

# Petitioning from an Island: Negotiated Sovereignty and Ruhnu's Incorporation into the Estonian State, 1919–1921

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**Abstract.** This article examines how the Swedish-speaking island community of Ruhnu in the Gulf of Riga navigated the island's incorporation into the Estonian nation-state through a sustained strategy of petitioning. From 1919 to 1921, Ruhnu's inhabitants pursued parallel petitions submitted to Estonian authorities and to the King of Sweden with the aim of gaining confirmation of what they understood as historical local rights. At the same time, the island's incorporation to the Republic of Estonia was contested by Latvia, which gave the islanders strategic leverage. Rather than treating the islanders' petitions as peripheral expressions of a local grievance, the analysis frames them as an independent political strategy by which the community actively, and in part successfully, shaped the terms under which Estonian sovereignty came to be exercised over the island. It identifies in these texts a distinct privilege-based idiom of claim-making ('privilege grammar') focused on exemptions and confirmations, which stood in tension with the idea of modern uniform citizenship.

**Keywords:** Ruhnu, Estonian Swedes, Estonian politics, petitioning, post-imperial borderlands, minority politics

## INTRODUCTION

In the final stage and aftermath of the First World War, as new nation-states emerged from the collapse of the Romanov Empire, small minority communities faced difficult choices in trying to assert their rights and articulate preferences for political allegiance. The inhabitants of Ruhnu,<sup>1</sup> a tiny island in the Gulf of Riga inhabited by a few hundred Swedish-speaking fishermen and seal hunters, became entangled in competing sovereignty claims advanced by Estonia and Latvia. This article focuses on how, between 1919 and 1921, the islanders navigated this fraught period by using petitioning as a political instrument to shape the terms under which sovereignty would be exercised over the island.

Ruhnu's case is notable in that the island's population, though numbering only around 275 inhabitants,<sup>2</sup> acted with striking political agency. While Estonia and Latvia were engaged in a dispute over the island's fate and Sweden was wary of any formal commitment, the Ruhnu Swedes intervened directly by petitioning for the confirmation of the exemptions and privileges that they believed had long defined their relationship with distant rulers. Written in a deferential but firm tone, these petitions only marginally adopted the language of modern democratic rights or ethnic self-determination, instead framing their demands in terms of confirmation of old rights and exemptions from new obligations, which they justified either by precedent under earlier sovereigns or promises allegedly made by representatives of the new rulers. This echoed a mode of political negotiation familiar from the history of the Baltic region, where local elites – the Baltic German nobility – had traditionally secured written guarantees of their corporate privileges when sovereignty changed hands.<sup>3</sup> The Ruhnu community pursued a comparable mode of negotiation, seeking reaffirmation of inherited community rights amid the post-imperial transition.

Recent scholarship on post-imperial Europe has increasingly shifted attention from border-making as something decided by diplomats and technical commissions to the ways in which local inhabitants intervened in this process for their own reasons. Most broadly, Tara

1 The island's name is here standardised as Ruhnu (in Estonian sources also Ruhno; in Swedish and German, Runö; in Latvian, Roņu sala).

2 Early 1922 press reports gave a population of 274 and 272 respectively: "Par Roņu salu". – *Latvis*, 28.01.1922 (274 inhabitants); "Valitsuse esitusest Ruhno saarel". – *Vaba Maa*, 03.02.1922 (272 inhabitants).

3 On the negotiation and confirmation of elite privileges in the so-called capitulations of 1710, see *Die baltischen Kapitulationen von 1710. Kontext–Wirkungen–Interpretationen*. Hrsg. von K. Brüggemann, M. Laur, P. Piirimäe. Böhlau, Köln u.a. 2014.

Zahra has urged historians of East Central Europe to pay close attention to the limits of nationalisation and to forms of political belonging that did not map neatly onto the categories claimed by national movements, arguing that local actors often responded to modern mass politics through loyalties and calculations that were situational, mixed, and not exclusively national in character.<sup>4</sup>

Particularly relevant for the Ruhnu case is Peter Haslinger's demonstration that in the Czechoslovak–Hungarian borderlands, local interventions in post-imperial border-making often centred less on abstract national principle than on livelihood, mobility and the practical terms of rule.<sup>5</sup> Even more relevantly, Catherine Gibson has shown that the making of new frontiers after the First World War unfolded “from below” in other Estonian–Latvian borderlands, too, as villagers, landowners and other border dwellers used petitions and other forms of claim-making to try to influence the outcome. Her analysis is primarily concerned with ethnographic mapping and counter-mapping rather than insular minority politics, yet it is highly applicable to nearby Ruhnu,<sup>6</sup> where post-imperial sovereignty was likewise negotiated at the local level.<sup>7</sup>

Along similar lines, this article argues that Ruhnu petitions were not a mere sideshow to high-level diplomatic manoeuvres between states, but a strategy through which the islanders exercised their political agency. Precisely because Ruhnu's Swedish-speaking community did not fit unproblematically into either the Latvian or the Estonian nation-state, it could exploit the uncertainties of post-imperial border-making to press for more favourable terms. By addressing appeals to both Sweden and Estonia, it hedged its bets and maximised its leverage. Sweden was entreated as the cultural ‘motherland’ that might, if not bring the island back under its rule, at least advocate on its behalf. Estonia, as the most plausible effective sovereign, was petitioned to confirm and preserve special arrangements if the island were to remain under Estonian

- 4 T. Zahra. *Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis*. – *Slavic Review*, 2010, 69, 1, 93–119.
- 5 P. Haslinger. *Dilemmas of Security: The State, Local Agency, and the Czechoslovak–Hungarian Boundary Commission, 1921–25*. – *Austrian History Yearbook*, 2018, 49, 187–206.
- 6 For other examples of negotiations of authority and identity among Estonian–Swedish communities in the late imperial and post-imperial Baltic, see also J. M. White. *Changing Tides of Nation and Confession: Building Orthodoxy and Empire on the Island of Vormsi, 1873–1905*. – *Ab Imperio*, 2022, 2, 147–177; and G. E. Kranking. *Island People: Transnational Identification, Minority Politics, and Estonia's Swedish Population*. Ohio State University, Columbus, 2009.
- 7 C. Gibson. *Geographies of Nationhood: Cartography, Science, and Society in the Russian Imperial Baltic*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, 177–216.

jurisdiction – not entirely a given, at a time when Latvia was also asserting its territorial claim.

I use ‘privilege grammar’ as a shorthand for the historically specific repertoire of claims through which the Ruhnu community articulated what it believed it was owed by any would-be sovereign. Three partially overlapping registers recur across the petitions. Most consistently, they speak in a corporate privilege idiom: rights appear as inherited, communal exemptions and customary entitlements that a new ruler should confirm, rather than as universal claims grounded in citizenship or equality. At the same time, appeals directed to Sweden activate a national-cultural patronage register, casting the ‘motherland’ as a legitimate patron with authority derived from language, Lutheran confession and an imagined continuity of ‘Swedish law’. Finally, the texts intersect with a state-sovereignty register of post-imperial border-making, in which Estonia and Latvia pursued administrative control, maritime security and diplomatic advantage. Reading the petitions through these registers makes it possible to follow how specific demands were justified by shifting combinations of idioms, and why this rhetorical flexibility could translate into concrete concessions at a moment when sovereignty over the island was still being stabilised.

This grammar should not be conflated with ethnic nationalism, modern minority rights discourse, or simple resistance to state authority. Nor did it presuppose legal codification in the strict sense. Rather, it operated in a register shaped by older imperial traditions of negotiated incorporation, in which local communities expected incoming sovereigns to recognise and reaffirm inherited arrangements as a condition of loyalty. The Ruhnu petitioners framed their demands (1) as requests for confirmation rather than innovation; (2) grounded entitlements in precedent, usage or earlier assurances rather than abstract rights; (3) articulated exemptions as inherited conditions of incorporation (from taxation, conscription, forestry regulation or arms control); and (4) addressed sovereign authority vertically, presuming asymmetry but also moral obligation. These elements recur across petitions to Swedish, Estonian, and intermediary authorities, allowing the islanders to recalibrate addressees without abandoning the underlying logic of their claims.

As strategic texts composed for specific authorities and designed to elicit action, the petitions involved selective self-presentation, use of deferential and morally charged language, and the framing of grievances probably calculated to have political effects. They therefore need to

be understood on two levels at once: first, for the explicit claims they make about rights, burdens and political belonging; and second, for the rhetorical work they perform in presenting Ruhnu as a deserving community whose exceptional treatment was justified.

Significantly, there are also other indications that the petitions were overwhelmingly collective rather than individual in character. The first surviving 1919 appeal was signed by a committee headed by village elder Johan Mogs/Mooks; the 1920 address to the Swedish king circulated as a mass petition signed by a large number of inhabitants; and the 1921 petitions were likewise rooted in community (*landskap*) meetings rather than private initiative.

Methodologically, the article is based on a close reading of primary sources, which include the petitions authored by the Ruhnu islanders, internal Estonian government correspondence, Swedish diplomatic memos and contemporary newspaper accounts from Estonia, Latvia and Sweden. An analysis of the petitions illuminates their rhetorical strategies from the humble, loyalist tone taken in an address to the Swedish King to the urgent pleas directed at Estonian officials. These texts are then triangulated with state records. The Estonian official correspondence reveals how officials responded to the community's requests. Swedish Foreign Ministry archives show how the petitions to the King of Sweden were handled behind the scenes, and what sort of dynamics consequently developed between Estonia and Sweden. The Latvian position, which is worthy of a separate study, is reconstructed here primarily through published Latvian press and through Estonian and Swedish archival representations of Latvian claims, rather than through systematic use of Latvian archival holdings.

The article proceeds chronologically. It opens with a brief contextual section on Ruhnu's historical status and the political repertoire available to the islanders before 1919, including the upheavals of 1917–1918. The core of the analysis then focuses on the years 1919–1921, when the islanders formulated and recalibrated a sustained petitioning strategy directed towards the young Estonian state and, in parallel, towards Sweden as a perceived historical patron. Particular attention is paid to the moment of heightened uncertainty in 1920–1921, when competing sovereignty claims and the circulation of international minority precedents (the Åland dispute between Sweden and Finland) gave this strategy its greatest leverage. Later developments, including the 1923 border settlement with Latvia and the longer-term administrative accommodation of the island,

are addressed only insofar as they illuminate the durability and afterlife of the earlier petitioning campaign.

### A SWEDISH ISLAND IN THE GULF OF RIGA: ISOLATION AS PRIVILEGE

Ruhnu is a small oval-shaped island (approximately 11.9 km<sup>2</sup>) situated in the Gulf of Riga, far off Estonia's southwestern coast. Physically, it is closer to the Latvian shore. It lies approximately 37 km from Cape Kolka in Courland (Latvia), whereas the nearest major Estonian port, Kuressaare, is nearly double that distance at roughly 70 km, and the mainland city of Pärnu is roughly 96 km away. Lacking deep natural harbours and surrounded by shoals, the island was difficult to approach for large vessels. In winter, isolation could become near-absolute: as the shallow waters froze, Ruhnu was often ringed by pack ice that was too thick for boats but too unstable for sledge travel. These material constraints made regular outside supervision of life on island expensive and intermittent.

For centuries, Ruhnu was populated almost entirely by ethnic Swedes, a community dating back to at least the Middle Ages. Under Swedish rule, which in Estonia and Livonia lasted until the early 18th century, the Ruhnu peasants were understood (as they later reminded the Swedish king) to enjoy certain customary rights, including local self-governance through their church congregation and elders, and the freedom to continue their Lutheran religion and Swedish language unabated.<sup>8</sup> Even after the island, along with the rest of Livonia, was formally ceded to the Russian Empire in 1721, Ruhnu's Swedes tenaciously preserved their distinct culture and normative order. In local lore and practice, they still lived by their 'Swedish law' (*svensk rätt*), meaning the traditional village laws and privileges believed to have been granted by Swedish kings and recognised by subsequent rulers. Indeed, their 1920 petition to the King of Sweden explicitly noted that Ruhnu's population "had lived under Swedish law for centuries" and in spirit "never wanted to be called anything but Swedes" despite being subjects of the Russian Tsar.<sup>9</sup>

- 8 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. Riksarkivet (SRA), Marieberg, Utrikesdepartementet (UD), 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079. On the role of the village assembly and the specific ecclesiastical privileges that had survived since the Swedish era, see also J. Steffensson. *Elu Ruhnul. Olion*, Tallinn, 1994.
- 9 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

Ruhnu's later petitioning campaign fits into a longer local tradition of collective bargaining with outside authorities. As Trond O. Tøllefsen and James M. White have shown in their study of the Ruhnu Orthodox conversion crisis of 1866–1867, the islanders used the threat of conversion as leverage against the Lutheran consistory to procure the removal of an unpopular pastor and the reconsideration of local obligations. Tøllefsen and White also emphasise the importance of the *loindskap* (*landskap*): the Ruhnu assembly of adult men, and of a collective historical memory in which the islanders had defended their freedom against external encroachment and secured recognition of themselves as a community of free farmers. Conversion, just like sovereignty, was treated on Ruhnu as a communal matter to be resolved collectively, with the corresponding expectation that outside church and state authorities would deal with the island as a single community.<sup>10</sup>

By the early 20th century, the islanders' sense of special status as a privileged Swedish enclave was thus deeply ingrained. However, the Ruhnu understanding of "Swedish law" is best treated as shorthand for inherited custom, parish-based social order and a remembered way of life, not as evidence that codified Swedish statute law continued to operate under the Russian Empire. Estonian observers in the early 1920s also described Ruhnu's everyday normative order as grounded less in "written law" than in customary practice (*kombeõigus*) and local regulation, with disputes handled through community mechanisms rather than formal courts.<sup>11</sup>

What did Ruhnu's claimed privileges entail? Even without a written charter granting them, imperial administrative practice appears to have tolerated substantial local leeway on the island. In the early 1920s, the islanders recalled that "during the Russian time the inhabitants of Ruhnu had, as is known, special privileges", which had included free use of the island's forests, *de facto* exemption from military service, and special tax advantages such as reduced or fixed payments.<sup>12</sup> In concrete terms, Ruhnu's peasants believed they could cut timber for their needs without paying fees; were used to conscription being irregular and usually not enforced; and under the impression that the community had been spared some of the heavier provincial taxes that burdened other villages.

10 T. O. Tøllefsen, J. M. White. Navigating an Orthodox Conversion: Community, Environment, and Religion on the Island of Ruhnu, 1866–7. – *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2021, 46, 5, 642–664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2021.1921840>.

11 Ruhno saarel. VIII. Kirjutatud seadus ja kombeõigus; XI. Külakondline maapidamine. – *Kaja*, 29.08.1923.

12 Memorandum of the Swedish government concerning the situation of the inhabitants of Runö, 12.09.1921. RA (Eesti Rahvusarhiiv), ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

Whether these facts ever amounted to anything formally recognised and legally codified is more than doubtful. A corrective view on taxation came from the Estonian Ministry of Finance in 1921, which insisted that Ruhnu had not possessed special Russian-era tax exemptions beyond the general arrangements applicable to Saaremaa county. Rather than treating it as a case of historical fiscal exceptionalism, the ministry instead framed Ruhnu's problem as one of poverty and structural disadvantage (poor land, limited income sources), implying that any relief should be justified on contemporary socioeconomic grounds rather than as the continuation of old rights.<sup>13</sup> The Estonian Ministry of Agriculture submitted a similar corrective on forest material, stating that the former Russian government had not provided the islanders with free forest material, and explained the subsequent concessions in this area again as a new policy choice rather than confirmation of an old entitlement.<sup>14</sup> Regarding freedom from conscription under the tsar, the Swedish *chargé d'affaires* Einar af Wirsén reported in 1921 that the islanders had had no legally codified exemption from military service during the Russian period, and that the relative absence of conscription was instead a contingent outcome of insularity and state practice. More generally as well, the island's remoteness had according to af Wirsén, left it to itself in many administrative matters, while the imperial system in any case only called up a limited proportion of those formally registered for service.<sup>15</sup> Read against Ruhnu's own memory-language, these sources are reminders of how quickly the 'privilege' idiom could become contested: what the islanders experienced as inherited entitlement could be reframed by the state or outsiders as a by-product of the tsarist state's limited administrative reach and uneven enforcement.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the social and institutional pattern that the island's insularity had preserved was increasingly represented as anachronistic, though the seclusion was interpreted differently depending on the observer. For Swedish nationalists across the Baltic, the island served as a romanticised time capsule. One 1906 account describes the islanders in exoticising terms as "simple fishermen" who held fast to their nationality with an "obstinacy that must gladden every Swedish heart".<sup>16</sup> Similarly, a 1919 article in *Stockholms-Tidningen* depicts

13 Report of the Direct Taxes Head Administration of the Ministry of Finance on the tax burden of the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 26.08.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 24–26.

14 Memorandum of the Ministry of Agriculture to the Government of the Republic concerning timber use on Ruhnu, 29.05.1922. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 61.

15 E. af Wirsén to the Swedish Foreign Minister (H. Wrangel), report on the Runö islanders' petition, 02.10.1921. SRA, Marieberg, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

16 Svenskarne ihågkomma sina stamförvanter på Runö i Ryssland. – Åland, 01.09.1906.

the island as a surviving fragment of an older Swedish world, portraying it as remote, culturally intact and morally appealing precisely because it seemed to stand outside modern political time. In this genre, Ruhnu is described as a national-cultural relic, inviting emotional identification and philanthropic concern.<sup>17</sup> The islanders themselves went along with this narrative of exceptionalism. In their later appeals to Sweden, they framed their history not as one of backwardness, but of heroic preservation, claiming to have “kept the Swedish language and customs sacred” and remained “Swedes in heart and soul” through centuries of foreign rule.<sup>18</sup>

From an Estonian administrative perspective, however, Ruhnu’s isolation was seen as precarious and culturally backward. The Estonian press characterised the community’s situation as a Robinson Crusoe-like seclusion, emphasising how the lack of regular steamship connections or telegraph lines severed the island from the modern world. This also posed severe physical risks. During the winter months, the island was frequently cut off by ice for weeks at a time, and the lack of a telegraph line meant the community could not signal for help or effectively warn passing ships of navigation hazards. Occasionally, they lacked information about even major political events. *Postimees* reported that when Tsar Alexander III died in 1894, the news failed to reach Ruhnu for many months, leading the church to pray for the late emperor well into the following spring.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, according to contemporary press accounts of the first Estonian visit to the island in the first half of May 1919, the inhabitants were then still unaware of the existence of the Republic of Estonia.<sup>20</sup>

The above highlights how severely Ruhnu appeared to be cut off from outside world, at least in the winter. Yet even in its isolation, the ties of loyalty and identity connecting Ruhnu to Sweden were kept alive: Sweden had not forgotten “its children on the lonely island”, as the islanders themselves later wrote.<sup>21</sup> Already in 1906, spurred by the Kuressaare-based Swedish engineer Hans Fraenkel, the Swedish press launched a public campaign to establish a parish library on the island, collecting books to ensure the population would not lose their Swedish language.<sup>22</sup> Even during the hardships of the First World War, Swedish

17 G. Danell. Ett par Runö-bilder. – *Stockholms-Tidningen*, 24.04.1919.

18 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

19 Nagu Robinsoni saarel. – *Postimees*, 14.02.1920.

20 Eesti Vabariigi maa-ala, kus kuni 8. maini Eesti Vabariigist veel midagi ei teatud. – *Vaba Maa*, 17.05.1919.

21 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

22 Svenskarne ihågkomma sina stamförvanter på Runö. – *Åland*, 01.09.1906.

well-wishers had managed to send emergency provisions to the island, a fact the islanders gratefully cited in their later appeals.<sup>23</sup>

Most importantly: over the years, Sweden dispatched Lutheran pastors to serve Ruhnu parish, supporting local education and ensuring worship in Swedish.<sup>24</sup> In 1906, the Swedish ecclesiastical ministry even sought to make sure that service on this remote island would count towards official seniority in Sweden, effectively treating Ruhnu as a Swedish ecclesiastical outpost.<sup>25</sup> A new church on the island was constructed and opened in 1912 largely with funds collected in Sweden.<sup>26</sup> This reinforced the islanders' identity as Swedes abroad, whose motherland acted as a remote but benevolent patron.

However, this relationship with Sweden did not go unnoticed and in the increasingly paranoid atmosphere of the late empire, it could indeed be interpreted as a geopolitical threat. In autumn 1912, the Estonian daily *Päevaleht* reported on an article by the Tallinn Russian newspaper *Okraina* that claimed to have discovered a case of "treason" (*isamaa äraandmine*) on Ruhnu. The paper had pointed to the recent church opening as a diplomatic slight, noting that while a Swedish representative had been present, not a single Russian official attended. Furthermore, *Okraina* catalogued the island's administrative anomalies, specifically the lack of a compulsory municipal school and the total absence of border guards as evidence that Ruhnu was drifting dangerously into the Swedish orbit.<sup>27</sup>

Suspicious of this type had intensified after the 1909 founding of the Friends of Swedish Education (Svenska Odlingens Vänner, SOV), an organisation dedicated to strengthening the national consciousness of Swedes across the Baltic provinces. The founding of SOV marked a critical turning point where the disparate Swedish communities, scattered across islands and coastal villages, began to forge a unified national movement. Initiated and led by schoolteachers Hans Pöhl and Johan Nymann, this movement sought to overcome the communities' geographical fragmentation and social marginalisation by promoting Swedish education and cultural cohesion. Shortly before Christmas 1913, SOV's headquarters were raided and documents confiscated by the

23 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

24 J. Steffensson. *Elu Ruhnul*. Olion, Tallinn, 1994.

25 *Svenskarne ihågkomma sina stamförvanter på Runö*. – Åland, 01.09.1906.

26 Estonian observers noted the symbolism of this construction: the new church stood immediately beside the ancient wooden church from 1644, creating a visual testament to the continuity of Swedish patronage across centuries: Nagu Robinsoni saarel. – *Postimees*, 14.02.1920.

27 *Okraina kahtlustused*. – *Päevaleht*, 23.10.1912.

authorities. SOV itself was not banned, but the beginning of the war soon afterwards made serious work impossible.<sup>28</sup>

For Ruhnu, the most isolated of all Estonian Swedish communities, the emergence of the Estonian Swedish movement signalled something quite new. The islanders were now being linked to a broader ethnic network with organisational resources and a political agenda. From 1919 onward, this broader Swedish movement would also provide crucial support both to the islanders' fight for local privileges and for the Estonian state in its efforts to integrate Ruhnu administratively.

By the beginning of the First World War, Ruhnu thus had quasi-autonomous status in practice, existing under a distant Russian imperial framework. However, this specific combination of isolation, perceived privilege and budding national consciousness relied on the relative stability of the Russian Empire. In the last years of the War, Ruhnu's Robinson Crusoe existence abruptly ended, as the island's strategic location in the Gulf of Riga made it a military asset for the enemy. When the German occupation on Ruhnu began in October 1917, the islanders found that their way of life was no longer guaranteed by inertia. Indeed, by that point the Russian administrative presence had already evaporated, reportedly leaving the community in a form of autarkic self-governance in which a local bellringer doubled as pastor and teacher.<sup>29</sup>

## NAVIGATING THE IMPERIAL COLLAPSE, 1917–1918

The year 1917 proved to be a turning point for the peoples of the former Romanov Empire, including the Swedish community on Ruhnu. In the wake of the February Revolution, 23–27 February,<sup>30</sup> the collapse of tsarist authority created new political possibilities in the Baltic provinces. In early March the Provisional Government replaced the tsarist governor in Estonia with a gubernatorial commissar, appointing Tallinn's mayor Jaan Poska to the position. On 30 March 1917, it issued the decree that granted Estonia a measure of territorial-administrative autonomy by uniting the Governorate of Estonia with the Estonian-inhabited

28 M. Kuldkepp. The political choices and outlooks of the Estonian Swedish national minority, 1917–1920. – *National Identities*, 2021, 23, 4, 409–431, here 414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2021.1873930>.

29 Kudas Ruhno saar ära võeti. – *Uus Päevaleht*, 14.11.1917.

30 Unless otherwise noted, dates until the beginning of 1918 are given in Old Style.

northern districts of the Governorate of Livonia under the commissar's authority. This brought the main ethnically Estonian areas together in a single administrative unit for the first time.

Sensing an opportunity, Estonian Swedish leaders mobilised to ensure their minority rights would be recognised in this new order. After petitioning the Provisional Government in Petrograd (a text not known to have been preserved), a delegation headed by Hans Pöhl submitted to Poska a petition dated 20 March 1917 and registered by the chancery on 19 April.<sup>31</sup> It demanded cultural and linguistic rights for Swedes who had been “inhabiting the ... islands and coasts of Estonia since the 2nd century, or even before that”, including the right to use Swedish in local schools, courts and churches, and the creation of a Swedish secretary post within the governor's administration. Based on the fact that the Russian Provisional Government had just granted autonomy to Estonians, the Swedish delegation argued that the Swedish minority was entitled to the same ‘equal rights’ now enjoyed by the Estonian majority.<sup>32</sup>

The organisational steps that made these claims sustainable followed almost immediately. On 15 April 1917, representatives from Swedish communities across Estonia met in the Swedish church hall in Tallinn and unanimously resolved to found the League of the Swedish People in the Baltic Sea Provinces (*Svenska Folkförbundet i Östersjöprovinserna*), a permanent Swedish political organisation. Pöhl's formulation of the League's purpose was strategic: he argued that the Swedes were not merely a cultural minority but the “indigenous population of Estonia and Ruhnu”, and so were entitled to equal participation in the emerging Estonian autonomy. By framing the community's rights as deep-rooted and territorial, Pöhl positioned the League to demand political rights, including Swedish-language schools, local administrative rights and a guaranteed seat in the new Estonian Temporary Diet (*Ajutine Maanõukogu* or *Maapäev*), the first Estonian parliamentary self-governance institution. These aims were formally adopted as the League's platform at its constitutive meeting on 2 May 1917.<sup>33</sup>

Notably, these 1917–1918 initiatives framed Swedish claims in the idiom of equality, representation and cultural-linguistic guarantees within an autonomous Estonia, while Ruhnu's petitioning would later

31 Statement of the Swedish population of Estonia to the Commissar of the Estland Governorate, 20.03.1917. RA, ERA-R f. 1290, n. 1, s. 100, l. 49.

32 Statement of the Swedish population of Estonia to the Commissar of the Estland Governorate, 20.03.1917. RA, ERA-R f. 1290, n. 1, s. 100, l. 49.

33 M. Kuldkepp. The political choices and outlooks, 415–416.

lean much more heavily on a confirmation-and-privilege logic. This broader Estonian Swedish framework nevertheless mattered because it created recognised minority intermediaries in the Estonian administrative system. In summer 1917, Pöhl became a member of the Temporary Diet, and, in December 1918, he was appointed the Swedish National Minister in the Estonian government. A few months later, this ministerial post was abolished and replaced by that of the Swedish National Secretary attached to the Ministry of Education, taken up by Nikolaus Blees. This positioned Pöhl and Blees as the first intermediaries through whom the Ruhnu islanders went on to channel their grievances and requests.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, Ruhnu entered the German operational horizon: following some earlier seaplane actions against the island, German forces moved to secure the area during Operation Albion.<sup>35</sup> On 13 October, a German unit landed on Ruhnu by seaplane to take control of the lighthouse and remove the remaining Russian personnel.<sup>36</sup> The German pilot Rudolf Pechel, who participated in the operation and later became a prominent journalist and editor, described in his memoir the takeover as peaceful and the reception as warm,<sup>37</sup> even though the community was forced to surrender its entire arsenal of approximately 300 seal-hunting rifles.<sup>38</sup> In a symbolic act of aligning with the new power, an “old, grey-bearded Swede” requested that his rifle be sent to Field Marshal Hindenburg as a token of loyalty. According to Pechel, the islander hoped this personal tribute would secure a direct response or protection from the Field Marshal, much like a feudal subject petitioning a king. Of course, the reply never came. As Pechel wrote with regret, the German High Command was too busy to notice such “psychological imponderables”, leaving the islanders’ attempt to establish a personal bond with their new sovereign unanswered.<sup>39</sup>

Following the Bolshevik seizure of power in Petrograd in October 1917, authority on the Estonian mainland became sharply contested. While the Estonian Temporary Diet had declared itself the supreme authority, Bolshevik institutions and pro-Bolshevik armed formations

34 M. Kuldkepp. *The political choices and outlooks*, 416, 420–421.

35 About Operation Albion, see M. B. Barrett. *Operation Albion: The German Conquest of the Baltic Islands*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2008.

36 Kudas Ruhno saar ära võeti. – *Uus Päevaleht*, 14.11.1917. Later, Pechel celebrated this operation as the first instance in military history of an island being captured solely by air forces: R. Pechel. *Die Besetzung von Runö*. – *Deutsche Rundschau*, October 1937, 41–48, here 48.

37 R. Pechel. *Die Besetzung von Runö*, 46.

38 Kudas Ruhno saar ära võeti. – *Uus Päevaleht*, 14.11.1917.

39 R. Pechel. *Die Besetzung von Runö*, 47. The story of a gift of rifle to Hindenburg is also corroborated by another description of the German takeover of the island: Kudas Ruhno saar ära võeti, *Uus Päevaleht*, 14.11.1917.

asserted control in Tallinn and other urban centres and initiated a campaign of repression against political opponents while disrupting administrative continuity. The countryside was further destabilised by the looting of demoralised soldiers retreating from the front, creating an atmosphere of pervasive insecurity and lawlessness. This volatile situation persisted until the second half of February 1918, when the rapid advance of Imperial German forces (Operation *Faustschlag*) and the retreat of the Bolshevik armed detachments allowed the three-man Estonian Salvation Committee appointed by the Council of Elders of the Temporary Diet to declare Estonia an independent republic on 24 February, just before the arrival of the German forces and the beginning of German occupation on the Estonian mainland.<sup>40</sup>

In the run-up to the German occupation, the circle around Hans Pöhl in Tallinn attempted to internationalise the Estonian Swedish question. On 2 February 1918, the Swedish People's League dispatched a petition to the Swedish envoy in Petrograd, Edvard Brändström. Fearing the unpredictable consequences of the German advance and the Russian retreat, the League implored the Swedish government to intervene diplomatically to "safeguard the rights of the Swedish population" in any coming peace settlement. It also floated attachment to Sweden, Finland or an Åland-type autonomy as the preferred solution; failing that, it asked for Sweden to support Swedish cultural autonomy. Notably, this shows that 'Åland' already functioned as a political template in Swedish activist language already in early 1918.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, the newspaper *Åland* began championing the cause, publishing an article that highlighted the "loyalty and conservative nature" of the Estonian Swedes and urging Sweden not to forget its "tribal kin" across the Baltic.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, Ruhnu and its sister communities were part of a trans-Baltic network that was already then actively soliciting Swedish state protection.

However, as the German occupation consolidated in the spring of 1918, the community's leadership demonstrated its adaptability and turned their attention instead to the new masters in Berlin. On 12 April 1918, the League of the Swedish People submitted a deferential

40 On the chaotic conditions of the "dual power" period, the retreat of Russian forces, and the emergence of the Salvation Committee, see T. U. Raun. *Estonia and the Estonians*. 2nd ed. Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 2001, 101–105; and K. Brüggemann. *Die Gründung der Republik Estland und das Ende des "Einen und unteilbaren Russland": die Petrograder Front des russischen Bürgerkriegs, 1918–1920*. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 2002, 58–64.

41 Swedish Embassy in Petrograd to the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, forwarding a memorandum of the League of the Swedish People in the Baltic Provinces, 02.02.1918. SRA, Arnninge, St. Petersburg, vol. 33.

42 J. Pöhl. *Revolutionen och svenskarna i Estland. – Åland*, 06.02.1918.

memorandum to the head of the German occupation administration in Estonia, Lieutenant General Adolf Freiherr von Seckendorff. This text mobilised a rhetoric of “Germanic” solidarity, thanking the Kaiser for liberating them from Russian terror and framing the inhabitants of Ruhnu and the other islands not merely as Swedes, but as a “Germanic stock” (*germanisk folkstam*) who had battled for its existence for 900 years and who had now secured their national survival thanks to the “mighty German Empire”.<sup>43</sup> This policy of accommodation extended to the very end of the occupation. In November 1918, as plans for a German-dominated United Baltic Duchy client state reached their zenith, Hans Pöhl allowed himself to be elected as the Swedish representative to the Duchy’s *Landesausschuss* (Land Committee) in Riga; an indication that the community was preparing to secure its rights within a German state order should the Estonian Republic fail to materialise.<sup>44</sup> Rather than being exclusively aligned with the project of independent Estonian statehood, the Swedish activists were pragmatic brokers who could speak multiple “languages of power” (democratisation of Russia, Germanic solidarity, etc.) to protect their community interests.

At the same time, Ruhnu’s administrative isolation was deepened by German occupation policy, which dismantled the 1917 autonomy arrangements and reinstated older provincial jurisdictions. As a result, Ruhnu was returned to the jurisdiction of the province of Livland once more as the sole Swedish settlement.<sup>45</sup> This latest step in Ruhnu’s administrative exceptionalism added to its ambiguity of political belonging and probably made it easier to depict the island as a disputed border space rather than an unproblematic part of the Estonian state.

The autumn of the same year brought another sudden change. Germany’s revolution in November 1918, followed by the armistice, allowed the Estonian Temporary Government, which had been forced to operate underground during the occupation, to take the reins of power. The German troops started pulling out of Estonia, coinciding with the beginning of the Estonian War of Independence against the Red Army, which immediately invaded from the east. For months, Ruhnu would be effectively adrift as a “no man’s land” with no police, no mail and no clear sovereign, as the islanders would later describe it.<sup>46</sup>

43 Memorandum of the League of the Swedish People of Estonia to General von Seckendorff, 12.04.1918. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PAAA), RZ 201 21769, 177–180. This memorandum specifically lists Ruhnu (Runö) as a constituent part of this “Germanic stock”.

44 M. Kuldkepp. The political choices and outlooks, 419–420.

45 M. Kuldkepp. The political choices and outlooks, 419.

46 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Memorandum concerning petitions from

The years 1917–1918 laid important groundwork for the Ruhnu community’s later political strategy. The collapse of imperial rule, rapid administrative reconfigurations, and the experience of German occupation made the islanders’ position precarious, although they also pulled Ruhnu into wider political circles. At the same time, the broader Estonian Swedish movement acquired practical experience in petitioning new centres of authority created by revolution and autonomy, translating local concerns into a language of rights, representation and institutional guarantees.

Ruhnu was peripheral to this activity, but the island was repeatedly evoked within it, and, crucially, the organisational infrastructure and intermediaries that emerged began to create channels through which Ruhnu’s local claims could later be routed. Ruhnu thus entered 1919 primed to treat sovereignty not as a settled territorial fact but as a negotiable relationship.

### TRADING SEAL FAT FOR SOVEREIGNTY IN 1919

In the middle of January 1919, Estonia’s emerging state apparatus still had not clarified in formal administrative terms where Ruhnu belonged. This caused some confusion. On a proposal from the Maritime Affairs Department, the Ministry of Trade and Industry asked the Temporary Government on 16 January 1919 to clarify “under whose jurisdiction Ruhnu island falls, whether it is part of Estonia or of Latvia”.<sup>47</sup> The question was answered the next day at cabinet level: among the resolutions dated 17 January 1919, the government explicitly ruled “to recognise Ruhnu island as part of the Estonian Republic”.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Estonia asserted sovereignty over Ruhnu as a matter of formal state decision well before that claim could be made fully effective on the island itself, which, as in most winters, lay isolated behind pack ice.

Therefore, by the first months of 1919, neither Estonia nor Latvia had established a sustained administrative presence on Ruhnu. The first link to Estonian authorities was created through the arrival on the island on 8 May 1919 of an Estonian naval officer, Rudolf Schiller

the inhabitants of Runö, 02.07.1921. SRA, Marieberg, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

47 Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Estonian Temporary Government, 16.01.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 42, l. 1.

48 Eesti Ajutise Valitsuse otsused (17. jaanuar 1919). – Riigi Teataja, 23.01.1919.

(captain 2<sup>nd</sup> rank). The exact circumstances of Schiller's visit are unclear (the sources do not specify who dispatched him there and why), but after his departure, Schiller reported to Prime Minister Konstantin Päts that the islanders had been without contact with the mainland since November and "knew nothing" of the Estonian state. Schiller had temporarily confirmed the village elder Johan Mooks/Mogs in office, told the islanders that Ruhnu continued to fall under the Saaremaa county administration based in Kuressaare, declared former crown property to be property of the Estonian state, forbade trade with "foreign lands" and heard their grievances. Crucially, he also told the islanders that they had "their own Swedish national minister" in Tallinn, and the islanders immediately turned towards this figure.<sup>49</sup> Ruhnu's very first encounter with Estonian sovereignty was thus framed not as popular participation but as mediated access to a patron-like representative at the centre.

The resulting letter from the Ruhnu community to Pöhl (dated 8 May 1919 but preserved in a file registered later in May) is revealing because it is so concrete. Written in Swedish, it opens with a deferential request for help "in our missions", and moves immediately to a list of necessities. The "forest question" comes first, justified by scarcity and invoking the right of the congregation to take what it needed "from the crown's forest", thereby treating this resource as claimable by precedent and necessity rather than purchasable on a market. The next request is for salt, described as an essential commodity for survival. Finally, the letter states that Germans had removed the community's landholding deeds and taken them to Kuressaare. The islanders asked Pöhl to enquire for them in writing, and likewise to ask for the return of the maps of fields, meadows and forest. The letter was signed by a committee headed by Johan Mogs/Mooks as chairman, underscoring that Ruhnu's petitioning activity was organised and hierarchical from the outset. It also led to immediate follow-up: the administrative notes on the same document show the beginning of its bureaucratic life, including a prompt to consult the Trade and Industry Ministry about petroleum and salt.<sup>50</sup>

This May 1919 petition is significant for at least two reasons. First, it shows that even before a stable Estonian administrative presence had been established on Ruhnu, the islanders were already trying to negotiate the practical terms of incorporation by addressing it through a usable intermediary. Secondly, the letter's agenda is materially specific, but

49 Schiller's report on Ruhnu, 10.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 158, l. 50; Eesti Vabariigi maa-ala... – Vaba Maa, 17.05.1919.

50 Petition of the inhabitants of Ruhnu to Hans Pöhl, 08.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 38–39.

its phrasing already presupposes a relationship in which the incoming state can be politely but insistently asked to provide necessities on a preferential basis. The request that the congregation should obtain what it needed “from the crown’s forest” and the appeal for salt “according to our need” are not framed as market transactions or optional acts of charity, but as matters of entitlement and government duty.<sup>51</sup>

In his report to Päts, Schiller had also stated that a boat had been detained near the island carrying three Latvians, one of them a former junior lieutenant Jan Kolme from Mērsrags (Markgrafen) in Courland. The Latvians had told Schiller that the government of Kārlis Ulmanis had declared that Ruhnu belonged to Latvia and placed it under Talsen district (*kreis*); the corresponding proclamations had reportedly been posted in Courland.<sup>52</sup> Soon afterwards, these allegations also appeared in the Estonian press<sup>53</sup> and were taken up by Swedish newspapers, which reported that the Latvian government had proclaimed the island’s union with Latvia.<sup>54</sup> Later, Ruhnu’s pastor Nils Linderstam told Blees that he had heard Latvians had announced Ruhnu as Latvian “in their newspapers”, even if the islanders themselves had not been formally notified.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ruhnu question entered documented ministerial workflow in Tallinn. Schiller’s report had included a description of Ruhnu’s desired exchanges, including seal fat for salt and cartridges.<sup>56</sup> It is unclear where the idea of organising a trade expedition to Ruhnu first appeared, but on 24 May, the Ministry of Trade and Industry asked the State Audit Office to delegate a representative (preferably “someone with prior experience purchasing seal fat”) to participate in the ministry’s planning meeting to be held that day. Two days later, the ministry forwarded the meeting minutes and plan to the State Audit Office for approval and announced a scheduled departure for 27 May (later postponed). The State Audit Office, in turn, issued a written authorisation empowering its officer Jaan Kuusik to join the mission as the audit representative for the inspection and acquisition of seal fat and other material.<sup>57</sup>

51 Petition of the Ruhnu islanders to Pöhl, 08.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 38–39.

52 Schiller’s report on Ruhnu, 10.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 158, l. 50.

53 Eesti Vabariigi maa-ala, kus kuni 8. maini Eesti Vabariigist veel midagi ei teatud. – Vaba Maa, 17.05.1919.

54 Från det isolerade Runö. – Svenska Dagbladet, 22.06.1919; Hvem tillhör Runö? Lettland eller Estland. – *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, 23.06.1919.

55 Linderstam to Blees, 21.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 48–50.

56 Schiller’s report on Ruhnu, 10.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 158, l. 50.

57 Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Head of the Economic Department of the State Audit Office, Tallinn, 24.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 32; Minutes of the meeting on the Ruhnu expedition, 24.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 34; State Audit Office’s

As evident from this paperwork trail, the expedition was explicitly conceived as a combined procurement and incorporation operation. Audit memoranda preserving the ministry's meeting minutes record that the "exchange goods" approved for the expedition included not only commercial staples but also tools of hard and soft power: 20 rifles, roughly 20,000 Arisaka cartridges for Japanese-made rifles, leather and Swedish-language calendars (a gift from Minister Pöhl to the islanders). The same audit material also preserves the protocol's price discipline for seal fat purchases (a ceiling price, with higher rates only under defined conditions), underscoring that the expedition's inducements were intended to be connected to a controlled, auditable procurement regime.<sup>58</sup>

The expedition's own reporting confirms how these commercial and political elements fused on the ground in early June. The delegates departed Tallinn on 30 May, reached Kuressaare on 1 June, and then sailed for Ruhnu in the early hours of 3 June, arriving that afternoon. Because the Food Ministry had supplied only a small quantity of salt, the delegation purchased additional salt in Kuressaare. Once at Ruhnu, the delegates (Blees, Kuusik and others) first negotiated with the island's elders and then held a community meeting at the pastorate. There, Blees addressed the population in Swedish, read out the act of independence, declared the island part of the Estonian Republic, and supervised the raising of the Estonian flag, which was followed by the singing of the Estonian national anthem.<sup>59</sup>

On the procurement side, the same expedition documentation gives precise quantities and a price structure. The delegates bought a large lot of seal fat (recorded as 644 poods), with different price rates applied to different portions of the lot. The transaction was embedded in a credit-backed operation: the ministry issued a substantial advance, most of it was spent on seal fat (with additional costs booked for "representation", shipping and supplies), and the balance was returned to the ministry cashier. In other words, Estonia's first effective move towards Ruhnu

authorization for Jaan Kuusik to participate in the Ruhnu expedition, 26.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 35.

58 V. Reiman-Augi. Audit report to the State Auditor on the Ruhnu expedition and related financial irregularities, 28.07.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 30–31; Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Civil Department of the State Audit Office, Tallinn, 28.10.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 4; Minutes on the Ruhnu expedition, 24.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 34.

59 N. Blees, E. Paldrock, O. Truumees, J. Kuusik. Report of the meeting of the Ruhnu expedition members, 14.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 22.

was not only a political act but also an auditable transaction producing obligations, receipts, and, later, disputes over accounting.<sup>60</sup>

The political incorporation component is equally explicit and connects directly to the islanders' confirmation-and-privilege expectations. The expedition report states that since Ruhnu lacked organised self-defence, the delegates created a local *Kaitseliit* (militia) unit appointing village elder Johan Mogs as commander and issuing rifles and cartridges for local defence. According to the report, the islanders immediately turned this into a bargaining position: since the island lacked any external protection and the population was only a few hundred, they asked for the Ruhnu men to be left as the island's defenders and, on that basis, to be freed from general military service. They also made communications demands that read more like sovereignty terms than requests for charity: a monthly ship to bring post (and a doctor), and repair of a damaged telephone cable to Saaremaa, explicitly described as having both economic and political significance.<sup>61</sup>

From the perspective of the Ruhnu community, these arrangements were understood as a confirmation-in-practice of the exemptions that sustained their customary way of life. No written document was signed on the island during the expedition and the state's own subsequent paperwork framed anything the delegates had done as discretionary relief. Yet later Swedish advocacy distilled the islanders' interpretation of this event into a basic claim: that when Estonia "took over administration of the island", expedition representatives allegedly promised that earlier privileges would remain in force, only for these understandings to be challenged when the state later demanded payment for timber and pursued conscription.<sup>62</sup>

A further shift in 1919 came when Swedish aid for Ruhnu began to be negotiated through Estonian administrative gatekeeping. A telegram from the Estonian Stockholm consulate dated 28 May reported that Swedish donors had assembled a substantial gift consignment for distribution on Ruhnu (including 3,000 kg of sugar, tobacco worth 400 kronor, sacks of wheat flour, a barrel of kerosene, and grain feed) and wished to send it on a Swedish Red Cross vessel bound for Riga that would stop at Ruhnu. Consul Arnold Posti asked for a prompt reply

60 Blees et al. report of the Ruhnu expedition members' meeting, 14.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 22; Reiman-Augi audit report on the Ruhnu expedition, 28.07.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 30–31; J. Adams. Audit report to the head of the Trade Section concerning the Ruhnu expedition accounts, 12.09.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 37–39.

61 Blees et al. report of the Ruhnu expedition members' meeting, 14.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 22.

62 Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

on whether permission could be granted and how customs would be handled, while guaranteeing that the cargo was meant to remain on the island.<sup>63</sup> The Foreign Ministry forwarded the request “in urgent order” to the Ministry of Food, which requested the necessary import licence from the licensing commission and simultaneously asked the Finance Ministry to exempt the shipment from customs duties.<sup>64</sup> By positioning itself as the permitting state through which Swedish patronage would pass Estonia helped demonstrate both to the islanders and to their Swedish supporters that incorporation into Estonia need not immediately sever Ruhnu’s channels of support from Sweden.

At the same time, Estonian responsiveness to Ruhnu’s needs in 1919 cannot be separated from the fact that Latvia was actively contesting the island’s legal status. Although the government had already in January decided explicitly to make Ruhnu a part of the Estonian state,<sup>65</sup> Latvia’s counterclaim was neither abstract nor merely rhetorical. What is more certain than the rumours that circulated in spring 1919, is that the Latvian delegation placed the claim in documentary form in its submission to the Paris Peace Conference, arguing that Ruhnu “must” be included in Latvia on the grounds that the island lay in Latvia’s territorial waters and that its wireless station and lighthouse were indispensable to Riga’s navigation during winter and spring.<sup>66</sup> Latvian press commentary likewise framed the island as an object of peace diplomacy, expressing the hope that the peace conference would recognise Latvia’s claim to Ruhnu.<sup>67</sup>

The idea of the islanders’ possible orientation towards Latvia was also not entirely far-fetched, but, as they themselves stressed, a practical consequence of seasonal connectivity in the Gulf of Riga. On 28 August 1919, the islanders sent a follow-up letter to Bles in Tallinn in which they listed their grievances once more, but also argued that Ruhnu had “from time immemorial” stood in connection with Courland and could not “get by” without it: the island lay closer to the Courland mainland than to Estonia, and at certain times of year it was possible for them to maintain contact only with Courland. They particularly pointed to the winter period, when they had customarily used Kolkasrags (Domesnäs)

63 Estonian Consulate in Stockholm to the Ministry of the Interior, 28.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 8, s. 90, l. 77.

64 Ministry of Food Supply to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 31.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 8, s. 90, l. 78; Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Estonian Consulate in Stockholm, 03.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 8, s. 90, l. 79.

65 “Eesti Ajutise Valitsuse otsused”, Riigi Teataja, 23.01.1919.

66 Mémoire sur la Latvia, presented by the Latvian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, 1919. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (Utenriksdepartementets arkiv), UD, P 10, A 7, 1918, p. 5.

67 Roņu sala. – Brīvā Zeme, 14.08.1919.

as their post station, linking it to basic subsistence: mail, purchasing and bartering for necessities. On that basis, they requested permission to continue, as they had “from of old”, to sell, buy and exchange goods with Courlanders.<sup>68</sup> Beyond any political posturing, this was the material basis that made Latvia a credible reference point in their later bargaining.

On balance, the islanders’ preference for Estonia was quite clear; not only because all other Swedish settlements were in Estonia, but also (as repeatedly emphasised in both Estonia and Sweden) because the community’s seal hunting grounds lay by the Estonian coast and islands.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, by late summer, Latvian officers had reportedly again visited Ruhnu and recommended Latvian rule, prompting the Ruhnu village elder to reiterate in Kuressaare that the community preferred to be attached to Estonia and to remain there.<sup>70</sup> But some ambiguity of allegiance remained. In that setting, local dissatisfaction over supplies, military service, forests, or taxes carried an amplified cost for Estonia: it risked turning grievances over local “privileges” into evidence that Estonia’s sovereignty was merely declaratory or, what’s worse, rejected by the Ruhnu community.

In summary, 1919 was the year in which Ruhnu’s incorporation into Estonia was initiated as an informal, conditional settlement: less a one-time act of allegiance than a sequence of negotiated exchanges. Already the initial assertion of Estonian authority by Rudolf Schiller on 8 May was coupled with the acknowledgement that governance would run through local intermediaries.<sup>71</sup> This started the pattern of petitions, beginning with the islanders’ first approach to Hans Pöhl, where timber and salt appeared as necessities the community expected to obtain through precedent and official help.<sup>72</sup> When the seal fat expedition followed in early June, incorporation was again made a workable arrangement through a blend of material provision and administrative recognition. The expedition’s internal reporting foregrounds the deliberate respect shown to “old customs and traditions”, the necessity of obtaining the full community’s consent, the provision of salt and the purchase of seal fat.

68 Petition of the Ruhnu islanders to Nikolaus Blees, 28.08.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 77–78.

69 T. Undén (Swedish Legation in Riga) to Nothin (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), 05.04.1922. SRA, Marieberg, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079; A. Schiller. Ruhno saar. – Päevaleht, 15.08.1923; Confidential report by the Information Bureau (Laaman) on Ruhnu, 29.08.1923. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 12, s. 360.

70 Lätlased soovivad Ruhno saarele oma valitsust. – Vaba Maa, 01.09.1919.

71 Schiller’s report on Ruhnu, 10.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 158, l. 50.

72 Petition of the Ruhnu islanders to Pöhl, 08.05.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 38–39.

It also records the islanders' own wish to remain the island's defenders and, on that basis, to be exempted from ordinary military service.<sup>73</sup>

By the end of 1919, Estonia's de facto position on Ruhnu was stronger, yet it remained politically sensitive, and the islanders continued to treat their incorporation into Estonia as negotiable. The Latvian rival claim did not disappear, and the Ruhnu community was certainly conscious of the leverage this fact gave them, alongside Sweden's somewhat romanticised interest in its trans-Baltic diaspora. This environment magnified the cost of leaving Ruhnu unadministered and helps to explain why sovereignty over the island was asserted by Estonia not simply by declaring it "Estonian" but by addressing its immediate needs.

### RUHNU'S ÅLAND MOMENT: THE PETITION TO THE KING OF SWEDEN IN 1920

The Tartu Peace Treaty (2 February 1920) ended the Estonian War of Independence and removed Soviet Russia from Estonia's sovereignty equation, but it did not settle Estonia's border with Latvia. Ruhnu therefore remained a live variable in an ongoing interstate dispute. In early 1920, the Latvian official gazette framed Ruhnu as lying under "Estonian occupation".<sup>74</sup> The claim also entered the mechanics of border-making: Latvian representatives repeatedly attempted to place Ruhnu on the agenda of the border commission,<sup>75</sup> which led to mutual suspicions and finger-pointing. In May, the Tallinn daily *Tallinna Teataja* went so far as to claim that the Latvian government planned to transform the idyllic island into a penal colony, a "Baltic Sakhalin" for forced labourers, thereby framing the choice of sovereign as one between traditional liberty under Estonia and existential destruction under Latvia.<sup>76</sup> Conversely, a survey of Latvian press in *Postimees* reported a mirror-image allegation

73 Blee's report to the Minister of the Interior on the Ruhnu expedition, 09.07.1919. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 158, l. 56; Blee et al. report of the Ruhnu expedition members' meeting, 14.06.1919. RA, ERA f. 66, n. 1, s. 99, l. 22.

74 Roņu bagāta. – Valdības Vēstnesis, 01.02.1920; Ajakirjanduse ülevaade. Ruhnu saare küsimus. – Postimees (Hommiku-väljaanne), 04.05.1920.

75 Valga saatuse otsustamine. – Tallinna Teataja, 27.04.1920; Eesti-Läti piiriküsimus. – Sakala, 01.09.1920.

76 Lätlased ja Ruhnu saar. – Tallinna Teataja, 15.05.1920; K. Täht. Ruhnu saare küsimus Läti ja Eesti omavahelistes suhetes ning selle kajastamine perioodikas (1917–1927). BA thesis, University of Tartu, 2017, 24.

from the Latvian side: that it was in fact Estonia that had intended to make Ruhnu a prison.<sup>77</sup>

Others sought to appropriate the islanders' grievances for their own anti-reform agendas. In May 1920, the former Livonian Land Marshal Heinrich von Stryk<sup>78</sup> attempted to draw Ruhnu into a broader Baltic German campaign against the Estonian land reform by presenting the island's church income and pastoral salary arrangements to Swedish interlocutors as evidence that the republic was despoiling a Swedish ecclesiastical foundation. The Estonian Consul Eduard Klaas, however, framed the episode as a baronial "manor intrigue" rather than a genuine defence of the islanders: any historical revenues connected to the manor had been appropriated under the old estate order, not confiscated from the Swedish church by the new Estonian state. In the ensuing press discussion, the new Ruhnu pastor Ernst Gordon publicly distanced himself from von Stryk's claims, denying knowledge of the alleged endowment. The result was therefore not an alliance between Ruhnu and the Baltic Germans over alleged Estonian violation of their rights, but a rapid public clarification that helped keep the island's negotiations with Estonia on a separate track from the simultaneous Estonian–Baltic German controversy.<sup>79</sup>

In the continuing Estonian–Latvian border discussions, Ruhnu turned up as a possible bargaining chip. In June, Estonian press reported on rumours of plans under which Latvia would receive Ruhnu as compensation in a Valga/Valka arrangement.<sup>80</sup> The reports detailed a supposed compromise proposal attributed to Colonel Robinson, an aide to Commissioner Tallents, wherein Estonia would retain the contested town of Valga/Valka, while Latvia would be compensated with other territories and/or money. In the most striking version, Latvia would be allotted Heinaste harbour, Ruhnu, and a large monetary payment of 20 million marks, half of which was to be paid in gold, if the whole of Valga/Valka went to Estonia.<sup>81</sup>

77 Ajakirjanduse ülevaade. Ruhno saare küsimus. – Postimees (Homniku-väljaanne), 04.05.1920.

78 Erroneously named "Kurt von Stryk" in the newspaper articles.

79 E. Klaas (Estonian vice-consul in Stockholm) to the Head of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ed. Virgo), 18.05.1920. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 11, s. 275, l. 15; Baltisk politik i Runöprästens löneförmåner. – Dagens Nyheter, 16.05.1920; Eesti maaseadus ja Rootsi usuasjade ministeerium. – Kaja, 21.05.1920; Mitte Eesti valitsus, vaid Balti parunid on maakoha ära võtnud. – Tallinna Teataja, 21.05.1920; Ruhno saarelt. – Postimees (Homniku-väljaanne), 27.05.1920.

80 Nagu Valgast kuuleme, – Postimees (Homniku-väljaanne), 08.06.1920.

81 This discussion is summarised in K. Täht. Ruhnu saare küsimus Läti ja Eesti omavahelistes suhetes, 25–26.

A compensation scheme involving Ruhnu did not materialise, but the uncomfortable realities of border settlement became very apparent when British Commissioner Stephen Tallents announced on 1 July 1920 his decision which physically divided the railway hub of Valga/Valka between the two states. This drastic solution was widely lampooned in the regional press for its perceived absurdity. In 1921, when the conflict over Ruhnu still continued, Latvian satirical periodical *Suari* suggested that, if Tallents were left in charge, he would apply to Ruhnu the same partition logic and “cut the island, the church, the parsonage, the 37 1/2 inhabitants, 3 houses and the old woodshed in half.”<sup>82</sup>

In late August, when Estonian–Latvian negotiators met in Riga for border talks, the Latvian side again proposed placing both Ruhnu and the Laura colony<sup>83</sup> on the agenda, which the Estonian side explicitly rejected,<sup>84</sup> it nevertheless fed uncertainty. By early September, Swedish newspapers were treating “the Ruhnu question” as an open matter: reporting that Estonia and Latvia were negotiating over an island “currently without sovereignty”, and presenting a possible plebiscite as the mechanism through which the inhabitants’ preference might decide the outcome.<sup>85</sup>

This external attention intersected with the logic of Ruhnu’s earlier conditional incorporation. In Estonian and Swedish narratives alike, the island’s “choice” was framed as a function of governance and privileged treatment rather than abstract constitutional belonging. A widely circulated pro-Estonian account attributed to Ruhnu’s previous Swedish pastor Nils Linderstam shortly after leaving the island asserted that Estonia, unlike Latvia, had repeatedly sent ships, repaired the lighthouse and rescue station, appointed a forest guard, supported schooling, delivered food without charging freight and – crucially – exempted Ruhnu men from military service while allowing extensive access to timber without payment.<sup>86</sup> The argument for Estonia’s claim was thus made by Linderstam in the same privilege-and-confirmation

82 C. Gibson. Attuning to Emotions in the History of Border-Making: The Estonian-Latvian Boundary Commission in 1920. – *Journal of Modern European History*, 2024, 22, 1, 40–54, here 40–41, 52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944231221031>.

83 The “Laura colony” (Estonian: Laura asundus or Laura koloonia) was an ethnically mixed settlement belt around Laura alev in Petseri maakond and the second main contested territory in the Estonian-Latvian border disputes in 1920–1923. See e.g. Eesti-Läti piiriküsimus. Sennise piiri tegelik tõmbamine. Laura asundus. Ruhno saar. – *Vaba Maa*, 19.08.1921; Veel Laura küsimusest. – *Tallinna Teataja*, 21.12.1921.

84 Eesti-Läti piiriküsimus. – *Sakala*, 01.09.1920.

85 Ruhno küsimus Rootsi lehtedes. – (Information Department report), 03.09.1920. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 1, s. 51, l. 10.

86 Ruhnu küsimus. – *Meie Maa*, 11.09.1920.

terms that structured Ruhnu's petitions: through exemptions, supplies and guarantees.

The Estonian response to this publicity shows how quickly petitioning, diplomacy and administrative proof became entangled. In October, the Foreign Ministry forwarded to the Interior Ministry a recommendation from Karl Menning, Estonia's envoy in Stockholm: send a government representative to Ruhnu to secure a written, signed statement of the inhabitants' political preference. This material could then be "spread in the press" in Sweden and strengthen Estonia's position against continued Latvian pressure. The same communication explicitly linked Swedish interest in the matter to the contemporaneous Åland question, noting that the Swedish government had become "somewhat cooler" towards Estonia because it sought French support over Åland and therefore hesitated over moves (such as *de jure* recognition of Estonia) that France might dislike.<sup>87</sup> This shows that Ruhnu was seen by Estonia as a potential reputational problem in a Swedish public sphere shaped by other, very current sovereignty disputes.

Indeed, in the Nordic political discourse in 1920, the Åland question was the most visible contemporary test of how post-imperial border-making might be reconciled with the wishes of a small, linguistically distinct island population. A strategically placed archipelago at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia, the Åland islands were inhabited overwhelmingly by Swedish-speakers. Historically, they had belonged to the Swedish realm until 1809, when Sweden ceded Finland (and Åland with it) to the Romanov Empire. In 1917–1918, the issue re-emerged in acute form because Finland's declaration of independence in December 1917 and subsequent civil war created a moment in which Ålanders claimed that sovereignty had become unsettled enough to reopen the question of allegiance.<sup>88</sup>

Åland activists framed their demand as a matter of popular will and national self-determination, petitioning for reunion with Sweden and presenting the islands as a Swedish community that should not be stranded inside a new state against its wishes. Finland, in contrast, treated Åland as non-negotiable territory essential to the integrity and security of the new republic, and sought to contain the dispute by insisting on sovereignty while exploring concessions in the direction of autonomy. By 1920 the conflict had moved beyond bilateral argument into a wider

87 Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of the Interior, forwarding a letter from the Estonian envoy in Stockholm, 27.10.1920. RA, ERA F. 957, n. 11, s. 494, l. 69–70.

88 J. Barros. *The Åland Islands Question: Its Settlement by the League of Nations*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1968.

international arena: it was being discussed in terms of plebiscites, minority guarantees, and the problems of small communities whose linguistic identity did not align neatly with the borders being drawn after the First World War.<sup>89</sup>

For precisely this reason, Åland provided an immediately intelligible template (both rhetorically and procedurally) for how a Swedish-speaking island could be argued about in public opinion and diplomacy. This 'Åland moment' also sparked debate in the Estonian Swedish community.

In spring 1920, the organ of the League of the Swedish People and the only Estonian Swedish newspaper *Kustbon* (edited by Nikolaus Blees), became a key arena in which some Estonian Swedish activists tested how far they could push from Swedish cultural autonomy claims towards a more territorial language of autonomy. Writing under the signature "M. K.", one of them argued that the postwar moment had elevated "the nations' right of self-determination" into a practical political lever, explicitly invoking the Ålanders' struggle for reunion with Sweden. M. K. insisted that Aiboland – a collective term for all Estonian Swedish settlements – also needed its own *landsting*, i.e. a representative assembly, and even suggested that, if Estonian authorities resisted the idea, "the council in Paris" (i.e. the Paris Peace Conference) could function as a kind of ultimate court of appeal.<sup>90</sup> In this key, Åland served as a moral analogy and an imagined procedural pathway: self-determination could be operationalised through institutional claims framed as both locally necessary and internationally intelligible.

Blees's published response did not reject the autonomy idea so much as discipline it. He stressed strategic sequencing and institutional feasibility: rather than leaping directly to a territorial legislature, the Swedish movement should prioritise attainable organisational forms and representative mechanisms that could function within Estonia's administrative and political framework. In effect, Blees reformulated the autonomy question as a problem of building capacity (structures, procedures and legitimacy) before escalating demands to maximal institutional endpoints. Hans Pöhl's contributions to the debate similarly emphasised consolidation, but from the angle of political

89 See League of Nations. The Aaland Islands question: Report of the International Committee of Jurists entrusted by the Council of the League of Nations with the task of giving an advisory opinion upon the legal aspects of the Aaland Islands question. Harrison & Sons, London, 1920.

90 [M. K.]. Vi fordra. – *Kustbon*, 03.03.1920; [M. K.]. Aibolands landsting. – *Kustbon*, 14.04.1920.

architecture: he stressed the need for durable national organisation, rules of representation and internal funding mechanisms, and treated “self-government” not as a slogan to be imported wholesale from the Finnish-Åland dispute but as something that would have to be designed to fit Estonia’s constitutional and administrative realities.<sup>91</sup>

This discussion did not go unnoticed abroad. In June 1920, Estonia’s envoy in Finland, Oskar Kallas, wrote to Prime Minister Jaan Tõnisson, noting that the dispute over Åland was “running high” in Finland and urged the Estonian government to inspire newspaper editors to back Finland morally in the matter. Kallas argued that even Finland’s Swedish-speakers largely opposed Åland’s separation and that critical voices could be heard in Sweden as well. Kallas then immediately turned to a domestic analogy and proposed that such press positioning could simultaneously serve as a stance “regarding our coastal Swedes”, whom their own newspaper *Kustbon* wanted to make “independent” via Paris, explicitly glossing this as *mutatis mutandis*, “Åland in Estonia”.<sup>92</sup>

It was in this intellectual climate that Ruhnu’s own petitioning strategy acquired its sharpest international edge. On 18 October 1920, a *landskap* (village assembly) meeting took place on the island, and after a speech by the new Swedish pastor Ernst Gordon explicitly invoking the community’s former connection with “old Sweden”, the meeting resolved to petition the Swedish king and to approach Swedish authorities about placing Ruhnu under Swedish protection or otherwise arranging its attachment to Sweden.<sup>93</sup>

The petition’s opening adopts the deferential royal-supplique genre while simultaneously presenting the islanders as a coherent corporate community. It begins with language of loyalty, emphasising an “old longing” to be reunited with the Swedish fatherland, before anchoring it in demographic and historical claims. Ruhnu is described as an island inhabited “for centuries” by an exclusively Swedish population who have remained Swedish “in heart and soul” even as subjects of foreign rulers. The petition thereby positions Sweden as the proper moral addressee for a community that insists it never consented to becoming anything else.<sup>94</sup>

91 [H. P.]. Vår nationella organisation. – *Kustbon*, 10.03.1920; [N. B.]. Vårt närmaste mål. – *Kustbon*, 17.03.1920; [N. B.]. Aibolands självstyrelse. – *Kustbon*, 21.04.1920; [H. P.]. Om Estlandssvenskarnas självstyrelse. – *Kustbon*, 28.04.1920.

92 O. Kallas (Estonian Legation in Helsinki) to Prime Minister Jaan Tõnisson, 18.06.1920. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 1578, l. 239.

93 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079; B. Johansson (Swedish Consulate in Mariehamn) to the Cabinet Secretary of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 03.11.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

94 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

To make this moral claim credible, the petition foregrounds a history of Swedish patronage in explicitly institutional terms. It points to the long-standing provision of Swedish clergy and support for local education, and treats the 1912 church, financed largely through Swedish contributions, as a material monument to Sweden's continuing engagement with Ruhnu. It also invokes Swedish wartime aid as a lived experience of protection, suggesting that the relationship between Ruhnu and Sweden was understood as reciprocal: Sweden had acted as a distant patron, and the islanders had interpreted those acts of patronage as confirmation that they remain within Sweden's sphere of concern.<sup>95</sup>

Only after establishing this patron–client relationship does the petition turn to the post-imperial settlement, where it deploys a notably flexible understanding of sovereignty. The collapse of the Romanov Empire is presented as having opened a moment in which the island's status is unsettled, allowing the petitioners to claim that Ruhnu was effectively “no man's land” (*ingen mans land*).<sup>96</sup> Rhetorically, this kept the island's future available to potential Swedish intervention by casting current governance as provisional and the international settlement as incomplete.

The petition is particularly notable for how explicitly it then steps onto the terrain of plebiscitary self-determination. Rather than arguing through the more common Ruhnu repertoire of negotiated exemptions, it goes on to frame the central issue as the community's right to decide its state allegiance in accordance with national identification and historic connection, asserting that “each people itself should be allowed to decide where, politically, it wishes to belong”. It reports rumours that the Estonian–Latvian dispute might be resolved through a vote (*omröstning*) and within that framing, the petition's core request is direct: the islanders ask to be reunited with Sweden and to become Swedish citizens (*rikssvenskar*), insisting that they do not wish to become subjects of either of the new Baltic republics.<sup>97</sup> Timed to exploit the perceived fluidity of the post-imperial period and adopting the rhetoric of self-determination, it places the Swedish king in the position of the potential protector and the political solution to the “Ruhnu question”.

95 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

96 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

97 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

In Estonia, the islanders' appeal remained unknown or at least did not generate press debate. In Åland, it surfaced briefly when on 3 November 1920 the newspaper *Åland* carried a brief notice, explicitly based on a private letter from Ruhnu, which stated that the islanders had addressed the Swedish king in a "mass petition", seeking to have the island placed under Sweden's protection and thereby obtain security for "language and culture".<sup>98</sup> The Swedish consulate in Mariehamn immediately forwarded this item to Stockholm, adding that the report rested on a letter sent to a student (Dreier) from his father, a farmer on Ruhnu.<sup>99</sup>

On the Swedish state side, the petition did land in the administrative machinery even if it did not produce immediate action. A later internal Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum records that on 5 November 1920 a petition addressed to the King, signed by a large number of Ruhnu inhabitants, arrived "with the ordinary post" at the Foreign Ministry; it then outlines the petition's core elements (centuries-old Swedish population; Swedish aid in pastors, church funding and wartime provisions; the claim that circumstances had changed after World War; and the request to be reunited with Sweden). The memo goes on to note that the petition had "hitherto" not led to any measure, but it was prepared for presentation within the Foreign Affairs Council (*Utrikesnämnden*). This fact shows that Stockholm still treated the matter as something that had to be recorded, summarised and managed by Swedish diplomacy.<sup>100</sup>

In 1920, the Ruhnu question entered public view through the Åland-inflected communicative space in which "small Swedish islands in new states" were being discussed as a recognisable category. This made their petition to the Swedish King both intelligible and, in strategic terms, well-timed. That timing mattered because the islanders were trying to preserve, for as long as possible, the framing of Ruhnu as an open question rather than a settled fact of interstate border-making. The petition's own rhetoric stressing that only now could the island's inhabitants give political voice to their long-standing Swedish identification, helped to keep sovereignty supposedly unresolved and therefore negotiable.<sup>101</sup> Unlike the previous petitions, this one engaged

98 Hava runöborna vädjat till Sverige? – Åland, 03.11.1920.

99 B. Johansson (Swedish Consulate in Mariehamn) to the Cabinet Secretary of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 03.11.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

100 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on Runö petitions, 02.07.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

101 Petition from the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 18.10.1920. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

with the idea of self-determination, but expressed it through sentiments of communal continuity, patronage and the moral authority of the Swedish motherland, rather than through a universalist theory of citizenship. In the end, this form of self-determination was fully consistent with the broader Ruhnu political approach since 1919: the islanders treated incorporation as conditional and revisable and saw external patrons as instruments for enforcing (or restoring) the practical confirmations on which their customary life depended.

Notably, possibly the same “M. K.” who had argued for Aiboland’s territorial autonomy in Kustbon in spring 1920, wrote in 1922 an article about Ruhnu for the newspaper *Åland*, where he reworked the island’s significance in an archipelago idiom. Addressing “Åland sailors” (*Åländska sjömän*), he pointed to Ruhnu’s similar reputation for dangerous banks and repeated a supposed tradition that the island’s first settlers were storm-driven Åland seal-hunters. He thus symbolically folded Ruhnu into the same Swedish-island world that had made Åland a *cause célèbre*.<sup>102</sup>

### THE DUAL-ADDRESS PETITIONS OF 1921 AND ESTONIA’S DE FACTO CONFIRMATION OF RUHNU’S PRIVILEGES

By 1921, Ruhnu’s brief “Åland moment” – the attempt to convert postwar diplomatic fluidity into a sovereignty claim by appealing over Estonia’s head to the Swedish crown – was already over. In Sweden, the petition received in November 1920 was later explicitly noted as not having to any measure<sup>103</sup> and on 5 February 1921, Sweden, alongside Norway and Denmark, formally recognised Estonia as an independent state.<sup>104</sup> This meant that any official Swedish intervention was now difficult precisely because the island lay under Estonian sovereignty.<sup>105</sup> The practical consequence for Ruhnu was that the “no man’s land”

102 Runö. Svenskön i Riga-viken. – Åland, 26.08.1922.

103 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on Runö petitions, 02.07.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

104 See M. Kuldkepp. Põhjamaine Eesti: rahvusriigi süünd. Varrak, Tallinn, 2024, 281.

105 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on Runö petitions, 02.07.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

rhetoric collapsed back into administrative bargaining over the questions that had surfaced in 1919: forest use, conscription, and taxation.

On 6 May 1921, the community held another meeting and decided to compose a renewed address to the King of Sweden. This petition was once again to emphasise their wish to be reunited with Sweden, but its argumentative weight was to lie in the well-known repertoire of grievances and what was framed as broken Estonian promises to solve them.<sup>106</sup>

The text of this petition stressed that the island's economy and survival were "by nature" dependent on access to the crown forest (for fuel, building timber, boat timber), and presented earlier arrangements under Russian rule in terms of tolerated or lightly charged use rather than market-priced extraction. The petition then framed the 1919 Estonian takeover as a moment of promised continuity: when the Estonian flag was first raised by representatives of the new republic, the islanders claimed they had been assured that their earlier "benefits" would not be removed. Yet they were now being asked to pay compensation for timber already cut, faced the calling-up of all men of conscription age, and were threatened with heavier taxes. The new request to the Swedish king therefore combined aspiration and fallback: reunion with Sweden remained the ideal, but the immediate plea was for Swedish help in securing, "as long as" Ruhnu was administered from Estonia, continued free access to necessary timber, exemption from military service and relief from onerous taxes.<sup>107</sup> This was, in effect, a recalibration of the strategy of the previous year: Sweden was still invoked as the proper moral patron of the island, but the petition's operative goal was to mobilise Swedish authority as protector of exemptions under Estonian sovereignty, not to ask it to step up as an alternative sovereign.

That this strategy worked better is demonstrated by Swedish files showing that the new petition entered formal diplomatic processing. A Foreign Ministry memorandum notes that on 1 June 1921 Pastor Gordon had personally delivered a new petition dated 6 May 1921. The memo then summarised the same triad of issues (forest, military service, taxes) and highlighted the islanders' claim that Estonian representatives had promised continuity when the Estonian flag was raised. Crucially, it then drew a policy conclusion in terms of sovereignty constraints: an official Swedish intervention could not be contemplated

<sup>106</sup> Excerpt from the minutes of the Ruhnu village assembly, 06.05.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

<sup>107</sup> Petition of the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 06.05.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

but an informal approach through Sweden’s diplomatic representative in Tallinn in support of the islanders’ wishes might be possible.<sup>108</sup>

On the Estonian side, the same months show attempts to regularise Ruhnu’s requests into administratively manageable decisions, especially regarding forest use. A cabinet decision of 20 May 1921 instructed the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that islanders could obtain firewood “for the cleaning of the forests”, while any allocation of usable timber was to proceed only through regulated felling permits. In other words, forest access was cast as a work-linked concession rather than confirmation of an inherited right.<sup>109</sup>

At the same time, the continued salience of “the Ruhnu question” also worried Estonian Swedish activists who had rejected M. K.’s programme of territorial autonomy for Aiboland. A letter in April from the chairman of the board of the Swedish Teachers’ Association Joel Nyman to Hans Pöhl noted, on the basis of newspaper reports, that Latvia again appeared to be asserting a claim to Ruhnu. Framing the island as “in so many respects” closely bound to Swedish Estonia – indeed as constituting an “organic whole” with it – Nyman warned that its “detachment” from the other Swedish settlements would harm not only Ruhnu but Swedish Estonia as a collective, and urged Pöhl to issue a public protest (either as parliamentary representative or in the name of the Swedish People’s League) against Latvian propaganda, arguing that organised opinion might matter not only in Estonia and Latvia but also “abroad”.<sup>110</sup> This minority-solidarity logic closely resembles the stance visible in the contemporaneous Åland dispute, where (as reported by Oskar Kallas) even most Finland-Swedes opposed Åland’s separation from Finland.<sup>111</sup>

By summer 1921, the interstate frame that had helped keep the Ruhnu question rhetorically open was narrowing but not gone. Press reports on border-commission proceedings state that Tallents again removed Ruhnu from the Estonian–Latvian agenda at Estonia’s insistence.<sup>112</sup> Yet, while Estonian officials insisted that Ruhnu’s state affiliation was already decided and not open to renewed bargaining,

108 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on Runö petitions, 02.07.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

109 Decision of the Government of the Republic concerning timber use on Ruhnu, 20.05.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 3, s. 6266, l. 1.

110 J. Nyman to Hans Pöhl, 10.04.1921. SRA, Marieberg, Hans Pöhl, vol. II.

111 O. Kallas (Estonian Legation in Helsinki) to Prime Minister Jaan Tõnisson, 18.06.1920. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 1, s. 1578, l. 239.

112 *Latvijast. Jälle Ruhno saare küsimus.* – *Päevaleht*, 04.04.1921.

Latvia continued to treat the island as part of a wider bundle of unsettled border questions.<sup>113</sup>

In this conjuncture, Estonia performed its sovereignty visibly by bringing the head of government to the island. In early July 1921, State Elder Konstantin Päts travelled from Kuressaare to Ruhnu by motorboat, accompanied by several senior officials. In newspapers, the visit was reported as both inspection and reassurance: Päts was said to have spent the day on the island, hearing the inhabitants and noting their concerns.<sup>114</sup> The islanders reportedly asked Päts directly whether the island's political belonging was now definitively settled, and his answer – reported as unequivocal – was presented as calming local uncertainty and reducing the space for Latvian-oriented rumours. At the same time, Estonian press coverage cast Ruhnu's "choice" in strongly practical terms: although the islanders were described as Swedish-speakers, they were also represented as communicating readily in Estonian and as accepting Estonian rule because it best secured their livelihood: above all access to seal-hunting grounds in Estonian territorial waters.<sup>115</sup>

Beyond informal conversations during Päts's visit, the Ruhnu community decided to compose yet another petition. Received on 23 July 1921 and rooted in a *landskap* decision of 13 July, it was addressed "most humbly" to the "President of the Estonian Republic". It explicitly invoked the border dispute and the possibility of a plebiscite, and it framed the islanders' political position as preference-based ("with whom we want to belong"). After this introduction, however, it immediately turned to Ruhnu's usual programme of exceptions. The petition asked for continued free access to necessary timber from the state forest (especially for fuel and boats), for tax relief and reshaping of burdens (including explicit mention of inheritance taxation), for exemption from general conscription for a fixed period (framed as a long-term guarantee), and for permission to retain the community's firearms – thirteen rifles previously supplied by the 1919 seal fat expedition – rather than being required to hand them back.<sup>116</sup>

Estonian records suggest a readiness to address at least some of Ruhnu's concerns, but the matter was certainly helped by the fact

113 J. Seljamaa. Ruhnlaste arvamine Ruhno saare allumisest. – Vaba Maa, 14.07.1921.

114 Riigivanem Ruhno saarel. – Meie Maa, 09.07.1921; Riigivanem Ruhno saarel. – Vaba Maa, 13.07.1921.

115 Ruhnosaarlastel tahavad Eesti vabariigi alla jääda. – Vaba Maa, 11.07.1921; Riigivanem Ruhno saarel. – Vaba Maa, 13.07.1921; J. Seljamaa. Ruhnlaste arvamine Ruhno saare allumisest. – Vaba Maa, 14.07.1921.

116 Petition of the inhabitants of Ruhnu to the Estonian State Elder. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 15–17, 42.

that the islanders' dual-address strategy soon also produced help from Sweden. Its role as Ruhnu's external patron became concrete again in September, when Sweden's representative in Tallinn delivered to the Estonian State Elder Päts an informal, unsigned memorandum. Dated 12 September, this document was carefully framed so as not to challenge Estonia's sovereignty: it explicitly acknowledges that Ruhnu is practically and economically bound to Estonia, while relaying the islanders' anxiety that conditions had worsened under the new administration and that their future looked insecure. The memorandum foregrounds the same domains that were central to Ruhnu's own petitions (forest use, conscription and fiscal burdens) and does so in a language of continuity: the islanders are presented as insisting that under the previous regime they had enjoyed special arrangements in these fields, and that when the transfer occurred they were promised that those arrangements would not be withdrawn. The aim of this Swedish intervention was thus not a challenge to Estonia's sovereignty, but it certainly amounted to pressure for a style of rule compatible with Ruhnu's inherited "specialness".<sup>117</sup>

This support for Ruhnu exceptionalism apparent in the Swedish documents reflects the broader Swedish tendency to frame the island as a culturally valuable Swedish enclave: a "paradise for ethnographers", as Dr Ernst Klein described it<sup>118</sup> or a "living museum" (as put by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself),<sup>119</sup> whose integrity could be endangered by coercive state use. In April 1921, Swedish newspapers (drawing on the Estonian Baltic German paper *Revaler Bote*) had reported with evident alarm that the Estonian government had designated Ruhnu a place of expulsion (*utvisningsort*) for persons deemed undesirable on the mainland. This, it was feared, would transform "old, wonderful Runö" into a dumping ground for unwanted outsiders. The Estonian consulate in Stockholm immediately sought to neutralise the story by issuing a correction to the Swedish press: the island in question was not Ruhnu at all but Kihnu in Pärnu Bay, explicitly described as having no Swedish population.<sup>120</sup> Regarding Latvia, similar anxieties were more persistent: in August 1923 Torsten Undén warned Stockholm that, if Latvia became master of the island, measures might be taken "without regard to the population" that would be experienced as hateful, noting circulating

117 Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

118 E. K—n [Ernst Klein]. Runö – ett paradis för etnografer. Intressanta fynd. – Svenska Dagbladet, 26.10.1922.

119 Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

120 Runö icke förvisningsort. En förklaring från estniska konsulatet. – Svenska Dagbladet, 10.04.1921; Rootsi eksiärevus. – Sotsialdemokraat, 15.04.1921.

rumours that Latvia wished to establish a penal-prisoner colony on Runö and would probably station troops there.<sup>121</sup>

The September 1921 memorandum also shows the limits of what Stockholm was prepared to do for Ruhnu. The operative policy line had been formulated in the Foreign Ministry handling of the islanders' May 1921 petition: an official intervention could not be contemplated given Estonia's rights as sovereign, but it might be "possible and appropriate" to make an informal approach through Sweden's diplomatic representative in Tallinn in support of the islanders' wishes.<sup>122</sup> The September memorandum was the practical implementation of that line: an attempt to keep Sweden present as a patron without reviving the "Ruhnu as an open sovereignty question" framing of the previous year.

Under pressure from two directions – the islanders themselves and their Swedish allies – Päts signalled a clear willingness to make concessions to the islanders' demands.<sup>123</sup> Yet the following months and years reveal how difficult it was to translate Ruhnu's "privilege grammar" into administratively acceptable forms. The outcome, accordingly, was not a clean transition into a codified territorial autonomy, but a piecemeal politics of confirmation: discrete concessions and administrative accommodations that kept the island's core demands subject to case-by-case bargaining and, crucially, reversible as administrative policy rather than entrenched right.

Where clear concessions can be documented, they appear as *ad hoc* decisions that satisfy a particular demand without necessarily endorsing the wider claim behind it. A good example is the firearms question. Ruhnu's petition to the State Elder in July 1921 explicitly included the request to retain the thirteen rifles (of the original twenty supplied in 1919) rather than being required to return them. Their claim rested on the assertion that expedition representatives had made oral promises to this effect in 1919.<sup>124</sup> In September 1921, the issue was processed inside the Estonian state as a matter of political prudence: an internal report and ministerial proposal warned that demanding payment or reclamation would probably produce needless resentment on an already sensitive

121 T. Undén (Swedish Legation in Riga) to the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, private letter, 26.08.1923. SRA, Marieberg, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

122 Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on Runö petitions, 02.07.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079; Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

123 See Päts's handwritten resolutions (to consult the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Interior) attached to the Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52.

124 Petition of the inhabitants of Ruhnu to the Estonian State Elder. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 15–17, 42

island. Consequently, the state retrospectively regularised the arming of 1919 by formal recognition that the rifles would be treated as community property, free of charge. This is precisely the kind of ‘confirmation’ outcome the petitions presupposed: exceptional local arrangements of unclear legal standing converted into administratively recognised exceptions.<sup>125</sup>

Forestry is the clearest case where ‘confirmation’ turned into regulation rather than recognition, and this through protracted administrative handling rather than a single sovereign act. In the islanders’ own narrative, access to fuel, building timber and boat timber belonged to the core of their customary order, and they traced its renewed legitimacy to assurances given at the moment of transfer in 1919. Already in late August 1919, they reminded Blees that, when Estonian representatives visited the island, they had asked for the free use of the forest for repairs and fuel and had been told this would be allowed, with a written permit to follow.<sup>126</sup> By 1921, that remembered assurance was being experienced as fragile and reversible. In May, the second petition to the Swedish King framed the island’s survival as “by nature” dependent on the crown forest and treated the new demands for compensation and controls as a breach of the continuity promised when the Estonian flag was raised.<sup>127</sup>

The Estonian state, however, processed the same issue through the administrative logic of state forestry. As already noted, a cabinet decision in May 1921 allowed household firewood without payment but tied the concession to an obligation “to clean the forests”, while other timber was to be handled through ministerial regulation and standard permits. Wood was therefore understood as a supervised state resource rather than an inherited communal entitlement.<sup>128</sup> That gap in framing persisted into the following years and repeatedly pulled the “Ruhnu question” back into ministerial paperwork even after other issues cooled. In May 1922, the agricultural administration explicitly reconstructed the chain of earlier decisions and reiterated a key state premise: that, under the Russian regime, the islanders had not possessed any general right to free extraction from the state forest, implying that “old privileges” were at best partial, at worst exaggerated, and therefore could only be

125 Report to the Minister of Trade and Industry on rifles issued to the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 01.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 3; Proposal of the Minister of Trade and Industry concerning rifles issued to the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 13.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 33.

126 Ruhnu inhabitants’ petition to Blees, 28.08.1919. RA, ERA f. 1108, n. 8, s. 4, l. 77–78.

127 Petition of the inhabitants of Runö to the King of Sweden, 06.05.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

128 Decision of the Government of the Republic on timber provision for the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 20.05.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 3, s. 6266, l. 1.

continued as a policy justified by need, not as the legal confirmation of an ancient right.<sup>129</sup>

By 1923 the same anxieties over forest were still being reported as politically combustible, intersecting with rumours of Latvian agitation and the islanders' continuing sensitivity to anything that looked like administrative "normalisation" (i.e. treating Ruhnu like any other rural district).<sup>130</sup> A compromise came in July of the same year in the form the state found administratively tolerable: renewed provision of timber as an exceptional measure to stabilise the community, reported publicly as a discretionary concession rather than as the restoration of a right.<sup>131</sup>

Fiscal officials from the Finance Ministry's direct tax administration responded coolly to Ruhnu's attempt to turn past fiscal practice into a permanent privilege. In the July 1921 address to the Estonian head of state, the islanders had grounded their complaint in the history of land redemption: once they had gained the right to buy their holdings from the crown and the purchase sum had been partly paid and partly remitted, they claimed that their income taxes had been "very small", and they now demanded that these "old rights" be left in place despite rising assessments.<sup>132</sup> The Finance Ministry's response of 26 August 1921 dismantled this narrative, insisting that the cancellation of redemption arrears after the 1905 revolution could not be treated as an island-specific tax entitlement, and argued that under the Russian government Ruhnu had not enjoyed "any special privileges or reliefs" beyond what it described as general Saaremaa-wide tax abatements. On that basis, the ministry found "no need" to introduce any Ruhnu-specific concessions in land or income taxation.<sup>133</sup>

Beyond the tax issue, which yielded no positive results for the islanders, conscription was the hardest domain to convert into an explicit, formal exception, since it cut so clearly against the republican state's core principle of uniform obligation. Swedish diplomatic reporting from Tallinn relayed that Ruhnu's requests in this area were discussed sympathetically in administrative circles, but also that the War

129 Ministry of Agriculture to the Government of the Republic, 29.05.1922. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725.

130 Confidential report by the Information Bureau (Laaman) on Ruhnu, 29.08.1923. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 12, s. 360.

131 Ministry of Agriculture (Forestry Department) to the Government of the Republic, proposal on Ruhnu forest use policy, 05.07.1923. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 3, s. 6342, l. 1; Ruhnu saare elanikkudele antakse tasuta metsamaterjaale. – Vaba Maa, 08.07.1923.

132 Petition of the inhabitants of Ruhnu to the Estonian State Elder. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 15–17, 42.

133 Report of the Direct Taxes Head Administration of the Ministry of Finance on the tax burden of the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 26.08.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 24–26.

Ministry resisted the creation of an overtly privileged legal category: such exemptions would violate the “equal basis” principle and invite copycat demands. Even when Estonian officials signalled willingness to “take account” of the islanders’ wishes, the workable horizon was typically framed as an informal or narrowly delimited accommodation rather than a statutory exemption.<sup>134</sup>

Over the following year, however, a pragmatic compromise nevertheless emerged that redefined what this exemption could mean in administrative practice. Instead of abolishing military service in principle, the solution was to displace it into locally bounded duty compatible with the island’s labour needs and strategic functions. According to a government decision of 16 June 1922, Ruhnu conscripts could serve their term on the island (explicitly linked to duty at the Ruhnu lighthouse), while any wartime mobilisation of Ruhnu reservists was left to the discretion of the commander-in-chief.<sup>135</sup> This was far from a timeless privilege, but it was duly implemented as shown in later communications.<sup>136</sup> It also produced the kind of outcome the islanders could treat as functional confirmation of their claimed exceptional status.

Taken together, the resolutions of these domains (firearms, forestry, taxation and conscription) reveal the underlying logic of the 1921–1923 settlement. It was not a simple capitulation to the islanders, but a partial translation of their privilege grammar into the language of the modern state. Where the islanders sought exemptions, the state successfully recoded them as specific duties: the freedom from conscription became the duty of local defence, just as the right to timber was reframed as a labour obligation in the state forest. Crucially, where such translation proved unacceptable, as with the retrospective tax claims, the state held firm, proving that the “privilege” logic had hard limits. The ultimate result was a functional hybrid: a set of administrative arrangements that allowed the community to live as if under their idea of the ancient Swedish Law, while allowing the state to govern as if it were maintaining a uniform legal order.

134 Swedish memorandum concerning Runö, 12.09.1921. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 5, s. 725, l. 52; Wirsen report on the Runö petition, 02.10.1921. SRA, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

135 State Secretary to Minister of War, notice of the Government decision of 16.06.1922 permitting Ruhnu conscripts to remain in service on the island at the lighthouse, 19.06.1922. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 4, s. 1326, l. 10.

136 Ministry of War to the Government of the Republic, report on the fulfilment of compulsory military service by the inhabitants of Ruhnu, 04.09.1923. RA, ERA f. 31, n. 4, s. 1326, l. 4.

## CONCLUSION

Later reporting and memoranda underscore how consciously the islanders treated sovereignty as leverage for extracting (or restoring) their claimed exceptions. A September 1923 Swedish memorandum (based on information from Dr. Ernst Klein of the Nordic Museum, who had done fieldwork on Ruhnu) stated that Ruhnu people had no serious wish to exchange Estonian nationality for Latvian but had “simulated” indifference to that possibility in order to produce “healthy anxiety” in the Estonian government and thereby make it more accommodating on their “special wishes”.<sup>137</sup> Estonian internal communications corroborated this assessment. A report by journalist Eduard Laaman from August of the same year, which detailed conversations with the Swedish envoy Torsten Undén, characterised the islanders as “very cunning” (*väga kavalad*) – while also remarking on their outwardly naive presentation – and explicitly framed their demands regarding forest management and limited conscription as an attempt to “extort” (*välja pressida*) privileges. The report concluded that the state nonetheless had to meet these demands “to the last possibility” to prevent the islanders from drifting towards Latvia, even if their economic dependence on seal hunting in Estonian waters made a genuine exit unlikely.<sup>138</sup>

This conclusion on part of Laaman is evidence of how well their sustained and successful petitioning campaign had served the needs of the Ruhnu community. It had also set Ruhnu apart from other Swedish settlements in Estonia, which, as far as is known, engaged in petitioning only under the umbrella of SOV/League of the Swedish People, and did not demand special local privileges during this period. Under the leadership of figures like Hans Pöhl, other Swedes pursued their rights through Estonia’s domestic political process, lobbying for cultural autonomy, Swedish-language schools and equitable land reform.<sup>139</sup> Unlike the Ruhnu case, these efforts were collaborative with the Estonian state rather than explicitly conditional and focused on minority rights rather than historic exemptions from general law.

Ruhnu’s exceptionalism stemmed from a convergence of geography and memory. Unlike the other Swedes, who lived mostly

137 Memorandum by Eric Gyllenstierna based on Dr. Ernst Klein’s observations, 25.09.1923. SRA, Marieberg, UD, 1920 års dossiersystem, HP, vol. 1079.

138 Confidential report by the Information Bureau (Laaman) on Ruhnu, 29.08.1923. RA, ERA f. 957, n. 12, s. 360.

139 See M. Kuldkepp. The Estonian Swedish National Minority and the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law of 1925. – Nationalities Papers, 2022, 50, 5, 923–941. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.86>.

interspersed with Estonians and had been subject to Baltic German landlords, the Ruhnu islanders inhabited a homogeneous, geographically isolated “crown domain” with a strong tradition of self-governance. Their distinct collective memory of local rights made the universal obligations of the new Estonian state feel like a degradation of status rather than a democratic gain. Furthermore, their isolation and status as a contested territory between Estonia and Latvia allowed them effectively to frame themselves as a “no man’s land” in the eyes of foreign observers, a rhetorical luxury unavailable to other Swedish villages. Thus, while Pöhl and the mainland leadership worked from late 1918 onwards to integrate Swedes into the republic, facing only occasional criticism from activists keen to bring up the Åland example, Ruhnu mobilised its peripheral status to keep the republic at arm’s length.

The diplomatic window that made this strategy finally closed in 1923, when Estonia and Latvia signed, then ratified a supplementary border agreement that definitively assigned Ruhnu to Estonia.<sup>140</sup> This formally ended the “floating” status of the island and removed the Latvian threat that had given the islanders political leverage. Yet, by the time the geopolitical door closed, the Ruhnu anomaly had already been successfully embedded into the administrative fabric of the Estonian state.

Importantly, the case of Ruhnu offers a counter-narrative to the standard history of post-imperial state-building, where small minority communities are typically portrayed as passive objects of diplomatic bargaining, swept up in the “unmixing of peoples” or subjected to the nationalising policies of new states.<sup>141</sup> The Swedish fishermen of Ruhnu demonstrated a remarkable capacity to reverse this dynamic. By exploiting the geopolitical fluidity of 1919–1921, they leveraged their peripheral status into political power to negotiate the terms of their loyalty to Estonia. In this sense, their petitions were not simply reactions to state-level decisions, but drivers that helped condition them. The fact that Estonia hurried to solidify control with material incentives in 1919, and that Sweden engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy in 1921, would be difficult to explain without the influence of the islanders’ expressed will. The success of this strategy lay in the community’s ability to translate their privilege-based idiom of political claim-making into a language that the modern Estonian state could, however reluctantly,

140 Weenofchanās panākta. – Latvis, 02.11.1923; Eesti–Läti lepingud ratifitseeritud. – Vaba Maa, 22.12.1923; Läti valitsus tunnistas Ruhno saare Eesti omaks. – Vaba Maa, 25.11.1923.

141 See R. Brubaker. *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1996.

accept and regulate. By couching their requests as continuations of what they had ‘historically enjoyed’ rather than as separatist demands, the islanders made it politically feasible for Estonian officials to acquiesce without losing face; honouring local custom could be framed as good governance rather than capitulation.

In the end, the islanders did not achieve their maximalist goal of unification with Sweden, nor did they secure a formal constitutional autonomy on the Åland model. A genuine union with Latvia was probably never a serious option for them. But instead, they secured something in the Estonian state, a functional hybridity of status. Through a piecemeal process of bureaucratic bargaining, most of their desired corporate exemptions were recoded as modern administrative duties. Ultimately, in an era defined by the Wilsonian rhetoric of national self-determination, they succeeded by deploying a much older political logic: the negotiation of conditional loyalty in exchange for the confirmation of inherited rights. For two decades, until the violent ruptures of the Second World War finally ended their centuries-long habitation, the Ruhnu community managed to live within a modern republic while maintaining the sense that they were still governed by their own Swedish Law.

PALVEKIRJAD ÜKSIKULT SAARELT.  
LÄBIRÄÄGITAV SUVERÄÄNSUS  
JA RUHNU LIITMINE EESTI RIIGI  
KOOSSEISU 1919–1921

*Mart Kuldkepp*

Artikkel käsitleb Ruhnu saare rannarootslastest kogukonna palvekirja-aktsioone aastatel 1919–1921, mil saare kuuluvus Eesti riigi koosseisu ei olnud veel täielikult põlistunud ning saart soovis endaga liita ka Läti Vabariik. Artikli keskne väide on, et Ruhnu elanikud ei jäänud selles olukorras pelgalt riikidevahelise poliitika ja diplomaatia passiivseks sihtmärgiks, vaid sekkusid aktiivselt ka ise, püüdes petitsioonide abil mõjutada eelkõige tingimusi, mille alusel Eesti riiklikku suveräänsust saarel teostama hakatakse. Lisaks Eesti ametivõimudele pöördus Ruhnu kogukond 1920. ja 1921. aastal ka Rootsi kuninga poole, kasutades enda

huvides ära seega mitte ainult Eesti-Läti territoriaalset vaidlust, vaid ka Rootsi riigi põhimõttelist huvi oma rahvuskaaslaste saatuse vastu.

Ühtlasi asetub Ruhnu juhtum laiemasse, I maailmasõja järgsete postimperiaalsete ümberkorralduse konteksti Kesk- ja Ida-Euroopas. Vene impeeriumi kokkuvarisemine, Saksa okupatsioon ning I maailmasõja jätkusõjad ja piirivaidlused muutsid väikeste kogukondade staatuse ebamääraseks ja vaieldavaks mujalgi. Ruhnu ja võib-olla ka mõne teise sarnase juhtumi puhul on aga märkimisväärne, et kohalikud elanikud ei lähtunud omapoolseid nõudmisi esitades mitte peamiselt moodsast vähemuste õiguste või rahvusliku enesemääramise diskursusest, vaid toetusid ajaloolise eriseisundi, põliste õiguste ja varasemate lubaduste kinnitamise loogikale. Artiklis kasutatakse selle retoorilise repertuaari kohta terminit „privileegigrammatika“.

Konkreetsetl Ruhnu eripärade taustaks võib pidada saare suhtelist isoleeritust ning sellest tulenevat ja pikalt kestnud vähest administratiivset sekkumist kohaliku kogukonna ellu. Nii oli Ruhnul tekkinud tugev omavalitsustraditsioon, mis soodustas kohalikku arusaama, et ruhnlased peavad saama elada oma tavade järgi üldistele koormistele allumata, sh õigusega langetada riigimetsast tasuta puid, olla vabastatud sõjaväeteenistusest ja mujal kehtivatest maksudest. Samavõrra tähtis oli Ruhnu jaoks ka Rootsi kui emamaa roll. Rootsikeelne kirikuelu, haridus, Rootsis tehtud korjanduse toel rajatud uus kirik ning perioodiline Rootsi humanitaarabi kinnistasid ettekujutust, et Rootsi kuningas asub Ruhnu suhtes vähemalt moraalse kaitsja positsioonil, kui mitte enam.

Ruhnu palvekirjapoliitika eeldused loodi 1917.–1918. aasta murranguliste sündmuste ajal. Vene veebruarirevolutsiooni järel hoogustus eestirootslaste rahvuslik liikumine, mis püüdis kindlustada rootsi vähemusele keelelisi ja kultuurilisi õigusi autonoomses või iseseisvas Eestis. Ruhnu puhul kujunes postimperiaalne trajektoor siiski teistsuguseks, kuna ruhnlased ei nõudnud mitte poliitilist esindatust ja vähemusõigusi, vaid kohaliku kogukonna ajalooliste privileegide tunnustamist. Seejuures lähtus kohalik kogukond algusest peale arusaamast, et Eesti suveräänsus saare üle ei ole mitte paratamatult lõplik ja vaieldamatu fakt, vaid selle aluseks peavad olema läbirääkimised ruhnlaste ja Eesti ametivõimude vahel ning kogukonna varasemate privileegide kinnitamine.

Kuigi Eesti ajutine valitsus otsustas juba 1919. aasta jaanuaris, et Ruhnu kuulub Eesti Vabariigile, sai esimeseks tegelikuks kontaktiks saarega mereväeohvitser Rudolf Schilleri visiit mai alguses. Schilleri vahendusel sai ruhnlastele teatavaks, et neil on Hans Pöhli näol Tallinnas oma rootsi rahvusminister, kellele nad läkitasid esimese artiklis käsitletud

petitsiooni riigimetsa kasutamise, soola saamise ja muudes küsimustes. Leevendamaks saarel valitsevat ainelist puudust ja kinnistamiseks seal Eesti riigivõimu toimus sama aasta juunis nn hülgerasva-ekspeditsioon, mille raames töid Eesti riigi ja rootsi vähemusrahvuse esindajad saarele tarbekaupu, ostsid ära ruhnlaste aasta jooksul kogutud hülgerasva, kuulutasid Ruhnu Eesti osaks ning rajasid kohaliku kaitseliidu.

Omalt poolt esitasid ruhnlased kohe Eesti riigiga liitumise tingimused, mille sekka kuulusid õigus tasuta puudele riigimetsast ja pääsemise üldisest sõjaväeteenistusest. Seega oli hülgerasva-ekspeditsioon korraga nii kaubanduslik tehing kui ka poliitiline kokkulepe: Eesti riik soovis näidata, et suudab saart tegelikult valitseda, ruhnlased aga seadsid tingimuseks oma eristaatuse tunnustamise. Viimase tõsiseltvõetavust mõjutas tugevalt Läti Vabariigi poliitika, mis oli samuti suunatud Ruhnu endaga liitmisele ning andis ruhnlastele täiendavat läbirääkimisruumi.

1920. aastal, kui aktuaalne oli Rootsi-Soome vaidlus Ahvenamaa üle, saavutas Ruhnu küsimus oma kõige rahvusvahelisema mõõtme. Kuna Ahvenamaa juhtum pakkus selget eeskujut ka teiste rootsikeelsete saarekogukondade enesemääramiseks, otsustasid ruhnlased ahvenamaalaste eeskujul pöörduda 1920. aasta oktoobris Rootsi kuninga poole. Palvekirjas rõhutati saare sajanditepikkust rootslust ning väideti, et kogukonnal, mille lõplikku kuuluvust pole veel otsustatud, peab olema õigus ise valida, millisesse riiki ta soovib kuuluda.

See „Ahvenamaa moment“, mille kestel esitati seniste praktiliste nõuete kõrval ka enesemääramisargumente, jäi siiski lühiajaliseks. Rootsi riik ruhnlaste palvekirjale ei reageerinud ning 1921. aasta alguses, kui Rootsi Eesti iseseisvust ametlikult tunnustas, muutus igasugune otsene sekkumine Ruhnu suveräänsusküsimusse üldse poliitiliselt võimatuks. Ka ruhnlaste strateegia keskendus taas praktilisematele küsimustele: 1921. aasta mais saadeti Rootsi kuningale uus pöördumine, milles küll taasesitati soov Rootsi ühineda, kuid tegelik rõhuasetus oli metsa kasutamisel, maksukoormusel ja sõjaväeteenistuse küsimusel. Samal ajal pöörduti ka Eesti riigivanema poole, kellele esitati sisuliselt sama nõudmispakett.

See kahesuunaline strateegia andis tulemusi: Rootsi diplomaatiline esindus Tallinnas sekkus mitteametlikult ruhnlaste soovide toetuseks ning need võeti põhimõttelise heasoovlikkusega vastu ka Eesti poolel. Eesti riik Ruhnu väidetavaid ajaloolisi privileege siiski ei kinnitanud, kuid tegi rea praktilisi mööndusi, sh rakendati riigimetsa kasutuses erikorda ning sõjaväekohustust kohandati nii, et Ruhnu mehed said teenistuse läbida oma saarel. Ainult maksuküsimuses jäi riik jäigemale seisukohale.

Nii ei kujunenud tulemuseks mitte Ruhnu otsene autonoomia, vaid kompromiss, milles ruhnlaste soovitud eriseisund sõnastati ümber Eesti riigile vastuvõetavateks administratiivseteks eranditeks.

Artikli lõppjärelendus on, et Ruhnu juhtum aitab nüansseerida tavapärasest postimperiaalsete piiride tõmbamise käsitust, mille järgi olid väikesed vähemuskogukonnad eeskätt sõjajärgse riigiloomes passiivsed objektid. Ruhnu rootslased oskasid oma perifeerset asendit, ajaloolisi traditsioone ja riikidevahelisi territoriaalseid vaidlusi kasutada selleks, et võrdlemisi edukalt läbi rääkida oma Eesti riiki kuulumise tingimuste üle. Seejuures ei saavutanud nad küll liitumist Rootsi ega Ahvenamaa tüüpi autonoomiat, kuid teataval määral säilis nende ajaloolise eriseisundi tuum siiski ka Eesti riigis erandliku halduskorraldusena.