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TRACING VIKING JOURNEYS: HOW SWEDISH SCHOOL BOOKS IN HISTORY REFER TO VIKING AGE EASTERBOUND RAIDS AND TRAVELS

Carl-Mikael A. TEGLUND

*Mälardalen University
Universitetsplan, 1, Västerås, 722 20, Sweden
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3522-1108
e-mail: carl-mikael.teglund@mdu.se*

This article examines the representation of Ukraine and Russia in Swedish school textbooks and children's history books that cover the Viking Age. The study investigates how the course literature describes the eastward journeys of Swedish Vikings. What place names are used to illustrate their routes?

Unfortunately, the results were both unequivocal and concerning. The Russian narrative is pervasive and consistently dominant in most of the literature. Of the 20 books reviewed, 15 (75%) exclusively used “Russia” to describe the areas between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, with only one book mentioning only Ukraine.

Key words: History, Vikings, Rus, Russia, Ukraine, Sweden, Viking Age, School Books, Kyivan Rus, Jus Ad Bellum

Introduction

It is often said that history is written by the winners, and if you control the past, you also maintain firm control over the present and future. To achieve this, one must shape the narrative of how history unfolded, or more precisely, the official account of the past.

There are many ways to control this narrative, but one of the most effective methods is through public education.

A key issue underlying the Russo-Ukrainian war is the question of who owns the history. Specifically, it concerns who has the right to claim the honor and legacy of the Kyivan Rus Empire. Putin himself alluded to this when he declared the invasion of Ukraine on February 22, 2022. In this instance, we should take him at his word. Russia aims to stay an empire and claims Kyiv as its birthplace. Consequently, controlling Kyiv and its surrounding regions is vital for Russia to preserve its imperial legitimacy. Without control over its supposed birthplace, it becomes difficult for the empire to sustain its authority. Therefore, Moscow's need to control not only Kyiv but also the narrative of who is the sole legitimate heir to the Kyivan Rus is essential. What is taught in schools becomes crucial, as it solidifies this narrative for future generations.

This influence is not limited to Russia; it extends beyond its borders as well. If a country's *casus belli* is accepted internationally as the primary justification for a conflict, it is a significant victory for that belligerent. While Swedish students and teachers may not directly

associate the narrative of a “thousand-year-old Russia” and the idea that the areas around Kyiv have always been Russian with Russia's justification for its war, these small fragments collectively contribute to a broader acceptance of the Russian narrative.

As a result, the language used in textbooks is critical. It not only provides factual details but also reveals how deeply rooted the Russian narrative is and how it influences the development of historical consciousness, not just within Russia but also in other countries, including those that Russia may perceive as adversarial.

The belief that Swedes were involved in founding Russia and therefore ought to have strong emotional ties to the country, presents a significant risk. This perspective can obscure why Sweden might have closer connections to Ukraine. A more urgent concern is that Russian efforts to justify the war by claiming that Kyiv and parts of present-day Ukraine are historically Russian, and therefore subject to annexation, are supported by this kind of propaganda in Swedish schoolbooks, which in turn helps enable Russian imperialism.

Objective & Scope

This study investigates whether Swedish schoolbooks indicate that Vikings traveled through Russia and its rivers, journeyed to Ukraine, traversed the Kyivan Rus, or simply described their travels as “eastward”.

The data for this study consist of 20 books on the topic, as well as interviews with several schoolbook authors and a professor who proofreads schoolbooks and children's history books. The findings are categorized into five main groups based on how the eastward Viking travels are described.

- a) Only mentioning Russia;
- b) Only mentioning Ukraine;
- c) Both countries are mentioned;
- d) Eastward Viking raids and travels are indicated, but only by cardinal direction or the cities they visited;
- e) Garðaríki; being the historical name used by the Vikings themselves at the time.

Methodology

The rationale behind these categorizations is relatively simple and straightforward, as they represent the key distinctions identified in the books examined.

The term “Rus” appears in the *Primary Chronicle* in connection with events dated to the year 912, although the text itself was compiled several centuries later and is traditionally attributed to the monk Nestor. Importantly, this early use of the name does not refer to Russia as a modern or even medieval state, but to a loose federation of principalities centered around Kyiv. What the local Slavic population called these lands before this period remains unclear, and no major unified kingdoms or empires existed in the region prior to the formation of Kyivan Rus in the late ninth century (Zhdan, 1988). Even if we knew the native name used at the time, it remains unclear why such a historical term would be presented in Swedish schoolbooks as if it were neutral or self-evident, given its complex political and ideological implications in both past and present contexts. The topic is already complex for the average Swedish student, especially when it is pointed out that Rus is not the same as Russia. Simplifying the learning process is important, but that doesn't mean western countries should contribute to the spread of Russian imperialist propaganda.

Other analyses of history books could be much more in-depth and rigorous compared to this research paper, as they often need to consider multiple aspects. Researchers use various

methods to analyze ideological influences in history books. One approach is content analysis, where they systematically examine the topics covered, the language used, and how events are framed across different textbooks. Another method involves comparative studies, where researchers contrast how the same historical events or periods are presented in textbooks from different countries or time periods. Additionally, critical discourse analysis explores the underlying assumptions, power structures, and ideologies embedded in historical narratives. These methods provide researchers with a deeper understanding of how history is shaped by and reflects different ideological perspectives.

As previously mentioned, this research is intended to be straightforward. If a book refers to Russia purely in a geographical context, specifically in connection with the areas the Swedish Vikings traveled to in the east, it will be placed in the “only mentioning Russia” category. Similar classifications will apply to other mentions.

All literature reviewed has been translated from Swedish to English by me, and all excerpts are unabridged translations that aim to retain the full content and meaning of the original works. I chose not to translate the titles of the books to ensure that anyone seeking the original editions can easily locate them. This decision preserves the exact wording and helps maintain accuracy in referencing.

Theory

This article rests on the theoretical understanding that historical narratives in educational materials are not only shaped by temporal interpretations but also by spatial ones. To analyze how geography is used to frame historical meaning in Swedish textbooks, the concept of *imagined geography* is applied. The concept of imagined geographies (or rather “imaginative geographies”) originated with the Palestinian Harvard scholar Edward Said, who used it to describe how spaces are perceived and constructed through imagery, discourse and textual representation. In Said’s usage, imagined does not imply something false or invented, but refers to how space is perceived and made meaningful within cultural and ideological frameworks (Said, 1979). This approach highlights that space is never presented neutrally but is instead shaped by political, cultural and symbolic forces. As Gregory (1994) later elaborates, such spatial representations often reflect geopolitical agendas and inherited narratives.

Educational texts often do more than describe geography. They suggest what spaces are historically meaningful, who they belong to, and how they should be understood in the present. Such imagined geographies can reinforce specific national or civilizational narratives.

In the context of history education, imagined geography becomes a didactic concern, as it directly influences how students come to understand the historical relevance of different places. By presenting certain regions as inherently linked to specific modern nations, textbooks may unintentionally shape pupils’ mental maps of the past in ideologically charged ways. This article therefore uses imagined geography not only as an analytical tool but also as a lens through which to reflect on how spatial representations in school history may affect students’ understanding, interpretation and even values related to historical events and regions.

Literature & Publications Review

Students' perceptions of history and historical consciousness

Research indicates that children and adolescents develop historical consciousness and perceptions of history at a relatively early age, depending on how the terminology is defined. Younger children, typically between the ages of 5 and 7, often view history as a series of stories about the past, lacking a clear sense of chronology or causation. By ages 7 to 11, their understanding becomes more structured as they begin to grasp historical time and make causal connections between events. As they reach adolescence, around age 11 and beyond, they start to engage in more sophisticated historical reasoning, including the ability to consider multiple perspectives and critically evaluate historical evidence (Bergman, 2020).

Karin Bergman of Mälardalen University also notes in the same publication (2020) that younger students tend to focus on and identify more with the history of the majority culture. This helps explain why the Viking Age is primarily taught in the early stages of Sweden's elementary education, as this era is almost exclusively Nordic. However, this period also provides students with the opportunity to learn about the history and geography of the regions closest to Scandinavia, as the Vikings traveled and settled in these areas. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the information presented is accurate, so students do not receive incorrect details about the significant events that shaped the regions closest to them.

Ideology and books for adolescents

Scholars in the field of children's literature have long investigated the various levels of ideological engagement that can be traced in schoolbooks and educational materials for youth and adolescents. These ideological positions may be deliberately written with a specific agenda, or they may emerge unconsciously as authors reproduce their assumptions about social structures and norms, which young readers then internalize as inherent truths. As scholar John Stephens at Macquarie University noted in 1992, "there cannot be a narrative without an ideology" (McCallum & Stephens, 2010).

A wide range of articles and books has documented how ideology and other semi-political narratives are represented in children's literature. Many themes have been scrutinized, such as the justification of wars (Edwards, 1996; Draper, 2015; Fiala & Kling, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023), advocacy for feminism and gender equality (Brugilles & Cromer, 2009; Mburu & Nyagah, 2012; Casey, Novick, & Lourenco, 2021), and the propagation of political ideologies from left to right in schoolbooks (Dogan & Collier, 2018; Stephens & McCallum, 2010). The latter authors even suggest that no book is truly neutral. Regardless of how straightforward or simple a text may seem, every book carries ideological implications (Stephens & McCallum, 2010).

Historiography

This principle also applies to the narration of history, and schoolbooks are no exception. The inclusion or exclusion of specific historical events in classroom discussions reflects the ideologies of both the history teachers leading the conversations and the authors of the textbooks they use. Schneider (2009) refers to this as a form of ideological transmission within educational institutions. Teachers wield significant influence in shaping their students' opinions and values, and the literature they select plays a crucial role in molding students' ideological frameworks.

Research on history books, including those intended for adults, has shown that the selection of historical content can promote different ideological agendas. This is a key area of study within historiography, the field that explores how history is written and interpreted. Historians and education researchers have found that history textbooks often reflect the dominant ideological perspectives of their time and place. For example, research has shown that topics such as colonialism, civil conflicts, and other contested historical events are often presented differently in textbooks from different countries or regions involved in those histories (Danto, 2008).

The historical narratives presented in school textbooks can have a lasting impact on societal memory and the collective understanding of the past. These narratives influence not only individual knowledge but also broader cultural narratives and national self-perception. Additionally, such literature plays a significant role in identity formation. The narratives in textbooks contribute to the development of national and cultural identities, shaping how individuals see themselves as part of a broader historical continuum (Grever & van der Vlies, 2017), particularly regarding the formation of what are now Russia and Ukraine.

In Sweden, historical research on the Viking Age and the Eastern journeys of Scandinavian seafarers has approached the subject from a variety of perspectives, often shaped by disciplinary traditions and national contexts. Some scholars, such as Birgitta Hårdh, have referred to early trade networks using terms like “Old Russian grivna” and described river routes and cities such as Kyiv as “Old Russian” trading systems and cities, without acknowledging the present-day political or cultural implications of such terminology (Hårdh, 2016). In contrast, researchers like Charlotta Hillerdal have highlighted the complexity of ethnic identities during the Viking Age and have cautioned against anachronistic national labels. She stresses that terms such as “Varangian” or “Rus” encompass a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and should not be reduced to simplistic historical narratives (Hillerdal, 2006). However, even Hillerdal has in later publications used expressions such as “Viking Age Russia,” which points to the ongoing tensions and ambiguity in terminology (Hillerdal, 2009). Ukrainian-Swedish archaeologist Fedir Androshchuk has employed more neutral or historically grounded geographical designations in his studies, often referring to rivers like the Dnipro and using terms such as “Rus’ areas,” while in contrast retaining modern designations like Sweden in contrast (Androshchuk, 2002). Historian Samuel Edquist has a more careful use, preferring cardinal direction labels such as “eastern journeys” rather than projecting later national identities onto Viking Age contexts (Edquist, 2012). These varied approaches show that there is still no full consensus in Swedish historiography about how to describe the Eastern Viking routes. I would therefore suggest that further scholarly dialogue is needed to establish a more widely accepted academic terminology.

A Brief Historical Background

The *Primary Chronicle*, also known as the Nestor Chronicle, is the oldest and most renowned historical record of the East Slavic world. Much of our knowledge about this period in what is now Ukraine and Sweden comes from this chronicle, which serves as a near-primary source for understanding events of that time. Written in the early 12th century at the Pechersk Monastery in Kyiv, the chronicle describes how the Varangians, also known as the Rus (a people which the chronicle describes as stemming from the west of the Baltic Sea) arrived in the region in the 850s to collect tribute (Harrison, 2023).

In the 8th century, the territory they entered was inhabited by various tribes who spoke a common proto-Slavic language, as well as Khazars, a Turkic-speaking people who had adopted Judaism (Zhdan, 1988).

For the first three years, everything proceeded smoothly. However, it appears that the Varangians (known as Vikings in the West) were eventually driven out. According to the *Primary Chronicle*, conflicts between various groups in the region escalated to the point where they invited the Norsemen back to oversee the area and restore peace. Their chieftain, Rurik, settled in Novgorod, while two other Vikings, Askold and Dir, traveled south to Kyiv, where they became rulers of the region (Harrison, 2023). The territories between these two cities eventually formed the Kyivan Rus Empire.

Today, the historical connection between Kyivan Rus and Scandinavia is widely accepted by historians and is supported by archaeological evidence. Numerous Norse artifacts from the first half of the 10th century, including swords, skeletons, arrowheads, and axes, have been uncovered. Additionally, the political alliances of the early 11th century further highlight the connections between the Nordic countries and present-day Ukraine, as documented in the historical narratives of both regions (Harrison, 2023).

Results

How is this topic addressed in Swedish schools today? In reality, it receives limited attention. The Viking Age is introduced in Swedish schools during the early years of elementary education, specifically in grades 4-6, when students are between 10 and 12 years old. At this stage, students learn about Viking life and its impact on Sweden's history and culture. This topic is part of the history curriculum and is often covered alongside other historical periods to provide a broader understanding of developments in Scandinavia and surrounding regions. Additionally, subjects like religion and geography must also be integrated, as history is just one of four components within the broader subject known as 'Social Sciences' in Swedish elementary education.

Given the extensive content that needs to be covered, teachers cannot delve deeply into early Swedish history. As a result, detailed aspects of the Viking Age, such as the founding of the Kyivan Rus Empire and the involvement of Swedes in that process, are often overshadowed. Instead, more emphasis is placed on the formation of Viking society, its cultural and religious values, and the transition to the end of the Viking Age and the creation of modern Sweden.

This does not mean that the more intricate details of the Viking Age are never mentioned. However, based on my own anecdotal experience, feedback from other teachers, and insights from the curriculum, it is not a heavily emphasized topic. This trend is also reflected in the literature reviewed for this research.

Regardless of the specific category each book falls into, references to these events are typically brief and lack detailed exploration. Schoolbook authors generally use these events to illustrate the Vikings' travels to distant lands, their interactions with foreign cultures, and their encounters with various peoples, rather than delving into deeper historical connections.

Books only mentioning Russia

This chapter examines textbooks and other historical resources aimed at adolescents that use the term "Russia" to explain where Swedish Vikings traveled. These materials help students understand the Vikings' eastern routes and settlements within the geographical context of modern-day Russia.

Of the 20 books reviewed, 15 fall into this category, making it by far the largest. This category can be further divided into two subgroups: books that explicitly mention Russia as a country and those that refer to Russia indirectly, such as through references to Russian rivers.

Viking Travels to Present-Day Russia

First, some books directly mention Russia as a reference point for where the Vikings traveled. For instance, Örjan Nyström's books from 2016, written for different courses, use similar language to describe the Vikings' eastern expeditions. In Sweden, there is a main history course in the senior high school system called Historia 1B, which is required for students who wish to pursue higher education after graduation. However, for those studying for a certification in a specific trade that does not require a university degree, a shortened version of the course, Historia 1a1, is available.

Nyström and his colleagues have written extensively for both of these courses in a series called *Perspective on History*. In the book for the 1B course, the author states, "The Vikings plundered and waged war, but they also engaged in peaceful trade with slaves and furs. In England, France, and Russia, Vikings established themselves as rulers over the local populations" (p. 48). Interestingly, in the book for the shorter course (*Perspektiv på historien 50p*), the text describing where the Vikings settled remains roughly the same, continuing to use contemporary countries as markers for the Vikings' destinations. However, Ukraine is notably omitted in both instances.

Similarly, Ericsson and Hansson (2013) state, "Russia was invaded by the Mongols under Genghis Khan in the 13th century" (p. 186). This example illustrates how "Russia" is often used as a geographical marker for events in ancient history, not just as a reference to where the Swedish Vikings traveled. Steedman, in his book *Vikingar* (2003), writes that "to reach Russia, the Vikings sailed up the Baltic and Polish rivers, such as the Dvina, Lovat, and Vistula". He also notes that "most of the Vikings who traveled to Russia and along the eastern routes were Swedes. Many runestones tell the stories of Vikings who died in Russia, Greece, the Byzantine Empire, and even in Muslim countries. Steedman concludes by highlighting the significant role of Vikings from the Swedish island of Gotland, stating, «The Gotlandic Vikings traveled deep into Russia, and their skilled craftsmen often adopted styles from the East»" (p. 18).

Similar explanations of Viking destinations can be found in Else Christiansen's book *Vikingarnas världsrike* (2012), a Danish work represented here in its Swedish translation. She writes, "In the 9th century, more and more people from Scandinavia set out by ship along Europe's west coast and eastward, following rivers into Russia" (p. 28). Hammarén and Engström (2019) echo this sentiment, stating, "Only a few of them were warriors. The Vikings also founded new settlements both in the east and the west, for example in Russia, Normandy, and North America, as well as in Iceland, Greenland, and the British Isles" (p. 57). Christiansen further notes that "in Russia, they established small trading posts, which soon grew into a vast realm where the Norsemen lived for three centuries."

Additionally, Edberg (2001) references Princess Ingegerd, the daughter of the Swedish Viking Age King Olof, who married Yaroslav, mentioned as the "Grand Prince of Russia," in an educational book about the history of the city of Sigtuna (p. 49).

“Viking Journeys to What Is Now Russia”

In some literature, Russia is described as the destination of Viking travels, with the clarification that this refers to the region we *nowadays* call Russia—not that it was known as Russia at the time. For example, Tibballs and Caldwell (2016) state, “Further inland, the Vikings could drag their ships from lake to lake until they reached the Dnieper River, and then continue to the Black Sea. This was important for what later became Russia, as trading posts were established along the main routes, and the Swedes settled to trade” (p. 21). Similarly, Höglund (2019) notes, “... the Vikings were called 'Rus,' which later gave its name to Russia” (p. 28).

Erre and Savoia (2019) take a similar approach, stating, “The Rus created the Kiev Empire, which later became Russia” (p. 45). Vänehem (2015) echoes this reasoning, explaining, “The people in Gårdarike were not called Vikings, but 'Rus.' Their land would later be known as Russia” (p. 35).

Russian rivers

The second most common feature in schoolbooks and children's literature about Vikings and their travels is the discussion of “Russian rivers.” This focus is understandable, as Swedish Vikings used these rivers to travel through Eastern Europe to the Byzantine Empire, where they often served as mercenaries in the emperor's elite unit known as the Varangian Guard.

For example, a Swedish history textbook for senior high school students, written by Per-Arne Karlsson, Robert Sandberg, Karl Molin, and Ann-Sofie Ohlander for the History A course (later renamed History 1B), contains this passage: “The Swedes instead turned eastward. They traveled along the major Russian rivers down toward the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, reaching all the way to the Byzantine Empire and the Muslim Caliphate” (Karlsson et al., 2010, p. 54). Notably, in the later edition (2014), after the course name changed to History 1B, the reference to “Russian rivers” remained unchanged.

In the book *Milstolpar – Historia A*, the same point is made: “... it was Vikings from Denmark and Norway who went westward and southward. Most Swedish Vikings traveled eastward, to the Baltics and via the Russian rivers to the Black Sea and Constantinople” (p. 81). Ahlberg adds that the boats used on the Russian rivers for these eastward journeys were shorter, about 10 meters, because they needed to be carried or rolled on logs between the rivers (p. 96).

Björn Höglund, previously mentioned, has a more recent book titled *Spännande fakta om vikingarnas värld* (Exciting Facts About the World of the Vikings), released in 2023. This book is particularly interesting as Höglund is arguably the most invested, among the sources examined, in connecting the Vikings to present-day Russia. In his latest work, he writes: “In Sweden, many ships were built to sail on the Baltic Sea and the Russian rivers” (p. 9).

However, Ericsson and Hansson (2013) offer a different perspective, noting that while there were Viking journeys along the Russian rivers, these were relatively few: “Their trade voyages were generally not very long, and few of them traveled, for example, along the Russian rivers” (p. 129).

There are additional examples of the use of “Russian” as an adjective to describe the regions Swedish Vikings traveled to. For instance: “She raised her children in Novgorod and Kyiv. Six sons became Russian princes, and three daughters married kings – of Norway, France, and Hungary” (p. 49). This also aligns with the theme of this subchapter.

“Vikings created Russia”

It was not uncommon either to encounter claims in various books that Swedish Vikings were responsible for creating Russia. For example, Björn Höglund (2019) asserts that “Rurik founded Russia”, referring to Rurik as the founder of the ruling dynasty of Kievan Rus and its principalities, and thus as the founder of Russia. However, this is factually incorrect, regardless of whether one views Russia as the sole inheritor of the Kyivan Rus legacy. Höglund expands on this, stating, “One of the three brothers was named Rurik, and he would become the progenitor of all the future rulers of the great Russian Viking kingdom” (p. 29).

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this category is Torgny Wiking’s book *Sagan om Rörrik: Vikingakungen som skapade Ryssland*, which translates to *The Saga of Rurik: The Viking King Who Created Russia*.

It is highly misleading and factually inaccurate to claim that Swedish Vikings created Russia. Firstly, it was never called Russia during that period. Secondly, the medieval state of Rus' was centered around Kyiv, not the territory of modern Russia. Thirdly, it was only in 1721 that Peter the Great renamed the Tsardom of Muscovy as the Russian Empire. The name “Russia” thus emerged long after the Kyivan Rus period and was associated with the Muscovite state, which had developed independently of Kyiv's influence after the Mongol invasion (Harrison, 2023).

Books where only Ukraine is mentioned

Russia is not the only country mentioned as a potential destination for Swedish Vikings at the end of the first millennium AD. In 2022, following the onset of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, Fabian Göranson wrote a children's book titled *Sveriges fantastiska historia – Vikingatiden (The Fantastic History of Sweden – The Viking Ages)*. At the end of the book, Göranson includes a timeline where he writes:

*“In 862, the Viking Rurik took control
of the land around Könugård (Kiev in Ukraine)”* (p. 61).

No other place names are mentioned in the book. Instead, the author frequently uses neutral phrases like “then they went to another place that...” and so on. In an interview, Göranson explained that the book is intended for young learners (ages six to nine) who likely have limited historical and geographical knowledge. He emphasized that it was important not to complicate the narrative, focusing instead on telling the story of who the Vikings were and what they did, without adding unnecessary geographical details. This approach explains why Ukraine was the only specific place mentioned. Since Kyiv (spelled as Kiev in the book) is located in modern-day Ukraine, introducing additional place names would have complicated the learning experience for the book's target audience, which Göranson saw as not pedagogically appropriate.

Books where both countries are mentioned

It is safe to say that no historian in Sweden is more famous right now than Dick Harrison. In his role as the country's most prominent historian, it was only natural that he, together with his wife, would release a schoolbook for Swedish senior high school students. Published in 2016, this book not only narrates the history of Sweden but also illustrates it. Appropriately titled *Bilden av historien (The Image of History)*, the book was written years before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which makes its description of Viking travels refreshingly impartial.

This book offers what can be considered the most accurate and comprehensive account of Viking seafaring journeys.

“Many journeys in the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries from what is now Sweden took the eastern route toward the vast land that corresponds to today's Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine”(p. 94).

This description is fair and balanced because it acknowledges all three countries—Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine—that are involved in the historical regions where Viking journeys took place. By including these modern nations, the statement provides a more comprehensive view of the vast territory the Vikings explored, without oversimplifying their routes or focusing solely on one area.

Cardinal direction

By using cardinal directions, we can focus on the actual routes and regions the Vikings explored, such as their eastern journeys toward the Baltic Sea and the river systems that led deep into Eastern Europe. This approach avoids anachronisms and provides a clearer representation of the geographical realities during the Viking era. Lars Hammarén adopts this approach in his book *Vägar till nuet – och framtiden*. Below, I would like to present a map included by the author on page 22.



In the map, the author clearly attempts to neutralize the depiction by using arrows to indicate the Vikings' routes without showing any modern-day borders. There is a brief explanation at the top of the map, stating 'Europe around the year 800,' but that is all. The Swedish Vikings are shown moving eastward, as illustrated by the first arrow, and then continuing south. The author's intent is to focus on the Vikings' routes rather than contemporary names, emphasizing how their paths differed based on their home origins. In

an interview, Hammarén explained that this was a deliberate choice, although he acknowledged that if he were writing the schoolbook today (and not in 2015), he would have included more focus on what Kyivan Rus actually was.

Another book that exclusively uses cardinal directions is a classic from my own youth—*Barnens Svenska Historia – När människorna kom* (*Children's Swedish History – When Humans Arrived*). Written in 1986 by Sonja Hulth and Anna-Clara Tidholm, it is a picture book that simplifies the story of how Sweden came to be, while still covering the most important parts and telling the history in an engaging way.

For two pages, we follow a young Swedish boy who bids farewell to his parents as he embarks on a Viking journey to the east. His parents stand on the shoreline waving, and the book poses the question of whether they will ever see him again. On the second page, we get the answer:

“Alas, no. It went badly for Öyvind and he died. He fell in the east together with Ejvisl. Only the stone remains, which his father carved with runes and erected at home” (p. 47).

Books using “Garðaríki”

Another possible strategy is to use the actual names that the Vikings themselves used. We know they referred to the area now known as Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine as *Garðaríki*, which roughly translates to ‘the land of many houses or farms.’ To achieve greater historical accuracy, this would be the optimal choice. One author who chose this approach is Olle Larsson in his schoolbook *Möt Historien 1b* for senior high school students in Sweden. In the book, he includes a map featuring historically accurate names for that time period, along with a small description, which is translated into English below.



“This illustrates the routes taken by the Scandinavian Vikings. The Swedish Vikings traveled to Garðaríki (see the map), while the Danish and Norwegian Vikings traveled westward.”¹ (p. 43)

¹ Author's note: The map above the text shows Garðaríki's location in the middle of present-day Ukraine and includes the Viking-era names for Kyiv (Könugård) and Novgorod (Holmgård).

Conclusions

The findings of the research are clear. Seventy-five percent of literature in Sweden intended for young people about Viking eastbound journeys only mentions Russia as their destination. This creates the misleading impression that Swedish Vikings only settled in what is now Russia and that Russia is as old as Kyivan Rus or the city of Kyiv. However, as previously discussed, Rus and Russia are not the same, and the state was not called Russia at all. Russia did not exist before 1721, when Peter the Great renamed the Tsardom of Muscovy as the Russian Empire. Moreover, the territory of the Tsardom of Muscovy did not even include the Kyiv region. Despite this, literature, including that intended for school children, continues to promote this inaccurate view.

This study categorized the material into several distinct categories. The first category, where only Russia is mentioned, reveals nuances in how different authors have approached their texts. Therefore, it was important to divide this chapter into two subchapters to clarify the various ways Russia is used as an indicator of where the Swedish Vikings traveled. These subchapters distinguish between direct and indirect references to Russia. The former involves mentioning Russia explicitly, while the latter involves using “Russian” as an adjective to describe certain rivers, people, or cities.

The least problematic aspect of this chapter involves books that use “Russia” as a reference but clarify that they are not referring to the modern-day state, but rather to the region that would later become Russia. When I talk or write about Vikings, I increasingly find it important to clarify that Sweden did not exist at that time. When we use the term “Swedish”, we are referring to something that meant different things to these people compared to what it means today. It is more accurate to describe them as “the Vikings from what would later become Sweden”. This is not merely a matter of semantics, as the way we phrase these details can significantly affect the accuracy and understanding of historical contexts.

However, there is a third category addressed at the end of this chapter: the claim that the Vikings (or their leader Rurik) created Russia. This is particularly problematic because it not only entirely omits Ukraine from the discussion but also disregards its role as a successor state to Kyivan Rus. Moreover, this assertion is factually incorrect.

While it is accurate to say that the Vikings traveled to what is now Russia and sailed down Russian rivers, it would be more honest to acknowledge that these rivers also flow through present-day Ukraine. A notable example is the literature made by Dick Harrison and his wife. The Dnieper River does indeed originate in the Valdai Hills of Russia, near Smolensk. However, it flows south through both Belarus and Ukraine before emptying into the Black Sea near Zaporizhzhia, which is in Ukraine. Thus, neglecting this fact can be seen as either careless or disingenuous.

Nevertheless, it is far more problematic to claim that Rurik or any other individual from the 10th century founded Russia. Not only is this factually incorrect, but it also undermines Ukraine’s legitimacy as the successor to Kyivan Rus and questions Ukraine’s very existence. If Russia was supposedly created in Kyiv and all subsequent developments of this medieval state are deemed to be solely Russian, then Ukraine does not exist. This perspective supports Putin’s argument that Ukraine is merely a modern construct – a mistake allegedly made by communists in the early 20th century or, worse, a fabrication by Austro-Hungarians, Germans, and Poles designed to weaken Russia, a notion that Americans and Europeans have

supposedly perpetuated. If one accepts this narrative as true, it would almost be unethical *not* to support an invasion of Ukraine.

Addressing how Western (and non-Western) schoolbooks and curricula can better educate new generations on this topic involves several considerations. First and foremost, educational materials must simplify complex concepts into more digestible pieces. This task becomes even more challenging with younger students. As illustrator and author Fabian Göranson highlighted in his interview with me, very young children typically lack extensive background knowledge on most subjects covered in this article, especially in areas far away from the actual region. In such cases, simplified narratives risk contributing to the imagined geography discussed in the theoretical outline of this article, because we analyze the world with our preconceived understanding of it which is in turn at risk of being shaped by cultural assumptions rather than historical or spatial accuracy. When abstract or distant places are introduced without nuance, they may become associated with (in this case, earlier) dominant national or civilizational identities, reinforcing spatial assumptions and outdated imperialist terminology.

It is understandable why this practice persists. Often, authors equate Rus directly with Russia, believing there are no significant differences. It is also simpler to use modern country names to help the audience grasp the concepts. This article does not claim that all 15 books were written by Russian loyalists intending to undermine Ukraine. In most cases, it is doubtful the authors are even aware of the implications. When they are aware, they often use terminology they think will be easiest for their audience to understand. However, this highlights a significant issue: the pervasive influence and deep-rooted nature of Russian propaganda.

It is somewhat reassuring that Lars Hammarén, in response to my inquiry, expressed hope that he would have phrased things differently today and included more details about this controversy. Nevertheless, Torgny Wiking published a book in 2021 with the title explicitly stating that Rurik founded modern-day Russia, and Björn Höglund referred to the “great Russian Viking kingdom” in his 2019 publication. These formulations exemplify how imagined geographies continue to shape historical narratives, even in contemporary Swedish educational contexts. By framing early medieval Eastern Europe as intrinsically Russian, such texts contribute to the construction of a spatial imagination that aligns with imperial narratives, and thereby risk reinforcing ideologically charged understandings of both the past and the present.

More research is indeed needed to determine the best approach for teaching young students about historical events related to geographical locations that have changed since the events took place. This is especially challenging for teachers working with young children in the early stages of elementary education. It would be valuable to identify methods that effectively avoid anachronisms while providing a clear and honest representation of geographical realities.

At the same time, there is a clear need for further studies that focus on how students themselves understand and interpret these historical narratives. While this article has examined how textbooks and teachers may convey particular geographical or ideological perspectives, it remains uncertain how such content is actually received and processed by pupils. From my own national context, such research would naturally focus on Swedish students, but similar investigations would be equally relevant in any Western country where school history may carry geopolitical or cultural implications. A study that includes student voices through interviews and/or written reflections could offer valuable insights into how

school history shapes pupils' perceptions of the broader Eastern European space. Such research would not only complement textbook and teacher-focused analyses but also contribute to a more complete understanding of the role of history education in shaping geopolitical and cultural awareness among young learners.

I believe that using cardinal directions is generally the most effective approach, as it avoids reliance on modern country names that did not exist at the time. Collaborating with a geography teacher could make this approach a comprehensive project, where students also learn how to use a compass and map. Simply put, if students do not understand how to complete a task or the expected methods, they will not learn efficiently—or at all. All elements need to be in place.

For older students, using modern country names could be appropriate, provided it is clear that these correspond to today's geography, not the historical names. If a teacher chooses to include the historical names used at the time, this can be done, but it is unclear whether this would provide more than interesting but anecdotal information. Ultimately, the goal of studying history is to understand the people who lived before us, their decisions, and the impacts of those decisions on the present. Lastly, it also aims to make us more discerning when leaders distort history to justify invasions or take other actions based on historical inaccuracies.

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ШЛЯХАМИ ВІКІНГІВ: ЯК У ШВЕДСЬКИХ ШКІЛЬНИХ ПІДРУЧНИКАХ З ІСТОРІЇ ОПИСУЮТЬСЯ СХІДНІ ПОХОДИ ТА ПОДОРОЖІ ЕПОХИ ВІКІНГІВ

Карл-Мікаель А. ТЕГЛУНД

Університет Мелардален

Університетська площа 1, Вестерос, 722 20, Швеція

ORCID ID: 0009-0001-3522-1108

e-mail: carl-mikael.teglund@mdu.se

У статті здійснено аналіз вживання назв “Україна” та “Росія” у шведських шкільних підручниках і дитячих історичних виданнях, присвячених добі вікінгів. Основну увагу зосереджено на способах репрезентації подорожей шведських вікінгів у східному напрямку в навчальній літературі, зокрема на аналізі географічних назв, що використовуються для позначення їхніх маршрутів. Отримані результати виявилися викликають занепокоєння, оскільки у більшості проаналізованих видань домінує російський наратив. Із 20 розглянутих книг у 15 (75%) використовується тільки термін “Росія” для позначення територій між Балтійським і Чорним морями, і лише в одному виданні зафіксовано назву “Україна”. Відтак, це формує хибне уявлення про те, що шведські вікінги оселялися винятково на території сучасної Росії, а також що Росія має таку саму давність, як Київська Русь чи місто Київ. Адже “Русь” і “Росія” не є тотожними. Загальновідомо, що лише у 1721 році Петро I проголосив Московське царство “Російською імперією”. Крім того, до складу Московії територія Південно-Західної Русі не входила. На жаль, орієнтована на шкільну аудиторію шведська література продовжує відтворювати спрощене й історично неточне уявлення.

Аналізовані публікації автор поділив на кілька окремих груп. Перша – це ті, в яких згадується лише Росія. Вона поділена на два підгрупи: у першій – землі

між Балтійським та Чорним морями прямо називаються Росією, тоді як у другій – використовується прикметник “російський” для опису певних річок, людей або міст. Друга група – це книги, в яких використання назва “Росія” позначає не сучасну державу, а регіон, який згодом став Росією. До третьої групи віднесено твердження, що вікінги (або їхній вождь Рюрик) створили Росію. Вони особливо проблематичні, оскільки не лише повністю виключають Україну з обговорення, а й ігнорують її роль як держави- правонаступниці Київської Русі. Це не лише фактично неправильно, але й підриває легітимність України як правонаступниці Київської Русі, ставить під сумнів саме існування України та підкріплює аргумент Путіна про те, що Україна є лише сучасним конструктором – помилкою, нібито допущеною комуністами на початку ХХ ст., або ж вигадкою австро-угорців, німців і поляків, покликаною послабити Росію.

На думку дослідника, причиною поширення проросійських наративів у шведських підручниках з історії та історичній літературі для дітей є намагання до спрощення складного матеріалу для молодшої аудиторії та несвідоме дотримання ustalених стереотипів. Здійснений огляд підкреслює існування дуже важливої проблеми: всепроникний вплив і глибоко вкорінену природу російської пропаганди.

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