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Christoffer Kølvråa

To cite this article: Christoffer Kølvråa (2019): Embodying 'the Nordic race': imaginaries of Viking heritage in the online communications of the Nordic Resistance Movement, Patterns of Prejudice, DOI: [10.1080/0031322X.2019.1592304](https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1592304)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1592304>



Published online: 17 May 2019.



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Embodying ‘the Nordic race’: imaginaries of Viking heritage in the online communications of the Nordic Resistance Movement

CHRISTOFFER KØLVRAA 

ABSTRACT Kølvråa’s article focuses on the cultural imaginary of the Scandinavian extreme right by analysing the online presence of the so-called Nordic Resistance Movement. He seeks to show how the cultural imaginaries of this National Socialist organization make use of the Scandinavian Viking heritage in three distinct ways. First, to produce a distinctly Nordic form of National Socialism and thus potentially make this ideology palatable to Nordic publics. Second, to differentiate their racially oriented political project from a wider far-right or populist right concern with the defence of European Christian heritage and/or civilization against Islam. And, third, to thematize and perform a certain hyper-masculine identity, especially in the context of martial and sporting competitions arranged by the organization.

KEYWORDS National Socialism, Nordic Resistance Movement, race, racism, Scandinavia, Sweden, Viking heritage

Vikings are no novelty in National Socialist imaginaries. They were already extensively present in Third Reich propaganda, especially propaganda targeting Scandinavian societies.¹ And, today, contemporary National Socialist groups in Scandinavia still make considerable use of Viking imagery, Old Norse mythology, runic symbols and even the re-enactment of supposedly Viking practices and games. Indeed, the cultural imaginary organized around the figure of the Nordic Viking is a core part of the contemporary effort to introduce National Socialist ideas into Scandinavian societies, which are often hostile to them on both democratic and national grounds. After all, while Viking heritage is certainly cherished in most Scandinavian nations, so are the collective memories of resistance to Nazism and its German proponents in the Second World War. It is, therefore, relevant to investigate how the extreme right attempts to use the figure of the Viking to construct a distinctly Nordic National Socialist imaginary.

This article analyses the different ways in which the image of the Viking serves as the lynchpin in a distinctly Nordic reiteration of National Socialist ideology, as articulated by and through one of the most central and active

1 See, for example, John T. Lauridsen, ‘Nazister i Danmark 1930–45: En Forskningsoversigt’, *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1995, 99–142.

organizations on the Scandinavian extreme right: the so-called Nordiska Motståndsrörelsens (Nordic Resistance Movement). Even though it is dominated by Swedish National Socialists and communicates mainly through its Swedish site *Nordfront.se*, the Nordic Resistance Movement is nonetheless working towards becoming a pan-Nordic organization and already has branches in Norway, Iceland and Finland.

In what follows, I will first introduce the Nordic Resistance Movement and its Swedish/Scandinavian context. I will then outline the approach to studying cultural imaginaries employed here, and finally argue that the Viking becomes an 'empty signifier',² serving three distinct purposes in the construction of a cultural imaginary suitable for a Nordic National Socialism. First, it serves to signify the National Socialist idea of a 'Nordic race' and, in that sense, implicitly links this ideology to a specifically Nordic historico-cultural space. Second, it serves to differentiate the pan-Nordic racial project of the Nordic Resistance Movement from a wider European far-right populist agenda of defending European Christian civilization. Third, it serves to symbolize a classic National Socialist body ideal of hyper-masculinity and homo-social community in a distinctly Nordic code.

The Nordic Resistance Movement

It has often been pointed out that Sweden is a special case in Scandinavia in terms of the country's historical experience of the Second World War and its subsequent attitude to National Socialist ideas and symbols. This has to do with the fact that, while both Denmark and Norway endured German occupation, Sweden managed to avoid occupation by remaining neutral. This also meant that Sweden did not experience the same post-war legal trials of Nationalist Socialist sympathizers as Denmark and Norway.³ Indeed, in Denmark and Norway a strong collective memory of national resistance was established that meant that anyone designated as a 'Nazi' was effectively excluded from the national community.⁴ However, in Sweden, scholars such as Katrine Fangen have claimed that the absence of the experience and the memory of national resistance against Nazi Germany has meant that the extreme right is more prone to identify itself overtly as National Socialists and to use the symbols and iconography of the Third Reich.⁵ Indeed, it is

2 See Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso 1996), 36–46.

3 Katrine Fangen, 'Living out our ethnic instincts: ideological beliefs among right-wing activists in Norway', in Jeffrey Kaplan and Tore Bjørgo (eds), *Nation and Race: The Developing Euro-American Racist Subculture* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1998), 202–30 (223).

4 See Claus Bryld and Annette Warring, *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring: Historie- og traditionsforvaltning af krig og besættelse 1945–1997* (Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag 1998).

5 Fangen, 'Living out our ethnic instincts', 223.

certainly true that Sweden has both an interwar and a post-war presence of overtly National Socialist parties. In fact, the most successful far-right populist party in Sweden at present, Sverigedemokraterna (SD, Sweden Democrats), has undeniable roots in neo-fascist milieux,⁶ unlike its equivalent in Denmark, Dansk Folkeparti (DF, Danish People's Party).⁷ However, Sweden is also one of the most stable (social) democracies in Europe and, in recent decades, successive governments have done much to disseminate the memory of the Holocaust and other crimes of the Third Reich.⁸ In fact, since the 1990s, Sweden has been at the core of efforts to establish common European commemorations and initiatives in order to preserve knowledge of the Holocaust.⁹ So, while it is true that Sweden does have a long legacy of extreme-right movements and violence, and while the country is to a large extent the 'hub' of such activities in Scandinavia,¹⁰ this should not be taken to mean that National Socialist ideas or symbols are simply uncontroversial in Swedish society. In Sweden, too, National Socialists must attempt to package or frame their ideology in ways that might shield it from immediate public condemnation. Indeed, the mobilization of a Viking imaginary can partly be read as such an attempt to make National Socialism more palatable in a Swedish and wider Nordic context.

The organizational genealogy of the Nordic Resistance Movement connects back to Swedish interwar National Socialism. It is a pan-Nordic initiative of the Svenska Motståndsrörelsen (Swedish Resistance Movement), an organization that was established in 1997 by Klas Lund as the continuation of the highly activist, violent and often criminal movement Vitt Ariskt Motstånd (White Aryan Resistance). This movement had split off in 1991 from the so-called Nordiska rikspartiet (Nordic Reich Party), which had been the major and most influential actor on the Swedish extreme right since it was founded in 1956 and which had strong roots back to the Swedish Nationalsocialistiska arbetarepartiet (National Socialist Workers' Party) of the 1930s. In

6 Anders Hellström and Tom Nilsson, "'We are the good guys': ideological positioning of the nationalist party Sverigedemokraterna in contemporary Swedish politics', *Ethnicities*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2010, 55–76.

7 Susi Meret, 'From the margins to the mainstream? The development of the radical right in Denmark', in Nora Langenbacher and Birtta Schellenberg (eds), *Is Europe on the 'Right' Path? Right-Wing Extremism and Right-Wing Populism in Europe* (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2011), 243–67.

8 Aleida Assmann, 'The Holocaust—a global memory? Extensions and limits of a new memory community', in Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (eds), *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010), 97–117.

9 Aleida Assmann, 'Europe's divided memory', in Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind and Julie Fedor (eds), *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013), 25–41.

10 Benjamin Teitelbaum, "'The path of dreams": Breivik, music, and neo-Nazi skinheadism', in Jan Sverre Knudsen, Marie Strand Skånland and Gro Trondalen (eds), *Musikk etter 22 Juli* (Oslo: Norges Musikhøgskole 2014), 119–38 (123).

the 1980s the Nordic Reich Party indeed became the link between interwar National Socialism and a new generation of activists influenced by British and American White Power milieux.¹¹

With such a pedigree, it is perhaps not much of a surprise that the Nordic Resistance Movement makes no secret of its Nationalist Socialist ideology and self-conception. It is in essence the latest branch of an activist Swedish National Socialism that is not a new phenomenon in itself. However, the Nordic Resistance Movement is so far the most ambitious attempt to couple a pan-Nordic racial ideology with the attempt to construct an actually pan-Nordic organizational structure.¹² While the Swedish branch—and its website *Nordfront.se*—is clearly dominant, it also links to organizational branches and sister sites in most of the other Nordic countries, the Norwegian site being the most developed of these. In fact, the Danish organizational branch (and site) was shut down in 2016 due to inactivity, something that illustrates that the public aversion to National Socialist ideas and symbolism in Denmark has caused the Danish extreme right to style themselves exclusively as ‘nationalists—not Nazis’.¹³ Indeed, Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Bevægelse (National Socialist Movement of Denmark), which at one point boasted both a local radio station (Radio Oasen) and a party newspaper *Fædrelandet* (The Fatherland),¹⁴ has collapsed in recent years, and its members are either attempting to make the transition into parliamentary politics by denying or disavowing their past, or reorganizing in movements that are certainly radically anti-immigration, anti-Muslim and clearly racist, but that do not identify themselves as National Socialist or accept this description without protest.

In Sweden, by contrast, recent years have seen the National Socialist right mount public demonstrations and other ‘offline’ activities with increasing strength. Whereas earlier it was often noted that the extreme right secured media attention and impact by way of violence, despite its often small numbers,¹⁵ and that such organizations usually preferred the relative

11 Markus Lundström and Tomas Lundström, ‘Hundra år av radikal nationalism’, *Arkiv: Tidskrift för Samhällsanalys*, a special issue on ‘Det vita fältet III: Samtida forskning om högerextremism’, no. 5, 2016, 39–66; Katrina Hirvonen, ‘Sweden: when hate becomes the norm’, *Race & Class*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2013, 78–86.

12 This is made clear in the organization’s manifesto, *Nordiska Motståndsrörelsens, Vår väg: Ny politik för en ny tid* (Grängesberg: Nordfront Förlag 2015). An English version, *Nordic Resistance Movement, Our Path: New Politics for a New Time* (Grängesberg: Nordfront Förlag 2016) is available at www.nordfront.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Our-Path.pdf (viewed 13 April 2019).

13 For example, one of the most extreme right of activist organizations in Denmark, Danmarks Nationale Front (Denmark’s National Front), completely avoids National Socialist symbolism. For its website, see www.danmarksnationalefront.dk (viewed 13 April 2019).

14 Michael Kimmel, ‘Racism as adolescent male rite of passage’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2007, 202–18 (206).

15 *Ibid.*

anonymity of online propaganda,¹⁶ there is now little doubt that the membership of the Nordic Resistance Movement is increasing, together with the number of activists willing to show their allegiance to it in public. Indeed, 2016 saw a noticeable rise in activities,¹⁷ and some reports claim that a third of those active in 2015 were new recruits.¹⁸ At one march in Stockholm in November 2016, some reports counted 600 Nordic Resistance Movement participants.¹⁹

As such, the Swedish/Nordic Resistance Movement and its online media outlet *Nordfront.se* are arguably today the central National Socialist voice on the Swedish extreme right and possibly the dominant platform for such ideas in Scandinavia as a whole.²⁰ It is, therefore, the online communication through *Nordfront.se* that forms the basis of the following analysis.

Cultural imaginaries and empty signifiers

The notion of the imaginary in a collective political context drawn on here is that developed by Ernesto Laclau.²¹ Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur and Cornelius Castoriadis had already drawn attention to this imaginary dimension and its connection to ideological affiliations,²² but it is Laclau who has most consistently sought to develop an understanding of political ideologies aimed at unfolding the interplay in political discourses between 'form and force', meaning and affect. Laclau claims that ideological projects construct imaginaries of societal harmony yet to be attained. It is such Utopian imaginaries that serve to bind the followers to an ideology at an emotional level.²³ Lacanian scholars such as Slavoj Žižek have coined the term 'ideological

16 Tina Askanius and Yiannis Mylonas, 'Extreme-right responses to the European economic crisis in Denmark and Sweden: the discursive construction of scapegoats and lodestars', *Javnost—The Public*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2015, 55–72 (58).

17 Linnea Eastman, 'Neo-Nazi groups are more active in Sweden than ever before—and they're quickly adopting new methods', *Business Insider*, 12 May 2017.

18 Tom Michael, 'Nazis on the march', *The Sun*, 12 December 2016.

19 Lucy Pasha-Robinson, 'Swedish neo-Nazis stage biggest ever march in wake of Donald Trump', *Independent on Sunday*, 13 November 2016.

20 Lundström and Lundström, 'Hundra år av radikal nationalism', 50–1; Hirvonen, 'Sweden: when hate becomes the norm'.

21 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso 2005) and Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London and New York: Verso 1990). For a broader discussion of the idea of cultural imaginaries, see the introduction to this special issue; see also Bernhard Forchtner and Christoffer Kølvråa, 'Extreme right images of radical authenticity: multimodal aesthetics of history, nature, and gender in social media', *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2017, 252–81.

22 Cornelius Castoriadis, *L'Institution imaginaire de la société* (Paris: Seuil 1975); Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures of Utopia and Ideology* (New York and Guildford, Surrey: Columbia University Press 1996).

23 Laclau, *On Populist Reason*.

fantasies',²⁴ thus further stressing that these are not technical or precise plans for the development of society, but rather a tableau of images and narratives concerning an imaginary state of bliss and harmony, often either thought to have been lost or to be attainable only after some final struggle. For Laclau, therefore, the foundation of such imaginaries is not a coherent theory or policy package, but rather what he calls 'empty signifiers': signifiers that are highly movable and employed in so many various contexts that they tend to lose any distinct meaning, retaining little more than a strong positive valorization. In a sense, the empty signifier becomes simply a metaphor for 'the good'. Laclau gives the example of slogans such as 'Respect' or 'Revolution',²⁵ but one might also say that demands for 'Change' or ambitions to 'Make America Great Again' have functioned in this way. The core point is that, as the empty signifier loses concrete meaning, it does not simply become meaningless; rather, it becomes a focal point for affective investment. One might not know exactly what the 'Change' or 'Greatness' entails, but one knows that it is what 'we' need and want. As such, empty signifiers, once established, can—by the force of their vacuity and positive valorization—be used in widely differing arguments and situations. Further, the internal consistency of a cultural imaginary might, therefore, be approached by analysing how its central empty signifiers travel across its different elements and contents, thereby linking them together in a way that is emotionally charged and implicitly Utopian but not necessarily logically consistent or argumentatively rational. It is this kind of ability to integrate a Nordic National Socialist cultural imaginary that I claim is partly delivered by references to Viking heritage.

Signifying 'the Nordic race'

Vikings are a much-loved part of Nordic history in contemporary Scandinavian societies. In short, the Viking Age signifies the years c. 800–1050 during which Scandinavians mounted seaborne raids along the coastlines of Europe. At its height, the Viking Age also saw major invasions and conquests, especially in Britain. In Scandinavia today, it is perhaps the Vikings whose historical imagery enjoys the most widespread recognition and use. Vikings are as ubiquitous in Scandinavian public spaces, commercial discourses and popular culture as cowboys and Indians are in the United States. It is on this basis that it makes sense that perhaps the most obvious function of Viking heritage in the cultural imaginary of the Nordic Resistance Movement is simply as a way of making National Socialism less of a 'German' ideology and reorientating it towards a Nordic cultural-historical context. Here, the Nordic Resistance Movement employs a strategy that was employed in the Third Reich. As already noted, Viking imagery was especially evident in

24 See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso 1989).

25 Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*.

war-time German recruitment efforts in the occupied Nordic countries. However, the notion of a 'Nordic race' exemplified especially by the Viking was not simply a propaganda ploy. In particular, Heinrich Himmler's SS wholeheartedly bought into this imaginary. Himmler himself was influenced from early on by the Nazi Party's agricultural expert Richard Walther Darré and his notion of 'Blood and Soil', which entailed the idea that mediaeval Teutons had been weakened by Christianity introduced from the South. The SS was to be a quasi-religious order composed from elements of Viking and Teuton symbolism in a Wagnerian packaging.²⁶ Indeed, as Stanley Payne notes, this elevation of 'the Nordic race' eventually had real organizational consequences: the all-Scandinavian-recruited Waffen SS Division Viking was the only foreign-recruited Waffen SS division whose members were eligible to join the SS proper.²⁷ It is the symbolic legacy of Himmler's SS that is probably responsible for the fact that, after the war as well, National Socialist groups 'saturated their iconography with themes from Norse mythology and Viking History' in order to 'frame Nordics as the standard-bearers of whiteness'.²⁸

This link is arguably especially strong among Scandinavian National Socialists for whom it is both in tune with their ideological convictions and their historico-cultural context. As Michael Kimmel notes:

In addition to Nazi paraphernalia, the single most common symbolic tropes among Scandinavian Nazis are references to Vikings. Viking men are admired because they lived in a closed community, were fierce warriors, feared and hated by those they conquered.²⁹

In fact, in the Swedish context, it is telling that, when the Sweden Democrats in the 1990s started the process of becoming a legitimate populist party rather than an extreme-right movement, they not only renounced Nazism and banned their members from wearing uniforms,³⁰ but also toned down references to Swedish Viking history because this historical imagery was thought to indicate a continued link with the National Socialist scene.³¹ Indeed, the Nordic Resistance Movement certainly addresses its audience as modern-day Vikings. Most visibly, the official emblem of the organization, the

26 Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power 1933–1939* (New York and London: Penguin 2006), 253–4.

27 Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press 1995), 373–4.

28 Teitelbaum, "'The path of dreams'", 123.

29 Kimmel, 'Racism as adolescent male rite of passage', 214.

30 See Jens Rydgren and Patrick Ruth, 'Voting for the radical right in Swedish municipalities: social marginality and ethnic competition?', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2011, 202–25.

31 Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press 2017), 104.

'Tiwaz rune', is linked with the Norse god Tyr, who is associated with law and heroic glory.

The *Nordfront.se* site is primarily a news site where most of the content is overtly political and based on what the organization sees as the main elements of its concrete day-to-day 'struggle'—the degenerating effect of multiculturalism and cultural Marxism, the threat of Islam and Muslim immigration, the betrayal of 'the Nordic race' by liberal politicians, and the continued insidious influence of Jews especially in media and finance—all well-known and somewhat classic National Socialist themes. However, subsections of the site put articles in categories such as 'Culture', 'Religion', 'World View', 'History' and 'Lifestyle'. Here, references to Viking heritage and Viking imagery are a stable ingredient of the conversation. At the most banal level, the site sees it as a core task to keep the audience updated on 'all things Viking'. It offers lists of events with Viking or mediaeval themes, Viking markets, re-enactments of Viking battles, and upcoming Viking rituals, festivals and commemorative dates.³² Indeed, 'Viking markets'—which are an embedded practice in Scandinavian popular culture today and certainly not necessarily tainted by National Socialist influence—are nonetheless popular sites for leafleting or propagandizing.³³ Beyond this, the site regularly offers informative articles on historical figures and events such as prominent Viking kings, warriors, battles and conquests.³⁴ Furthermore, it regularly reports on archaeological findings from the Viking Age, new interpretations of Viking history, and new books or movies about Vikings.³⁵ The implication here—even when the ideological link is not made explicit—is that to be a contemporary Nordic National Socialist is also to be a Viking enthusiast. As such, the mere seamless juxtaposition of the ideological agenda and this cultural-historical heritage might be said to reduce discretely the potential distance or conflict between National Socialism as a 'German' idea and the Viking as Nordic heritage. At times, however, there is also a more direct combination of the two, as when the Norwegian sister-site to *Nordfront.se*, *Frihetskamp.net*, ran an article

32 See, for example, Editorial, 'Medeltidsmarknader och vikingatida evenemang under 2016', *Nordfront.se*, 24 May 2016, available at www.nordfront.se/medeltidsmarknader-och-vikingatida-evenemang-2016.smr (viewed 14 April 2019).

33 See, for example, Simon Holmqvist, 'Aktivist bar Tyrruna på norsk vikingafestival—eskorterades ut av polis', *Nordfront.se*, 19 August 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/aktivist-bar-tyrruna-pa-norsk-vikingafestival-eskorterades-ut-av-polis.smr (viewed 14 April 2019); and Editorial, 'Flygbladsutdelning på vikingamarknad i Stallarholmen', *Nordfront.se*, 12 July 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/offentlig-flygbladsutdelning-pa-vikingamarknad-stallarholmen.smr (viewed 14 April 2019).

34 See, for example, Editorial, 'Ragnar Lodbroks dag', *Nordfront.se*, 28 March 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/ragnar-lodbroks-dags.smr (viewed 14 April 2019).

35 See, for example, Editorial, 'Stort vikingaläger hittat i England', *Nordfront.se*, 21 May 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/stort-vikingalager-hittat-england.smr (viewed 14 April 2019); and Editorial, 'Vikingafilm gör stor succé i Ryssland', *Nordfront.se*, 20 January 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/vikingafilm-gor-stor-succer-ryssland.smr (viewed 14 April 2019).

triumphantly declaring that 'the Swastika was very popular among the Vikings' on the grounds that a figurine with such symbols had been discovered.³⁶

Vikings are, furthermore, present in articles that have purely ideological themes, such as those attempting to educate readers on topics such as National Socialist racial theories, the meaning of the term 'Aryan', the idea of life as struggle or the warrior ethos of the National Socialist. At the textual level, Viking heritage is often only alluded to in passing, such as when it is claimed: 'Our forefathers knew the secret of the blood. They understood it so well, both regarding animals and people, that they did what they could to prevent mixing the Nordic-Germanic (Aryan) race with the other races of the earth.'³⁷ But, in the images used, Viking heritage very often overtly serves to illustrate the Nordic element of the ideology. Before moving on to discuss this further, it is necessary to note that the political project of the Nordic Resistance Movement centres on the revolutionary creation of a National Socialist pan-Nordic state. The organization aims to unify the Nordic peoples into one Nordic Nation united by common racial features in order 'to preserve the Nordic people as they are today, where the Nordic racial type is the dominating element in the Nordic gene pool'.³⁸ This pan-Nordic ambition was already present in interwar Swedish National Socialism. As Matthew Feldman and John Pollard point out:

By the mid-1930s . . . Swedish fascists had become increasingly uncomfortable with the stigma of being seen as an alien group and resorted to promoting a form of Nordic racialism that transcended national boundaries. Thus, Swedish fascism would be both thoroughly 'Swedish'—that is 'racially Nordic'—yet still, implicitly at least, international, linked to racial relatives among German Nazis and others.³⁹

For the Nordic Resistance Movement, this means that the politico-cultural community envisaged is neither the individual Nordic nations nor *Norden* (the North, namely Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland) as a mere territorial homeland, but emphatically 'the Nordic race'.⁴⁰ It is in relation to this core ideological construct that one often finds the empty signifier of the Viking. It is not just that Viking heritage can function as a historical reference

36 Editorial, 'Hakekorset var svært populært blant vikingen', *frihetskamp.net*, 22 February 2014, available at www.frihetskamp.net/hakekorset-var-svaert-populaert-blant-vikingene (viewed 14 April 2019).

37 Magnus Söderman, 'Till den svenska ungdomen', *Nordfront.se*, 13 January 2007, available at www.nordfront.se/till-den-svenska-ungdomen.smr (viewed 15 April 2019). All translations from the Swedish, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

38 Nordic Resistance Movement, *Our Path*, 14.

39 Matthew Feldman and John Pollard, 'The ideologues and ideologies of the radical right: an introduction', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 50, no. 4–5, 2016, 327–36 (329).

40 Simon Lindberg, 'Rasen—inte landet', *Nordfront.se*, 27 October 2010, available at www.nordfront.se/rasen-inte-landet.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

that all the Nordic nations share but that, even if such a connection is not made explicit in the text, the illustration of ideas about ‘the Nordic race’ is often accompanied by pictures of Viking warriors, Viking artefacts or Viking gods.⁴¹ The Viking, therefore, is not only a favoured historical example of Nordic racial community, but also its modern popular signification.

This becomes all the clearer in the articles that discuss various ‘abuses’ of Viking heritage. For example, a quite disproportionate anger is expressed in the comments section of an article reporting that an organization promoting tolerance under the heading ‘Vikings against Racism’ will participate in a Gay Pride parade. Here, the anger does not seemingly spring simply from the fact that such an attitude is contrary to the political beliefs of the Nordic Resistance Movement. Rather, it is provoked by seeing the empty signifier of Vikings moved to an altogether different ideological position. The first comment seethes: ‘Our Viking forefathers would have split the skulls of these jerks trying to imitate Vikings.’⁴² Another example is the rage directed at the inclusion of actors of non-Nordic ethnicities in the popular television series *Vikings* about the exploits of the famous Viking warrior Ragnar Lodbrok. A lengthy article criticizing this development clearly illustrates how Viking history, popular culture and National Socialist ideology are intertwined in an imaginary vision of both a past, present and future Nordic society.

Once a week, the viewer could look through a window, in the form of his HDTV, into an idealized version of our history. A world where only people of their own kind lived, fought and died. Such a simple thing as to walk—via the camera lens—through a society where everyone shares phenotypic features, languages and culture, where foreign elements that create subconscious stresses and agitation are absent, constitutes a strong attracting force.⁴³

41 There are an abundance of examples of this use of Viking imagery of which only a few can be referenced here: Christian Hamilton, ‘Hur hängiven är du?’, *Nordfront.se*, 20 January 2013, available at www.nordfront.se/hur-hangiven-ar-du.smr; Sebastian Elofsson, ‘Radikal och kompromisslös kamp är enda vägen till seger’, *Nordfront.se*, 3 April 2015, available at www.nordfront.se/radikal-och-kompromisslos-kamp-ar-enda-vagen-till-seger.smr; ‘Caesar’ (anonymous contributor), ‘Kamp mot folkförintelsen!’, *Nordfront.se*, 4 December 2015, available at www.nordfront.se/kamp-mot-folkforintelsen.smr; Mikael Karlsson, ‘Att sätta hästen framför vagnen—en analys av Nordiska motståndsrörelsens invandringspolitik’, *Nordfront.se*, 18 December 2015, available at www.nordfront.se/att-satta-hasten-framfor-vagnen-en-analys-av-nordiska-motstandsrorelsens-invandringspolitik.smr; Editorial, ‘Nationell.nu tar strid mot kristna influenser’, *Nordfront.se*, 14 September 2012, available at www.nordfront.se/nationell-nu-tar-strid-mot-kristna-influenser.smr; and Joakim Blixt, ‘Seger genom revolutionär kamp’, *Nordfront.se*, 6 September 2015, available at www.nordfront.se/seger-genom-revolutionar-kamp.smr (all viewed 16 April 2019).

42 Editorial, ‘“Vikings” mot rasism’, *Nordfront.se*, 5 August 2014, available (without comments) at www.nordfront.se/vikings-mot-rasism.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

43 Mikael Karlsson, ‘“Vikings” blir mångkulturell’, *Nordfront.se*, 20 February 2016, available at www.nordfront.se/vikings-blir-mangkulturell.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

Here, the imaginary quality of Viking heritage for the organization becomes implicitly visible as the author inadvertently admits that he has been enjoying an 'idealized' version of the past, thus doubly removed from reality by being both an 'ideological fantasy' and a fictional product of popular culture. Nonetheless, the force of this imaginary and its function in the repackaging of contemporary racial attitudes in the familiar aesthetics of a revered Viking heritage is equally clear given that the author and the organization find it worthwhile to attack furiously what is, after all, simply a banal fictional plot twist meant to recapture audience numbers for a certain media commodity.

Nazi pagans

Another aspect of this link between Viking heritage and National Socialism emerges in articles about religion. The Nordic Resistance Movement distances itself from a major development on the far and populist right by adopting a severely critical attitude towards Christianity. Notions of 'Christian Europe' and the figure of the Crusader have become quite popular elsewhere on the extreme right, as exemplified by Anders Bering Breivik's terrorist dream of a 'monocultural, patriarchal Christian Europe without Muslims, Marxists, multiculturalists, or feminists'.⁴⁴ The popularity of notions of Christian Europe is linked to the fact that it easily supports the construction of a violent antagonism towards Islam or a 'clash' between Islam and a European/western civilization. Furthermore, the Nordic Resistance Movement indulges itself at times by imagining the danger of what has been called 'Eurabia': the supposed grand strategy behind a Muslim takeover of the European continent.⁴⁵ However, as a rule, the organization rejects a positive valorization of Christian values and heritage. As one article points out, pride in the cultural legacy and achievements of Christian Scandinavians is justified but nonetheless mistaken:

Christians and non-Christians need not discuss whether noble and creative Norwegians, who happened to be Christians, were noble and creative 'in spite of' or 'because' they were Christians. It is our deeper qualities that are expressed in these religious practices, not the opposite. These properties are genetic, and we share them with our people who are living far beyond Norway. Our race has left the remains of high culture all over the globe for centuries.⁴⁶

In fact, in most cases, the Nordic Resistance Movement's attitude to Christianity is to view it as a foreign, southern and ultimately Jewish idea, unduly and

44 Mattias Gardell, 'Crusader dreams: Oslo 22/7, Islamophobia, and the quest for a monocultural Europe', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2014, 129–55 (131).

45 See Matt Carr, 'You are now entering Eurabia', *Race & Class*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2006, 1–22.

46 Ulvhild Aarhun, 'Innan kristendomen "visade oss ljuset"', *Nordfront.se*, 15 February 2013, available at www.nordfront.se/innan-kristendomen-visade-oss-ljuset.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

forcibly imposed on their Viking ancestors with vast and still-present detrimental consequences. As one article states:

The fact is that we can trace destructive political systems back to the words of the Jew Jesus as they were recorded in the Bible. Social Democracy and Communism, Liberalism and Humanism bear all the traces of the crazy faith that our forefathers were fooled into, and forced to embrace.⁴⁷

Crucially, it is often the Viking heathen gods that are contrasted to both the insidious weakness of Christianity and the aggressive intrusion of Islam. Here, the attitude of the organization seems to be in line with earlier extreme-right engagements with religion. As John Pollard notes:

The religion of the Norse or German gods and associated forms of paganism are particularly popular among skinheads, precisely because of their violent, warrior ethos. Skinzines, and especially the *Blood & Honour* magazine, frequently point out that Odinism is a *religion of warriors*, whereas despised Christianity is presented in Nietzschean terms as a *religion of slaves*.⁴⁸

Indeed, the Nordic gods Odin, Thor and Tyr (it is to the latter that the organizational emblem refers) are also often symbolically mobilized.⁴⁹ Further, the website subsection on religion reports diligently from the small community in Iceland that has recently sought to revive the old Norse religion of Odinism, reporting, for example, in detail on the plans for, and progress of, the building of a major temple for this faith.⁵⁰ In the end, though, the organization conceives of itself as secular and scientifically minded, finally rejecting all religion as having outlived its purpose in a modern age. As Klas Lund explains: ‘Our view of paganism is that it was first and foremost about remembering and celebrating their ancestors, and that’s something all people should do. Today, we do not need to personalize the wind, the thunder or the sun, we can explain it scientifically.’⁵¹ It should be noted that this seemingly rational attitude disappears when it comes to the idea of ‘the Nordic race’—though it too is claimed to be a ‘scientific fact’—which is consistently praised, revered and lauded in

47 Magnus Söderman, ‘Den mörka religionen’, *Nordfront.se*, 27 February 2008, available at www.nordfront.se/den-morka-religionen.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

48 John Pollard, ‘Skinhead culture: the ideologies, mythologies, religions and conspiracy theories of racist skinheads’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 50, no. 4–5, 2016, 398–419 (409).

49 See, for example, Editorial, ‘Lars Lindström: Oden var “inskränkt” och “trängsynt”’, *Nordfront.se*, 10 April 2016, available at www.nordfront.se/lars-lindstrom-oden-var-inskrankt-och-trangsynt.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

50 Bror Vakur, ‘Den nordiska hedendomens resning; Asatemplet på Island’, *Nordfront.se*, 4 May 2015, available at www.nordfront.se/den-nordiska-hedendomens-resning-asatemplet-pa-island.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

51 Editorial, ‘Klas Lund svarar’, *Nordfront.se*, 16 January 2012, available at www.nordfront.se/klas-lund-svarar.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

nothing short of quasi-religious terms. Thus it seems that the Nordic Resistance Movement's actual relationship to the old Norse gods is similar to that which Pollard describes among skinheads when he concludes:

The appropriation of Odinist/pagan imagery and iconography by racist skinheads seems to be largely symbolic, rather than a serious attempt to adopt an alternative religion to Christianity. . . . The embracing of Odinism therefore seems to be essentially a case of 'belonging rather than believing', a typical example of the appropriation of symbols for identitarian purposes.⁵²

Thus, even when the Vikings are used as a means to mark religious difference, they function more as an empty signifier than as an actual counterpoint or alternative. It is not about becoming Vikings but about establishing a cultural imaginary in which National Socialism is linked, juxtaposed and repackaged in Viking heritage for Nordic consumption.

Embodying the Viking

A final dimension of the organization's use of Viking heritage as an empty signifier is its role as an overtly bodily metaphor for masculinity and homosexual community. This is found especially in the effort of the Nordic Resistance Movement to offer its members 'offline' occasions for social interaction beyond political activism. A core longstanding annual event is referred to as the *Nordendagarna* (Nordic days), originally called (and still encompassing) the *Nordisk Vikangakamp* (Nordic Viking fight). This is a weekend retreat for current and potential members, featuring lectures and Q&A sessions with the leadership aimed at educating members about the organization's politics and ideology. However, the centrepiece still seems to be the 'Viking fight', entailing several sporting competitions that culminate in the announcement of the 'Nordic Man of the Year'.⁵³ All this is extensively reported in both text and video on *Nordfront.se*. Indeed, as Mattias Ekman has shown, videos of such 'outdoor activities' are an established genre in extreme-right online communications. While these clips might show activities like hiking or farming, they are often martial or military in theme and, here, the Viking frame can again be mobilized, as Ekman notes, in videos of archery or wrestling presented as training sessions in 'Viking combat'.⁵⁴ In fact, disciplines such as knife fighting, wrestling and various tests of endurance and strength are core to the so-called 'Viking fight'. Clearly, in this instance, the signifier Viking does not simply index the actual

52 John Pollard, 'Skinhead culture', 410.

53 See Editorial, 'Nordendagarna 2017', *Nordfront.se*, 29 August 2017, available at www.nordfront.se/nordendagarna-2017.smr (viewed 16 April 2019).

54 Mattias Ekman, 'The dark side of online activism: Swedish right-wing extremist video activism on YouTube', *Mediekultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, vol. 30, no. 56, 2014, 79–99 (92).

content of the competitions, only some of which are by any stretch of the imagination authentically Viking. Rather, the Viking signifier here can be understood as pointing to the aspect of National Socialism that Michael Kimmel has called the 'masculinizing project'. According to Kimmel, National Socialism is an ideological framework able to serve as a 'rite of passage' for adolescent boys and men in search of a solidly male gender identity.⁵⁵ What is on offer—beyond and besides the specifics of National Socialist political ideology—is a form of 'hyper-masculinity' securely embedded in 'homosocial community'.⁵⁶ This is also a classical theme in the literature on historical fascist and proto-fascist movements. For example, it is analysed at length in Klaus Theweleit's work on National Socialist 'male fantasies',⁵⁷ and in Barbara Spackman's work on 'fascist virilities'.⁵⁸ Indeed, as George Mosse recounts, the idea of the SS as a *Männerbund* and of the Third Reich as a *Männerstaat* was core to Himmler's vision.⁵⁹

However, it is perhaps the gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who most clearly articulated the inherent tension in the heightened intensity of homosociality associated with fascist male community. She argued that fascism is caught between, on the one hand, a heightening of male homosocial bonds—often, as in Himmler's *Männerbund*, entailing the explicit or implicit exclusion of meaningful relations with women—and, on the other hand, the accompanying fear that these bonds will go too far and tip over into homosexual feelings. As such, the performance of fascist masculinity is suspended between the idealization of homosociality and rampant homophobia, between a male bonding and intimacy simultaneously encouraged and prohibited.⁶⁰

In this light, the image of the Viking and the packaging of male sociality in the aggressive practice of competition and overt mutual violence (even if only in games, sport or training) that the 'Viking fight' framing affords can be understood as a reasonably recognizable National Socialist strategy for handling this tension. The Vikings on long sea raids become here the model of an original *Männerbund* whose purely homosocial composition is securely distanced from any homosexual connotation by an overcompensating focus on ruthlessness, brutality, hierarchy and ultimate self-reliance in relation to the other members of the group.

55 Kimmel, 'Racism as adolescent male rite of passage'.

56 Ekman, 'The dark side of online activism', 84–5.

57 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols, trans. from the German by Stephen Conway with Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987, 1989).

58 Barbara Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996).

59 George L. Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: H. Fertig 1999), 191.

60 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1993), 48–51.

Vikings in contemporary Scandinavian National Socialist imaginaries: concluding remarks

This article has sought to explore how a typical Scandinavian Viking heritage functions within the cultural imaginaries of one of the most prominent National Socialist organizations today: the Nordic Resistance Movement. In understanding the role that it plays in the online communications of the organization's website *Nordfront.se*, it is crucial to regard the Vikings heritage as an empty signifier, the content of which is highly movable and able to be linked to various elements in the organization's ideology. As such, the Vikings are clearly a way to repackage National Socialist ideology in a more Nordic cultural context. But, rather than being a mere propagandistic shell, Viking imagery is used both explicitly and implicitly in a variety of ways and contexts. It emerges as a much-used image signifier for the core ideological concept of 'the Nordic race' and, by extension, the Viking Age becomes a historical period in which it is expected that modern National Socialists are particularly interested. As such, Viking heritage becomes central to the cultural imaginary of these modern Scandinavian National Socialists in its ability to link the internal elements of their communal ideal: an ideal of a pure Nordic racial community undisturbed by foreign influences, Christian weakness and degenerate modernity; a community shaped by an embedded hyper-masculinity lived out in homosocial interactions saturated with struggle, aggression and the will to supremacy.

Christoffer Kølvråa is Associate Professor in the School of Culture and Society at Aarhus University, Denmark. His recent publications include: 'Psychoanalyzing Europe? Political enjoyment and European identity' (*Political Psychology*, 2018), 'Limits of attraction: the EU's eastern border and the European neighborhood policy' (*East European Politics & Societies*, 2017), and 'Extreme right images of radical authenticity' (with Bernhard Forchtner in *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 2017). Email: eurock@cas.au.dk

ORCID

Christoffer Kølvråa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8600-914X>