



## **Colonialism and decolonization<sup>1</sup>**

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In introductions to and comparative accounts of colonialism, one often looks in vain for information on the role of the Nordic countries. Norway, Finland, and Iceland did not become sovereign nation states until the 20th century. At the time of the European expansions, they were themselves dependent territories in the Swedish and Danish kingdoms and the Russian tsarist empire, which from the perspective of the respective metropolis were seen as at least peripheral, if not culturally inferior. The formation of their national identities since the 19th century has thus been accompanied by their own narratives of emancipation. For this reason, the recognition and reappraisal of participation in the colonial expansions of others, such as the old Scandinavian empires of Sweden and Denmark, seems insignificant for the national self-understanding of Norway, Finland, and Iceland.

The same can be said of Sweden, whose direct colonial expansions in the global South were few and far between. The fact that the border colonization of Sápmi is sometimes euphemistically referred to as “internal colonialism” underscores the enduring effectiveness of colonial patterns of thought: the transnational settlement area of the indigenous Sámi can thus be imagined as primordially Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, or Russian, and any resistance to the gradual shifting of the settlement frontier can be interpreted as an internal ethnic conflict. As emigrants, hundreds of thousands of Scandinavians were also involved in the colonization of the North American continent and the displacement of the American indigenous population.

Finally, Denmark, whose postcolonial relationship with Greenland has not been conclusively clarified, had colonies on almost every continent and is thus perhaps the only Nordic country to be classified as a colonial empire in the strict sense. Despite these considerable internal differences, the notion of a pan-Nordic colonial

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exceptionalism remains powerful even in the case of Denmark, both in the country's self-image and in its external perception (Körber & Volquardsen in this volume). Where historical colonial expansions and interconnections cannot be completely denied, the exceptionalist figure of thought generates historiographical narratives that ascribe to the Nordic countries a special position characterized by ethical and moral superiority, making any comparison of their colonial interventions with those of the larger European colonial powers appear disproportionate and thus illegitimate.

Where, then, are the historical sites of Nordic colonial expansion and intervention, and what is the state of political and mental decolonization in the former colonies and in the region itself?

### Denmark-Norway

With the electoral capitulation of King Christian III, who ruled Denmark (including Schleswig-Holstein) and Norway in personal union, and the dissolution of the *Riksdag* in 1536, Norway lost its sovereignty and, together with Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, became part of the Danish Empire. All the North Atlantic islands had been linked to Norway since the Middle Ages, but only Iceland and the Faroe Islands were still inhabited by descendants of the Norse emigrants who had settled there in the 9th century. In Greenland, which had been inhabited by various Paleo-Inuit cultures for millennia, an Inuit population that had migrated from Alaska and Canada began to populate the entire west coast and parts of the east coast in the 13th century. They were the ancestors of today's Greenlanders. It is disputed to what extent the Inuit were in contact with the Norse settlers who lived in West Greenland between the late 10th and early 15th centuries. However, the beginning of the Danish-Norwegian colonization of Greenland is dated to 1721, when the missionary Hans Egede became the first European to settle in Greenland after an interruption of 300 years. As early as 1605, Christian IV had sent out expeditions to "rediscover" Greenland and determine the fate of the Norse settlers, during which Inuit were repeatedly kidnapped and taken to Copenhagen to be presented at court (Harbsmeier 2001).

Christian's mercantilist trade policy, which aimed to make Denmark a relevant colonial power on a par with Britain, France, and the Netherlands, also led to the establishment of the Danish East India Company. As early as 1620, Admiral Ove Gjedde founded the southeast Indian colony of Tranquebar, which

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became an important place for the spice trade and, in the early 18th century, a center for Protestant missions under the leadership of the German Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (Fihl/Venkatachalapathy 2014), which even served as a model for Hans Egede's missionary work among the Greenlandic Inuit. With Frederiksnagore, today's Serampore near Kolkata, Denmark had a second colony on the Indian subcontinent between 1755 and 1845. Repeated attempts to permanently colonize the remote Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal failed, not least because of outbreaks of malaria.

## Sweden

As Danish kings began to pursue colonial ambitions, Sweden emerged as a major power in the Baltic Sea region. Under Gustav II Adolf and Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna, the Swedish Empire reached its greatest expansion. In addition to Finland, it included Estonia, Livonia and Ingermanland, parts of Pomerania, the Duchy of Bremen-Verden and, from 1658, the former Danish provinces of Scania, Halland and Blekinge. However, Sweden had few overseas possessions. To enter the tobacco and fur trade, Swedish and Finnish settlers established Sweden's first colony in the New World in 1638. In New Sweden, on the banks of the Delaware River, they maintained contact with the indigenous peoples of North America (Fur 2006), but were forced to cede the colony as early as 1655 due to ongoing territorial disputes with the Dutch, who had settled around Nieuw Amsterdam, now New York. The Swedish presence on the so-called Gold Coast in present-day Ghana was even shorter, from 1650 to 1663. Under the leadership of Henrik Carloff, a native of Pomerania, the Swedish Africa Company built forts, trading posts, and factories, which soon fell into Danish or Dutch hands when Carloff went into the service of the Danes. Fort Christiansborg (Osu Castle) in Accra, built in 1652, was the seat of the Ghanaian government and is currently being converted into a museum.

## Scandinavia and the transatlantic slave trade

The heyday of Danish colonialism began around the same time as Sweden's withdrawal from the Gold Coast. Even today, palaces in Copenhagen's Frederiksstad district and historic merchant houses in Flensburg bear witness to the wealth generated during the mercantilist period. With the capture of the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas and St. Jan in 1665 and the acquisition of the formerly French neighboring island of St. Croix in 1733 (together the "Danish West Indies"),

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Denmark emerged as a major colonial power and slave-trading nation. In West Africa, textiles, liquor, and weapons were traded for slaves, whose labor provided the basis for the operation of Caribbean sugar plantations. Loaded with sugar, the ships returned to their home ports in Denmark. A person like Heinrich Carl Schimmelmann, born in Demmin, landowner in Holstein, operator of a gun factory and a sugar refinery near Copenhagen, plantation owner on St. Croix, major shareholder of the West India Company, and from 1768 Danish Minister of Finance, illustrates the cycle of the Atlantic triangular trade as well as the dominant position of individuals (Degn 2000). The Schimmelmann years are often described in Danish historiography as *den florissante periode*, "the prosperous period". The trade in whale oil and seal skins from Greenland, spices from South Asia, porcelain, tea and silk from the factories in Canton, China, enslaved people from West Africa, and sugar and rum from the Caribbean brought the kingdom previously unknown riches. A phase as a central player in global trade was followed in the early 19th century by Denmark's entry into the Napoleonic wars, which led to the capture of the Danish fleet by the British, the national bank's bankruptcy, and the territorial loss of Norway: a phase of "deglobalization" (Olwig 2003) that forced the Danes to find a new national self-image as a small state, which created a breeding ground for exceptionalist narratives, also in relation to the country's performance in its colonial possessions (Andersen 2017).

For example, the 1803 ban on the transatlantic slave trade, which Denmark enacted earlier than other countries for economic rather than humanistic reasons, and the historiographical exaggeration of the role of the Danish West Indian Governor-General Peter von Scholten, who thwarted a bloody Haitian-style rebellion in 1848 by declaring the abolition of slavery, could in retrospect reinforce Denmark's self-image as a humanist nation. Until well into the twentieth century, the focus on the historical figure of Scholten allowed Danish national historiography to perpetuate on a personal level the narrative of a humane Danish colonialism, which seemed absurd in light of the cruelty of enslavement. The historiography not only ignored the role of local resistance fighters in ending slavery in 1848, but also the fact that forced labor under slave-like conditions continued for at least another 30 years, until workers set fire to much of St. Croix's sugar plantations in a revolt in 1878. The leaders of the rebellion, known in Caribbean history as "the Fireburn", were recently honored with a public artwork in Copenhagen's harbor that challenges the dominant Danish historiography. After the sale of the Indian and

African colonies to Great Britain in 1845 and 1850, the sale of the Caribbean islands to the United States in 1917, in exchange for recognition of Danish sovereignty over Greenland, marked the end of Danish colonialism in the global South.

Sweden's only Caribbean colony, apart from the attempted conquest of Tobago (1733) and the brief rule of Guadeloupe (1813/14), was the island of St. Barthélemy (1784-1877). Although a plantation economy was not possible here, the island's capital, Gustavia, developed into an important free port and transshipment point for the slave trade, similar to the Danish Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas (Körber 2019).

At least indirectly, Scandinavians were also involved in the European expansions of the New Imperialism, in significant numbers as Protestant missionaries in Africa and, from 1880, as sailors and mercenaries in the establishment of the Congo Free State by Belgian King Leopold II. Despite the comparatively early abandonment of most of their own colonies, the Scandinavians have thus been ascribed a "colonial complicity" (Vuorela 2009). Colonial discourses were also present in Scandinavia itself, for example in the form of numerous human zoos (Andreassen/Henningsen 2011) or the eugenics of the Swedish race theorist Herman Lundborg, founding director of the world's first institute for racial biology in Uppsala from 1921.

## **Greenland and Sápmi**

The colonization of Greenland and Sápmi is often seen as a special case, if only because of their location in the far north. The absence of torture and slavery and the preservation of the traditional sealing culture (the animals' blubber was a sought-after commodity for the colonial trade until the use of petroleum as lamp fuel) make Danish colonialism in Greenland appear mild to this day, and at the same time provide a breeding ground for exotic depictions of Greenlanders. For many Greenlanders, the year 1953 was thus experienced as the actual beginning of colonial foreign rule. At that time, Greenland was transformed from a colony into a Danish province, and a policy of infrastructural and linguistic modernization and assimilation began. Dissatisfaction with unequal wages, forced resettlement and Denmark's entry into the European Community, which brought unprecedented competition for Greenland's fishermen, fueled the separatist movement. Since 1979 Greenland has had its own government and regional parliament. The Self Government Act of 2009, in which Denmark recognized Greenland's right

to future state sovereignty, marks the temporary culmination of political emancipation from the former colonial power.

As in the case of Greenland, the first contact between the Scandinavians and the Sámi cannot be precisely dated. What is certain is that the Sámi have been taxed by Swedish, Norwegian and later Danish kings since the late Middle Ages. The establishment of the northern border between Denmark-Norway and Sweden in 1751 ended the practice of double taxation. The Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné (Linnæus), who traveled to what then was called Lapland in 1732 and created not only the botanical and zoological nomenclature still in use today but also a hierarchical categorization of the human species in his *Systema Naturæ* (1758), played a significant role in classifying the nomads as subaltern subjects. Missions, forced labor in ore and silver mines, and the gradual shifting of the border between Scandinavian and Sámi settlement areas transformed the formerly low-conflict coexistence of the peoples into a colonial relationship in the 18th and 19th centuries. The policies of the Nordic countries towards the Sámi differed considerably in some respects: while in Norway until the 1970s the focus was on extensive assimilation of the Sámi, accompanied by an attempt to eradicate their language and traditions, Sweden pursued a policy of segregation, which allowed the Sámi to maintain their culture and customs, but also deprived them of the opportunity to develop according to their own premises and to rise within Swedish society (Junka-Aikio et al. 2022). Finally, Finnish Sámi policy, shaped by its own experience of devaluation in the Swedish and Russian empires, oscillated between non-recognition of the Sámi as a people distinct from the Finns and assertion of a supposedly antiimperialist identity and consequent rejection of any accusations of discrimination (Lehtola 2015).

## Decolonization

Sweden's subordinate role in European colonialism (with the exception of Sápmi), its commitment to peace and development aid, and Prime Minister Olof Palme's early dissociation from the Vietnam War, the South African apartheid regime, and the bloc-political logic of Western Third World policy enabled Sweden to become a kind of "world conscience" between the 1960s and the 1980s. When humanities and social science research on Northern Europe has undergone a postcolonial turn in recent years, the focus is not only on historical colonial relations in Sápmi, the North Atlantic and the global South, but also - for example in connection

with debates on immigration and integration - on the critical questioning of the exceptionalist pan-Scandinavian self-image, which is characterized by notions of ethical and moral superiority (Loftsdóttir/Jensen 2012; Naum/Nordin 2013; Körber/Volquardsen 2020).

Global discussions about the need for mental decolonization have reached Denmark with a time lag. This may be due to the fact that the majority of its former colonies did not become independent states after their abandonment, but passed into the hands of other colonial powers, to whom the decolonization demands of the formerly colonized are now primarily directed. In Greenland, which has achieved a considerable degree of self-determination compared to other indigenous territories, the concept of decolonization has until recently often been equated with the formal political process of emancipation. However, the recently completed work of a reconciliation commission, successive reports coming to light on state abuses such as dubious adoption practices and biopolitical measures even in the recent past (Hermann 2021), and above all a globally networked youth are increasingly raising questions about the mental aspects of colonization, the internalization of colonial thought patterns and the overcoming of intergenerational trauma, a discussion that has gained considerable importance in 2021, the 300th anniversary of Greenland's colonization. Another anniversary year, the centenary of the sale of the Virgin Islands to the United States in 2017, seems to mark a turning point for Denmark in coming to terms with its colonial past. In addition to a new five-volume colonial history (Brimnes 2017), which for the first time includes Greenland, the numerous recent publications, exhibitions, and art projects on the subject justify the prognosis that in Denmark, too, the hitherto effective grand narrative of colonial exceptionalism is gradually giving way to heterogeneous perspectives and decolonial questions.

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