Soviet Union (Gustafsson 2006; Golubev & Takala 2014).

Fig. 2. Chart representing percentages of class variable within each location.

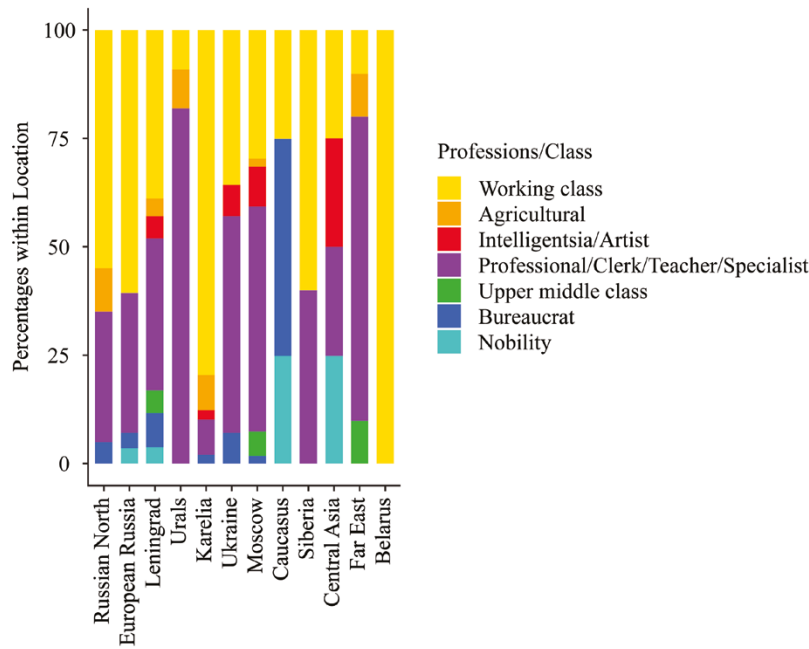


Fig. 3. Chart showing the distribution of the class variable within the binary variable of “surviving the period of terror.”



An important variable applied in our analysis is the binary indicator “survived the period of terror.” We employ a broad definition of the “period of terror,” encompassing both the 1930s and 1940s, in recognition of the continued arrests of Swedish nationals after 1938. Unfortunately, archival materials from the 1950s and 1960s concerning Swedes who “disappeared” in the interwar Soviet Union, as well as those who survived and later returned, remain classified at the National Archives in Stockholm, thereby limiting the scope of our analysis.

An interesting finding emerging from the examination of the Swedish sample is the apparent lack of influence of social class on the likelihood of survival during Stalin’s rule. More than 30 per cent of individuals in the sample are known not to have survived the period of terror, with many perishing through execution or in labour camps. As the chart above indicates, class does not appear to have been a significant determinant of survival, as the class compositions of those who survived and those who did not are relatively similar. The same contingency is presented in tabular form below.

Table 1. Contingency table based on the same data as the bar chart above omitting entries for which there was no conclusive data.

Survived the period of terror			
Profession/Class	No	Yes	Total
Working class	46	46	92
Agricultural	6	4	10
Intelligentsia	5	9	14
Specialist/Clerk	32	53	85
Middle Class	3	3	6
Bureaucrat	7	6	13
Nobility	3	2	5
Total	102	123	225

Conducting a chi-squared test yields a χ^2 value of 5.09 with a pvalue of 0.532, indicating no statistically significant difference among class groups with respect to the binary variable of survival. It should be noted that the sample size is relatively small, owing to the substantial number of missing data points for individuals whose class or profession could not be reliably established. Likewise, no significant association was found between class and the binary variable of having been sentenced to imprisonment or labourcamp terms. One variable that did demonstrate a statistically significant effect on survival was gender: men were disproportionately represented among those who did not survive the period of terror. A chi-squared test for the contingency table below produces a χ^2 value of 14.3 with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, indicating a strong and highly significant dependence. This pattern is also immediately evident from inspection of the table: in this sample, half of the men did not survive, compared with 30 per cent of the women.

Table 2. Contingency table containing the binary variables “gender” and “survived the period of terror.”

Survived the period of terror			
Gender	no	yes	Total
M	103	98	201
F	29	73	102
Total	132	171	303

Finally, it is useful to examine the statistics concerning those individuals who left the Soviet Union. It should first be noted that, within the total sample, 145 out of 458 individuals (approximately 30%) can be definitively established as having departed. The true proportion is likely higher, but this figure represents a conservative lower bound for our dataset. The table below presents this variable contingent on location of residence, excluding individuals for whom no clear place of residence could be determined. As the table shows, those residing in Northern Russia and Karelia corresponding largely to the group often referred to as the Kiruna-Swedes were far less likely to emigrate (0% and approximately 10%, respectively) compared with individuals in other major population centres such as Moscow and Leningrad, where the proportions were around 30 per cent and 40 per cent, respectively.

Table 3. Contingency table with the variables “Moved out of SU” and location of residence.

Moved out of SU			
Location	No/unclear	Yes	Total
Northern Russia	24	0	24
European Russia	22	15	37
Leningrad	54	38	92
Urals	9	7	16
Karelia	57	6	63
Ukraine	11	14	25
Moscow	73	31	104
Caucasus	10	4	14
Siberia	8	2	10
Central Asia	4	1	5
Far East	10	3	13
Belarus	3	0	3
Total	285	121	406

The time of arrival appears to have no discernible effect on the likelihood of individuals leaving the Soviet Union (see Table 4 below), as the proportions leaving and remaining are relatively similar across categories. In contrast, the factor of immigration origin does seem to be significant (see Table 5). Individuals born in the Russian Empire were more likely to emigrate from the Soviet Union, with nearly half (~45%) of this group in our dataset leaving. Among those born in Sweden, 75 out of a total of 256 individuals (~30%) emigrated. This correlation is statistically significant ($\chi^2 \approx 9.3$; $p < .01$).

It must be emphasized that these percentages represent lower bounds based on the available dataset, and the actual proportions may be higher. Moreover, because individuals who did not survive the period are included in the category “did not move out of the Soviet Union,” the observed effect may reflect mortality rates rather than successful emigration. This interpretation is clarified in Table 6, which presents the same contingency table restricted to those who survived the terror. In this filtered sample, the effect disappears, although the sample size is too small to support statistically robust conclusions.

Table 4. Contingency table with the variables “Moved out of SU” and time of arrival.

Moved out of SU			
Arrived	No/ unclear	Yes	Total
Before 1917 (including those born in the Russian Empire)	112	67	179
After 1917	109	57	166
Total	221	124	345

Table 5. Contingency table with the variables “Moved out of SU” and location of birth.

Moved out of SU			
Location of birth	No/unclear	Yes	Total
Russian Empire	62	52	114
Sweden	181	75	256
Total	243	127	370

Table 6. Contingency table with the variables “Moved out of SU” and location of birth, for those who survived.

Moved out of SU			
Location of birth	No/unclear but survived	Yes	Total
Russian Empire	13	52	65
Sweden	17	69	86
Total	30	121	151

Conclusion

Our results suggest that the Swedish diaspora can be divided into seven groups by personal background, geography, timing of emigration and fate in the interwar Soviet Union:

- I. Kiruna-Swedes. The sample contains detailed personal data for 60 Kiruna-Swedes, many of whom settled in the Karelian-Finnish Republic, though not exclusively so; some worked in Leningrad, Moscow and Kharkiv. At least 12 returned to Sweden, at least 11 did not survive the terror, and the fates of the remainder are unknown.
- II. Members of the SKP aligned with the Communist International. Most “voluntarily” accepted Soviet citizenship, seeking social benefits or under NKVD pressure not to renew residence permits, and thereby lost Swedish citizenship, since dual nationality was not recognised by Soviet authorities. As a result, they often remain invisible in Swedish records. This group appears over-represented in Memorial’s databases of Great Terror victims, though further research is required.
- III. Professionals, engineers and technical specialists (roughly 120 persons). Most were born in tsarist Russia to Swedish immigrant families; a smaller number immigrated in the early 1930s as invited specialists for industrialisation and plant construction. As a rule, they retained Swedish citizenship. A sizable share of this group (about 40%) succeeded in leaving the USSR.
- IV. Swedes born in tsarist Russia (144 names), who together with non-Swedish spouses and children retained Swedish passports. According to our findings, 52 left the USSR.
- V. Baku-Swedes as a distinct group of c. 40 individuals. Our sample includes detailed data on 14 adult Swedish citizens in the Caucasus, nine of whom resided in Baku. Families typically comprised Swedish-born men married to local women of various ethnic origins and their Russian-, Armenian- and Azeri-speaking children. Four of the nine families in our dataset left the USSR.
- VI. Ukrainian Old-Swedes. In 1937–1938, 22 individuals (predominantly men) were arrested by the NKVD as members of a fictitious espionage organisation and shot in Kherson. The Swedish embassy could not assist, as Moscow regarded them as Soviet subjects; few appear in Swedish records.
- VIII. Russian widows or divorcées of deceased Swedish men. Approximately 20 such cases appear in Swedish Foreign Office files. Most received regular financial support from the Swedish embassy. They did not suffer directly in the Great Terror owing to natural death or repatriation to Sweden.

The results of quantitative analysis that combined with micro-level study of personal files clarifies who became targets of Soviet terror, who survived, and why. It also illuminates correlations among class, geography, timing of emigration and citizenship. Outcomes varied markedly across categories of Soviet-Swedes. There was no discernible correlation between class and survival. However, the Kiruna-Swedes, bilingual immigrants from northern Sweden, faced heightened risk of arrest and are over-

represented among Swedish victims of the national operations. They were also far less likely to emigrate out of the Soviet Union than Swedes in major population centres like Moscow and Leningrad. Many fell under the Finnish operation of the NKVD despite lacking Finnish citizenship and previous residence in Finland. The reason was bureaucratic: following Stalin's definition of nationality, the NKVD privileged native language and culture over country of origin and citizenship. Consequently, the Karelian NKVD classified Kiruna-Swedes as "Finns" because they spoke Finnish and participated in Finnish public life in Karelia (Nilsson & Kotljarchuk 2022: 479–480). The NKVD sought to "cleanse" Karelian society of all kinds of Finns, which is, Finnish-speaking people who had come not only from Finland but also from Sweden, Norway, the USA and Canada. Many had accepted Soviet citizenship, which diminished their chances of survival. Some crossed the Soviet Finnish border illegally. Only immigrants who retained Swedish citizenship could count on effective diplomatic assistance, enabling departure and survival during the Great Terror.

As shown, the timing of emigration to the Soviet Union does not exert any discernible influence on the likelihood that individuals would later leave the country. By contrast, geographical remoteness appears to have played a significant role. The long distance from Karelia to the Swedish embassy in Moscow, especially after the general consulate in Leningrad was closed by the Soviet authorities in January 1938, shaped both the magnitude and direction of repression. Those who departed Karelia swiftly for Moscow and were able to make personal contact with Swedish diplomats had a greater chance of survival and eventual repatriation. Some individuals waited for months in rented apartments in Moscow while their Swedish citizenship was restored. Once new passports were issued, they were permitted to remain within the diplomatic compound for several days before departure to Sweden via Finland; for security reasons, diplomatic staff escorted Soviet-Swedes to the Leningrad railway station in Moscow.⁶

A second high-risk group comprised the members of the Swedish Communist Party. Because many of them had accepted Soviet citizenship, the Swedish embassy's ability to assist was sharply constrained. In the 1930s, numerous Swedish communists were arrested on espionage charges and either executed without trial or sent to the Gulag. Only a few survived and returned through intensive Swedish diplomatic efforts. Among them, as currently known, Edvin Blom, Wagner Hansson, Einar Holm, Bertil Johansson, Axel Karlsson, Gösta Keskitala, Karl Georg Nilsson, Elin Lehtonen and Konrad Sinclair Söderberg (Kotljarchuk & Nilsson 2021).

Finally, we can conclude that the Swedish embassy's response differed starkly from that of Nazi Germany's mission. Following instructions from Berlin, German diplomats in Moscow refused aid to many citizens of the Third Reich and Austria, which was annexed by Germany after the Anschluss in March 1938. This concerns especially communists and those they labelled "persons of alien race," i.e. German citizens of Jewish origin (Vatlin 2011: 175–182). By contrast, as representatives of

⁶ In 1938, the staff of the Swedish embassy in Moscow consisted of six professional diplomats: Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Otto Wilhelm Winther; Counsellor and Press Attaché Nils Lindh; First Secretary Sten Hansson von Euler-Chelpin; Second Secretary Eng Brynolf; Military Attaché Major Carl Vrang; and Head of the Chancellery Georg Nyström. Nils Lindh had served in the USSR since 1924 and spoke fluent Russian.

a democratic state governed by the rule of law, Swedish diplomats sought to assist every national subject irrespective of political affiliation, class, ethnicity or personal background (Nilsson & Kotljarchuk 2022). As a result, many Swedes survived and returned home. The success of this neglected humanitarian operation also rested on relatively functional Swedish–Soviet relations, anchored in Sweden’s neutrality, profitable bilateral trade, and the absence of a common border and direct military conflict since 1809. Experience gained in the interwar Soviet Union may have informed Sweden’s large-scale humanitarian actions in Germany and in Nazi- and Soviet-occupied countries during the Second World War. However, this is an issue for future research.

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