Martin Dackling, Poul Duedahl
& Bo Poulsen

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“The population question is, in short, a question of our people’s survival”

Reframing population policy in 1940s Finland

Sophy Bergenheim

Introduction
In the nineteenth and twentieth century, population policy in Europe and the Nordic countries has been tightly intertwined with several other policies, ideologies and lines of thought, such as eugenics (or racial hygiene, as it was called in the Nordic countries), public health and family and gender policy. All of these various forms of biopolitics have also been closely linked with nationalism – ‘race’, for instance, was understood as synonym for nation or national (e.g., “the British race”),¹ which also applies for ‘population’ and ‘people’.

In this paper, I study how Väestöliitto, the Finnish Population and Family Welfare League, framed population policy. Väestöliitto was founded in 1941, after Finland had undergone the Winter War (1939–40) against the Soviet Union. While Väestöliitto officially was a non-governmental expert organisation, it had close and official ties with the government (most notably the Ministry of Social Affairs) and soon gained an established role in Finnish public policy, influential in several public policy areas, such as family welfare and housing policy. The strong role but nevertheless non-govern-
mental status of Väestöliitto makes it an interesting study subject from the perspective of population policy, a central and multifaceted policy strand with marked nationalist features. In its population policy, Väestöliitto largely followed the population policy developed by the Swedish Social-Democrat couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. However, Väestöliitto followed the Myrdalian model only in form – the core ideology and rationale remained conservative rather than progressive-reformist.

Research questions, material and methods
This article deals with the founding and first years of Väestöliitto; the aim is to analyse how the actors behind Väestöliitto constructed population policy and its problems. The main focus is on the founding phase 1940–41 and the following years 1942–43, during which the founders and actors of Väestöliitto diligently framed population policy, its issues and its objectives. This will be complemented by a post-war follow-up, in order to form a more comprehensive picture of the population policy framing of Väestöliitto in the 1940s.

I will approach this research problem through the following research questions: What did Väestöliitto’s actors frame as the main population policy objective in Finland? Respectively, what did the actors of Väestöliitto define as the main population policy problem? According to the organisation, who or what caused the problem and why? What was perceived as the solution for these problems, and, respectively, as the means for achieving the main objective of population policy?

My primary source material consists of Väestöliitto’s archive material. I use Väestöliitto’s minute books with appendices and drafts from 1940–43, the first official programme and rules of Väestölii-
to from 1941, as well as annual reports and other printed material directed at policy-makers, experts and the general public. The follow-up analysis is based on various published material from 1946, with a similar broad target audience.

In my analysis, I draw upon a combination of methods. The constructionist analysis of social problems, in accordance with Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse, problematises the problem nature of phenomena perceived as social problems. In other words, it does not focus on social problems per se, but on the processes through which phenomena are identified, defined and represented – i.e., constructed – as social problems and on the actors conducting these processes. Carol Bacchi’s WPR approach (What’s the Problem Represented to be?) is a similar method of analysis. It focuses on the way a phenomenon is represented, the actors’ presumptions, unproblematised aspects of the problem representation, and so forth. Following Spector and Kitsuse and Bacchi, I will concentrate on similar focal points in order to analyse how population policy and its problems were constructed.

As a systematic and structuring tool, I apply frame analysis, following Robert Benford and David Snow. Frames are sets of beliefs and objectives through which actors interpret and label phenomena. Frame analysis, as defined by Benford and Snow, includes three core tasks or stages of framing. ‘Diagnostic framing’ is the process of identifying problems as well as the entities and causes the problems can be attributed to. ‘Prognostic framing’ entails finding solutions and strategies for solving problems. ‘Motivational framing’ serves as the final thrust for mobilisation, seeking either consensus or action. In addition, framing has an interactive and discursive feature, meaning that frames are defined or articulated as well as amplified through specific discourses.
Population policy in Finland and Sweden
The Nordic countries share many characteristics in their population and family policy development. Population policy, eugenics, public health and family policy have often been more or less the same thing, and they have overlapped or intertwined with social policy and social hygiene/medicine. Population and family policy as well as public health were strongly influenced by race and degeneration theories, which interlinked with nationalist ideas. The objective was to study and cultivate the Nordic race, on the one hand, and control and isolate the deviant and asocial, on the other. These objectives translated into various positive and negative eugenic measures, such as eugenic marriage legislation, sterilisations and mother contests.5

Many studies associate Finnish inter- and post-war population and family policy, as well as its legacy in contemporary policies, with the Swedish Social Democrat ‘power couple’ Alva and Gunnar Myrdal.6 Rightfully so, since Finnish experts and policy-makers explicitly referred to the Myrdals’ renowned population policy publication Kris i befolkningsfrågan7, in which they promoted positive population policy: universal social and family policies that eased the economic and social burden of child-rearing and thereby encouraged procreation. These social policy reforms would ultimately raise productivity, as quality of the population increased and the social costs of poverty, unemployment and criminality decreased. In the Myrdalian vision, the quality of the population was a public and national issue, and the good of society preceded the good of the individual.8

Finland followed the Nordic development in several respects. It did, for instance, adopt similar marriage and sterilisation laws in 1929 and 1935, respectively.9 However, Finland has a distinctively different political, cultural and social background compared to, e.g., Sweden, which needs to be taken into account when analysing Finnish actors and developments. The Finnish development
“The population question is, in short, a question of our people’s survival”

is marked by what I have labelled ‘underdog trauma’, rooted in its history as an autonomous grand duchy under the Russian rule and in neighbouring the powerful and hostile Soviet Union, against which it fought in the Winter War (1939–40) and Continuation War (1941–44) during the Second World War. In addition, immediately after Finland gained independence in 1917, it descended into a bitter civil war, in which the bourgeois White eventually won over the socialist Red. The civil war left the Finnish society with a deep class-based hostility and mistrust, which did not ease until the 1940s.

These events have had a significant impact on the nation-building of Finland; one could say that nationalism has been particularly pronounced in the Finnish development. The so-called national project dates to the nineteenth century, when the Finnish cultural and political elite embarked on a nationalist and moral education project. The goal was, in short, to civilise the Finnish people and to strengthen the political and cultural status of Finland. After the civil war, the classist feature of education was strengthened even further, as the winning party sought to educate and control the working class. This was mixed with eugenic ideologies, as the working class was seen by some Whites as ‘degenerative material’. Indeed, in interwar Finland, eugenic arguments served as tools for class, gender and motherhood politics.  

**Founding Väestöliitto: actors and context**

19 November 1940, the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity took the initiative and invited Finnish social and health policy associations to a consultation meeting on 9 December. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the prospect of founding an umbrella organisation for associations engaged in population pol-
In a speech held at the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity, V. J. Sukselainen noted how “the population question is perhaps one of the most central issues regarding our nation’s survival” and how the time was fruitful for active population policy.

As a result of the consultation meeting, a new association, Väestöliitto, was founded on 14 February 1941. In addition to the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity, the founding organisations consisted of 20 social and health policy organisations and politically engaged associations (often with a nationalist stance), for example Rising Finland, the Social Democratic Working Women’s Association, the Social Policy Association in Finland, the Finnish Society of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and General Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. Sukselainen was elected as the chair, and Aarno Turunen (Finnish Society of Obstetrics and Gynaecology) and Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio (Rising Finland) as vice-chairs. The board also had two representatives of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Niilo Mannio and Rakel Jalas. In 1943, Heikki von Hertzen was appointed as the managing director of Väestöliitto.

The board members and managing director of Väestöliitto represented various fields of expertise. V.J. Sukselainen was a social scientist, trained in sociology and economics. He was also a politician: the president of the centre-right Agrarian League (1945–64), one of the biggest parties in Finland, Prime Minister (1957; 1959–61) and director general of the Social Insurance Institution (1954–71). Heikki von Hertzen was legally trained with a background in the banking industry. Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio and Rakel Jalas were both actively involved in the association sector and women’s issues, and both were members of the conservative National Coalition Party. Enäjärvi-Haavio was a docent of folkloristics, and she was the prime figure behind Väestöliitto’s home aid activities. Jalas was a physician and psychiatrist, and she was very involved in sexual education and family policy.
Population policy was not a new topic. In the early twentieth century, the neo-Malthusian discourse, fearing overpopulation, was being challenged by a pronatalist discourse. In 1934, statistician Gunnar Modeen held a presentation at the Finnish Economic Association, in which he presented calculations predicting a halt in Finnish population growth in the 1970s, which would lead to serious economic difficulties. Also the Myrdals’ *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (1934) attracted interest in Finland. In line with these concerns, in 1937, the Finnish government appointed the Population Policy Committee to address this development.

Yet, according to Väestöliitto, the Finnish population policy discussion gained momentum only along the Second World War:

Not even the [Population Policy] Committee seized the opportunity to wake our country into acknowledging population policy issues. This task was performed by the war. During the Winter War, the entire people of Finland was forced to note what the former Foreign Minister Väinö Tanner crystallised in his radio speech on the day of peace-making: “Our sole fault was that we were too few.”

### Framing the population crisis

*The ‘population question’*

The early minute books of Väestöliitto reveal meticulous diagnostic and prognostic framing. The core problem was constructed without hesitation, which was also reflected in the rhetorical framing. The ‘population question’ formed a self-explanatory representation of Finland’s too small population as well as the looming halt in population growth and its consequences.

After the consultation meeting, the Central Commission on Pop-
ulation Policy (hereinafter CCPP) was established as the governing body until the official founding of the organisation. In December 1940, the CCPP sent a letter describing future activities to the Population Policy Committee and prospective member associations.

In your circles, as well as elsewhere in our country, you surely have come to notice […] the startling fact: we are too few.¹⁶

The sentence reflects the unproblematised views on the population question. For one, Finnish people being “too few” was considered a “fact”, and secondly, it holds the assumption that this fact was generally acknowledged and accepted.

According to the same letter, the duty of the Finnish people was to exploit the economic possibilities offered by the country, to achieve a standard of living as high as possible, and from this material basis cultivate a culture as developed as possible. The letter presents statistical predictions that population growth will come to a halt at four million around 1975. As a result, a threat scenario is portrayed, in which Finland is occupied by other countries – i.e., the Soviet Union – and Finland, with such a small population, is morally and physically incapable of defending itself.¹⁷ This was not an isolated and sporadic notion, but was repeated and printed in Väestöliitto’s official programme.¹⁸

The factual nature of the population question is reaffirmed in the above-mentioned letter. Firstly, it notes how it is a “self-evident truth to every rational person” that a population of four million is incapable of gaining the production capital necessary for harnessing the Finnish nature to serve man and culture. Secondly, it brings up how “there are many among our people who are eager to refer to the economic difficulties the current generation is facing and who assume
that a smaller population could live a better and more decent life”. Such neo-Malthusian viewpoints are dismissed as false:

It must be made clear to them that poverty does not stem from Finland having too large a population, and that unemployment in our country is not a result of an oversupply of workers. [...] Poverty and unemployment are questions related to the economic organisation of the society, not the size of the population.¹⁹

Väestöliitto’s official programme crystallises its alarmed nationalist and pronatalist perspective:

The population question in Finland is, in short, a question of our people’s survival.²⁰ [Original emphasis.]

The citizen as culprit
What, then, had led to the population question becoming an issue? Diagnostic framing consumed much of the CCPP’s time and attention. The issues framed as the underlying reasons can be roughly divided into two categories: the citizen as the culprit, and society as the culprit (and the citizen as victim).

In his speech at the Association of Finnish Culture and Identity’s meeting in November 1940, Sukselainen shed some light on the historical development:

[F]or a long time, people of more limited means have taken care of raising the future generations also for the part of the wealthier. Now when they do not engage to the same extent, it is essential to re-evaluate the situation. Every citizen must learn their responsibility in this sense.²¹
In other words, the reason behind the population question was the citizens’ neglect of their reproductive duty, in particular the wealthier individuals. The ‘child limit’, i.e., voluntary refraining from procreation, was perceived as a form of this neglect. The CCPP admitted that raising a new citizen imposed an economical strain on the caretaker. It was therefore possible for an individual to raise their standard of living, i.e., to gain personal economic advantage by refraining from child-rearing.

[I]t must be made clear that this is not to the advantage of the national economy. For the part of the society, raising a child is an investment in capital. It is a saving that starts to grow interest as soon as the child engages in useful work in the society. It is therefore clear that the rise in the standard of living that people have achieved by adhering to a child limit and by neglecting to fulfil their part in maintaining the nation’s healthy growth, that advantage has been achieved by hindering the economic development of the society.22 [Original emphasis.]

The CCPP had formed divisions for preparing and organising certain tasks in regard to establishing the new organisation. One of these divisions was the Public Health Division, which provided the CCPP with a comprehensive experts’ report on the population question and its underlying reasons from a medical point of view. According to the report, it was necessary to focus on factors that had an impact on birth rates (which should be increased) and death rates (which should be lowered), in order to affect the development of Finland’s population growth. The division outlined five factors that had a negative effect on these objectives: a late marrying age, childless (sterile) marriages, prevention of fertilisation, abortions,
and maternal mortality and childbirth-related disabilities.\textsuperscript{23}

According to the division, abortions were condemnable both due to the deed itself, but also for the multiplicative effect, harming population growth. “Almost all” so-called criminal abortions (i.e., medically induced miscarriage; abortions were illegal until the Act on Induced Abortions in 1950\textsuperscript{24}) led to serious infections that were difficult to cure and “very often” led to permanent sterility. This prevented new generations from being born – generations that could have created yet new generations.\textsuperscript{25}

Abortion and family planning developed into a central theme for Väestöliitto in the 1940s–50s. It was tightly linked with normative and eugenic conceptions of marriage, family and procreation. On the one hand, Väestöliitto stressed how even single mothers should be persuaded to keep their child rather than grant them an abortion – even though in general, Väestöliitto deemed sexual desire and fertility control of single women as a ‘sexual problem’. On the other hand, eugenic grounds for abortions were seen as a natural extension of the existing eugenic sterilisation and marriage legislation.\textsuperscript{26}

According to the CCPP/Väestöliitto, the core factor behind the population question was thus the reproductive duty of women of fertile age. Any kind of deviation or neglect in this regard was perceived as individualistic and selfish, and therefore unpatriotic. The rhetorical flipside of the coin was utilised as well, glorifying and praising childbirth and -rearing:

\begin{quote}
Giving birth is the most valuable national service a woman can do for her country, and it is by no means effortless or danger-free.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Rakel Jalas used a similar wording in her book from 1941 dealing with sexual health and family life:
Motherhood is the great task of the active years in a woman’s life. Other work is done only after she has fulfilled this national duty.\textsuperscript{28}

Representing reproduction as the civic duty of the mother had already been part of the Finnish Enlightenment and nation-building project in the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Such representations resurfaced strongly in the 1940s throughout the Western world, as motherhood was stressed as the important and primary duty of women.\textsuperscript{29} The Finnish word for national service, as used by Väestöliitto and Jalas, refers explicitly to military service. This created a pronounced nationalist analogy of the reproductive woman as the female equivalent of the male soldier, performing her national duty in defending her country.

\textit{The society as culprit and the citizen as victim}

In this section, I will analyse the second causal category constructed by the CCPP, later reaffirmed by Väestöliitto in its programme, among others. Namely, the diagnostic framing of the society as culprit and citizen as victim.

According to Tim Knudsen and Bo Rothstein, Sweden and Denmark have attempted to unify or identify ‘state’, ‘society’ and ‘people’. Following Knudsen and Rothstein, Pauli Kettunen notes how ‘society’ in the Nordic countries refers first and foremost to the \textit{moral} relationship of the state to people and individuals, whereas \textit{organisational} forms linking together state and civil society come secondary. The idea of a virtuous circle between economy, politics and ethics, based on class compromise, can be seen as a constructive factor in the Nordic concept of society. The society is both a subject and an actor, it has rights and duties, goals and values.\textsuperscript{30}
“The population question is, in short, a question of our people’s survival”

This largely reflects the views of Väestöliitto’s actors in the 1940s, with the exception that they also emphasised the organisational forms. In my source material, ‘society’ is used in an ambiguous sense. Depending on the context, it refers to a) the state, i.e., the public sector and government as a whole; b) the society in the broad sense, encompassing both the state and other actors (e.g., employers) as well as societal structures; and/or c) the citizens as a community, or the general public. In other words, ‘society’ and ‘individual’ or ‘citizen’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive: the citizens as a community or the general public may victimise a specific sub-group of citizens.

A text by Heikki von Hertzen, in which he outlines the principles and practice of population policy, \(^{31}\) illustrates the blurred line between the various forms of ‘society’ and its responsibilities. On the one hand, he notes how the core reason behind the “population problem” lies with the urbanisation of society, and how the state has not realised its role in governing this change, thus distinguishing between ‘state’ and ‘society’. On the other hand, he attributes the responsibility to the broader organisation of and atmosphere in the society, thereby encompassing all aspects of ‘society’.

While Väestöliitto framed women who neglected their procreative duty as the main cause behind the population question, they did not bear the blame all by themselves. The society was seen as a partial culprit by not creating favourable conditions for them to fulfil their duty, thereby victimising mothers and families. The society had to do its part in lessening the economic burden of child-rearing, so that economic hardships would not hinder couples from reproducing.
What is the relation between the standard of living between different individuals in the society, with or without families? Does the society favour the former, or the latter? *This is the core of the population question.* [Original emphasis.]

[It] is essential to address the societal reforms that are necessary for providing each citizen the economic prerequisites, so that they can fulfil their duties in regard to future generations and the economic and social well-being of generations to come.

Other societal actors played a role in the hardships of families as well. As noted above, urbanisation was one of the core factors to which the population question was attributed. Families and family farms were less self-sufficient, work outside home was becoming more commonplace, and children attended school for a longer period of time and therefore contributed less at home.

The idea of the child limit was seen to be disseminated by the general public; “uncomprehending” people had begun to portray the child limit as a means for achieving a higher standard of living, which had also translated to negative attitudes towards large families. “Everyone can now see the results in the current statistics.” This statement puts the blame on couples’ and mothers’ fellow citizens who had discouraged them from producing large families and had lured them into seeking a higher standard of living by refraining from reproduction.

The Public Health Division did not see the general public as the sole factor to encourage child limits, but pointed the finger at the state as well. In its experts’ report’s section on fertility control, it notes how
[t]he public, albeit silent, opinion seems to accept [contraception] as a means to control the family’s number of children, and apparently even the society, primarily in order to prevent the more dangerous way for reducing the number of children, criminal termination of pregnancy, has somewhat given it its acceptance by establishing special consultation clinics that advise women, sometimes even men, on how to prevent fertilisation.36

In addition to attributing the problem to the state as well as fellow citizens, this statement reflects class-based conflicting viewpoints – and the conservative nature of Väestöliitto. Whereas conservative and bourgeois women deemed contraception as selfish and individualistic, left-wing women saw contraception as a means for liberating working class women, burdened by constant childbirth and violent and unhappy marriages, from both class and male oppression. The consultation clinic refers to the contraceptive consultation clinic in Helsinki, which was established in 1935 following the initiative of female left-wing city councillors. The clinic’s doctors, however, delimited consultation to married women and imposed strict criteria based on “medical indications”, to which only few qualified. As a result, the clinic was closed in 1936.37

Childbirth-related health risks and maternal care in general was another aspect where the society should support and protect its citizens. The Public Health Division, for instance, stated that “it is a matter of honour for each country to take as good care as possible of birth-giving mothers and to make childbirth as safe as possible through all usable means”.38

In short, Väestöliitto constructed four main external factors that prevented citizens (i.e., women) from fulfilling their reproductive duties: economic challenges, the child limit, hostile attitudes to-
wards large families and early marriages, and health risks. The first three were closely linked, since both economic challenges and general attitudes encouraged families to adhere to a child limit. All three aspects of society played a part in sustaining these three factors. Health risks, on the other hand, were seen as being only within the sphere of the state. It did not provide adequate facilities (hospitals, maternal care) in order to make pregnancy and childbirth as safe as possible, and thereby neglected its important duty towards its citizens. All of these factors rendered (prospective) mothers victims of circumstance – even though women were simultaneously seen as the main cause behind the population question.

**Addressing the population question**

*Mission: Elevating the number and quality of the population*

In order to change the looming population development and to hinder the population question from materialising, the CCPP/Väestöliitto saw that there was only one solution: to elevate the number and quality of the population. This section, in other words, reflects the prognostic framing of Väestöliitto.

In its official rules from 1941, Väestöliitto states that its purpose was to spread information on the importance of the number and quality of the population both for the nation’s existence as well as its material and spiritual development, to follow, in that sense, the development of Finland’s population, and to affect, through awareness-raising education and by furthering necessary societal reforms, the growth of the population and the improvement of the population’s living conditions.⁴⁹
According to the CCPP, poverty and unemployment could not be addressed through population control, but only through population growth. In order for Finland to offer its population the best livelihood possible, production must increase, and the increase of production can only be achieved through larger new generations.\textsuperscript{40} Similarly to the Myrdalian view, population growth was perceived as a virtuous circle: the more people, the more production and workplaces, and therefore also higher living standards. Higher living standards, for their part, removed obstacles for child-rearing, and new citizens eventually meant yet an increase in production, and so forth.

The ideal number of children per family was set at “at least six” – four was defined as the “normal family” that society had the right to demand its members to produce and maintain by themselves.\textsuperscript{41} This would elevate the population from four million to six million, although the long-term goal was implied to be doubling the population, i.e., to eight million.\textsuperscript{42}

The quality question was an issue that also the Ministry of Social Affairs pushed Väestöliitto to focus on. Referring to the elevation of the population’s quality, the Ministry emphasised the “social side of population policy”. This, in turn, referred to improving living conditions and other conditions that should “meet satisfactory social requirements”.\textsuperscript{43} ‘Quality’ thus encompassed a broad gamut of themes, many of which fell under the Myrdalian ‘positive population policy’: improving standards of living in terms of housing, hygiene and economic situation, combatting infant mortality and childbirth- and maternity-related health risks through prenatal, maternal and child care, as well as improving public health in general. ‘Quality’ also referred to the improved composition of the society, as the upper socioeconomic classes performed their reproductive duty.

Negative eugenics was also a central feature in the quality objectives
of Väestöliitto. The organisation was explicitly in favour of eugenic compulsory sterilisation and abortion as well as the eugenic marriage law, in order to protect the population from degenerative material. Similarly, its conceptions of ‘people’, ‘population’ and ‘public health’ (in Finnish, literally ‘people’s health’) included marked inclusive and exclusive features, which were linked with this eugenic understanding.⁴⁴

According to the Public Health Division, compulsory sterilisation was a measure through which the society limits or prevents people from reproducing who have such criminal characteristics or illnesses which would, if inherited, render their descendants as asocial, dependant individuals. Sterilisation, in other words, is used for improving the race.⁴⁵

The Sterilisation Act of 1935 was deemed “a complete failure”, as it had had “no social impact whatsoever”. The division favoured a new sterilisation law, since “a properly implemented sterilisation policy has a positive effect on the composition of the society”, even if it naturally had a small negative impact on birth rates.⁴⁶ Reforming the Sterilisation Act became one of Väestöliitto’s main objectives, particularly of Aarno Turunen, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology, who drafted a letter for the Ministry of Social Affairs with detailed reform suggestions.⁴⁷ The form in 1950 did indeed emphasise the eugenic qualities of the legislation, which led to a peak in compulsory sterilisations in 1956–63.⁴⁸

To conclude, the grand mission of Väestöliitto was to elevate the number and quality of the population. Population growth was to serve the national economy and improve the nation’s defensive position in its geopolitically challenging situation and location. Elevating the population’s quality referred to improving public health
in its various forms, which entailed marked exclusive features and negative eugenics as well.

Achieving these objectives required action on two fronts: education and knowledge production, and furthering and participating in policy-making, which will be scrutinised in the following section.

Education and knowledge production

The Finnish word for ‘education’ (valistus) used by Väestöliitto does not have an exact equivalent in English. It refers to awareness-raising as well as communication and distribution of knowledge (i.e., propaganda, as it was called at the time), and the same word also refers to (E/e)nlightenment. However, it does not have a dual meaning of education in the sense of school education.

In this article, ‘education’ is to be understood as raising the Finnish people’s awareness and to distribute knowledge regarding different aspects of the population question. This was a concrete form of Väestöliitto’s own motivational framing – i.e., what the organisation itself should do in order to further a healthy population policy. The objectives of this work can be coarsely divided into two categories: firstly, affecting the public opinion, and secondly, increasing the general public’s knowledge on population policy matters.

One of Väestöliitto’s goals was to change the general atmosphere so that the reproductive duty would be internalised as a general norm. This was explicitly expressed in Väestöliitto’s programme:

\[\text{The most important task of population policy education is to remove the ideological conditions that allow the child limit idea to spread. We have to achieve a change of mind in regard to the home, children and the family, ‘a new world view’ on these matters.}^{49}\]
This topic had, of course, already been raised during the preparatory stage. For instance, a newspaper report after the consultation meeting read: “We have to stand up and fight against false prejudices and general misconceptions.” A letter describing future activities noted how “the public opinion must be changed to understand that child-rearing is not, in the current conditions, a private matter, but a duty towards the nation and society.” This duty aspect was reaffirmed in a draft for the short version of Väestöliitto’s programme, which calls for “making every healthy individual understand their responsibility as procreators and secureurs of the nation’s future.” Note the phrasing ‘every healthy individual’, referring to the quality aspect of population policy.

Population policy-related knowledge that Väestöliitto sought to spread dealt with diverse themes. For example, the Public Health Division saw that many pregnancies were terminated on dubious grounds, since women were simply unaware of the dangers of the procedure. This could be avoided through education. In the draft for the short version of Väestöliitto’s programme, “in order to increase the number and elevate the quality of the population”, the federation saw necessary to “give every citizen a basic education in healthy sexual behaviour”. This basic education was to raise children and young people into a “healthy and societally positive direction”. This education aimed at raising healthy, reproductive and child-rearing generations.

**The population question in post-war Finland**

Birth rates increased already during the war, and in 1945, the baby boom was underway. This dampened the alarmed nature of Väestöliitto’s pronatalism and transformed it into a family-positive focus. The main objective of Väestöliitto was to create a fam-
ily-friendly society both on the level of the state and individuals. Or, as it formulated in an educational booklet directed at the general public:

We do not want ‘propaganda children’ in a society that is unkind to them, nor in loveless homes in which they are not cherished!  

The main objective of increasing the population remained unchanged, however. In Väestöliitto’s first annals, published in late 1946, V. J. Sukselainen outlined the main tasks of population policy in post-war Finland. He emphasised how Finland differs from Sweden in that the objective was to increase the size of the population, not merely maintain it at existing level. In this task, he stressed the citizens’ responsibility – reproduction was still explicitly referred to as a civil duty. In particular, Sukselainen frowned upon the better-off who neglected their responsibilities. Yet, citizens were still not the only one who bore duties: Sukselainen also highlighted how the state and society had to provide social and economic safety for families with children. He again brought up the issue of how the economic burden of child-rearing should be distributed more evenly among all taxpayers – a topic both he and Väestöliitto published about in 1950, as well as proposed a reform bill as Member of Parliament, supported by Rakel Jalas, among others.  

Throughout the 1940s, Väestöliitto framed urbanisation and industrialisation as detrimental for population development. City life was portrayed as unhealthy, cramped and detrimental to morals, and waged work in all its precariousness created an unstable and discouraging environment for reproduction and family life. This view was present the first annals of Väestöliitto, but a pro-
nounced expression of this framing was presented in *Homes or Barracks for Children*⁶¹, a housing policy booklet commissioned by Väestöliitto and written by Heikki von Hertzen. Finland suffered from a severe housing shortage resulting from the baby boom and the war, in which the Soviet Union annexed large areas in Karelia and Northern Finland, leaving Finland with 400,000 evacuees in need of settlement. Not surprisingly, housing policy – ensuring good homes and living environments – soon developed into one of the core foci of Väestöliitto.⁶²

To summarise, the diagnostic and prognostic framing of Väestöliitto remained intact during its first years, through the war and in the post-war situation. The organisation was still markedly pronatalist, and reproduction was still understood as a civil duty. Respectively, the society had the responsibility of providing a family-friendly environment and eliminate all factors that discouraged procreation.

**Conclusions: Productive population policy**

During the nineteenth and twentieth century, interventionist population policy and family policy have evolved in the Western world from the idea of protection to the idea of production. Traditionally, bourgeois ideology has not favoured state or other public intervention (cf. private, individual freedom). However, as Ritva Nätkin has formulated, intervention became acceptable when it was framed as protection. Who was protected, and from what, varied according to time and place. In terms of maternity protection, women have been protected from, among others, the harms of working life, industrialism and urban environments, decaying civilisation and morals, uncontrollable male sexual drive, and their own unpredictable self (the so-called biology of the female body).⁶³
Finland itself has also been framed to require protection from various threats, which has shaped the Finnish nation-building process and given Finnish population and family policy a pronounced nationalist stance. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Finland needed political and cultural protection from Czarist Russia, which entailed cultivating the Finnish people and civilisation. After the civil war, in the 1920s–30s, the perspective of the winning party prevailed. The Finnish civilisation, race and people needed to be protected from degeneration, and the threat comprised of the Reds, the working class in general, as well as the poor, delinquents and the hereditarily ill. This idea translated into eugenic legislation, among others. In the 1940s, the Finnish nation needed to be protected against the Soviet Union.

According to Ilpo Helén, in the 1930s–40s, the attempt to subject the family under the bourgeois-national discipline transformed from protection to a matter of organising the family to serve the nation. The family became a population production unit, a reproductive factory. The people itself formed the core of the national project, and the state adopted the role as the organ treasuring, calculating and effectivising the nation’s life force and life processes.⁶⁴

Alberto Spektorowski and Elisabet Mizrachi have analysed Myrdalian Social Democratic population policy and its rationale for eugenics and sterilisation. They apply the concept of welfare eugenics, which refers to an ideology that stems from and promotes welfare reforms, but also focuses on productive elements. Due to the high cost of social reform, membership of or exclusion from the community was not based on race, but on the productive quality of the individual. Non-productive elements had to be defined and controlled; they were not denied social welfare, but their right to procreate.⁶⁵

In her reading of Alva Myrdal’s sociological contribution, Hed-
vig Ekerwald concludes that Myrdal reframed the family, traditionally considered private and a conservative trope, and used it for feminist and emancipatory purposes. As Ekerwald puts it, Myrdal sought to make the private public. Rather than addressing low fertility as a biological and private matter, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal sought to address it through positive population policy, which focused on the social and economic reasons behind low population growth. Moreover, the Myrdals endorsed birth control: when families could control pregnancies, it would lead to a positive attitude towards reproduction. Alva Myrdal also advocated working women’s right to marry and have children. According to her, social and economic responsibilities and rights should be the same for men and women. The economic burden of children should also be borne by the entire society, not only families with children. Following this ideology, the Myrdals also rejected the conservative degeneration fears associated with the reproduction of poor people.66

Väestöliitto largely adopted the framework of the Myrdalian positive and productive population policy. The representatives of the organisation indeed viewed family and reproduction as a public, national issue. They promoted various social and economic means for making procreation more attractive – also for poor families. Väestöliitto also became a pioneer in researching and developing contraceptives for married women, precisely with the rationale that birth control promoted marital happiness and thereby also positive attitudes towards reproduction. Väestöliitto also embraced the Myrdalian notion that the good of the community prevailed over the individual, and that population policy should seek to foster productive citizens.

However, the difference between the Myrdals and the actors of Väestöliitto was their core ideology. Whereas the Myrdals promot-
ed statist intervention for furthering progressive social reform, Väestöliitto utilised a modern framing for solidifying conservative, traditional values. It held tightly on to the bourgeois nuclear family model: it represented motherhood as the most important duty of the woman, and respectively, advocated the male breadwinner model. These goals were furthered, e.g., through family taxation, child benefits and family-friendly housing, which would make the housewife model economically possible and socially attractive.

The conservative perspective of Väestöliitto is connected with the ‘underdog trauma’. Väestöliitto constructed elevating the number and quality of the population as a geopolitical matter of life and death: the nation would not survive without a large, productive people. The ‘population question’ was, in other words, an attempt to politicise and depoliticise population policy. On the one hand, Väestöliitto questioned the prevailing situation and discourse and sought to initiate action; on the other, it framed the population question as inevitable and represented its own solutions as the only option.67

The population policy framing of Väestöliitto linked nationalism and pronatalism intrinsically together. The ultimate goal was, as said, to increase the number and improve the quality of the population, and the prospect of a deviating development (i.e., a declining and degenerating population) was framed as a problem, the ‘population question’. In its diagnostic and prognostic framing, reproduction was perceived as a civic duty – something society had the right to demand from its members. Respectively, neglecting this duty was seen as a breach against the nation itself. However, individuals were seen as a part of the society, and all parties involved played a role in the development, be it in causing the ‘population question’ or in solving it. The productive people, the society and the nation were one and the same.
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**NOTES**


“The population question is, in short, a question of our people’s survival”


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