

Forgotten responsibilities? Nordic truth commissions, Sámi history, and the difficulty of transnational perspectives on historical responsibility

Ethnicities

2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–16

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14687968241266251

journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Otso Kortekangas** 

Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology, Åbo Akademi University, Abo, Finland; Nordic Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Natan Elgabsi

Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology, Åbo Akademi University, Abo, Finland

Malin Arvidsson 

Department of Child Studies, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden

Abstract

The article studies the Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish truth commissions dealing with state-Sámi (an indigenous population living in northern Scandinavia, Finland and north-western Russia) relations through the concept of transnational historical justice. The fact that three separate commissions are studying the history of the Sámi has been criticized by earlier researchers, but never from the perspective of intergenerational, and more specifically historical justice. Our study of the mandate documents and the report of the Norwegian commission (the only one published in the time of writing of this article) points to constructive ways forward that could acknowledge and better embrace the transnational character of Sámi history, especially in terms of historical justice. We also study in what way the Norwegian commission worked within and stretched the framework set by the mandate document. Our conclusion is that the lack of transnationalism in the mandate and work of the commissions leads to historical Sámi individuals and groups being forgotten. These are historical groups and individuals whose existence does not fit in neatly in the presentist perspective of the commissions, projecting the

Corresponding author:

Otso Kortekangas, Faculty of Arts, Psychology and Theology, Åbo Akademi University, Fabrikgatan 2, Abo 20555, Finland.

Email: Otso.kortekangas@abo.fi

current nation state borders back in time. For this reason, historical justice toward these groups is also a forgotten issue in the mandate and work of the commissions.

Keywords

Sámi history, historical responsibility, intergenerational responsibility, truth and reconciliation, transitional justice, transnational history, transnational historical justice, historical justice

In recent years, Norway,¹ Finland, and Sweden² have each established truth (and reconciliation)³ commissions that examine the historical relations between the states and the Sámi.⁴ The initiatives to establish such commissions regarding the past and present relations between the Sámi and the Nordic countries came from the Sámi parliaments of each country. The Sámi parliamentary council (an international organization for cooperation for the Sámi of Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden) recommended the establishment of truth and reconciliation processes already in 2004 ([The Truth and Reconciliation Commission \[Norway\], 2023](#): 106). The political-administrative statuses of the commissions vary somewhat between the countries, as do the schedules and the scope. The Norwegian commission, working as a special group established by the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament) and treating the history of both Sámi and Finnic-speaking minorities, has already published its final report. The Finnish commission, a working group established by the Prime Minister's Office, and the Swedish one, a government inquiry,⁵ are still working on hearings and data gathering. Both are projected to publish their final report in 2025. Even though the Swedish commission has deliberately omitted the word reconciliation from its name (see footnote 3), this article uses the conventional abbreviation TRC (truth and reconciliation commission) for all three commissions.

The Nordic TRCs have garnered a fair share of scholarly attention ([Skaar, 2023](#); [Ochs, 2024](#)). More specifically, the questions of responsibility toward the past, on the one hand, and the lack of a transnational approach in these commissions, on the other, have been treated in separate research articles (e.g., [Kuokkanen, 2020](#); [Sjöberg and Sara, 2022](#)). There is no earlier work bringing together these perspectives.

Combining the two theoretical perspectives puts us in a unique position to formulate a constructive critique of how the Nordic TRCs frame responsibility toward the transnational parts of the Sámi past. In our view, assuming ethical responsibility for past events would necessitate a fuller embracement of the transnational character of Sámi history. We will mainly look at the commissions' mandates, which set the rules and framework for what is possible to discuss and deal with in the TRC processes. In all three cases, these mandates were formulated by the commissioning body before the commission members were selected and the secretariats of the commissions were set up. For the part of Norway, we also treat the commission's final report (the only one published at the time of writing of this article) by comparing it to the mandate. This allows us to analyze how the

commissions negotiate and, in some ways, challenge the limits and framework of their mandates. Our article has two principal research questions:

1. In what ways do the mandate documents of all commissions and the report of the Norwegian one relate to the transnational history of the Sámi, which precedes the rather recent nation-state borders crisscrossing the Sámi area?
2. What does this treatment or omission of a transnational perspective mean for the question of ethical responsibility toward the past, i.e., for posterity's assuming or acknowledging responsibility for events concerning past individuals and societies?

We will first discuss earlier researchers' take on intergenerational and transnational issues regarding historical responsibility. We will then discuss the limitations of the Nordic TRC processes from the perspective of the methodological combination of these two concepts, transnational and historical responsibility. To elucidate our case, we investigate the mandate documents as empirical examples of omissions of historical Sámi groups that do not neatly fit within the current nation-state borders in the Nordic area. These borders are mainly the result of geopolitical processes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the formative processes defining historical and current state-Sámi relations were established long before these borders.

We hope that our findings could point to constructive ways forward for the follow-up phases of the work of the committees. We especially wish to engage and promote the question of historical responsibility in more transnational terms.

Historical responsibility – collectives and individuals

A rather substantial body of earlier research focuses on intergenerational justice in reconciliation processes (Baquero, 2023; Fareld, 2018; Olick, 2007; Rotberg and Thompson, 2000; Thompson, 2002; Torpey, 2003). These processes are founded on the notion that at least in some way, it is possible and fruitful to project questions of responsibility back or forward in time.⁶ This theme and its ethical pitfalls and political dimensions have been discussed by e.g., Bevernage (2012), Neumann and Thompson (2015), and Baquero (2023). One question that has been critically discussed, apparent in the case of the Nordic-Sámi TRCs, is the role of the governments in these processes. The fact that three different commissions are studying the history of the transnational Sámi area is pointed out as an example of lingering methodological nationalism⁷ or colonialism. According to Kuokkanen (2020) and Sjöberg and Sara (2022), including the nation-states as self-evident parties in the processes risks reinforcing the role of the nation-state vis-à-vis the Sámi, even though an important goal of the commissions is to examine this role in a historical perspective critically.

The truth and reconciliation processes initiated in societies such as South Africa or several Latin American countries were justified as transitional (Barkan, 2015; Rotberg, 2000; Teitel, 2000). That is, they were conceived as necessary for society as a whole to transition to a more just and stable future. One of the most important precursors of TRC processes in general was the South African TRC, which functioned within a society with a

close history of violence. The South African TRC was founded on the notion that a large number of individual testimonies could expose both individual and institutional perpetration. Individualization, especially on account of the victim's experience, was one crucial ingredient in seeking transitional justice for re-stabilizing society (Bevernage, 2012; Rotberg and Thompson, 2000; Tutu, 2000; Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd, 2000, see also Baquero, 2023). In processes such as the one in South Africa, whole societies found themselves in a situation following a collective trauma. A transitional process was an effort to carry on as a society (Rotberg 2000: 5–9). In this light, the TRCs of the Nordic countries come closer to the TRC processes in, e.g., Canada and New Zealand (Destrooper et al. 2023; James, 2021; Nagy, 2008; Skaar, 2021; Winter, 2014), where Western democracies conventionally viewed as stable and peaceful, chose to scrutinize parts of their pasts with the help of reconciliation processes. Nicola Henry (2015) has shown how transitional justice works in “established democracies”. She advocates a learning process where new processes can use older ones as examples to avoid committing earlier mistakes, both in more traditional contexts of transitional justice and in more established democracies (Henry, 2015). In her systematization of various truth and reconciliation processes, Elin Skaar (2021) has argued that the Nordic commissions can be seen as examples of “non-transitional” contexts of reconciliatory processes, as the Nordic TRCs take place in, conventionally speaking, stable democracies. Such a label, “stable democracies”, can be challenged from many angles and certainly that of Sámi and minority history.

Differently from conventional contexts of transitional justice, in the Nordic countries, the collective trauma to be addressed is more of a regional character. It is especially an issue for minorities. Large parts of the Nordic societies are ignorant about the atrocities of the past due to a traditional lack of education and publicity about this part of the history of the region. Partly for this reason, public education about past and present discriminatory policies lies at the heart of the Nordic reconciliation processes (Norlin and Lindmark, 2021; Solomons et al., 2021). This is exemplified by key verb formulations in the mandate documents and by one of the main recommendations in the final report of the Norwegian TRC. A public education mandate follows in all documents in which the primary functions of the commissions are described as “mapping out and investigating” (Sweden), “identifying and evaluating” (Finland), and “studying and describing” (Norway) the forms of discrimination and oppression the Nordic states have directed toward Sámi populations and individuals. (Ministry of Culture [Sweden], 2021; Prime Minister's Office [Finland], 2019; Storting, 2018; see also Skaar, 2021).

As public education is one of the guiding principles, the mandate documents in each country express a reluctance to individualize perpetrators and victims. All three mandates state clearly that the processes aim to increase public knowledge and awareness about state-Sámi relations and not to focus on individual atrocities and oppressions. Individual cases can and will, of course, come up in the confidential hearings that the TRCs hold with the Sámi, but the commissions' mandates do not warrant them to include such cases in their reports. In terms of historical responsibility, this issue is relevant. Matt James (2021) has pointed out that the definition of

“collective responsibility” that, e.g., the Canadian TRC resulted in, risks downplaying the activity and, indeed, the responsibility of and toward individuals.

TRCs and the question of historical responsibility

What is a TRC, and how does it connect to the question of truth and, in turn, to responsibility toward the past? As [Maier \(2000\)](#) and, most recently in a Nordic context, [Norlin and Lindmark \(2021\)](#) argue, the truth about the past that a truth commission seeks is somewhat different when compared to academic historical investigations that conventionally do not have outspoken social or political agendas ([Evans, 2002](#); [Maier, 2000](#); [Norlin and Lindmark, 2021](#)). Telling the truth or uncovering it in the context of a TRC is often done for the sake of bringing up atrocities in the past for the process of reconciliation and social justice. This is not always compatible with the concept of truth in historical research (see [Berger, 2019](#); [Cracraft, 2004](#); [Evans, 2002](#)). The truth about the past that is investigated in scholarly historiography may, of course, bring up atrocities that have taken place, but it may also, and equally often, give another kind of insight into complex occurrences in the past. As with the judge, the historian, as Marc Bloch contends, “whatever his secret heart’s desire, questions witness with no other concern than to know the facts, whatever they may be” (1954: 139). Or as Saul Friedländer argues: “The historian cannot be and should not be the guardian of memory. The historian’s gaze is analytic, critical, attuned to complexity, and wary about generalizations” (2000: 13, *our italics*). From this historical perspective, the truth about the past can thus not be contextually predefined to convey a particular story or to put the past on trial (see also [De Baets 2009](#)). “In the face of simplified representations of the past, the historian’s duty is to reintroduce the complexity of discrete historical events, the ambiguity of human behavior, and the indetermination of wider social processes” ([Friedländer, 2000](#): 14). Strictly speaking, pointing out this complexity and ambiguity, is for many, what truth about the past and historical responsibility implies.

In the context of the TRCs, however, uncovering the truth, recognizing it, and living on with it is to move forward as a society in which both past victims and perpetrators and their descendants continue to co-exist, “it involves seeking reconciliation between those who have to live together in spite of past injustice” ([Cairns, 2003](#): 66). Telling the truth about the past, as Margaret Urban Walker has argued, can thus count as reparations for historical injustices:

In order to redress a wrong [...], the truth about that wrong must be uncovered and acknowledged. Because all reparations depend upon the expressive dimension that acknowledges offense, responsibility, and intent to do justice, truth-telling about a wrong is also a constitutive element of that expressive function. So, truth-telling is clearly both a condition and a constituent of reparations measures. ([Walker, 2015](#): 133–134)

This conception of truth about the past is targeted at unfolding atrocities in a society for present and future social justice (see the relation between history and memory in [Assmann, 2006](#); [Olick, 2007](#)). The mandate document for the Swedish-Sámi commission states that an “independent truth commission” is initiated “about the State of Sweden’s atrocities against the Sámi people,” which implies that the truth under scrutiny is

exclusively these atrocities toward the Sámi having occurred in the past of Swedish society. Nevertheless, this also entails that historical responsibility, or responsibility toward the past, means not an inquiry into a historical truth that is unknown. Rather, “the government has a responsibility to increase the knowledge about the abuses, violations, and racism that the Sámi people have been subject to.” (Ministry of Culture [Sweden], 2021: (2) Responsibility toward the past as formulated in this context seems to consist of recognizing the guilt of being the posterity of people having lived under the Swedish state body. To what extent professional historiography may contribute to a contextually instrumental mission of this kind without diverging from its professional ethos of objectivity remains a dividing question. (Bloxham, 2020; Evans, 2002; Wiklund, 2019). As Norlin and Lindmark state, pursuing historical justice always entails “an agenda that goes beyond the academic interest in researching the past” (2021: 136). What follows of all this is that the historical inquiry and the truth sought in a truth and reconciliation commission is predefined in a certain sense, and academic historians working with or for such processes need to be aware of this conflict and use strategies to “academize” the process (see, e.g., Norlin and Lindmark, 2021: 138).

One important issue relating to and following this “predefined” character of the processes concerns the role of the nation-state, i.e., the unproblematized notion that the nation-state is and should be a “natural” part of the TRC processes. All three mandate documents state the involvement of the nation-state almost as doxa, a self-evident fact. The document in Sweden reads that the Swedish Sámi Parliament and the Swedish government have decided in June 2019 on the establishment of “an independent truth commission about the state of Sweden’s oppression of the Sámi people.” Both the oppression and the state of Sweden as the primary historical and geopolitical frame are predefined. This presentism is one clear example of how the task of reconciliation commissions differs from that of historical inquiries of a more academic character (see Norlin and Lindmark, 2021; Maier, 2000 for a discussion balancing between academic history and reconciliation).

The mandate documents also make visible that responsibility is not a matter of consigning individual blame or punishment but rather of underscoring historical abuses and oppressions carried out in the past by larger state bodies against particularly the Sámi people. In the wording of the Swedish mandate, “because the project covers the time up to today, it can be assumed that some of the abuses that will be highlighted in, among other things, interviews may be regarded as not yet prescribed crimes.” The mandate of the Finnish commission talks about a “general” picture of “historical and ongoing discrimination”, and the Norwegian one defines the task of the commission as mapping out the policies and activity of “authorities” on a general level. (Ministry of Culture [Sweden], 2021; Prime Minister’s Office [Finland], 2019; Storting, 2018). The task of the commissions is not to nail individuals to particular crimes but rather to do justice to Sámi experiences of oppression through education and possibly state reparations.

Most TRCs take place in a context where a juridical process is, for some reason or another, judged to be impossible or unproductive. In the mandate documents studied in this article, responsibility toward the past is not seen as a purely political activity targeted at a state body and its policy. For example, the primary purpose of the Swedish

commission is described as giving the Sámi “both collective and individual reparation” to “promote reconciliation” by “increasing knowledge throughout Sweden about the historical injustices committed” against the Sámi and their “traumas that live on to this day,” one purpose being “to prevent something similar from happening in the future.” (Ministry of Culture [Sweden], 2021) However, the documents do not give a reason why the most effective way to highlight ethical responsibility toward the past would be to frame it in intranational and collective terms. The mandate documents characterize responsibility as a kind of ethical responsibility that consists of revising our historical consciousness, done on intergenerational premises for a future generation. However, the national limitations of the commissions undermine the novelty of such ethical responsibility toward the past. These limitations entangle both the experiences of Sámi victimization and the accountability for these experiences to pre-given social or national boundaries.

What does this nationalization then possibly entail? As Hannah Arendt (2003) suggests, it might be meaningful to speak about a political responsibility that belongs to people who continue to live in a society in which injustices in the past have occurred. People living in German society immediately after the Second World War bore such political responsibility, a responsibility that has sometimes manifested itself in shame or guilt (see Arendt, 2003; Jaspers, 2000). Such political responsibility does not necessarily make posterity juridically guilty of the crimes that have happened in a society’s past. Yet, it invites them to take on the guilt of continuing to live on in exactly that society (see also Todorov, 1999). The mandate documents partly point in this direction of political collective responsibility.

Yet, responsibility toward the past does not need to conform to political responsibility tied to a state body. One could also say, as Cairns does, that “we misconceive our relation to the past if we think the only relevant pasts are national pasts” and that “‘our’ past is sufficiently unblemished that we can hold our heads up high” (Cairns, 2003: 64; see also Löfström, 2021) In truth, if we speak of a transnational or even global historical consciousness, “we cannot avoid the understanding” that we are historically germinated in a shared world as the posterity of past generations, and that “we nevertheless belong to the same humanity as those whose actions horrify us” (Cairns, 2003: 64). “All pasts in that large sense are also our pasts,” as Cairns aptly puts it (Cairns, 2003: 64). Or as Arendt argues: “Every government assumes responsibility for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessors and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past” (2003: 149). Some things can be said to be done in our name in the sense that we are members of a nation and representatives of a body politic, which means that “we are always held responsible for the sins of our fathers as we reap the reward of their merits” (2003: 150). “But,” as Arendt continues, “we are of course not guilty of their misdeeds, either morally or legally, nor can we ascribe their deeds to our own merits” (2003: 150).

It is imperative in ethical terms to understand what deeds we have done and suffered and what others have done. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to assume ethical responsibility toward the past to understand exactly how each of us should answer. This means that responsibility need not be restricted to the responsibility of being a representative of a body politic or sharing a question of political guilt of living in a society in which atrocities have happened in the past. Rather, we take responsibility for what has happened in the

past, done by others to understand and act upon what our forefathers have done. Ethical education about past generations' horrors and misdeeds toward the Sámi is one way of assuming such ethical responsibility. Yet, to tie ethical concerns to questions of "reparation" or "reconciliation" within a priori political frames can mitigate and blur what the ethical responsibility of cultivating a responsible historical consciousness beyond national borders consists of. The following shows that a fuller ethical responsibility toward the past should include a clearer transnational view of history.

Who and what is forgotten? The difficulty of a historically informed transnational responsibility toward the past

To shed light on the problems raised by the notions of transnationalism and historical responsibility and investigate in what ways the commissions relate to their mandates, we will now discuss a specific empirical case related to methodological nationalism, the successor state problem. As the Nordic Lutheran state churches played a paramount role in the Sámi areas historically, this successor state problem can be complemented with the "successor church" problem: when borders changed, and new powers took control over certain areas, did this change of metropole also end the historical responsibility of the former government or church?

In northern Scandinavia, large areas now pertaining to Finland were part of Sweden until 1809 when Finland, after many wars Sweden had lost to Russia, became a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire. These areas were partly administered by the Diocese of Härnösand and partly by the Diocese of Turku in Southwestern Finland (also part of Sweden until 1809). These regions were as much or as little "Swedish" as the Sámi areas in modern-day Sweden. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, the time of the most active missionary and colonization policies of the Church of Sweden and the Swedish crown, these areas were politically and in terms of church administration Swedish. (Elenius, 2006; Kylli, 2019; Lindmark, 2016).

These historical facts raise several critical questions for the work of the commissions: Numerous Sámi generations and their descendants living in modern-day Finland were affected by the missionary and colonization activities of Swedish ecclesial and state actors. Should the Swedish or the Finnish commission assume responsibility for the truth-telling and possible reconciliation? What about Norway and Denmark regarding missionary activities in northern Norway? Denmark and Norway formally formed a real union from the fourteenth century until 1814. Denmark and Copenhagen had a leading position in this union, and the power to introduce and implement policies was, in most cases, centralized in Copenhagen. This is actualized not least in the missionary policies targeting the Sámi. The missionary work and education among the Sámi formed part of the activities of the College of Missions (Missionskollegiet) in Copenhagen. This college oversaw the missions in northern Norway (among the Sámi), Greenland, and the Danish West Indies. (*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [Norway]*, 2023: 176; Nørgaard and Henschen, 2023; Hansen and Olsen, 2022).

The Norwegian mandate document actualizes this question of responsibility implicitly. The document excluded the period preceding the "Norwegianization policies" (a set of

rigid assimilative policies, roughly from 1800 onwards), although it does state that the commission can go longer back in time if it so desires (Storting, 2018). By this limitation, the mandate avoids the question of successor state responsibility, although only indirectly; the periodization can be challenged from the perspective of presentism. Why does the mandate present a pre-selection of a period instead of an open approach to history, including periodization and terminology, as Norwegianization is a concept with a long history and historiography? This pre-selection sets certain limits to the work of the commission, not only in terms of the period investigated but also concerning the question of transnational responsibility toward the past.

The final report of the Norwegian TRC shows that it has somewhat renegotiated and redefined its role in relation to the mandate. The report exceeds the mandate since it includes a historical background stretching back to prehistory. The report includes an in-depth historical background that studies the minorities from a historical perspective, leading to the beginning of the Norwegianization process. The background section starts with the earliest written records on the relationships between the Finno-Ugric and Germanic-speaking populations in what today is Norway. The early depictions of rather frequent relations and intermarriage between Scandinavian and Sámi groups are taken as examples of contacts between two populations with a rather reciprocal relationship (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [Norway], 2023).

The medieval expansions of the Norwegian Crown and the Catholic Church to the Sámi areas are presented as the beginning of a gradually intensified takeover of the Sámi homeland. At the same time, the shifting, undefined, and at times shared control of the areas in northernmost Scandinavia, Finland, and north-western Russia point to a continued coexistence that did not yet have clearly defined power relations: the Sámi were not necessarily “mere” subjects of other powers. The more formalized expansion of state and church administration from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards is described as “church, state, and nation building”, rather than as colonialism (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [Norway], 2023: 174–180). It will be interesting to see whether the Finnish and Swedish commissions will apply a similar strategy with the concept of colonialism or use it more straightforwardly as a label for the governmental and ecclesial takeover of the Sámi areas.

The historical summary of the pre-mandate period (roughly before 1800) ties to the mandate through a summarising discussion. The summary frames the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century history⁸ preceding the mandate period as the “way to the Norwegianization policies” (The Truth and Reconciliation Commission [Norway], 2023: 181). Even though the final report of the Norwegian TRC exceeds its mandate period in this way, its historical background functions precisely as a background to the “way to Norwegianization”. This way of relating to history, reading it as a teleological background to what then happened, reduces historical complexity in general, as interpreting history from presentist categories precludes the legitimacy of other historical categories that existed and that might have been. In the specific case of the TRC and its use of history, it also downplays the transnational aspects of historical responsibility. Viewing earlier historical periods primarily as a background to nineteenth and twentieth-century assimilation policies does not encourage a discussion on historical responsibility in this

period preceding the Norwegian nation-state itself, even if many, if not most, of the later discriminatory processes were direct continuations or modified versions of earlier policies. The problems caused by a lack of transnational perspectives (see [Kuokkanen, 2020](#); [Sjöberg and Sara, 2022](#)) seem to be present both in the mandate and the final report of the Norwegian commission.

The Finnish mandate document similarly highlights the role of the state and its assimilation policies. The mandate leaves the task open, however, in stating that the TRC will investigate the state and “various authorities”, which, in theory, could include historical actors not related to the modern state of Finland. Although tightly connected to the state of Finland as a frame of interpretation of the history of the Sámi, the Finnish mandate showcases a certain awareness of the transnational problem in stating that “given that the Sámi are a nation living in four countries and that similar truth and reconciliation processes are underway or are being planned in Norway and Sweden, the work of the commission should take into account the Nordic perspective and work to build links with other Nordic processes.” ([Truth and Reconciliation Commission Concerning the Sámi People \[Finland\], 2021](#)). This openness to a transnational perspective is probably the result of the Finnish process starting after the Norwegian one. It is natural to point to other ongoing Nordic processes. Yet, building links with other Nordic processes is still on the level of comparative rather than transnational policy work and analysis.

The Swedish mandate is formulated openly, leaving it up to the commission to decide which focus areas it will treat. The commission later specified this assignment by highlighting four focus areas: 1. Legislation and boundaries concerning land, water, etc. (including exploitation of natural resources); 2. Forced displacement of the Sami; 3. The reindeer husbandry right (particularly the consequences of the 1928 Reindeer Grazing Act); 4. The ‘Lapps [Sámi] should be Lapps’ policy, racial biology, and dispersal of Sami cultural heritage (this area also includes language and school policies) ([Truth Commission for the Sámi People \[Sweden\], 2023](#)).

It is especially point 1 that would warrant a transnational contextualization as the legislation passed by Swedish authorities in the early modern period continues to significantly impact land rights in Finland ([Korpijaakko-Labba, 1989](#)). There is a centuries-old problematic in the Sámi areas related to the way modern-day national borders crisscross the area and cut off, for example, traditional migratory routes for reindeer as well as traditional and natural trade routes between the Arctic Ocean and the Baltic coastlines ([Elenius, 2006](#)). It seems that the way the mandates are written, this kind of transnational responsibility is not assumed or recognized, apart from the call of the Finnish mandate to cooperate with the other Nordic-Sámi processes.

Our study of the mandate documents and the Norwegian report show that the commissions have difficulties discussing transnational aspects of past and present Sámi circumstances as their mandates are essentially connected to the modern-day nation-states, their administrative structures, and the current borders. The historical responsibility for the individuals who fall in between the historical and current state borders is ignored or simply forgotten due to the perspective adopted.

While the main aim of this article is not to commemorate the Sámi groups and individuals implicitly omitted from the mandate of the TRCs, for the sake of clarity, these

groups include the Sámi inhabitants of large parts of modern-day northern Finland and northern Norway during the most active missionary period of the Dano-Norwegian and Swedish Lutheran churches (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). In choosing to treat the more recent history of the Sámi, the commissions, of course, in a sense, omit the pre-nineteenth century historical Sámi groups altogether, regardless of the countries. But the consequences of these choices differ. In Sweden, there is a direct continuation of missionary and educational policies from the seventeenth century up until the twentieth century. Hence, this historical continuum is a natural part of the commission's work, as decisions on topics such as educational policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have their roots in much earlier missionary practices. However, in the case of the Sámi groups in Finland, such a link is cut short. Whereas the Church of Sweden and Sweden as a state were behind the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century policies implemented also in modern-day Finland, these kinds of responsibilities are absent in the mandates of both the Swedish and the Finnish commissions.

Discussion

The mandate documents of the Nordic TRCs studied in this article treat the subjects of truth-seeking and reconciliation on a collective level instead of a level of individualization of actions and events in the past. Presenting the mandates of the commissions as relating to collectives rather than individuals entails that one of the principal focus areas of the TRCs is the need of public education. Yet, if this public education takes place in the nation-states rather than transnationally and mainly about the history of the nation-states in relation to the Sámi, the nationalization of the Sámi population continues and risks to be reinforced. If the "collective" that the TRCs refer to in their efforts at reconciliation becomes synonymous with the twenty-first-century nation-states and the Sámi in each nation-state, there is a risk that transnational aspects of history are overlooked. The historical violation of Sámi individuals "in between" current nation state borders tend to fall into oblivion.

Based on our reading of the mandate documents, it remains unclear how the transnational past should be ethically responded to regarding public education and the cultivation of historical consciousness. The example of the final report of the TRC in Norway demonstrates that despite a certain awareness of these limitations of the mandate, it is difficult to address and point to historical responsibility for reconciliation in and with the transnational past. As Matt James has argued, the lack of individualization blurs the responsibility question on the part of the perpetrators. We argue that the generalizations and framing of historical complexity to match the modern nation-state structures also blur the picture of which victims the current states are responsible for. When the collectivization of historical responsibility is carried out along the lines of the modern nation-states, crucial aspects of the Sámi past simply disappear from the historical view of the commissions, as we have shown in this article.

We have aimed to formulate a constructive critique after a review of earlier research and based on our empirical cases studying the mandate documents and the report of the Norwegian commission from the perspective of methodological nationalism and the

successor state/successor church problematic. We acknowledge and endorse the importance of the work of the commissions, especially as they are established after initiatives from the Sámi parliaments in each country. The work of the commissions is connected to the governments or parliaments of the countries in different ways. For this reason, the processes are guided and limited by certain institutional and structural conditions that decide what is possible to do. The commission members might have had more substantial ambitions of transnationalism than finally was or will be the case. We hope our article could open the discussion to include deeper transnational perspectives, specifically regarding a historically informed transnational perspective on responsibility toward the past. The reconciliatory work only starts when the commissions hand in their reports, and we have written this article convinced that it could inform future research and public education projects on the history of the Sámi of northernmost Europe.

Our analysis actualizes the need to work more transnationally in the future, to include as many histories as possible, and to accept a more complete ethical responsibility toward the past. In terms of research, more cross-border cooperation would be beneficial. In terms of education, one way forward could be teaching materials with a straightforward transnational take on Sámi history available for teachers and schools in the Nordic countries. It is a step in the right direction that the report of the Norwegian commission includes in its recommendations a call to the authorities and instances responsible for knowledge production and knowledge dissemination to keep a close eye on the work of the commissions in Finland and Sweden ([The Truth and Reconciliation Commission \[Norway\], 2023: 652](#)).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark and the Kone Foundation.

ORCID iDs

Otso Kortekangas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6486-6239>

Malin Arvidsson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9231-9283>

Notes

1. The Norwegian commission also treats the history of three Finnic-speaking groups in Norway apart from the Sámi.
2. Sweden has also established another commission to treat the history of three Finnic-speaking groups in Sweden.

3. The process in Sweden is called truth commission whereas the processes in Finland and Norway are called truth and reconciliation processes. The Swedish mandate emphasises with this name form that truth needs to come first, before any reconciliation is possible. (Ministry of Culture [Sweden], 2021; see also Ochs, 2024).
4. The Sámi are an indigenous population living in northern Scandinavia, Finland and northwestern Russia. The commissions have been established in cooperation with the Sámi Parliaments in each country.
5. Another Swedish commission working with the Finnic-speaking minorities in northern Sweden delivered its final report (SOU, 2023:68) *Som om vi aldrig funnits: exkludering och assimilering av tornedalingar, kväner och lantalaiset. Slutbetänkande av Sannings-och försoningskommissionen för tornedalingar, kväner och lantalaiset* in November 2023.
6. We are principally interested in the backward-looking part of intergenerational responsibility, that is, historical responsibility.
7. We understand methodological nationalism as the a priori use of the nation state as the self-evident research frame. About methodological nationalism and Sámi historiography, see Minde (2008) and Kortekangas (2017).
8. During this pre-mandate period, the attitudes of the church and state authorities varied between a Lutheran, pragmatic principle of mission and education in the mother tongue of the minorities, and a strengthening nationalist ideology including the idea that Norwegian was the main language of the country, and thus the legitimate main language of instruction and mission.

References

- Arendt H (2003) Collective Responsibility. In: Kohn J (ed) *Responsibility and Judgement*. New York: Schocken Books, 147–158.
- Assmann A (2006) History, Memory, and the genre of testimony. *Poetics Today* 27(2): 261–273.
- Baquero RP (2023) Multilayered temporalities underlying Transitional justice: rethinking resentment and melancholia from jean améry and walter benjamin. In: Elgabsi N and Gilbert B (eds). *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History: A Cross-Cultural Approach*. London: Bloomsbury, 69–85.
- Barkan E (2015) Historical dialogue: beyond transitional justice and conflict resolution. In: Neumann K and Thompson J (eds). *Historical Justice and Memory*. Madison, Wis: The University of Wisconsin Press, 185–201.
- Berger S (2019) *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Bevernage B (2012) *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice*. London: Routledge.
- Bloch M (1954) *The Historian's Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Bloxham D (2020) *History and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cairns A (2003) Coming to terms with the past. In: Torpey J (ed). *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 72–75.
- Cracraft J (2004) Implicit morality. *History and Theory* 43(4): 31–42.
- De Baets A (2009) *Responsible History*. New York: Berghahn Books.

- Destrooper T, Gissel EL and Carlson KB (2023) *Transitional Justice in Aparadigmatic Contexts: Accountability, Recognition, and Disruption*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Elenius L (2006) *Nationalstat Och Minoritetspolitik. Samer Och Finskspråkiga Minoriteter I Ett Jämförande Nordiskt Perspektiv*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Evans RJ (2002) History, memory, and the law: the historian as expert witness. *History and Theory* 41(3): 326–345. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3590689>
- Fareld V (2018) History, justice, and the time of the imprescriptible. In: Helgesson S and Svenungsson J (eds). *The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility*. New York: Berghahn, 53–69.
- Friedländer S (2000) History, memory, and the historian: dilemmas and responsibilities. *New German Critique* 80: 3–15.
- Hansen LI and Olsen B (2022) *Samenes historie fram til 1750*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm akademisk.
- Henry N (2015) From reconciliation to transitional justice: the contours of redress politics in established democracies. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 9(2): 199–218.
- James M (2021) The structural injustice turn, the historical justice dilemma and assigning responsibility with the Canadian TRC report. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 54(2): 374–396. DOI: [10.1017/S0008423921000299](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423921000299).
- Jaspers K (2000) *The Question of German Guilt*. In: Ashton EB and Joseph WK (eds). New York: Fordham University Press.
- Korpijaakko-Labba K (1989) Saamelaiusten oikeusasemasta ruotsi-suomessa. In: *Oikeushistoriallinen Tutkimus Länsi-Pohjan Lapin Maankäyttöoloista Ja -oikeuksista Ennen 1700-luvun Puoliväliä*. Helsinki: Lakimiesliiton kustannus.
- Kortekangas O (2017) Whose history is Sámi history? Utility, nation state and the indigenous studies paradigm. A historiographical comment. *The Barents and the Baltic Sea Region: Contacts, Influences and Social Change*. In: Alenius K and Enbuske M (eds). Rovaniemi: The Historical Association of Northern Finland, 101–108.
- Kuokkanen R (2020) Reconciliation as a threat or structural change? The truth and reconciliation process and settler colonial policy making in Finland. *Human Rights Review* 21: 293–312.
- Kylli R (2019) Out of the “pagan darkness”: christian education in Finnish Lapland. In: Kortekangas O, Keskitalo P and Nyysönen J, (eds). *Sámi Educational History in a Comparative International Perspective*. Cham: Palgrave, 27–46.
- Lindmark D (2016) Svenska undervisningsinsatser och samiska reaktioner på 1600- och 1700-talen. In: Lindmark D and Sundström O (eds). *De Historiska Relationerna Mellan Svenska Kyrkan Och Samerna*. Skellefteå: Artos, Vol. 1.
- Löfström J (2021) Political good-will, moral lessons, historical justice? Upper secondary school students on the motives and effects of historical apologies. In: Keynes M, (eds). *Historical Justice and History Education*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Maier C (2000) Doing History, Doing Justice: the narrative of the historian and of the truth commission. In: Rotberg R and Thompson D (eds). *Truth V. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 261–278.
- Minde H (2008) Introduction. In: Minde H (ed). *Indigenous Peoples. Self-Determination, Knowledge, Indigeneity*. Delft: Eburon Publishers, 1–26.

- Ministry of Culture [Sweden] (2021) Kartläggning och granskning av den politik som förts gentemot samerna och dess konsekvenser för det samiska folket. Dir. 2021: 103.
- Nagy R (2008) Transitional justice as global project: critical reflections. *Third World Quarterly* 29: 275–289.
- Neumann K and Thompson J (2015) *Historical Justice and Memory*. Madison, Wis: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Nørgaard A and Henschen D (2023) Missionskollegiet. In: *Den Store Danske*. Available at: <https://denstoredanske.lex.dk/Missionskollegiet> (accessed 4 April 2024).
- Norlin B and Lindmark D (2021) Generating and popularising historical knowledge in a reconciliation process: the case of the church of Sweden and the Sami. In: Keynes M, (eds). *Historical Justice and History Education*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 131–151.
- Ochs SL (2024) Confronting legacies of indigenous injustice: lessons from Sweden. *Seton Hall Law Review* (54; forthcoming). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4522952> (accessed 11 June 2024).
- Olick JK (2007) *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Prime Minister's Office [Finland] (2019) Saamelaisten totuus- ja sovintokomission asettaminen. 19–724.
- Rotberg R (2000) Truth commissions and the provision of truth, justice, and reconciliation. In: Rotberg R and Thompson D (eds). *Truth V. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 3–21.
- Rotberg R and Thompson D (2000) *Truth V. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sjöberg L and Sara M (2022) When justice has borders: some reflections on national borders in relation to the TRC in Norway. In: Guðmarsdóttir S, Regan P and Solomons D, (eds). *Trading Justice for Peace? Reframing Reconciliation in TRC Processes in South Africa, Canada and Nordic Countries*. Cape Town: AOSIS.
- Skaar E (2023) When truth commission models travel: Explaining the Norwegian case. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 17(1): 123–140. DOI: [10.1093/ijtj/ijac027](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijac027) (accessed 1 July 2024).
- Solomons D, Regan P and Guðmarsdóttir S (2022) Introduction. Trading justice for peace? Perils and possibilities. In: Guðmarsdóttir S, Regan P and Solomons D, (eds). *Trading Justice for Peace? Reframing Reconciliation in TRC Processes in South Africa, Canada and Nordic Countries*. Cape Town: AOSIS.
- SOU (2023) Som om vi aldrig funnits: exkludering och assimilering av tornedalingar, kväner och lantalaiset. *Slutbetänkande av Sannings- och försoningskommissionen för tornedalingar, kväner och lantalaiset* [Swedish Government Official Report SOU]. Available at: https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/7cd3e7026dd141afac577586da7f8baa/sannings-och-forsoningskommissionen-for-tornedalingar-kvaner-och-lantalaisets-slutbetankande-sou-2023_68.pdf (accessed 1 July 2024).
- Teitel R (2000) *Transitional Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- The Commission to Investigate the Norwegianisation Policy and Injustice against the Sámi and Kvens/Norwegian Finns (also known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Norway) (2023) Sannhet og forsoning– grunnlag for et oppgjør med fornorskingspolitikk og urett mot

- samer, kvener/norskfinner og skogfinner. *Rapport til stortinget fra sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen*, Available at: <https://www.stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/sannhets-og-forsoningskommisjonen/rapport-til-stortinget-fra-sannhets-og-forsoningskommisjonen.pdf> (accessed 29 April 2024).
- The Storting (2018) Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonens mandat. Available at: <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Stortinget-og-demokratiet/Organene/sannhets-og-forsoningskommisjonen/sannhets-og-forsoningskommisjonens-mandat/> (accessed 29 April 2024).
- Thompson J (2002) Taking responsibility for the past. In: *Reparation and Historical Justice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Todorov T (1999) *The Conquest of America. The Question of the Other*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Torpey J (2003) *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission Concerning the Sámi People (Finland) (2021) Mandate. Available at: <https://sdt.sk.fi/en/mandate/> (accessed 29 April 2024).
- Truth Commission for the Sámi People (Sweden) (2023) The Commission's survey. Available at: <https://sanningskommissionensamer.se/en/about-the-assignment/the-commissions-survey/> (accessed 29 April 2024).
- Tutu D (2000) *No Future without Forgiveness*. New York: Image Books.
- Villa-Vicencio C and Verwoerd W (2000) *Looking Back, Reaching Forward: Reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- Walker MU (2015) How can truth telling count as reparations? In: Neumann K and Thompson J (eds) *Historical Justice and Memory*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 130–145.
- Wiklund M (2019) The ideal of justice and its significance for historians as engaged intellectuals. In: Berger S (ed). *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession*. New York: Berghahn Books, 44–62.
- Winter S (2014) *Transitional Justice in Established Democracies: A Political Theory*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.