

HISTORY & LANGUAGE

❖ The Vikings and Christian Conversion

While the long and deeply intertwined history of the Nordic countries is mostly associated with the Vikings, it in fact, dates back to the prehistoric period with the discovery of ancient petroglyphs and stone burial cairns that still stand to this day throughout the entire region. Though, it is important to note that it was only during the Viking age (800 AD – 1050) when the Nordic countries came into world and European prominence: Pagan seafarers from the Scandinavian peninsula – mostly from southern Norway, Sweden and Denmark – ravaged, traded and settled in many different areas of Europe like Germany, England and France.

Christian Europe responded to these raids with intensive missionary work, wanting these new northern territories to be ruled by Christian kings, who in turn, would help to strengthen the church's position in the continent. Seeing the political and economic advantages of adopting the Christian Europe's new faith, the Nordic chieftains converted, which bolstered their power and gave them access to mainland Europe.

Despite the conversion to Christianity, the Nordic region remained distinct from the rest of Europe. Its social structure remained simple, with the peasantry making up the majority of the population, with a few social elite and kings, who held very little administrative power. Professional military did not exist and there were almost no towns, but over the centuries, as trade and resettlement increased, Europe's influence in the Nordic region strengthened and gradually, the region found itself adapting to this new way of living, with a new noble social class emerging to rule over the peasantry.

❖ The Rise and Fall of the Kalmar Union

By the 11th century, the three northern kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden emerged and became a part of Europe – and over the centuries, these kingdoms grew in both stature and power, as it began to assimilate neighboring countries like Finland and Iceland, coming under Swedish and Norwegian rule, respectively, in the 13th century. By the late Middle Ages, the entire Nordic Region became a politically united front, called the Kalmar Union, with Denmark as its lead.

The Kalmar Union was envisioned to bring peace to the Nordic Region, but in reality led to more conflicts and constant civil war. Diverging interests, mostly stemming from Sweden's dissatisfaction with Danish dominance, gave rise to even more conflict that spelled the ultimate collapse of the Union by the 16th century. This resulted in the formation of two new states: Denmark-Norway and Sweden, with Iceland and the Faroe Islands also falling under the Danish crown, and Finland remaining a part of the Kingdom of Sweden. The Nordic settlement in Greenland, on the other hand, was left to die out.

The ongoing internal conflicts between the two states, which resulted in neither state gaining the upper hand, gave rise to a weakened position within the continent, and by the 18th century, Sweden had lost most of its territories beyond its border, including Finland which fell under Russian rule. Meanwhile, Denmark had regained control over the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland, but then as a result of the Napoleonic wars lost Norway to Sweden in the early 19th century.

❖ Globalization and the World Wars

As populations grew across the whole of Europe, and the early stages of industrialization gave rise to economic progress in the 19th century, the Nordic region found itself serving the European continent in new and industrialized ways. Norway and Sweden became a key source for raw metals and hub for chemical and technical production. Fisheries in both Iceland Norway grew during this period, as with the exportation of timber and pulp, which were coming mainly from both Finland and Sweden. And Denmark, with the advent of its agricultural reformation, became a source for Europe's food production.

New social classes also steered the entire region's political systems towards democracy, creating conditions for the subsequent independence of Norway (1905), Finland (1917) and Iceland (1944), as well as the eventual conception of an economic and social welfare system, aptly called the Nordic Model – characterized not only by the working combination of a welfare state, market economy and heavy levy on taxes, but also a strict emphasis on labor force participation and trade unions, an expansionary fiscal policy, social and gender equality, and an extensive benefits system and wide distribution of income.

The entire region's peaceful democracies were ultimately put to the test with the onset of World War I, and while all five Nordic states maintained their neutrality and isolation, they were forced into a challenging balancing act with the coming of World War II. Finland was attacked by the Soviet Union in 1939, and Germany occupied both Norway and Denmark in 1940. The Allies responded by occupying the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland. It was only Sweden that managed to avoid military action, maintaining formal neutrality throughout the war. Nevertheless, by the end of World War II, the Nordic region emerged relatively unscathed, which helps to explain the region's strong post-war economic development that led to all five Nordic countries' solid position alongside the big trading blocks, with Denmark joining the EEC in 1972, which eventually became the European Union in 1993. Finland and Sweden followed suit in 1995. Only Norway and Iceland have remained outside the European Union, but are members of EFTA (European Free Trade Association).

❖ Language

Due to the Nordic region's interconnected and centuries-long history, a common thread between the Nordic languages remain, so much so that it is perfectly possible for Danish, Norwegian and Swedish speakers to communicate with each other. There are also some commonalities enduring between Icelandic and Faroese. All of which are Germanic languages.

The other languages spoken in the region are Finnish, Greenlandic and several Sami languages, which are all non-Germanic and have little commonality with each other. A number of other minority languages, such as Kven, also exist in the Nordic region.

These languages are also taught in school across the region, reflecting the countries' interconnected history. Swedish, for example, is a mandatory subject in Finnish schools, as is Danish in Icelandic and Faroese schools. And the Sami, respective of the area, learn either Finnish, Swedish or Norwegian.

English is also widely spoken across the Nordic region, and travelers will find it easy to communicate with the locals, as the language is taught in all schools.