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National socialist cultural diplomacy and Scandinavian popular culture: debating the German-Nordic Writers' House in the 1930s

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the responses of the Finnish and Scandinavian writers' associations to a National Socialist cultural diplomatic initiative, namely the German-Nordic Writers' House. Doing so, it engages the interplay between popular culture and foreign politics, as Nordic writers negotiated how to respond to the Third Reich's quest for European cultural hegemony. Using the Writers' House as a case study, the article discusses the nebulous nature of cultural diplomacy and reflects on how responses to the Writers' House, especially in Finland, elucidate the limits of National Socialist cultural diplomacy in its engagement with the conflict-ridden Nordic cultural fields in the 1930s.

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Introduction

'I am by birth and unbridled habit liberal-minded', the Swede Johannes Edfelt wrote to his Finnish writer-colleague Göran Stenius in a letter thanking the latter for a copy of his 1937 book *Femte akten* [*The Fifth Act*]. Declaring all forms of dictatorship a thorn in his flesh, Edfelt added the following:

I have joined the association '*Kulturfront* [Cultural Front]': a little while ago a cantata, authored by me, was performed at Stockholm's Concert Hall, in which I defended values which for a Nazi must be devastating [...]. It is a shame that ideological differences must also remove one from people whom one respects on a personal level. Unfortunately, it is the way of the world. (Edfelt, n.d.)

Stenius' book had been occasioned by his stay at the German-Nordic Writers' House [*Deutsch-Nordische Schriftstellerhaus*] the previous summer, a place that Edfelt had visited a few years earlier. Both had been appointed by their respective national writers' associations. The institution had been set up in 1934 in a luxurious villa in Travemünde, on the initiative of the Lübeck-based *Nordische Gesellschaft* (Nordic Society). Its purpose was to bring together young Nordic and German writers for a few months

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each summer for ‘comradely togetherness’ in the house, and on excursions and travels designed to introduce the Finnish and Scandinavian guests to the Third Reich’s cultural, political, and socio-institutional offerings and spectacles. The institution functioned until and including the last pre-war summer in 1939. During its six years of existence, it hosted thirty Nordic and more than twenty German writers (Ørskov, 2023a).

From the outset, the German organisers were successful in engaging the Nordic writers. The Danish and Norwegian writers’ associations thus sent representatives to speak at an inauguration event in June 1934, and the associations in Scandinavia and Finland agreed to select and send a yearly representative to the House. As such, the House was apparently legitimised by the literary sphere itself, through the very institutions that represented the writerly professions. This was an ideal situation from a cultural diplomatic point of view. It seemingly bolstered the claim, made by hosts and guests alike, that the institution respected the cultural sphere’s autonomy from politics – that the house was ‘entirely unpolitical’ (e.g. Bertelsen, 1935; Domes, 1934b; Gehlin, 1993, p. 193; Sveen, 1935). At the same time, however, throughout its existence, the institution was first closely linked to Alfred Rosenberg’s NSDAP Office of Foreign Affairs through the Nordic Society, then became increasingly tied to the German Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda both financially and institutionally. Consequently, debates about the house in the Nordic public spheres came to revolve around a tension between, on the one hand, not only writers sympathising with national socialist culture but also those who believed in the possibility of separating literature from politics – with a view to protecting the interests of Nordic writers in Germany and on German book markets – and on the other hand those who warned against the futility of this position in the context of rapidly increasing ideological demands on cultural production. Whether and how popular culture and foreign policy could and should be kept apart were the central issues at stake.

The purpose of this article is to examine the ambivalent relationship between the spheres of cultural and political activity at a time of strong politicisation. The ways and degree to which these social fields were entangled with each other – a question that has been theorised in landmark scholarship by the likes of Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1993, 1996; Williams, 1983) – stood at the centre of debates among cultural actors in the 1930s. Many of the activities we will be looking at took place in those nebulous ‘spaces between fields’ that have recently been thematised as such by sociologists: in-between spaces where the relationship between fields was defined and redefined by brokers moving between fields (Eyal, 2013; Medvetz, 2012). Cultural diplomacy arguably operates in such in-between spaces, ‘swinging between culture and politics’ as Elisabet Carbó-Catalan and Diana Roig-Sanz have recently characterised the subject treated by scholars of cultural relations, intellectual cooperation, and cultural diplomacy (Carbó-Catalan & Roig-Sanz, 2022).

While scholars and practitioners of cultural diplomacy have defined the term in many different and at times contradictory ways (for a discussion of an array of different definitions, see Goff, 2013), they usually include interactions between cultural practices and producers, on the one hand, and state actors or foreign policy goals, on the other as central elements.¹ Benjamin G. Martin and Elisabeth Marie Piller have recently suggested that cultural diplomacy at its most basic involves ‘an outreach that [is] *diplomatic* – in the sense that it [seeks] to mediate between distinct polities – using means

that [are] cultural – in the sense that they [deploy] refined aesthetic practices’ (Martin & Piller, 2021, p. 149). Yet, the state’s reliance on non-state actors sets it apart from classical diplomatic practice (Gienow-Hecht, 2010, p. 376). The active involvement of state as well as non-state actors, we propose, makes for a particularly contentious interplay between the cultural and political fields (See also Martin & Piller, 2021, p. 149, 155). This was clearly the case at the Writers’ House in Northern Germany, which belongs to the ‘many new forms of collaboration between the state and private groups and individuals’ that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Martin and Piller, as efforts were made ‘to advance a [given] country’s international interests through cultural means’ (Martin & Piller, 2021, p. 159). At the Writers’ House, such efforts involved a broad array of state and non-state actors, including diplomats and ministry officials as well as cultural functionaries, writers’ associations, and individual writers.

In what follows, we therefore approach the theme of the special issue by drawing attention to the perception of the Nordic countries in German foreign policy, rather than the other way around, and by focusing on responses to a particular National Socialist cultural diplomatic initiative, the German-Nordic Writers’ House, in Nordic media and other segments of popular culture. In assessing this initiative, we also ask whether, for specific historical and political reasons, German foreign political actors primarily pursued relations with Nordic *cultural* actors in the 1930s. Should we, for instance, see National Socialist cultural diplomacy in the Nordic countries against the backdrop of the meagre support in these countries for right-wing extremism among the Scandinavian political elites, in a period of alliance formation between social democratic and non-working-class parties? Such questions form an important backdrop for our analysis, which is focused on the responses to the Writers’ House in Scandinavia and Finland. We start with a reflection on the Nordic intellectual space and some of the contextual specificities that had a direct impact on the Scandinavian and Finnish writers’ approaches to National Socialist cultural diplomacy. We then briefly consider how the Writers’ House was discussed in the different Nordic literary spheres, before turning our attention to our main case study: the impact of the Writers’ House on Finnish popular culture. Finally, the last part of the article highlights some of the pitfalls that popular culture proved to contain from a German foreign political perspective, and which made cultural diplomacy an uncomfortable if enticing undertaking for foreign political actors in the Third Reich – and indeed continue to do so for authoritarian regimes to this day.

Peripheral intellectuals facing National Socialism

The interplay between popular culture and foreign policy, as it played out in the Nordic public spheres in the interwar years, revolved around the question of accommodating, adapting, or rejecting the Soviet and the Nazi-Fascist camps’ competing cultural diplomatic overtures. In National Socialist Germany, the culture/politics division drew on what scholars such as Georg Bollenbeck and Wolf Lepenies have portrayed as a long-standing intellectual tradition of moving politics to the cultural sphere, by framing political questions in cultural terms and prioritising the lofty sphere of ideas and culture over the pettiness of everyday politics (Bollenbeck, 1994; Lepenies, 2006). After the defeat in the First World War, the German foreign political apparatus turned consciously to the cultural sphere to make up for lost ground in power politics (Trommler, 2014, pp. 289–300),

providing the context for the emergence of the Nordic Society in 1921 as well, and its subsequent existence as a private organisation enjoying some funding from the German Foreign Ministry (Hannemann, 2011; Ørskov, 2023a). With the National Socialist takeover, German foreign policy became increasingly embedded in different strands of economic, cultural, and race-theoretical visions of Europe (Bauer, 2019, pp. 23–28). German cultural functionaries, not least in the Propaganda Ministry, sought to foster a German-led movement towards a Europe of strong, anti-socialist national cultures through the creation of an array of international cultural organisations (Martin, 2016, 2013). Hence, in 1935 Toivo Lyy, the Finnish guest in Travemünde, depicted the institution's mission as a continuation of a Nordic orientation practised in Germany since the end of World War I – 'in an intensified manner now under the so-called Third Reich' (Lyy, 1936).

Contemporary accounts suggest that the mission was comparatively successful in Finland. This was at least how the situation was assessed when the Nordic writers' associations' somewhat uneven responses to German cultural diplomatic advances were assessed by a polemical member of the Danish Association during a discussion on how the Association and its leadership should relate to the Writers' House:

The Finnish Writers' Association immediately accepted the invitation to Lübeck. It is the most Nazi[-inflicted one]. Then Sweden, the second-most Nazi country [accepted the invitation]. In Norway, the Association was divided between Nazis and non-Nazis. Finally, after examining the point of view of the others, the Danish [Association] took its own [stance] (Forfatterforening, 1935).

Why might the Finnish literary milieu have been particularly susceptible to National Socialist culture-political advances? We can take a cue from a central claim in studies in the sociology of intellectual confrontations: moments of conflict and crises tend to bring to the surface underlying rules and norms of a given intellectual field, which under 'normal' circumstances remain invisible (Collins, 1998; Fabiani, 2007). This framework is well-suited for studying small-country intellectual spaces, where smallness translates into a propensity towards seeking consensus and compromise. Finland, and notably its Swedish-language writers, constituting a linguistic minority in a small country, provides an illuminating example. The most vocal liberal antifascists belonged to this group, where debates tended to gravitate towards ideologically centrist positions for very specific reasons having to do with peripherality and smallness: allowing an already constrained cultural space such as Swedish language literature in Finland to split into rival ideological camps – as was the case in larger countries – would have threatened the very existence of this culture. For this reason, there was an unspoken mutual understanding about the necessity of getting along with ideological antagonists (Nygård & Tandefelt, 2019, pp. 124–144).

The debates surrounding fascist, national socialist and Soviet communist cultural diplomacy are a case in point. In the Swedish language writers' association in Finland, discussions were carried out in a civilised manner between socialists, liberals and right-wing radicals all gathered around the same table and agreeing not to let political divergences get in the way of shared interests in their prioritised literary activities. When a socialist board member (Elmer Diktonius) in 1936 addressed his pro-Nazi colleague (Örnulf Tigerstedt), he thus opened the letter with 'Dear fascist and anti-modernist', before lowering the tone and moving on to discuss everyday literary matters (Diktonius, 1995).

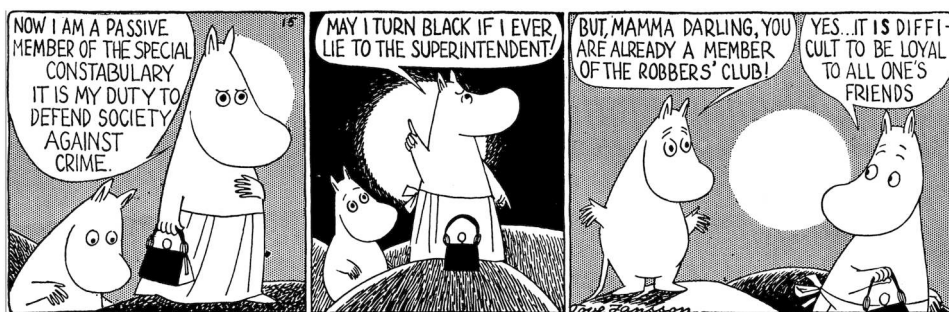


Figure 1. *Moominmamma* contemplating the difficulties of being loyal towards all one's friends. © Moomin Characters™ © dmg media licensing, London.

A well-known illustrator from the period illustrates the point about antifascism in small country consensus cultures. In the 1930s, Tove Jansson, a member of the same Swedish language writers' association – and author-cartoonist behind the Moomin characters and stories – positioned herself as a liberal antitotalitarian. She later captured the difficulties of peripheral oppositional intellectuals in a comic strip, in which the *Moominmamma*-figure, being simultaneously a passive member of the 'police protection corps' and a 'group of bandits', contemplates the difficulties of being 'loyal towards all one's friends'. Jansson was one of several intellectuals in her linguistic group struggling to reconcile a passion for specific causes with loyalty to her friends, until she was forced to choose sides in the 1930s. The Moomin character, then known as 'snork', originated in her illustrations in the liberal-conservative political satire magazine *Garm*, where the 'snorks' served to underline the antifascist (and anti-communist) motives of these illustrations (Figures 1 and 2). They formed the backbone of Jansson's early career as a prolific political cartoonist, and her mocking portraits of Hitler and Stalin, as well as their local champions, stirred debate. The former made her unpopular among pro-German groups and she was on several occasions subjected to censorship (Westin, 2007, pp. 109–112).

In literary circles and in public debates, the Writers' House became a focal point of discussions on the question raised in Jansson's comic strip, i.e. the extent to which one could remain loyal to one's friends without taking sides. The delicate balance was unevenly managed in Finland and the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Therefore, the next section of this article returns to the debates on the Writers' House in and around the Scandinavian writers' associations. They provide a comparative perspective for understanding the rather substantial mark left by the institution on Finnish popular culture in the mid-late-1930s, which is discussed in the article's second part.

Nordic responses to the Writers' House²

Aiming to safeguard and improve the legal and economic standings of writers, literary professionalisation had taken place across Europe since the middle of the nineteenth century, and in the Nordic countries since the 1890s. Writers' associations were established in Sweden and Norway in 1893, in Denmark in 1894, and in Finland in 1897 (Bourdieu, 1996; Nygård & Tandefelt, 2019, p. 11). Founded in 1919, following an invitation to participate at a Nordic Writers' Congress organised in Copenhagen by the Danish Writers'

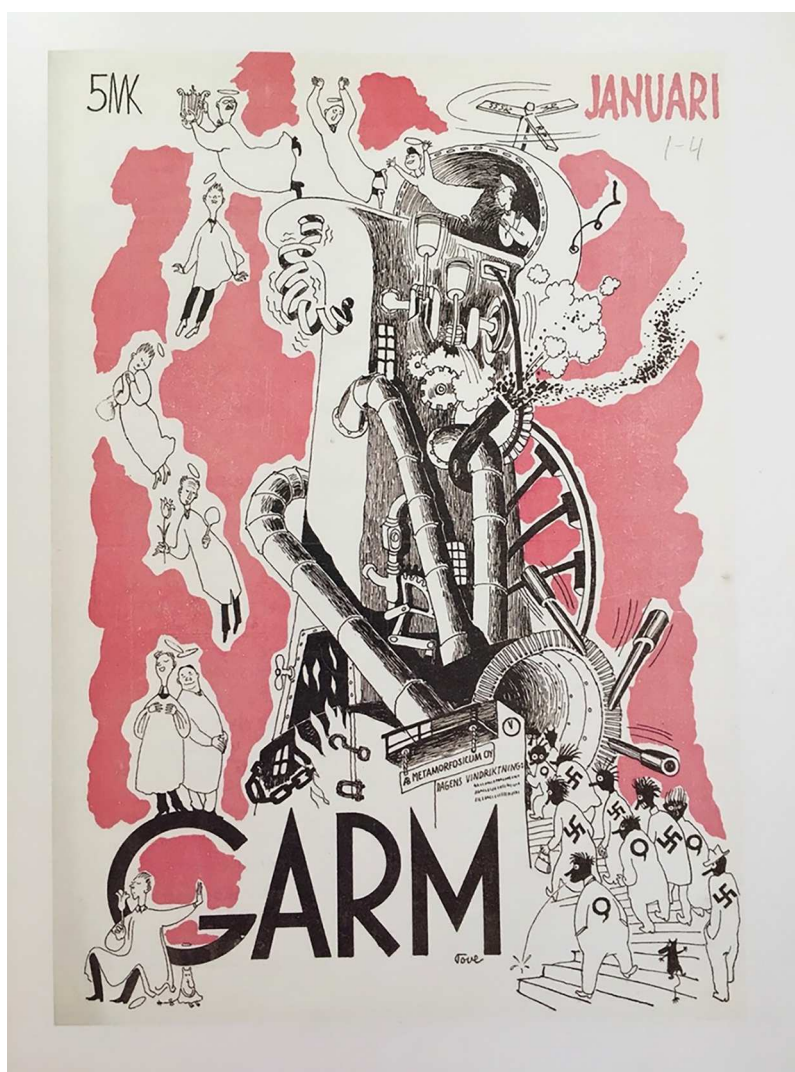


Figure 2. A Tove Jansson illustration from 1945, where a dark-shaded Moomin accompanies a group heading towards a denazification machine operated by the company 'Metamorfosicum'.

Association, the Swedish-language association in bilingual Finland was a latecomer (Tandefelt & Nygård, 2020, pp. 271–272). All four associations were formally independent from the respective states, and leadership was appointed by means of membership democracy. Their membership base was broad, and the intake of new members relied on criteria closely tied to the markers of prestige within the literary field, such as having been published with reputable publishers (for institutional histories, see Gehlin, 1993; Häggman, 2017; Nygård & Tandefelt, 2019; Ringdal, 1993; Worsøe-Schmidt, 1994).

Preparing for the opening of the Writers' House, the cultural functionary heading the Cultural Department of the newly nazified *Nordische Gesellschaft*, Fred J. Domes, invoked his pre-existing ties with these professional cultural associations, asking them to appoint selected members to spend a few weeks every summer in Travemünde (Ørskov, 2023b).

Having opened its doors for Nordic visitors in the summer of 1934, the so-called *Dichterhaus* immediately became a contentious issue in Danish and Norwegian literary circles, as an early manifestation of the uneasy relationship between cultural and political relations with the Third Reich. The Norwegian Writers' Association's Chairman, Johan Bojer, and Leck Fischer, a prominent member of the Danish Writers' Association's board, were both present at the House's inauguration ceremony, giving speeches that subsequently gave cause for controversy.

In Norway, the reception of the speech further unsettled the already tumultuous chairmanship of Bojer, a conservative and internationally renowned writer who privately supported the fascist *Nasjonal Samling* [National Unity]-party. The speech was the main topic at a heated assembly meeting within the Writers' Association at the end of 1934. It was also discussed vividly in the press, with Bojer insisting that the speech had celebrated the historical and contemporary existence and importance of a German-Scandinavian cultural community rather than political affinities (Ringdal, 1993, p. 152). Bojer's role was thus at the centre of the debate, which contributed significantly to his decision to give up the Association's chairmanship before the end of his term (Brochmann, 1952, p. 384). Questions were raised over the Writers' Association's role for example in the Norwegian Communist Party's newspaper, where one contributor pondered whether the Association had shown its true colours as 'a fascistically inclined organisation' (Luihn, 1934). Vocal critics within the Association's membership likewise condemned the Association's involvement with the Writers' House, portraying it as an instrument for National Socialist propaganda (Brochmann, 1952, pp. 407–412; cf. Fulsås, 2022, pp. 97–98).

Danish discussions, on the other hand, hardly concerned the board member Fischer's actions but instead related to the Association's mandate. A newspaper debate followed from Fischer's talk in early June 1934, while the discussion re-erupted with a vengeance at the Writers' Association's general assembly the following March. It first took off as an editor-in-chief of a major Danish newspaper objected to the association's presence at the inauguration and questioned the appropriateness of creating:

friendship bonds in the realm of the free arts [...] with a Nazi society whose own relationship to culture and art appear most visibly in the Jew-hatred and persecution of Jews that its leaders emit, [...].

An intense discussion followed, featuring both assenting and dissenting voices from among the Writers' Association and its leadership (for a more elaborate discussion, see Ørskov, 2023a, p. 137 ff.). With reference to Gisèle Sapiro's framework of literary sociology, the Association's staunchest critics emerged from the parts of the literary field that were neither institutionally nor aesthetically dominant – the members of the institutionally and politically marginalised (here especially left-wing) avant-garde (Sapiro, 2014, p. 4 ff.). At stake in the debates in Denmark and in the Nordic writers' associations was whether cultural relations with Germany could be seen as the continuation of a pre-existing non-political status quo, seamlessly fitting within their mandate to safeguard the economic and legal standing of their members, or whether the mere existence of cultural relations served to bestow legitimacy upon the Writers' Home.

The Danish Association's leadership and those defending its actions put forth variations of the former argument. The board insisted on multiple occasions that it had 'not taken and cannot take a political position towards the present German regime,

[and] that no political conditions of any kind are attached to the 3-month stay in the Writers' Home' (Dansk Forfatterforening, 1934). The writer Erik Bertelsen, set to be the House's first Danish visitor, highlighted that the idea of creating a German-Nordic Writers' House had first been aired by delegates from the Danish Association at a Writers' Congress in 1931, and that 'for that reason alone it would be a strange gesture to turn down the holiday stay offered' (Bertelsen, 1934).

The initial newspaper debate only lasted for a couple of weeks, yet the matter was far from resolved. In his annual report at the Association's March 1935 general assembly, the chairman Jens Hartvig Jacobsen insisted: 'Our association is politically neutral, it has no political tasks whatsoever and for that reason it also does not have any cause for distancing itself politically'. Yet, this did not have the calming effect that Jacobsen had presumably hoped. The board's handling of the Writers' House sparked fierce debate, and a vocal left-leaning oppositional group put forth an eventually unsuccessful no-confidence motion.

The public debate in the summer of 1934, Jacobsen told the assembly at the March meeting, had led him to correspond with the leaders of the Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish writers' associations over a common approach to the Writers' House. It was agreed that the associations would receive the invitations and advertise them to their members in the Nordic authors' review *Nordisk Forfatter-Tidende*. (Hartvig Jacobsen, 1935). Moreover, the debate itself was full of references to Scandinavian neighbours and the Nordic region. Some members found national comparisons relevant. Board members and most of the discussants supporting them referenced the approach to German writers chosen by not only the other Nordic writers' associations, but also their French and English equivalents. The opposition, on the other hand, deemed the approach of other Nordic associations irrelevant. One member saw representation in Travemünde as a matter of taking political sides, helping 'Germany [...] repair its ruptured connections towards the North', while arguing that it was hardly a meaningful excuse 'that Norway and Sweden have acted in the same way as we have', especially since such acts had in the meanwhile cost Johan Bojer his position as Chairman in the Norwegian Association. Others were equally sceptical about the usefulness of mobilising common Nordic experiences.

In Norway, the end of Bojer's chairmanship more or less quelled the tensions surrounding the Writers' House. Following his resignation, the new Chairman, Peter Egge, welcomed his Danish colleague Hartvig Jacobsen's suggestion on how to manage relations with the Writers' House. Addressing the board members, he suggested that 'we do as the Danish and Swedish Writers' Association', both of whom had decided to send a representative the following summer as well if invited to do so (Hartvig Jacobsen, 1935).

The debates, especially the Danish one, were noted in Sweden as the Association's leadership contemplated its relationship to the *Schriftstellerhaus*. Whether or not to accept the German invitation had already been debated by the Swedish Writers' Association's board before Johannes Edfelt became its first Travemünde-representative in 1934. The socialist writer and board member Fredrik Ström had been concerned whether the new institution was designed to bring 'about an attitude [in the visiting writers] against those of Germany's writers who for political reasons were excluded from the current German writers' organisation'. In that scenario, he argued, the Writers' Association should not get involved in the exchange (Cited in Gehlin, 1993, pp. 192–193). The

Association's Chairwoman Marika Stiernstedt, on her part, warned that representation in Travemünde could not be interpreted as a political statement on the Association's behalf, an understanding that she based on the presence of other Nordic writers' associations' representatives at the inauguration of the House.

Ström eventually gave in. Yet, the board nonetheless agreed that Edfelt, the Association's representative in 1934, would be required to file a report following his stay, so that the Association might reevaluate its approach the following year if the Writers' House turned out to be a political institution after all (Gehlin, 1993, pp. 192–193). Edfelt's report convinced the board that this was not the case. He had not been swayed by National Socialism but considered the cultural exchanges at the House as distinguished from the regime's politics: 'My scepticism of the current German political system may have increased rather than diminished during my stay down there', he reported, 'but I must say that the situation is probably the opposite of my doubts about this particular enterprise for German-Nordic relations. It has been handled tactfully' (cited in Gehlin, 1993, p. 193).

Although Edfelt's evaluation made it possible for the Association to select a visitor in 1935, there was seemingly little interest for the invitations among its members. In a report written in July of that year, the German Foreign Ministry's representative in Stockholm reported that the Writers' House and other German cultural diplomatic initiatives were met with suspicion. The public, he argued,

believes that behind the cultivation of the Nordic Thought and the proclamation of Nordic rebirth one must suspect German propaganda that pursues purposes beyond the cultivation of cultural relations. (von Wied, 1935)

If the diplomat was to be believed, the Writers' House had not been successful in convincing the wider Swedish public and press that it stood apart from National Socialist politics. Apparently, many Swedish writers were unconvinced as well. Five different candidates turned down the Swedish Writers' Association's invitation, before the author Vilhelm Moberg finally set out for Travemünde (Gehlin, 1993, p. 193; Stiernstedt, 1943, p. 99; Thulstrup, 1962, pp. 148–149).

The Writers' House in Finnish popular culture

Still, there was limited public discussion on the matter in Sweden, and this, too, was initially the case in Finland, and its two (Finnish – and Swedish-language) national writers' associations. The National Socialist cultural diplomatic focus on writers' associations should be seen against the backdrop of the fact that Finnish cultural and academic elites in the mid-1930s were more receptive to the National Socialist worldview than the country's political elites, which in 1937 followed the Scandinavian example of forming left-right governing coalitions (Häggman, 2017, p. 240; Hiedanniemi, 1980, pp. 88–89). The more-than-cultural nature of the Writers' House did, however, not escape some Finnish writers. Lauri Viljanen, the Finnish representative in 1934, expressed his astonishment over the extent to which the place was an official institution backed by prominent National Socialist politicians (Häggman, 2017, p. 235). In 1936, the Finland-Swedish lodger that year, Göran Stenius, recounted how his 'liberal friends' mocked him for accepting the invitation to a 'National Socialist plant nursery' in Travemünde (Stenius, 1937, p. 161). 'The

coldness you meet even from your friends just because you come from Germany', he noted upon his return, 'is something quite terrible' (Stenius, 1936, entry for October 1). This reputation among the Finnish intelligentsia was probably fuelled by the uninhibited praise for national socialist culture and society in the first Finland-Swedish visitor Tito Colliander's collection of travel essays *Glimtar från Tyskland* (Colliander, 1934), but also by insights into the debates in Denmark and Norway the previous year. In Sweden, at least, the Danish debate was well-known, as Vilhelm Moberg noted in his report to the association leadership following his stay in 1935 (Stiernstedt, 1943, pp. 98–100).

Three writers – Colliander, Stenius and Olavi Paavolainen, all Finnish, although Colliander and Stenius were Swedish-speakers – published book-length accounts based on their stays in Travemünde. These accounts were preceded by similar books written about fascist Italy in Finland, e.g. by the writer E. R. Gummerus in 1930 (Gummerus, 1930). Of the Travemünde books, Colliander's, 1934 essay collection gave the most enthusiastic account of the new political regime. Colliander, whom other Nordic guests admitted had gained 'very strong Nazi sympathies' during the stay (e.g. Sveen, 1935), reported on life at the Travemünde beach promenade (and perceived the presence of 'many Jewish families' as evidence that Nordic accounts of German antisemitism were disproportionate). He presented the 'S.A. in a new light', enthused about the German labour service, and gave a passionate account from President Hindenburg's funeral at Tannenberg, for which the Propaganda Ministry had organised a trip for the Writers' House lodgers (Colliander, 1934; Domes, 1934a). In the following year, Colliander elucidated that the purpose of the *Nordische Gesellschaft* was to make a widening circle of Germans aware of the 'Nordic' origins of German character as well as to 'counter the worship of foreigners, and the minority complex accompanying it, which for decades, even centuries, had left its mark on German civilisation, and in recent times with such fatal effects' (Colliander, 1935). Stenius was more ambiguous in his 1936 book *Femte Akten*, an occasionally critical travelogue through the 'young' Third Reich's literary landscape. As for the Writers' House as an institution, however, he explicitly denied that it was intent on political propaganda. It was, he claimed, not its purpose 'to recruit agents for the N.S.D.A.P., but friends of German culture' (Stenius, 1937, pp. 136–137). Colliander and Stenius, as well as Gummerus, belonged to a Swedish-speaking intellectual group known as the 'black guard' (Stjernschantz, 1991, pp. 140–141). Most members of the group were not unconditional supporters of Italian or German fascism, but given Finland's position as a small country neighbor to the Soviet Union they believed that fascism was the lesser evil in a future settlement between communism and fascism (Waltå, 1993).

Like Stenius, the Finnish association's representative in Travemünde in 1936, Olavi Paavolainen, published a book-length account of his impressions from the Writers' House and from the Third Reich upon his return to Finland. A both controversial and remarkable writer, Paavolainen, in his own words, investigated 'the cocktail of the present' in his writings (Kaunonen, 2019; Pulkkinen, 2016; See also Riikonen, 2014, 2016). Having 'never been interested in anything other than the living present', he approached National Socialism as 'the most living reality in this now' (Paavolainen, 1937, p. 6). *Visiting the Third Reich [Kolmannen valtakunnan vieraana]* (Paavolainen, 1936) became an immediate bestseller and belongs to the foremost cultural products of the time in terms of its foreign policy relevance. As an ideologically ambivalent intellectual, Paavolainen was considered unreliable both on the left and the right. When he was chosen to represent the Finnish

Writers' Association in Travemünde in 1936, his colleague Maila Talvio, a strong supporter of national socialist culture, expressed concerns over the wisdom of this appointment. From a German point of view, similar efforts were clearly more successful in the case of Talvio herself and the poet V. A. Koskenniemi, who after lecture tours in Germany organised by the Nordic Society wrote flattering accounts of their experiences and impressions of National Socialist policies (Häggman, 2017, p. 236; Hiedanniemi, 1980, pp. 91–92).

In the case of Paavolainen, Talvio's doubts proved well-grounded. With his visit in 'Travemünde's most stately villa' and the excursions and program items offered to its guests as its backbone, Paavolainen's book interpreted the Third Reich from up close (Paavolainen, 1936, the Swedish translation has been consulted for this study 1937, p. quote: 13). The book revolved around the ideology (including on questions relating to race theories and religion), art, and aesthetics of the Third Reich but 'in principle [...] contained] no positive statements about National Socialism as a worldview or political program', according to the historian Tomi Mertanen (Mertanen, 2011, p. 406). While often ironic and ambiguous, Paavolainen clearly criticised numerous aspects of the Third Reich and its ideology – particularly in questions related to the role of women, the Nordic race doctrine, and the limited value of officially sanctioned art and literature. Moreover, it avidly discussed National Socialism's religious dimension, essentially characterising the National Socialist spectacle as heathenism projected by light cannons. Indeed, Paavolainen argued that National Socialism's pagan instincts made it religious in its own way, and as such, practically at war with Christianity (see also Salminen, 1984, p. 111).³

The book appeared at a time when official foreign policy in Finland was gravitating Westward and the social democrats were included in the government in early 1937. This shift aligned Finland with the Scandinavian countries and their left-right coalitions formed in 1933 and 1935. After a failed coup d'état in 1932, the radical right party (IKL) never gained more than 7 percent in Finnish parliamentary elections (Meinander, 2013), and the efforts by the German National Socialists to turn this development around by means of a cultural diplomacy targeting the cultural and academic elites seemed to be failing. Paavolainen's report played a role in this failure, even if its author himself claimed to be merely recounting his experiences and encouraged the readers to make up their own opinions of the National Socialist worldview.

In this regard, Paavolainen personified Finland's unresolved position vis-à-vis National Socialism. In public debates, those who were concerned over the fragility of Finland's Western orientation frequently invoked the Scandinavian connection. When censorship in the literary field reached what, from a liberal standpoint, were unacceptable levels, domestic intellectuals quickly pointed out how bad this made Finland look in the eyes of Scandinavian observers. Indeed, the latter were beginning to question the sincerity of Finland's recent 'Nordic orientation'. The issue emerged already during the Nordic Writers' Congress in Helsinki in the previous year (Häggman, 2017, p. 227; Nygård & Tandefelt, 2019, pp. 99–103). The contrast between the Finnish and especially, as discussed above, Danish uses of the Nordic framework – not in support of liberal Scandinavianism but in order to justify a continued commitment to the status quo in relations with Germany – is striking. The vice chairman of the Norwegian Authors' Association (1938–45), Georg Brochmann, later recalled that the organisers of the Nordic writers' congress in Helsinki 1935 invited the House's leading organiser, the above-mentioned Fred J. Domes, as a participant. With this, he argued, the Finns demonstrated a different

understanding of what was 'Nordic' than what the rest of Scandinavia 'had been used to' (Brochmann, 1952, p. 437). Johannes Edfelt too, in the letter to Göran Stenius cited in the introduction to this article, found the Finnish visitors much more receptive than the Scandinavians to the hospitality offered by their hosts in Travemünde, as witnessed by the extensive literary accounts by Tito Colliander, Paavolainen and Stenius himself:

The Swedish contributions were meager in comparison: one (hasty) article by Stolpe [...] as well as a short newspaper essay by yours truly, signed 'evenings in Travemünde'. It is undeniably embarrassing.

Popular culture and the limits of national socialist cultural diplomacy

As Paavolainen's book became controversial within German foreign policy circles, Domes defended the institution's cultural diplomatic merits. He noted that 'five of the six writers from Finland who were in our House have dealt extensively with German cultural life', which he regarded as 'an unconditional success for the House'. In addition to Paavolainen's work, the successes included Tito Colliander's essay 'which is positive beyond measure', and 'a fine book by Göran Stenius on the latest German literature' as well as the 1934-lodger Lauri Viljanen's translation of Heinrich von Kleist's play 'The Prince of Homburg' and Toivo Lyy's translation of the *Nibelungenlied* as well as the medieval epic Gudrun (Domes, 1937). He could have added the translation of poems written by some of the *Schriftstellerhaus's* German lodgers by Viljanen and Colliander, whose own poems in turn were translated and published in the Nordic Society's magazine, *Die Norden* (Barthel, 1934, 1940; Brockmeier, 1934; Menzel, 1934). Indeed, whatever reputation the House might have obtained in the previous years, several prominent Finnish newspapers referred approvingly to it when interviewing Domes during a tour of Finland in 1938, which was to serve as the basis for a book about Finland (Vingt-et-un., 1938; Suomalainen kirjallisuus huomion kohteena Saksassa, 1938). Moreover, in one of those interviews Domes more than hinted that Unto Seppänen, that year's Finnish lodger, had his stay at the Writers' House to thank for the very successful German publication of his most recent book on the Müller Lange publishing house (Seppänen, 1938a; Vingt-et-un., 1938). Seppänen, in turn, wrote favorable travel impressions from Germany in the local newspaper where he was the editor-in-chief, including one in which he relayed the assurances of a German friend and Travemünde co-lodger that the German people did not want war (Seppänen, 1938b).

These examples highlight the importance of material aspects of cultural diplomacy, not least pertaining to the translation and popular outreach of texts and cultural products. As we have seen above, access to the German book market was an important motivation behind the desire among many Nordic writers and their professional associations to retain relations with Germany after 1933. National Socialist institutions, on their part, were more than happy to play the role of gatekeepers, facilitators, and to some extent even co-producers of the (often categorically 'regional' or 'national') literature that would make it into the Third Reich (Sturge, 2010, 2004; von der Ahé, 1982).

Engagement with the Third Reich's literature and other products of National Socialist approved German culture as well as the facilitation of material exchange and translation of cultural products between Germany and the Nordic countries, then, were among Domes' criteria for judging the Writers' House's success as a cultural diplomatic initiative.

Even if not always unconditionally positive, Nordic writers' engagement with the cultural products of the Third Reich could be interpreted as an implicit legitimisation of the new German state. By evaluating the Third Reich's cultural production on a par with that of any other state's, such intellectual engagements contributed to normalising the new regime (Björkman et al., 2019).

Domes was acutely concerned with the publicity of the guests' accounts and their place in public debates. His cultural diplomacy rested on the assumption that public outreach was more important than conformity to National Socialist viewpoints, as long as these accounts were not predominantly negative. Yet, as it turned out, the fact that Paavolainen's outreach exceeded his conformity became a source of great concern for Domes. More than any other account emerging from the Writers' House, Paavolainen's book served to strengthen the public association between the cultural diplomatic institution and the state, whose foreign political aims it aligned with. This gave Finnish lodgers cause for pause and the German organisers a harder time finding Finnish guests from 1937 and onwards (cf. Holmlund, 1992; Mertanen, 2011, p. 414; Paavolainen, 1937). The way the Writers' House entered popular culture in Finland through Paavolainen's book hampered the institution's efficiency as a tool for cultural diplomacy.

Visiting the Third Reich caught the ire of official German diplomacy as well. In early May 1937, Domes was informed of the German diplomatic delegation in Finland's assessment that.

the tone of Mr. Paavolainen's publication was so unfriendly and contained so many scathing comments (as a guest of the *Reichsparteitag* [the Nuremberg Rally] he calls the National Socialist Women's League a 'cackling chicken coop') that one would have to speak of an overall rather unfavorable impression.

Making things worse, according to the German envoy Wipert von Blücher the Finnish press highlighted the book's 'most detrimental passages', writing 'rather maliciously' about it, except for the pro-German newspapers, who tried to forgo it in silence. The Head of the Foreign Ministry's Scandinavian Department, Privy Councilor Grundherr had told Domes' co-organiser, the writer Hans Friedrich Blunck that while 'the Foreign Ministry welcomed criticism from foreign guests', Paavolainen had 'apparently not found the tact' (Blunck, 1937).

Von Blücher especially regarded Paavolainen's insistence that National Socialism and Christianity were 'at war' highly detrimental, which complicated the embassy's efforts to reach out to the Finnish conservative right. In his annual report for 1936, he described the book as a significant drawback for the Third Reich's image in Finland (Mertanen, 2011, p. 407). Accordingly, Domes was informed that 'it will take extensive work in the cultural field to repair the damage that the book has done to us here' (Deutsche Gesandtschaft, Helsinki, 1937).

The book drew more mixed reviews than von Blücher claimed. One reviewer, referencing the unflattering review in the Social Democratic press, perspicaciously observed that 'Paavolainen's book is [...] not good when seen from a notorious anti-German point-of-view [*tyskätarsynvinkel*]'. Yet, he continued, 'it is not [good] from the sympathisers' [point-of-view] either' (G., 1936). Mertanen argues that many 'average Finns' concluded that Paavolainen was sympathetically inclined towards National Socialism, while the

book met with approval from most literary critics, who focused on its critical elements (cf. Holmlund, 1992; Mertanen, 2011, pp. 406–407). Lauri Viljanen, the Finnish-language lodger from 1934, for one, wrote a positive review in the leading *Helsingin Sanomat*-news-paper where he was a literary critic for more than two decades (V., 1936). But ‘the skilful mixture of approval [of the Third Reich] and malicious criticism’ was precisely what made Paavolainen’s book ‘the most dangerous thing that has been written in Finland about the Third Reich’ in von Blücher’s analysis (Blücher, 1953). The tolerance for ambivalence was clearly lower among the official political diplomats than among the cultural diplomats.

Conclusion

Paavolainen’s book appeared at a time when the perception of politics and culture as separate fields of social activity was changing. In the public debates, the distinction was gradually receding. For a variety of reasons discussed in this article – geopolitics and small country dynamics – and as witnessed by the Finnish accounts from Travemünde, the desire to preserve a politically ‘neutral’ literary collaboration with Germany was somewhat more enduring and left more traces in popular culture in Finland in comparison with its Scandinavian neighbours. The Finnish case, as we have argued, thus serves as the clearest illustration of the difficulties involved in all Nordic countries with respect to the invitations from Travemünde to their writers’ associations. For peripheral intellectuals in cultural contexts where German culture and the German book market had long been essential to the individual writer’s literary prestige and economic standing alike, the explicit and dramatic politicisation of the German cultural sphere after 1933 proved a delicate and contentious issue for the Nordic writers and especially the organisations tasked with safeguarding their economic and legal rights.

In addition to exploring how writers navigated in the nebulous space between politics and culture, we have drawn attention to individual actors such as Fred J. Domes, who, in sociological terms, can be described as a broker between the cultural and political field, engaged in boundary work, moving between, and redefining the relationship between social spaces (Liu, 2021). Brokerage is a prominent feature of all cultural diplomacy, but as we have suggested, it becomes particularly visible in moments of heightened tensions and conflicts. In such situations, the challenges related to boundary work between culture and politics are also pronounced, as the incompatibilities of the rules, norms and social dynamics of the different fields are magnified. This is perhaps especially evident in ‘trans-ideological’ cases such as the Writers’ House, whose legitimacy and *raison d’être* was interpreted very differently by, respectively, cultural producers in democratic societies, whether accommodating or not, and political officials operating in an authoritarian system. The discussed limits to National Socialist cultural diplomacy highlight some of the headaches involved for states set on utilising popular culture for political purposes. Since cultural diplomacy ultimately hinges on a degree of mutuality and the participation of cultural producers and other non-state actors, as well as on their perceived autonomy from politics, it inevitably comes with a certain lack of control. For authoritarian regimes, this makes the juxtaposition of popular culture and the conduct of foreign politics an uncomfortable one.

Notes

1. For J. M. Mitchell, a former cultural diplomatic practitioner, the close links to state actors and foreign political priorities was exactly what set cultural diplomacy – ‘essentially the business of government’ – apart from ‘cultural relations’ – a ‘neutrally descriptive term’. (Mitchell, 1986, p. 3.) A similar view is quite common in International Relations, where scholars have followed the lead of former practitioners who were among the first to conceptualize cultural relations as ‘the fourth dimension of foreign policy’ (Coombs, 1964). For a recent historiographical overview, see (Chaubet, 2022; cf. Faucher, 2016, p. 375)
2. This section is to a large degree based on Chapter 3 of (Ørskov, 2023a)
3. Paavolainen developed this thesis further in a book from 1938, *The Cross and the Swastika* (Paavolainen, 1938, For the Swedish translation, see 1939).

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