The Police as a Municipal or State Agency
A Comparison of Police Reforms in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden during the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT
The aim of the essay is to describe, analyze and compare the nationalization of the municipal police service in Norway, Denmark, and Sweden during the first half of the twentieth century. Similar arguments for and against a nationalization were put forward in each Scandinavian country. At a theoretical level, the police were seen as the exclusive concern of the state. At a practical level, the many small municipal forces, with too few police constables, prevented development. Bringing the police under national control was seen as a way to develop the police. However, there were also arguments against nationalization that can explain why it took so long time to push through these reforms. The municipal police were regarded as more firmly rooted in the local community and among the general public. There was also a general fear of a nationalized police service. These views provided municipal police services with a strong symbolic meaning which was further strengthened through the connection between municipal policing and local government. The role of local government can also explain why Swedish police services were nationalized much later than in Denmark and Norway.

Keywords
police history, police reforms, Swedish police, Danish police, Norwegian police

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, police services have been reorganized in several northern and western European countries. Most of these reforms have led to increased centralization, with fewer police districts and with the state exerting stricter control over police services. For example, in 2013 both the Netherlands and Scotland replaced regionalized policing with national police forces. These developments have been discussed and analyzed, both in public debate and within the academic community (Fyfe & Terpstra 2013).

In the Scandinavian countries, police services have long been national agencies. Even so, in recent years there has been an increase in centralization with amalgamations of regional state-police districts, resulting in fewer units. This recent centralization can be understood as a continuation of an older process. The reorganization of Swedish police services in 2015 from twenty-one regional independent state agencies into one police force is the culmination of a process that began in the early twentieth century with discussions about the nationalization of more than 1,600 independent municipal police districts (synonymous with police forces). Finally, in 1965, Swedish police services were nationalized. Similar developments took place in both Norway and Denmark, where the police became state agencies in the mid-1930s.

This historical process provides a background to the current centralization, but it is also of interest for other reasons. Behind the historical centralization and amalgamation of police districts lie fundamental issues that are of interest for research about the present-day police service and its history: the role of the state versus that of municipalities in policing, and the conflict between the needs for a local police service and the need for the state to control the police, the relationship between the police and the public, and finally in relation to governance and the accountability of the police.

The purpose of this article, then, is to examine police reforms and the centralization of police services from a historical perspective. This will be achieved through a comparison of how and why municipal police services were brought under national control in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century. The aim is twofold: (1) To describe the development of police reforms in each country. This is not a well-known history, and there is almost nothing written in English for non-Scandinavian readers about the police history in these countries. (2) To analyze the causes of these reforms with arguments for and against nationalization. The article will conclude with a discussion about the parallels between the historical processes and the present-day situation.

By ‘the Scandinavian police’, I am referring to police in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. Finland has been excluded from this study for linguistic reasons. A comparison of police reforms in the Scandinavian countries is possible, and likely fruitful, due to the many social, economic, cultural, and historical similarities between these countries. Yet, as will be shown, there are also some interesting differences in the processes that led to nationalization of police services in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. These similarities and differences can contribute to an understanding of how and why municipal police services were brought under national control in Scandinavia – they also contribute to an analysis of the general conditions surrounding present and past police reforms.
THE STATE, THE POLICE AND THE MUNICIPALITIES

The development of modern police services is usually connected to the rise of the modern national state, with the police as the agency responsible for maintaining the state’s monopoly of violence within its territorial borders. Thus, the police are also commonly seen as a manifestation of the state (Emsley 2004 pp. 193–199). It is important to clarify, however, what we mean by ‘the state’, and in what way the police can be a manifestation of the state?

The police can be governed in different ways; directly under the state or indirectly through subordinated regional or municipal agencies. The state can be understood as constituting all government authority within the geographical area of a country, including all organs of central, regional, and municipal power. In this sense, all police forces are by definition state-police. The state can also be defined, however, in a more limited way as the central state, e.g. parliament, government, and national agencies – but not including institutions at a regional or municipal level. Under this definition, only police services subordinated directly under the central state are considered state-police. Thus, police forces under the direct control and management of regional or municipal agencies, for example towns, are not considered state-police. This article accepts the second definition of the state, e.g. the central state, and state-police (or synonymous national/nationalized police) are only police services that are subordinated directly under the central state.

It is important to emphasize that a state-police can be divided into smaller regional or local forces, with these units subordinated under the state and not regional or municipal authorities. The present-day centralization of Scandinavian police services is a process of amalgamation of police forces that are already coordinated by the state. This article is focused, however, on the nationalization of the many municipal police forces.

Municipal police services were not unique to Scandinavia, but were common in many countries. For example, police services in Scotland were organized at a municipal level until the 1970s, and in the Netherlands until the 1990s (Fyfe & Terpstra 2013). England and Wales are perhaps the most well-known examples of traditional municipal policing. For more than a century, the British state has tried to increase its control over municipal police services. These efforts have always been met with resistance. Nevertheless, there has been a centralization process (Emsley 1996 pp. 84–93, 160–175; Williams 2011 pp. 4–17).

The general long-term trend in most countries seems to be towards bringing municipal police forces under national control. In fact, this transformation stands out as a major process in the history of the police. Police historian Clive Emsley (2011) has analyzed how the police were organized in Europe during the nineteenth century. He claims that in principle there were three distinct types of police forces. While he writes mainly about France and Britain, this typology applies to many countries in Europe. Both Paris and London had “state civilian forces” commanded by government appointees. The London Metropolitan Police provides the best example. The borough and county police in Britain and the urban police in France were, by Emsley’s terminology, “municipal civilian” police forces since they were largely under the control of regional or local authorities such as towns. The third type of police force was the “state military” who were responsible to a central government ministry, with the Gendarmerie as a well-known example. Emsley concludes that during the nineteenth century, municipalities and towns in many parts of Europe were responsible for their own policing arrangements. However, he adds that states had started to circum-
scribe municipal police. Thus, it is this process of the state’s increasing control over municipal police services in Scandinavia until the middle of the twentieth century that is explored below.

EARLIER RESEARCH AND SOURCES

Interest in the area of police history has grown in Scandinavia since the millennium, although everything published is written in the Scandinavian languages. Henrik Stevnsborg (2010) has written an interesting history of the Danish police. Two PhD dissertations that focus on the Danish experience have also been published (Strand 2011; Christensen 2011). These three authors write about the nationalization of police services in Denmark, but they do not draw any comparisons with reforms in the other Scandinavian countries. While these books have been of great value when researching for this article, I have also gone straight to the Danish sources.

There is no comprehensive history of the Norwegian police, but there are some outlines about municipal policing in the large towns that also describe the general development of Norwegian policing (Valen Sendstad 1953; Fossen 1992; Bonde 1994). There is also an old article about the Norwegian police until the 1920s (Lassen 1928). Per Ole Johansen describes this process partly in his book about political surveillance during the mid-twentieth century (Johansen 1988). There is also a master’s thesis about the nationalization (Halvorsen 2003). PhD student Birgitte Elleføs is studying the reforms of the Norwegian police.

I have previously written about municipal policing and the nationalization in my book about the history of the Swedish police (Furuhagen 2009), in which there are also references to the sources used here. There is also a brief survey of the developments in Sweden from the 1950s by Helena Stensöta (2004 pp.110–113). A book about the history of the Swedish police union also describes the history of the police prior to nationalization (Edberg & Svärd 1963). PhD student Josefin Berndt is now studying the nationalization of police services in Sweden.

There are only a few articles that consider police services in these countries within a Scandinavian context, but there are surveys, texts aimed towards teaching, and drafts for further research. None of these texts are comparative in the same way as this article. Neither do they write much about municipal policing and the nationalization (Hjellemo 1980; Christensen 2014; Elleføs & Larsson 2014; Nyzell & Larsson 2016).

The scholarly literature mentioned above, contains important information for the aims of this article, but does not provide a complete picture. I have also used official reports that focus on the police and were produced under the auspices of the state in each country. These reports provide a window into the historical backgrounds of municipal police services and into the development of the police, as well as providing summaries of previous proposals and reforms. They also contain discussions about, and arguments for and against, nationalization.

These reports are the best source material available for the purpose with this article. However, it is important to highlight the limitations of these reports as historical sources. It was governments that appointed the committees of inquiry, and each government set the
committees’ remit. With that said, with only one exception the committees worked relatively independently from government. Thus, the reports should be seen not as the direct, but rather the indirect views of government. However, the reports present an official view, mostly from the members of the committees. In all three countries, the committees always included high-ranking police officers, prosecutors, and judges, providing a form of expert opinion. The police unions had representatives on most Danish and Swedish committees, but not on the Norwegian committees. The committees were not always unanimous. Instead, the reports show that occasionally individual members took divergent positions. In Sweden and in one Danish example, members of parliament, from different political parties, also sat on the committees. But the reports should not be seen, however, as purely political proposals, and the reports were not put forward in the parliaments.

THE PREHISTORY OF THE POLICE IN SCANDINAVIA

The police in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have historically developed in similar ways. Of course, there were minor differences, but there were also significant similarities in the role of the state in policing versus that of the towns/municipalities, hence this slightly simplified introduction to the prehistory of modern policing in Scandinavia. In the Scandinavian countries, the police were formally divided between the state and the municipalities/the towns. The police were historically considered to be almost like a local business. It is for this reason that they have been designated mainly as municipal by scholars writing about police services in Scandinavia (Hjellemo 1979; Johansen 1988 p. 11; Stevnsborg 2000 p. 782; Furuhagen 2009).

The state had overarching authority, but there were some differences in terms of the organization of the police and the role of the state in urban and rural areas. The state also paid for the few high ranking civil servants who were state employees and responsible for law and order on a regional basis, including having responsibility for the police. The municipalities and the towns had to organize, maintain, and direct the local forces – and they also had to pay for policing (or at least for part of it). It was an old tradition that each town should provide for its own police force. This legal custom was not formalized in law until the end of the nineteenth century in Denmark and the beginning of the twentieth century in Sweden and Norway (Lassen 1928 p. 146; Furuhagen 2009 p. 2; Stevnsborg 2010, pp. 50, 57 ff.).

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the police system had remained generally unchanged for centuries. Modernization occurred gradually, particularly in the capital cities of the Scandinavian countries where, during the 1850s and 1860s, the police were reorganized into modern forces. These reforms had been inspired by the Metropolitan Police in London (Furuhagen 2004; Christensen 2011 pp. 39–65; Ellefsen & Larsson 2014 pp. 45–47). Other large urban areas soon followed their capitals. There was a slower development in rural districts and small towns. These changes were connected to industrialization, urbanization, rising class conflicts, social problems, and other processes that were transforming society.

It was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that discussions began about the role of the state in policing. The first proposal to bring the Danish police under
national control was put forward in 1886. A commission of inquiry concluded that the 158
police districts that comprised the Danish police were an old-fashioned system, and that
nationalization was a way of modernizing the police service and making it more effective.
These proposals came to nothing, but there were subsequent commissions of inquiry and
proposals to increase the role of the state in policing (Stevnsborg 2000 p.782).

In 1908, the Norwegian police union proposed a nationalization of the entire police
force. The union managed to initiate a proposal to the parliament which was turned down.
Four years later, the police union convinced the state to appoint a commission of inquiry
focusing on the organization of the police (Halvorsen 2003 p. 34f, 48f.). This commission
concluded that the police should be the exclusive concern of the state. However, the com-
mission did not propose nationalization. The commission argued that it was important to
have close contacts and good relations between the police, society, and the general public.
This could be best achieved through more influence for the municipalities, not through
nationalization (Instilling fra den departementala politilovkomite av 1912).

There were discussions from the beginning of the twentieth century about the need to
reform the Swedish police. The police service was not organized in a homogeneous way,
the legal framework was not uniform, and the employment status of the constables was
uncertain. From 1875, the Government provided grants for these small police districts and this
financial aid was increased from1908 onwards. It was during this process, with proposals
in the parliament, articles in newspapers, and a few official reports, that the idea to nation-
alize the police was mentioned for the first time. The Swedish police union discussed the
possibility of nationalization from 1906 and argued officially for such a reform from 1920
(Furuhagen 2009 pp. 16–17, 28–30).

It is clear that the idea of a nationalized police service had taken root in Scandinavia at
the beginning of the twentieth century. During the following decades, the state's role in
policing increased in all three countries. This will be described and analyzed for each coun-
try below. That will be followed by comparisons and conclusions.

THE POLICE IN DENMARK

Denmark was the first country in Scandinavia to increase the role of the state in policing,
forming a separate state police force to run in parallel with municipal police services. It was
introduced in 1911 and only constituted a small force, mainly working as a criminal inves-
tigation unit outside Copenhagen. One reason for this reform was the need to improve
criminal investigations, which posed a particular problem in small towns and in rural areas
where there were no criminal investigation units. The force grew in 1918. One reason for
this increase was World War I and its aftermath of social unrest and perceived revolution-
ary threats (Stevnsborg 2000 p. 782; Christensen 2011 pp. 80, 94f.; Strand 2011 pp. 134–
138, 157).

There was a change to the constitution and in the administration of justice in Denmark
in 1916. A key change was abolishing the inquisitorial legal process in favour of an accusa-
torial process. This meant a changing role for the police, and in the same year a commis-
sion of inquiry was appointed to investigate how to develop this new role, with particular
focus on criminal investigations. The majority of the members of the 1916 commission concluded that in theory the police were the exclusive concern of the state. In addition, there were further arguments for nationalization. The division between the separate state police force and the forces in the municipalities was not working. The municipal police were organized into too many and too small independent police districts without enough police constables. To bring the entire police service under state control was thus the best way to develop the police service, making it more effective and easing the ability to coordinate resources. However, there was a minority in the commission who opposed nationalization. The municipal organization created positive bonds between the police and the local community, and between the police and the general public. These bonds would be loosened by nationalization. (Betaenkning angaande politiets ordning m v, afgiven af den ved kgl. ordre af 23. oktober 1916 nedsatte commission; Stevnsborg 2000 pp. 783–785; Christensen 2011 p. 97f.; Strand 2011 p. 157f.).

These contradictory standpoints emerged again when the parliament had to decide on how to proceed with the proposal from the committee. The Social Democratic Party argued for the nationalization as the only way to improve police services. The liberal party Venstre, however, was against nationalization because it would adversely impact the relationship between the police and the public. The result of this antagonism was a compromise decision by the Danish parliament in 1919. The politicians agreed to turn the criminal investigation unit of the police into a state agency, while police forces that were in charge of law and order were to remain under municipal administration. Thus, the already existing state police organization was to remain in place, but it was decided to increase its size (Stevnsborg 2000 pp. 783–785; Christensen 2011 p. 97f.; Strand 2011 p. 157f.).

The Danish police union lobbied the state to appoint this commission of inquiry and they also participated in the commission. The union wanted police services to be more unified and formalized, since this would improve the chances of higher wages and better working conditions for police constables. But the union did not primarily argue for nationalization per se. They were less interested in whether police services were to be administered nationally or at a municipal level (Stevnsborg 2010 p. 69; Christensen 2011 pp. 88, 97, 107).

These different views on the police were repeated in a subsequent commission that was appointed in 1925. The majority of the commission again supported nationalization and they presented the same arguments as before. Those members who opposed nationalization, however, had become more strident. If the police force in its entirety became a state agency, it would not only diminish its good relationship with the public, but it would also become isolated from society and could be seen as something strange and even dangerous. One member argued that nationalization would create a kind of “absolutism within the field of policing.” There were also some economic arguments against nationalization, e.g. it would increase the costs for the state (Betaenkning fra den ved justitieministeriets skrivelse af 19. juni 1925 nedsatte commission; Stevnsborg 2010 p. 77; Christensen 2011 p. 113f.; Strand 2011 pp. 163–167).

The parliament decided to keep the mixed system of state and the municipal police forces. This was mainly because Venstre, the liberal party, formed a government in 1926, and this party was against the notion of nationalization put forward by the Social Democrats. The result was a new police legislation that came into force in 1928. This law weak-
ened the position of the separate state police force in favour of local municipal forces (Stevnsborg 2000 p. 785; Christensen 2011 p. 113f.; Strand 2011 pp. 163–167).

The pendulum swung towards nationalization during the 1930s. The tense political situation was a contributing factor. Both the Nazis and Communists grew in strength and became more aggressive, with their own uniformed corps marching in the streets. This was seen as an existential threat to democracy. The political situation abroad was also growing more threatening, with the expansionist desires of both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. There were also Danish Nazi sympathizers in the southern part of Denmark who wanted southern Denmark to be subsumed into Nazi Germany. A special force was established in 1933 within the state police in order to curb this unrest (Stevnsborg 2010 pp. 81–86; Christensen 2011 p. 113f.; Strand 2011 pp. 163–167).

There was obviously a need for a stronger police force. When the Social Democrats in 1936 gained power they succeeded in bringing the police under national control. The government argued that policing was a state responsibility, and that nationalization would create a more effective police service. Such a police service could also be effective in defending democratic society against extremist movements. Venstre and the conservatives voted against, presenting the same arguments as before. They also voiced concerns that nationalization would threaten the integrity of traditional local self governance in the municipalities (Betaenkning afgivet af det af Justitsministeriet den 18 juni 1931 nedsatte udvalg; Stevnsborg 2010 pp. 81–86; Christensen 2011 pp. 129–134). Nevertheless, the Danish police were nationalized in 1938.

THE POLICE IN NORWAY

Norway did not introduce a separate state police force in the same way as Denmark. Instead, a system of national reserve police forces was set up in 1916. The state came to an agreement with some of the towns to provide reserve police forces for the state. Each town set aside a limited number of police personnel to be administered by the Ministry of Law, with the ministry funding this system. These police officers belonged to municipal police forces, but when needed they joined with the reserve police force. This force was used for tasks unsuited to the municipal forces. For instance, the reserve force was responsible for dealing with crimes such as the smuggling of alcohol and for policing demonstrations. During the interwar years, Norway was beset by class conflicts and social unrest.

In 1920 there was a proposal for new police legislation that aimed at increasing the role of the state. The police union supported these moves. Parliament rejected the proposals because the state lacked the funds to take control of the entire police system. Norway had to wait until 1927 for new police legislation. To a large extent, the new law confirmed existing practices, e.g. each municipal district and each town were required to establish and fund their own police force. The role of the state was clarified, however, and its position was strengthened. There was, however, a minority in parliament who supported full-scale nationalization of policing in Norway.

The system of reserve police forces for the use of the state remained in the police reform of 1927, but in 1932 a separate and permanent state police force was established. This police force was under the direct command of the state. It served as a special unit that could
be sent anywhere in the country. Its primary responsibilities were controlling demonstrations and social unrest due to the ongoing industrial and labor disputes (Lassen 1928 p. 147ff.; Johansen 1989 pp. 12–14, 44–48; Fossen & Ertresvaag 1992 pp. 283–288; Bonde 1994 pp. 39–45).

A new commission of inquiry was appointed in 1933. This commission argued that good contacts between the police and the public, and strong local ties within communities, were an advantage of municipal police services, and that there was a risk that any nationalization of the police service might jeopardize these good relations. Nevertheless, the commission argued for Norwegian police to be brought under state control. The commission perceived the police as an exclusive concern of the state. The commission also concluded that there was a growing need for the police to be organized as a national agency, due to the changes in society that had followed industrialization and urbanization. Certain tasks could not be handled by municipal police forces, such as social unrest, large accidents, and serious crime.

It was also hard to develop and coordinate the municipal forces because they were tied to an organizational structure with an excessive number of districts that were too small, often with very few police constables. In 1935 there were 57 districts (Instilling fra politikomiteen 1935, bilag s 4). As such, it was sometimes hard for many small municipal police districts to gather enough police constables when something exceptional happened that demanded more police officers than usual. In the worst case scenario, the limitations of the municipal police could compel the state to use military forces against incidents of social unrest, something no one wanted. There had also been problems with vigilante committees, both left- and right-wing groups, since the 1920s. This was believed to be the result of shortages in police numbers as a result of the municipal organization of policing.

The efforts to strengthen municipal policing with a separate state police were not enough. There were also difficulties in getting these different forces to cooperate. Furthermore, there was a perceived danger that the state police force might develop into a militarized special unit that lacked public support. Such criticism emerged within the context of accusations that the state police were employing extreme methods, especially towards demonstrations. In 1936, the parliament decided to nationalize policing from the following year. A majority comprising a broad spectrum of politicians supported the reforms (Instilling från Statspolitiutvalget 1934; Johansen 1989 pp. 12–14, 44–70; Fossen & Ertresvaag 1992 pp. 283–288; Bonde 1994 pp. 39–45).

THE POLICE IN SWEDEN

In 1920 the Swedish state appointed the first large commission of inquiry to thoroughly investigate the police and its organization (SOU 1922:49). According to the commission, the police were mainly a concern for the state. Even so, there were practical reasons for dividing the organization of the police between the state and the municipalities. It was argued that a police service partly under the control of the municipalities would always have better contacts with the public and the local community than a police service administered nationally. Thus, the commission did not propose nationalization, and this was broadly accepted by those who responded to the report, with only a few advocating nationalization (Furuhagen 2009 pp. 28–30).
The result of the commission’s proposals was the police reform of 1925. The police remained organized at a municipal level, e.g. each town, each smaller urban district, and each rural district that formed an administrative municipality was obliged to establish, finance, and maintain its own police force. Each one formed its own independent police district, but these were indirectly subordinated under state agencies at a regional level. This reform was not a radical change but rather a legal framing of current practices. However, the police law of 1925 also stated that the state was partly responsible for police services at a national level. The law regulated how the state in certain, but rather limited, ways could influence the police by imposing rules or by providing funds.

This locally-based police system was also supplemented with a national reserve police force, as in Norway. This national police force had been introduced in 1908, but was now expanded. Towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants were required to set aside a limited number of police officers for the disposal of the state. The reserve force was funded nationally. These towns were also, at the expense of the state, obliged to establish units that could handle criminal investigations in the small districts in the surrounding countryside (Furuhan 2009 pp. 17, 28–32).

In 1932 the parliament decided to set up an independent state police force. The reserve police system was not considered sufficient. However, the direct cause for parliament’s decision was the incidents surrounding the demonstrations in Ádal in 1931. Several demonstrating civilians were shot dead by the army. One argument for the new state police force was that law and order from now on should be upheld by a stronger and better organized police force, not by the army. Thus, the state police were given the responsibility of intervening when the smaller municipal forces could not handle problems with, for example, unruly crowds and strikes. The state police were also expected to function as a central criminal investigation force, handling the most difficult cases and assisting smaller municipal forces that lacked resources for the investigation of crimes (Furuhan 2009 p. 36f.).

The state continued to appoint new commissions of inquiry to investigate the possibility of bringing the entire police service under national control. The police union was among those who pushed for new commissions to consider this issue. The first commission was appointed in 1939 and was followed by another in 1948 (SOU 1944:53; SOU 1951:8). A member of the police union sat on the last commission. Both commissions were tasked with investigating how the police could be improved, either within the existing structure of municipal forces or as a new nationalized force. The main problem with the existing organization was, according to both commissions, the differences between police services in the countryside and in smaller towns, and those in the large towns. The latter functioned well, but the rural forces and those in small towns were too small to handle criminal cases or occasions when law and order was threatened.

There were too many police districts and they were also too small. In 1944 there were more than 1,600 police districts (in a country with only 6,600,000 inhabitants). Some of these districts had only one or two officers or village constables. It was hard to coordinate the police work between the districts. As society modernized, there was a greater need for better coordination between police forces and for the police to be highly mobile. The plethora of small police districts also made it difficult to improve and modernize the police. Additionally, there were difficulties with training, and technical development due to the
organizational structure of the police. The first commission considered nationalization to be the best way to overcome these problems, whereas two options were proposed in the report from the second commission – either nationalization or improvements to the existing municipal organization.

Both these commissions saw advantages with the municipal police system. This organization created strong bonds between the police and the local community, as well as with the general public. This promoted a positive attitude towards the police. This general view that there were advantages with municipal policing also explains why the proposals from both commissions to nationalize the police were turned down. There was significant opposition and criticism of nationalization. In short, it was argued that if police services were nationalized, the police would lose their close connection to society and to the general public. In the worst case scenario, a nationalized police service would pose a threat to democratic society. Some contributors to the debates pointed to parallels with the police state in dictatorships (Furuhagen 2009 pp. 37–38).

However, after the official report from a third commission with a member from the police union, in 1965 the Swedish police became a national agency (SOU 1961:34). The initiative came from the Social Democrats, although the proposals received bipartisan support along with support from experts. It seems that developments in society had finally made the municipal organization of policing, with its many small districts, impossible to maintain. Over the years, the number of small police districts had been reduced, but there were still 554 districts in the early 1960s. Seventy percent of these districts had less than ten police officers; some had only a few constables. From 1965 there were only 119 police districts – not municipal but state agencies (Furuhagen 2009 pp. 43–47).

CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that there were similarities in the development of police services in the Scandinavian countries. The idea to bring police services under national control appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This idea was subsequently repeated in official reports and proposals to the respective parliaments. However, it would take time before nationalization was realized. Instead, municipal policing was codified through police laws in the 1920s. Even before this, Norway and Sweden decided to establish reserve police forces for the state. That was the first step towards separate state police forces, which were established in both countries in the early 1930s. Denmark had already founded a state police in 1911. Full-scale nationalization was accomplished in Norway and Denmark during the mid-1930s, but not until 1965 in Sweden.

Similar arguments were put forward for and against nationalization in each country. At a theoretical level, the police were seen as the exclusive concern of the state. At a practical level, the many small municipal forces with few police constables, prevented the development of police services and these forces were unable to handle criminal investigations or unruly crowds. Nationalization was seen as a way of addressing this issue, particularly when it became obvious that separate state police forces were not adequate. However, there were also arguments against nationalization. Municipal police forces were regarded as hav-
A good point of departure for further analyzing and explaining the nationalization process is to compare it with the ongoing centralization of police services in Northern Europe. Nicholas Fyfe and Jan Terpstra (2013 pp. 6–13) have written about these recent developments. By using their analysis of the causes of police reforms, we can broaden our perspective.

Fyfe and Terpstra emphasize that police reforms should be understood in the context of profound changes in society. These social changes pose new problems for the police, problems that could only be addressed by reorganizing police services. This was also clearly an important background to the nationalization of the Scandinavian police services. From the end of the nineteenth century, the Scandinavian countries experienced profound and rapid social transformations. These were the basic causes for the reformation of the police. Municipal policing had its roots in preindustrial society. However, this organization was no longer fully adequate for an industrial society. This was particularly clear in small towns and in the countryside, where there were still part-time parish constables, as well as other old forms of policing.

Society changed in many different ways, and it is hard to pinpoint what was the most decisive factor. But it is obvious that people’s increased geographical mobility made the borders between municipal police districts a problem that they had not been in the old, less mobile society.

Just as today, developments in technology and communications posed new problems for the police. One example was the increase in road traffic that official reports in Sweden expressly identified as a reason for nationalization. With cars, people, including criminals, became more mobile. Municipal police, bound to their small districts, could not handle the increased traffic. Thus, Swedish state police, established as a separate force in 1932, became a traffic police force. A final factor was that the smallest police districts could not afford to buy police cars.

The new social and political conflicts that emerged were further factors that required significant changes in policing. The municipal police did not have sufficient resources to handle industrial conflicts with strikes and demonstrations. Of even more difficulty for the police was how to deal with right- and left-wing extremist groups that became increasingly aggressive during the interwar period. It is obvious that in all three countries, separate state police forces were established to handle these problems. Tension in society was probably more extreme than today, when this kind of unrest is seldom the most obvious cause for police reform.

Economic problems are sometimes the cause for reforms today. However, when the economy was discussed in the early twentieth centuries, it was rather posed as an argument against nationalization. The state, it was argued, did not have the resources to take over responsibility for the police. This was also an argument in Norway, but the Norwegian municipalities faced economic problems that may have contributed towards the process of nationalization. During the 1920s, some municipalities faced such significant economic problems that they were placed under compulsory administration by the state (Jansson 1987 p. 96).

A common reason for the current reforms is that the state is dissatisfied with the police, either that the police are perceived to be too independent and difficult to control, and/or
that the police are not performing to expected levels. The result is reforms aimed at increasing the state's control over the police and/or to improve their efficiency. It is also clear that these were important reasons behind nationalization in Scandinavia. The many small and independent districts were hard to control. Municipal police were also increasingly inefficient in the sense that they could not be developed and adapted to the changing needs of society. These two related problems were frequently raised and seem to have been the most decisive reasons for the establishment of separate state police forces and finally for full-scale nationalization.

Today, the existing police organization tends to be a structure that is difficult to reform because institutional stability and traditions have become so rooted that they prevent change. This was also clearly the case in Scandinavia during the interwar period, when the municipal organization was firmly rooted. Police reforms are also often symbolically charged and arguments surrounding them can become emotional. This can prevent change. In some countries nationalization might be viewed negatively, since national police forces tend to be associated with authoritarian regimes.

In the Scandinavian countries, these negative attitudes towards national police forces were obviously strong, and this can explain why nationalization was such a lengthy process. Sometimes there seems to have been a genuine fear of creating a police state, which must be seen against the background of political tensions and the nearby dictatorial regimes in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the interwar period. Sometimes it was instead the concern that a national police service would lose its good contacts with local communities, although there was no concern that it would be non-democratic. Thus, nationalization became a process filled with symbolic content. However, this was not solely about a simple dichotomy. When the Social Democrats gained power in Denmark, they nationalized the police in 1938, and the argument for this reform was that this would create a stronger police force. This was needed, it was argued, to defend democratic society from extremist movements.

Decisions about present-day police reforms often depend on the power relations within the political and administrative system. When these relations change, there is often the opportunity for reform. In the case of nationalization in Scandinavia, this was most pronounced in Denmark. The liberal party, Venstre, was opposed to nationalization, but the Social Democrats supported nationalization and established a national police system when the party gained power. The political conditions have not been explored as deeply in Sweden and Norway and there is a need of further research. There might also have been non-political conflicts and power relations, perhaps between actors and interest groups in the centre of the system and regional and local actors. One thing is, however, clear, the police unions played an important role in nationalization in Norway and Sweden. In Denmark, the union restricted itself to arguing for uniformity in the organization of police services.

Finally, despite the many similarities, it is necessary to analyze one interesting difference between the countries. The police were completely nationalized in Norway and Denmark during the mid-1930s, but not until 1965 in Sweden. This is interesting because each country shared a similar context: the arguments for and against nationalization, the police organization and its development, and most of the social, economic, and political conditions. It is thus puzzling that the Swedish police was not nationalized during the 1930s,
1940s, or the early 1950s when nationalization was proposed in the official reports in much the same way as in Denmark and Norway?

This problem is related to one contributory factor that Fyfe and Terpstra do not analyze – the role of local government in the municipalities, including in the towns. In the Scandinavian countries, local government has, since the 1800s, held a strong position in relation to the state. According to research within political science, in Europe there are several different traditions of municipal government in different groups of states. Within such a tradition, the municipalities have similar positions of power and rights in relation to the state, although there may be minor differences between each country. In the so-called Scandinavian tradition, municipalities have a strong form of self-governance. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the southern European countries. In this so-called Napoleonic tradition, the municipalities hold a weaker position in relation to the state than in most other European countries (Loughlin & Peters 1997; Lidström 2003 p. 16).

The power of local government is one important explanation for the strong position of municipal policing in Scandinavia, and for explaining why the proposals on nationalization aroused such opposition. The municipal police were perceived as part of local governance, and thus to nationalize police services the state would be interfering with the integrity of local government, which is a fundamental part of Scandinavian society.

There are also some differences between the Scandinavian countries in terms of the status and history of local government, differences that could explain why police services continued to be organized at a municipal level for much longer in Sweden. Several researchers suggest that local government in Sweden developed in such a way that it became stronger than in Denmark or Norway (Gustafsson 1987 p.15; Jansson 1987 pp. 16–17, 100–110, 150–55; Lidström 2003 p. 225, Page 2011 pp. 13–14). There are indeed differences between Norway and Denmark as well, but for the purposes of this point, it is sufficient to focus on how local government in Sweden differs from the development of local government in Norway and Denmark.

In all three countries, local government has deep roots. Under the age of absolutism during the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, however, the state reduced the role of local government to a much greater extent in Denmark and Norway. In Sweden, the parishes, the forerunners to the municipalities, and the towns were able to retain their strong position in relation to the state. Furthermore, absolutism remained in place for a longer period of time and was stronger in Norway and Denmark. In these two countries, even after the fall of absolutism, the constitutional legal tradition from the era of absolutism remained in place to some extent.

When society began to change during the mid-nineteenth century, new regulations that formalized local government and strengthened its position were introduced in Scandinavia. As a result of historical developments, local government in Sweden already held a stronger position than in Norway or Denmark. Although the reforms to local government in Norway and Denmark strengthened local governance to a position that was fairly close to Sweden, there still remained differences that likely played an important role in the position of municipal policing. That municipal police services remained for longer in Sweden may, therefore, be explained by the stronger position of local government in Sweden as opposed to a slightly different constitutional tradition in Norway and Denmark.
The comparison of nationalization in the Scandinavian countries has shown that the reforms focused on much more than just the formal organization of police services. Municipal police forces were regarded as having better contact with the general public and as being more firmly rooted in the local community. At a symbolic level, municipal police were thus seen as the “good” police force at the service of citizens. As society changed, the state's need to control and develop police services increased. It was also symbolically important for the growing state to assume control over police services, a representation of the state's monopoly of violence. Increased government control, however, was perceived as negative, both concretely and symbolically. Thus emerged a power struggle over the police, particularly between the competing needs of community-based policing and a police service that the state could govern and develop.

This conflict still exists today and is evident in debates around contemporary police reforms in Scandinavia. Police services are centralized in order to further develop them, but this leads to severe criticism, since it is perceived that centralization leads to the police losing their local and popular support. Therefore it has in Sweden been proposed that a municipal police should be reintroduced as a complement to the state police (Elofsson & Thelin 2017). Both in the past and in the present, the issues underlying police reforms could be formulated into a question; policing for whom? The state or the local communities and their inhabitants?

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Betaenkning fra den ved justitieministeriets skrivelse af 19. juni 1925 nedsatte kommission til overvejelse af hvorvidt der er grund til at aendre den bestaaende ordning af landets politi.
Betaenkning afgivet af det af Justitsministeriet den 18 juni 1931 nedsatte udvalg angaende et utvidet samarbejde mellem politikredsene.