

- Hedman, Jörgen, and Lars Åhlander. 2006. *Runö: Historien om svenskön i Rigabukten* [*Runö: The History of the Swedish Island in the Bay of Riga*]. Stockholm: Dialogos. 504 pp. appendices, maps, illustrations. 330 SEK.
- Hedman, Jörgen. 2006. *Runö: Historien om svenskön i Rigabukten, Bilagor* [*Runö: The History of the Swedish Island in the Bay of Riga: Attachments*]. Stockholm: Dialogos. 88 pp. 205 SEK.

The foremost authorities on the Swedish minority in Ukraine, Jörgen Hedman and Lars Åhlander, continue to expand our horizons by documenting the fascinating past of the Swedes across the Baltic Sea. While the remarkable history of the Ukrainian Swedes has received considerable attention during the last decade, not least due to the enthusiasm, dedication, and solid work of Hedman and Åhlander, many chapters of the history of the Swedish population in Estonia is perhaps less known among the general public. Yet in many ways the history of the island of Runö (Ruhnu in Estonian) may be even more extraordinary than that of Gammalsvenskby in Ukraine. The culture on Runö differed sharply from that of other Estonian Swedes. While Runö became a part of independent Estonia after World War I, following a diplomatic conflict with neighbouring Latvia, the island had historically been a part of Kurland and Livonia. Among the four Estonian Swedish dialects, the Runö dialect differed sharply from the other three, and remains almost incomprehensible to other Estonian Swedes. Runö was also the richest of the Swedish-Estonian islands. While ethnically Swedish, its inhabitants perceived themselves to be a people distinct from other Estonian Swedes.

The Scandinavian contacts with the Baltic and Slavic world go back to time immemorial. Runö is strategically located in the middle of the Bay of Riga, on the sailing route the Vikings took to reach the Daugava River. The name of the island, rather than stemming from the word *runa*, or *rune*, likely derives from the Latvian *Ronn Sala* [seal island]. Fishing and seal hunting had been important to the local economy, particularly prior to the reformation, as the Catholic Church considered seal meat to be fish, which could be eaten when a person was fasting. The blubber was turned into oil, used for lamps.

Lacking a proper port, the island was isolated for hundreds of years. From the Swedish settlement in the thirteenth century up until the collective evacuation to Sweden in 1944, the islanders maintained a very peculiar societal organization. The Swedes on Runö were the only free people in the Baltic countries; while other Estonian Swedes ended up under the rule of various landlords, those of Runö alone maintained their own inheritance laws, under which land and property

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were passed down to the next generation. At the same time, decisions involving property disputes and farm ownership were made in a democratic fashion. A royal decree by king Karl XI in 1688 banned further expansion of the population and house construction. Firewood was scarce on the island and what little that was available was needed to fuel the lighthouse that protected ships in these treacherous and shallow waters. As a result, the population on Runö never exceeded 400, a number that was maintained by social control and enforced by the *Loandskape*, the local parliament, in which all confirmed men had voting rights.

After Sweden lost its Baltic provinces in 1721, Russia allowed far-reaching autonomy for the island, which operated as a mini-republic, with its own *thing*, or parliament, and legal order. By using its surplus grain, the Runö community bought their young males freedom from service in the army. The social control was strong, and the community farmed and toiled very much like a communist society. As there were no taxes, there was a system in which the inhabitants took turns in doing day labour for the community. A German visitor in 1846 described how the Runö Swedes differed sharply from the Latvians, in that they lacked the timidity and submissiveness of the Latvians, who feared the “*zehniga Wahzescha*” or “the noble Germans.”

The few Swedes who visited the island before 1930 were astonished by the conservative nature and the old-fashioned life style on the island. They felt visiting Runö was “like visiting an outdoor museum”; its culture was described as “*det svenskaste av allt svenskt*” [more Swedish than the Swedish]. The roads were so rocky and uneven that carts were not introduced until the twentieth century. The inhabitants all wore very peculiar folk costumes, signaling their belonging and marital status. The houses had elaborately engraved dragons and horse heads carved on the logs at the roof ridges, accompanied by runic inscriptions. Pre-Christian terminology survived into modern times, cranes were called *Ods swalu* [Odin’s/Wotan’s swallows] in the Runö dialect.

Intrigued by this pre-modern society, anthropologists and racial biologists from both Sweden and Finland took an active interest in the Runö Swedes, recording their folk songs and measuring and categorizing their race, determining in the scientific language of the day that “language and race far from completely correspond to each other ... the Runö population constitutes a mixed product of the Nordic and Eastern Baltic race.”

World War II brought an abrupt end to this unique and isolated culture, as the islanders were evacuated, or “repatriated” to Sweden, after at least seven hundred years on the island. Only six Swedes stayed, two of whom suffered repression by the Stalinist authorities. After Estonia regained its independence, the land was returned to the old owners. But while 60 per cent of the land is owned today by Swedes, only one Runö Swede has returned to live permanently on the island, which today has a population of fewer than 60 people, most of them

Estonians. The island is economically depressed and alcoholism widespread. Its environment was damaged by the long-term Soviet military presence.

With this book, and the accompanying attachment, the first scholarly work on the history of the island, Hedman and Åhlander have made a little known and unusual part of Swedish history available to scholars and a general readership. Their writing is engaged and their research thorough, displaying an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the Estonian Swedes. This is popular history at its best, and will likely find a wide readership among people interested in Scandinavian history.

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