A Brief History of Scandinavia

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Introduction

The series presents a history of the Scandinavian countries - Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland - from the earliest times to the present day. It is intended for participants who have little prior knowledge of Scandinavia and none of its languages. It introduces each country’s history, traditions, politics, society, and culture.

History has given the Scandinavian peoples a bent which will not easily be changed. The image is egalitarian. The specific location on the Earth’s surface has kept the Scandinavian peoples always close to Nature. Scandinavia that was once “the unknown north” has come to represent in some special degrees the ideas and ideals of democracy, humanitarianism, and social equality.

Week 1: “The Unknown North” (pre-1347)

Scandinavia remained a *terra incognita* far into the first millennium of the Christendom. Then, Europe was taken by surprise with the Viking expeditions in the ninth and tenth centuries. Nevertheless, when in 1016 Danish prince Cnut ascended the throne of England, Viking Scandinavia became an outpost of the Christendom it had so long assailed. King Cnut inaugurated a new era of medieval Scandinavia.

Amber, Furs and Slaves

The Vikings

The Era of Conversions

Separate Kingdoms

Week 2: The Three Crowns (1347-1613)

In 1397, the three Scandinavian kingdoms constituted the second largest accumulation of European territories under a single sovereign, the Union of Kalmar. It was the Reformation, not the Renaissance, which spread the most decisive changes among the peoples of northern Europe. The Reformation stimulated nationalist influences in each of the Scandinavian lands and it also bound them together by strong cultural ties established with north Germany.
Late-Medieval Scandinavia

The Union

The Reformation

“Castle of the Heavens”

**Week 3: Great Northern Dream (1613-1721)**

Gustavus II Adolphus was called *il re d’oro* by Italians because of his hair, but he has gone down in European annals as “the lion of the north” who raised Sweden to the status of a great power. His untimely death meant the end of an era of high endeavour. But this, like the romance of Elizabethan England or the grandeurs of Louis XIV’s France, has had an influence upon the later generations. Sweden dazzled the eyes of contemporaries. Of the many foreigners who were drawn to the Swedish court the most illustrious was Descartes, who died there.

“The Golden King”

Standing Together

Sole Monarchs of the North

The Shadow of a Colossus

**Week 4: Monarchies in the “Age of Freedom” (1721-1815)**

In the eighteenth-century Sweden lost her briefly held status of a great power. Denmark-Norway, the Twin Kingdoms, too abandoned the hopes of acting as a great power. The other territories, Finland and Iceland, were unfamiliar to continental visitors. The remoteness of Scandinavia from the main theatres of European conflicts made neutrality possible. As neutrals they could enjoy the profits of the carrying trade with all sides.

The Hats and the Caps

Science

Enlightened Despotism

Scandinavia Remodeled
Week 5: Scandinavia Recognized (1815-1914)

By 1914 Scandinavia underwent an economic transformation which made it small-scale competitor of the most advanced industrial regions. The Scandinavian peoples became leading exponents of public welfare legislation combining national pride with a feeling for equality. The five small peoples of northern Europe had always been contributors to, as well as recipients of, the cultural influences. But it was only in the nineteenth century that their achievements came to be commonly appreciated.

Nationalism

Towards the Welfare State

Neutrality

Services to the World

Week 6: Modern Scandinavia (1914-2020)

During the 20th century, the Scandinavian states gained in prestige, acquiring some degree of recognition as a significantly homogeneous group. The increase of prestige resulted chiefly from the ability which these countries showed to achieve satisfactory solutions of their pressing problems by strictly democratic methods. They achieved a considerable degree of social harmony which bridged the gap between classes. In international affairs this like-minded group championed peace and the rule of law. New ventures opened up vistas of Scandinavian cooperation when Denmark, Sweden and Finland chose to join the enlarging European Union.

Northern Neutrals

World War II

Realism

Scandinavian “Image”
Further readings:


