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Entangled Atheism

Einar Adamson as a Local and Transnational Actor in the Interwar Period

Anton Jansson | ORCID: 0000-0003-2477-7482

University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

anton.jansson@lir.gu.se

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Abstract

This article deals with Einar Adamson (1894–1953), a Swedish atheist, newspaper man and leftist political activist based in Gothenburg, who was most productive during the interwar period. It uses Adamson to advance the concept of entangled atheism—that is, an understanding of atheism as a transnational phenomenon, as well as a phenomenon closely related to other issues and engagements. Adamson's involvement in the transnational communist and Esperantist movements is the key to understanding his atheism. The article argues that the biographical method is suited to understand such historical entanglements. Apart from discussing entangled atheism and the relation between secularist studies and biography, this article aims to contribute to an understanding of atheism in interwar Sweden—a period neglected in existing scholarship.

Keywords

atheism – communism – Esperanto – biography – entangled history – interwar period – Sweden

1 Introduction

The biographical method, which concentrates on a specific individual, has many uses in the history of atheism, secularism and humanism. This history

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writing deals with questions of individual private belief, and biography provides an important opportunity to delve deeper into the turning point of de- or counter-conversion—that is, when a person turns from his or her religious faith and becomes a non-believer. Such stories have historically been central to the freethought and atheist movements. As Laura Schwartz has pointed out regarding the 19th-century secularist movement, narratives of counter-conversion were ‘at the heart of the movement’s analysis of both religion and freedom of thought’.¹ Many famous freethinkers, such as Annie Besant, used their autobiographical stories to propagate secularism. Such biographical stories are useful in history writing, as they can provide an effective perspective on how belief and non-belief were experienced as a given moment in history and the discourse or narrative structures in which turning points were expressed.²

Just as biography can be used to ‘zoom in’ on a specific event or process that belongs to the private sphere by using the life of an individual, it can also be used to do the opposite. That is, biography can start from a specific person, but—rather than focusing on the private sphere, an individual belief or a personal experience—‘zoom out’ and concentrate on the circumstances, structures and communities around that individual, while still using the individual to structure the investigation.

This article deals with Einar Adamson (1894–1953), a Swedish atheist, newspaper man and leftist political activist based in Gothenburg. Adamson was most productive during the interwar period, especially the late 1920s and early 1930s, which are the years in focus in this essay. Nothing is known of Adamson’s de-conversion or when and why he left his belief—if he ever even had one. What is known, however, is that he was a staunch non-believer during his politically active years and wrote, spoke and organised around the issue of atheism. In particular, Adamson founded the only freethought organisation in Sweden during the interwar years: the Swedish Freethought Association, *Svenska Fri-tänkareförbundet*.

1 Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 73.

2 Of course, methodologically, it is important to keep in mind that the narration or discourse of a de-conversion story differs from an ‘actual’ conversion experience. One work in which de-conversion stories are used is Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2019). For the concept of a turning point in biography studies, see e.g. Hans Renders and Sjoerd van Faassen, “Biographies as Multipliers: The First World War as Turning Point in the Lives of Modernist Artists,” in *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, ed. Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Taking Adamson and his activity as a starting point reveals a great deal about the conditions and fate of Swedish atheism during the interwar years. One aim of this article is to contribute to the extremely sparse history of atheism in Sweden during this period.³ Furthermore, this article aims to connect the history of atheism more explicitly to the notion of entangled history and to advance the concept of ‘entangled atheism’. This is here a twofold concept, which is used, firstly, to discuss how the history of atheism is best understood as a transnational phenomenon, shaped by cross-border entanglements; and, secondly, to show that atheism is not a clearly demarcated issue but is most often one node within a complex web of ideas, ideals and political engagements. A third aim is to contribute to the discussion of the special issue of which this article is part—namely, what the field of biography studies has to offer to the history of atheism, secularism and humanism.

2 Entangled Atheism and the Biographical Method

History writing has traditionally tended towards methodological nationalism, isolating the phenomena under study to a specific country. The study of non-belief is no exception, and many noted historical studies—both previously and recently—have thus specifically focused on atheism or secularism in, say, England, Germany, France, the United States or Canada.⁴ However, recent studies have also applied more comparative approaches; some have even taken into account the interconnectedness of different national cases and of how parts of atheist, secularist and freethought activities may be better understood in a transnational perspective, as ideas, people and artefacts related to the movement cross borders or might not have a single specific national abode.⁵ In line

3 The historiography of atheism, secularism and humanism in Sweden is not very large, and what exists focuses mainly on two high points: the “golden age of freethought” in the late 1800s and the so-called Hedenius debate in the early post-war period. For an overview with further references, see Teemu Taira, Atko Rimmel, and Anton Jansson, “The Nordic and Baltic Countries,” in *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, ed. Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

4 See e.g. Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980); Schwartz, *Infidel feminism*; Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Charles Devellennes, *Positive Atheism: Bayle, Meslier, d’Holbach, Diderot* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America’s Unbelievers Made their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

5 See e.g. Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala, “Transnational Seculars: Belgium as an International

with this perspective, the concept of entangled atheism involves a focus on how the transnational dynamic has shaped the development of non-belief. Of course, this concept of entangled atheism is influenced by historiographical discussions of ‘entangled history’ in the last decades, which—among other things—have attempted to go beyond the assumption that specific nations or communities can be studied as distinct entities. Here, I use the concept of entangled atheism in an attempt to think about and apply this perspective to the history of atheism.⁶

I would however also like to broaden the concept of entangled atheism with the claim that it is not only important to focus the transnational dynamic but also highlight the interconnectedness of non-belief with other issues, ideas and political engagements. Atheism is best understood historically, if it is viewed not as a distinctive or discrete issue but as a node in a set of entangled or interconnected ideas, ideals, beliefs or political projects. Therefore, with the concept of entangled atheism, I aim to highlight not only transnational entanglements but also entanglements of issues, ideas and engagements.

In both those dimensions of entanglement, the biographical approach may be of assistance. First, one trend in biography studies in recent years has been to write about ‘transnational lives’, using the biographical method as a corrective to methodological nationalism. As the lives of many noted individuals—including those who become central in national histories—transverse borders, following a specific life story of such an individual necessarily involves a historiography that becomes transnational or displays important entanglements

Forum for Freethinkers and Freemasons in the Belle Époque,” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 90, no. 4 (2012); Nathan G. Alexander, *Race in a Godless World: Atheism, Race, and Civilization, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Carolin Kosuch, *Die Abschaffung des Todes: Säkularistische Ewigkeiten vom 18. bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2024). See also the introduction and part two in Carolin Kosuch, ed., *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).

6 The discussion of ‘entangled history’ originated from the study of colonial and postcolonial history; it problematises centre-periphery relations and stresses interconnectedness. The discussion has spread from colonial studies to other transcultural and transnational history writing and has been connected with various research fields. See e.g. Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, eds., *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2002); Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, “Beyond comparison: Histoire croisée and the challenge of reflexivity,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006). For examples of where this perspective has moved into more specific fields, see Margrit Pernau, “Whither Conceptual History? From National to Entangled Histories,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 7, no. 1 (2012); Marie Cronqvist and Christoph Hilgert, “Entangled Media Histories,” *Media History* 23, no. 1 (2017).

between borders. Thus, biography has been a methodological asset in transnational and global history.⁷

Second, biographers have pointed out that biography can serve to complicate our understanding of history, as individuals do not necessarily fit into the boxes of a historiography that tends to focus on one issue, or to write a narrative history of one specific part of society, be it politics, science, religion or culture, or a specific aspect of one of these. By taking ‘the subject as a point at which diverse historical forces converge’, it is possible to cut across such divides and thus provide a more complete picture of the past; this in turn makes it possible to show how different issues could or could not fit together and how phenomena that, in hindsight, may look obscure or have been forgotten were in fact important at the time.⁸ To put it differently, biography can bring to the fore entanglements, connections or logics that would have been less visible or ignored in other historiographical approaches.

This article is not a biography in the sense that it is a detailed description of or coherent narrative about Einar Adamson’s entire life. However, in departing from him, a rich picture of atheism in his time emerges. In line with what I have sketched out above, the article will look beyond the national perspective, but I will start with some brief background regarding both the local and national circumstances.

3 Einar Adamson, Sweden and Gothenburg in the Interwar Years

Einar Adamson was born in the central Swedish town of Mora in 1894. He then lived in the central and northern parts of Sweden before settling in Gothenburg, Sweden’s second biggest city, in 1922. Here, he resided until his death in 1953. Adamson married Elma Söderlund, who shared his activist work, and the couple had a daughter. Adamson already had some years of experience as a journalist when he arrived in Gothenburg, and he soon became the editor of a local newspaper, *Väst-svenska kuriren*. He held this position until 1930, when

7 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–present*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Ann-Christina L. Knudsen and Karen Gram-Skjoldager, ed., *Living Political Biography: Narrating 20th Century European Lives*, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2012).

8 Quote from Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2000), p. 41. For a discussion, see Josefin Hägglund, “Biografi som metod för politisk idéhistoria: Erfarenheter från ett forskningsprojekt om Carl Lindhagen,” in *Perspektiv på politisk idéhistoria*, ed. Hjalmar Falk, My Klockar Linder, and Petter Tistedt (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2023), pp. 92–96, 105–106.

he instead took over *Minareten*, a local weekly periodical combining communist politics with a sensationalist and popular tendency.⁹ *Minareten* and the other newspapers Adamson worked for had a left-wing profile, and Adamson's life and career—both as a journalist and more generally—reflected the fast and turbulent growth of leftist politics and the worker's movement of the 1910s to 1930s in Sweden. *Väst-svenska kuriren* was established in 1918, as a local organ for the Swedish Social Democratic Left Party (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska vänsterparti*, ssv) after this party was founded by splitting from the Swedish Social Democratic Party (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti*, SAP).¹⁰

The SAP went on to become a dominating force in Swedish politics, with Hjalmar Branting—a prominent freethinker in the 1880s—becoming the party's first Prime Minister in 1920 (even before the breakthrough of universal suffrage). However, the ssv remained a more marginal political force to the left and experienced more convulsions in relation to global socialism. The ssv party was founded in 1917, however before the Russian Revolution, and included a few different political tendencies and ideas about the way forward for the left. With time, the party developed a clearer communist profile, successively tying itself to the USSR and the Comintern. In 1921, the party became the Communist Party of Sweden (*Sveriges kommunistiska parti*, SKP), causing some notable members to leave. In 1929, the party split because of its relation to Moscow. One fraction, loyal to the Comintern, continued to control the party and expelled critics of this line, including Adamson. Nevertheless, Adamson initially seemed to have retained an individual commitment to the USSR and communist politics in general; later in life, however, he rejoined the social democratic SAP.¹¹

9 The name of the magazine might seem odd, but it was very anchored in its time and place. For the World Exhibition in Gothenburg in 1923, two large “minarets” (tall towers with a slightly oriental look, now dismantled) were raised at the entrance and became symbols of the fair. Thus, when *Minareten* was founded late in 1923, minarets were topical, and the founder of the magazine chose the name because of these towers, although the exact reason is unclear. Lars-Åke Engblom, *Arbetarpressen i Göteborg: en studie av arbetarpressens förutsättningar, arbetarrörelsens presspolitik och tidningskonkurrensen i Göteborg 1890–1965* (Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet, 1980), p. 84.

10 Biographical information from Sigfrid Hansson, ed., *Svenska folkrorelser 1: Nykterhetsrörelse. Politisk arbetarrörelse. Fackföreningsrörelse. Folkbildning. Kooperation*, (Stockholm: Lindfors, 1936), p. 134; Magnus Fahl, *Göteborgs stadsfullmäktige 1863–1962. 2: Biografisk matrikel* (Göteborg, 1963), pp. 335–336. Regarding the newspapers and Adamson's involvement in them, see Engblom, *Arbetarpressen i Göteborg*, pp. 82–87.

11 For a contextual overview of the foundation and early years of the Social Democratic Left Party/Communist Party of Sweden, see Josefin Hägglund, *Demokratis stridslinjer: Carl Lindhagen och politikens omvandling, 1896–1923* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2023), pp. 221–291; Kjell Östberg, *The Rise and Fall of Swedish Social Democracy* (London: Verso, 2024), pp. 48–65.

While a member of the city council of Gothenburg for the SKP between 1927 and 1930, Adamson was recurrently in conflict (or at least disagreement) with his party colleagues. At a time when the Swedish communists struggled to impose a strict party line in a movement with its fair share of eccentrics not necessarily keen on following suit, such conflict was not uncommon. And the working-class communities bustled with various engagements, particularly in Gothenburg, which had had a comparatively late but very dynamic development of working-class identity and politics.¹² In Adamson's case, this meant that he was engaged not only in party politics but—as we will see—also in Esperanto, along with anti-clericalism and atheism, of course. We now turn to the latter.

4 Adamson's Atheist Activity: *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet* and More

The main outcome of Einar Adamson's atheism was the creation of the Swedish Freethought Association (*Svenska Fritänkareförbundet*), which existed for a few years starting in the autumn of 1928. Although the exact time of its dismissal is unclear, there are no traces of its activity after 1931. During the years of its existence, the association's activities included public lectures, the publication and circulation of anti-religious books and pamphlets, and a periodical, which came out in four issues—the first two called *Nya fritänkarn* (The New Free-thinker) and the last two *Ateisten* (The Atheist).¹³ The association was never large, and it did not have a long-lasting legacy; however, it is interesting, as it seems to be the only freethought, atheist or secular humanist association in Sweden during the interwar era. Sweden had its own 'golden age of freethought' between the 1880s and the first decade of the 1900s, similar to and connected with the freethought movements in other countries. Starting in 1894 and continuing for a few years, on there existed a Freethought Association (*Fritänkare-*

12 Engblom, *Arbetarpressen i Göteborg*, pp. 220–221. For more on this local working class milieu of Gothenburg with its plethora of associations and organisations, focusing on a typically eccentric communist politician, see Hannes Rolf, "Martin talar ikväll: Martin Andersson som politisk aktör i den urbana arbetaroffentligheten," in *Politiskt aktörskap i en omvandlingstid: Sverige 1880–1930*, ed. Anton Jansson, Josefin Hägglund, and Erik Bengtsson (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2024).

13 Einar Adamson, *Prästlist* (Göteborg: Svenska fritänkareförbundet, 1931). In addition to the readings of its own material, the activity of the organisation was mapped by investigating newspapers—both the national digital newspaper archive of tidningar.kb.se, and the local communist newspaper *Väst-svenska kuriren*, which Adamson was an editor for (and which is not in this digital archive).

förbundet), but the largest and most successful organisation of this type in Sweden was the Utilist Society (*Utilistiska samfundet*) in the 1880s–1890s, which did not long survive its founder and leader, Viktor Lennstrand (1861–1895), the most (in)famous Swedish freethinker of the 19th century.¹⁴

Lennstrand was one of the few people in Swedish atheist history who Adamson—more specifically, his periodical—harked back to, by republishing an article by Lennstrand in the first issue of *Nya Fritänkarn*. In fact, the name *Nya Fritänkarn* itself referred to Lennstrand's journal, *Fritänkaren*.¹⁵ The other person Adamson leaned on from the existing freethought tradition was the famous radical Hinke Bergegren. Bergegren was active during the breakthrough of socialism and atheism around 1890 and later moved in the middle ground between anarchism and radical socialism; as a result, he was expelled from the social democratic SAP. From the outset, Bergegren (1861–1936) was named an honorary member of the *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet* and gave some public lectures together with Adamson.¹⁶

Because apart from publishing this periodical and other texts denouncing religion, Adamson did some public speaking against religion in and around Gothenburg. Some—but not all—of these lectures took place under the umbrella of the freethought association. Recurring debates took place with a local Baptist pastor, who Adamson decried as lying about the position of religion in the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Adamson was more of a reporter than a philosopher or ideological innovator, and he did not write longer argumentative or theoretical works on atheism. His atheist propaganda focused on certain themes and primarily dealt with how the church supported the exploitation and oppression of the lower classes. Adamson cited Lenin, saying that the ruling classes have two support

14 Anton Jansson, “Friends and Foes: Two Secularisms in Late Nineteenth-Century Sweden,” in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, ed. Carolin Kosuch (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020).

15 Viktor Lennstrand, “Kristendomens bedrägerier under medeltiden,” *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 1 (1929). In this text about Christianity during the Middle Ages, Lennstrand mentions as his source J.M. Wheeler, the man in focus of Clare Stainthorp's article in this issue. Incidentally, Lennstrand is the Swede with the longest article in Wheeler's *Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers*.

16 The first issue of *Nya Fritänkarn* states that Bergegren was immediately named an honorary member of *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet*. He also wrote for the publication later; see e.g. Hinke Bergegren, “Bort med gudaspektaklen,” *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 2 (1929).

17 “Ökad aktivitet i kampen mot religion och prästvælde,” *Ateisten* 2, no. 1 (1930). The pastor himself published a small book about his debates with freethinkers: C.G. Hjelm, *Mina diskussioner med fritänkare* (Örebro: Evangeliiipress, 1946).

squads: the military, which oppresses by sheer force, and religion, which—with its ‘beautiful perspectives on life beyond death’—deceives the population into becoming passive.¹⁸ By trying to engage the working classes in thinking about religious issues, priests not only deceive people and make them dumber but also divert people’s attention and energy from the work needed to make society better. In the early 1930s, Adamson wrote about how the church teamed up with fascism and antisemitic forces.¹⁹ Adamson’s atheism was thus clearly and conclusively political—a weapon of class struggle, very typical of communism in Europe at that time.²⁰ This leads us to a discussion of the role of Soviet communism.

5 Adamson’s Transnational Atheism—the Role of the USSR

An awareness of the Swedish context is necessary to understand Adamson’s atheism and his political work, but this is by no means sufficient. Firstly, it is notable that many of Adamson’s engagements were more local than national. As mentioned earlier, Gothenburg had a lively working-class movement of its own, which differed somewhat from the national movement, and Adamson was primarily active in Gothenburg and West Sweden, rather than nationally, in his political career. Apart from being the editor of a locally oriented communist newspaper and a member of the city council, Adamson was a board member of the Western district of the SKP for many years. *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet* and Adamson’s other public appearances for atheism were also very localized in Gothenburg and its surroundings.

Although there was certainly a national horizon to Adamson’s politics, the bigger world, his European connections, and (most notably) his connections to the Soviet Union were more important to him and to how he shaped his local activity. In the 1920s, communism in Europe in general was tightly tied to and conditioned by what took place in the USSR. This was the era of the offensive against religion in the newly formed communist state, spearheaded by the League of the Militant Godless. During that decade, the Comintern emphasised that ‘anti-religious propaganda’ (a very Soviet expression) was to

18 Einar Adamson, *Röd kulturfront mot okunnighet och vidskepelse: anteckningar från en resa i Sovjetunionen år 12 efter oktoberrevolutionen* (Göteborg: Andelsföreningen Göteborgs-tryckeriet, 1929), p. 3.

19 Adamson, *Prästlist*, pp. 6, 8, 15.

20 See e.g. Todd H. Weir, *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890 to 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 19.

be a prioritised feature of communism, including within the national parties it influenced.²¹

Adamson's connection with the Soviet Union played an important role in Adamson's life and his atheist activity. He visited the USSR a few times in the 1920s. After one such visit in 1929, Adamson wrote reports for his journal and newspaper, as well as a booklet. One of the topics he focused on was the congress of the League of the Militant Godless in Moscow in June 1929, from which he reported enthusiastically.²² His booklet on this topic is generally positive regarding the progress he perceived in the USSR, albeit focused on the fight against 'ignorance and superstition'—that is, religion. He concludes:

What is created here is something new in the history of the world; can only be achieved in a country where capitalism has been overthrown. Socialism is under construction, a higher morality is replacing the old Christian, capitalist oppressive morality and double standards.²³

Here, Adamson was a typical European figure. 'Soviet tourism' became an industry of its own among leftist European intellectuals and journalists in the mid-1920s, and Adamson's travel diaries belong to a specific genre depicting such tours.²⁴ Adamson had published a longer book with a more comprehensive travel diary earlier, in 1926, when he travelled, as the title put it, *From the city of Lenin through sunny Ukraine to Crimea*. In this book, he provided a very positive picture of a country in which the poor could afford to go on vacation, the youth used their spare time to study instead of drinking and dancing, there was little prostitution, the policemen were few and friendly, and—not least—the people had finally broken free from superstition and oppressive religion.²⁵

21 Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), ch. 1. For an example of how the Comintern declared this importance to various national parties, including that in Sweden, see Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents. Vol. 11: 1923–1928*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 37–39.

22 Adamson, *Röd kulturfront*; Einar Adamson, "Från 'De Gudlösas' andra kongress i Sovjet-Unionen," *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 1 (1929). In *Väst-Svenska kuriren*, see e.g. 22 June 1929, 26 June 1929.

23 Adamson, *Röd kulturfront*, p. 32. 'Ignorance and superstition' is from the subtitle of the book (Swedish 'okunnighet och vidskepelse')

24 Johannes Gleixner, "Socialist Secularism Between Nation, State, and the Transnational Movement: The International of Proletarian Freethinkers in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, ed. Carolin Kosuch (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 259.

25 Einar Adamson, *Från Lenins stad genom soliga Ukraina till Krim* (Stockholm: Frams förlag, 1926), pp. 9, 26, 34, 55, 78, 84, 89. Adamson was also there in 1927, invited by the Soviet

The most profiled non-belief in Sweden during the interwar years was Soviet-inspired 'godlessness', and Swedish atheism must be concretely viewed from this transnational angle. Apart from pressure from the Comintern to advance anti-religious propaganda in all national communist activity, atheism was conditioned by the Soviet Union in at least two ways: first, in travel diaries and other types of texts depicting the overthrowing of religion, which was tightly correlated in Adamson's and others' perspectives to the general leap of progress they perceived to be occurring in the Soviet Union; and, second, in argumentative and propagandistic material printed in Sweden that was directly imported from the USSR. One of the more prominent and substantial features in *Nya Fritänkarn/Ateisten* was a sequel running through all the issues under the heading of 'Religion and the Proletariat' (*Religionen och proletariatet*), which was extracted from a Soviet anti-religious handbook for workers and rendered into Swedish by Adamson. Soviet satirical pictures were also used in the periodical, as occurred in other Swedish communist publications of the time.²⁶

I have already pointed out that *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet* was the only atheist or secularist organisation during the interwar years in Sweden. In general, non-belief activity was in a period of recession at that time, after the earlier 'golden age' had ebbed away. This does not necessarily mean that the country experienced a religious revival; however, the fact that atheism was strongly associated with the Soviet Union certainly inhibited the former's development. Sweden had long had a strenuous, even conflicted, relationship with the big country to the East, and the communist incarnation of Russia made things even worse in the eyes of all non-communists, who made up the absolute majority, after all. During this period, the Social Democratic Party, which had included a freethought and secularist tendency since its foundation, shifted to create good relations with the Church of Sweden. Even after the Second World War, when atheist activity had waned in the USSR, relatively liberal secularist activists could be attacked by conservative critics who cast suspicions that these activists might have connections to communism.²⁷

Union Esperanto organisation, SEU, and his impressions from 1926 and 1927 were published together in Esperanto: Einar Adamson, *Sub la ruga standardo: Impresoj kaj travivaĵoj en Sovetio* (Göteborg: Sveda Esperanto-Oficejo, 1928).

26 See *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 1, p. 5, and *Ateisten* 2, no. 2, p. 7. See also the newspaper-like one-off publication *Den gudlöse* put out by the Swedish Communist Party in 1931, which is very clearly influenced by Soviet anti-religious propaganda. For an example of the reuse of Soviet cartoons in newspapers, see "Ett besök i det Antireligiösa Museet i Moskva", *Ny Dag* 22 December 1933.

27 "De konfessionslösa har bildat förbund", *Svenska Dagbladet* 18 September 1951, p. 11.

6 Further Entanglements of Adamson's Atheism: Esperanto and International Organisations

Adamson's travels in the USSR and the influence from Soviet communism are certainly central in understanding his atheism; nevertheless, other entanglements also played a large role. The main reasons for Adamson's travels to the USSR in 1926 and 1929 were to visit congresses in Leningrad. As mentioned previously, Adamson reported from the congress of the League of the Militant Godless in 1929. Three years earlier, a large international conference drew Adamson to the city: namely, the world congress of SAT, the *Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda* (World Anational Association), which was the organisation for the worker's Esperanto movement. Adamson's engagement with Esperanto was more profound than his engagement with communism in a sense. He was a life-long enthusiast of the constructed language; his first booklet on Esperanto was published as early as in 1915, and many more followed in the following decade. Moreover, Adamson was active in the Esperanto community—particularly locally in Gothenburg—until his death in 1953.²⁸

It was the Esperanto movement that provided a concrete background and reason for Adamson's creation of *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet*. The association came about as a piece in a large puzzle—or a node in a complex web of organisations, which extended beyond Sweden. In 1928, it was Adamson's turn to host and organise the world congress of SAT in Gothenburg. SAT had been founded in 1921, as a result of the left wing of the Esperanto movement being discontent with the existing 'bourgeois' international Esperanto organisation. Adamson, who had been an enthusiastic member from early on, was the central founding father of the Swedish branch of SAT, called SLEA (*Sveda Laborista Esperantista Asocio*); he was also a long-time editor of the journal of SLEA, named *Arbetar-Esperantisten*.²⁹ Since Adamson was also a noted international member of SAT, it was natural for him to bring the congress to his home town.

The congress Adamson hosted in Gothenburg gathered around 500 participants from 24 countries.³⁰ The first issue of Adamson's atheist journal, *Svenska*

28 G. Rosell, "Einar Adamson död," *Arbetar-Esperantisten* 32, no. 6–7 (1953).

29 For the history of the SAT, see Peter G. Forster, *The Esperanto Movement* (The Hague: Mouton, 1982), pp. 188–211. For a Swedish article on the movement, which discusses Adamson's activity, see Lars Gogman, "Mellan Babels torn och Norra Bantorget: Arbetaresperantistmen," *Arbetarhistoria* 2012, no. 3–4 (2012). Adamson was not the only founder of SLEA, but in his necrology in 1953, it is formulated as if he were the sole founder, stating that 'he created a movement'. Rosell, "Einar Adamson död," 7.

30 *Arbetar-Esperantisten* no. 6–7 (1929), p. 1. See also *Kongres-albumo: La 8:a Kongreso de SAT* (1928).

Fritänkarn, states that the *Liberpensula Sekcio de SAT*—the freethought section of the organisation—was founded at this congress. According to this programmatic yet unsigned text, it was decided that this section would fight religion with the help of Esperanto, in addition to propagating Esperanto among the freethinkers. It was emphasized that *Svenska Fritänkareförbundet* was founded not only to spread anti-religious propaganda in general but also to be a Swedish node in this organisational web, and that everyone who wished to be a member and support the work against ‘religious humbug’ would be automatically affiliated not only with the freethought section of the SAT but also with the freethought international, that is the International of Proletarian Freethought, IPF.³¹ The latter was founded in 1925 and had a Central European and German-speaking basis, although the Soviet League of the Militant Godless was a member organisation.³² In the subsequent issues of Adamson’s atheist periodical, it was stated that the Swedish organisation was, first, a ‘section’ (*sektion*) of the freethought section of the SAT and the IPF, and, second, ‘affiliated with’ (*ansluten till*) the SAT and IPF.³³ Esperanto was visible in other ways. On the masthead of *Ateisten*, the phrase ‘religion is opium for the people’ was printed in Esperanto, along with a confirmation that the journal ‘communicates in Esperanto.’³⁴

This complex web of organisations is proof of something pointed out by Johannes Gleixner: for Soviet atheists and European proletarian freethinkers—and, one may add, in leftist political circles in general—the ‘intense focus on organisational matters has to be understood as part of its ideological framework.’³⁵ That is, organising and starting associations was not just a practical matter of boosting an existing community or group; it was also almost an end in itself—an important ideological point for a political tendency that perceived itself to be collectivist. This explains why a freethought organisation existed for what was hardly a movement in Sweden in the 1920s. For Adamson, this organisational focus was key; it was ideologically central and instrumen-

31 “Fram för aktivt anti-religiöst arbete!” *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 1 (1929), p. 1. About the founding of the freethought section, see also the summer issue of *Arbetar-Esperantisten* no. 6–7 (1929), p. 1.

32 Gleixner, “Socialist Secularism”; Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), pp. 187–230.

33 See *Nya Fritänkarn* 1, no. 1, p. 8; *Ateisten* 2, no. 1, p. 8; *Ateisten* 2, no. 2, p. 8.

34 ‘Religio estas opio por la popolo’, and ‘Oni korespondas esperante’.

35 Gleixner, “Socialist Secularism”, pp. 236–237. See also Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: the Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 138–141.

tal in connecting Sweden to the transnational circles in which he moved. This connection was important, since—in Adamson's and many others' view—the political project was a transnational one: the utopian goal of Adamson's politics was not only a godless and classless society, but a borderless world society in some form.

In a sense, these entanglements explain not only how this organisation came about but also why it did not take off more than it did and why Adamson became a less prolific and noted figure in the 1930s. The years around 1930, when Adamson had risen to his peak in the Esperanto-communist-atheist battle, were turbulent. After the split in the Swedish Communist Party in 1929, not only did Adamson fall out of favour with the party, which was a blow to his political and journalistic careers, but also his Esperanto engagement was shaken. The local proletarian Esperanto organisation *La Aglo* came under the control of the Comintern-loyal fraction, causing Adamson to be sidestepped. After a strenuous period of time, Adamson left the leadership of SLEA to a social democratic member of parliament, as a result of which its headquarters moved from Gothenburg to Stockholm.³⁶

These developments taking place in Sweden (albeit conditioned by Soviet communism) reflected the conflicts and splits occurring in transnational communities and organisations after the sixth congress of the Comintern in 1928, at which the enmity towards social democracy was sharpened. The SAT experienced a schism due to increased pressure from the Soviet Union to place the SAT under Comintern control. When this attempt failed, the Soviet members withdrew, and their national Esperanto organisation started to act independently; later, a rival international organisation was founded that was strictly controlled by Moscow. Soon, however, Esperanto fell out of favour with Stalin, and many Esperantists were killed during the great purges. Although the SAT continued to exist, it did so in a weakened form.³⁷ This situation affected Adamson, who—as a prominent international member—was attacked in the Soviet-directed and -published Esperantist press.³⁸

A similar process had unfolded in the IPF, which split into a communist and a predominantly social democrat wing in 1930. Both struggled to survive during the 1930s, a decade characterised by an oppression of independent organisa-

36 The worker's Esperanto movement continued to be active in Gothenburg in the 1930s but was characterised by many splits, conflicts and reshuffling of clubs and organisations. See Christer Lörmemark et al., *Esperantorörelsen i Göteborg 1892–1992* (Göteborg: Esperanto-alliansen i Göteborg / Göteborgs esperantoförening, 1994).

37 Forster, *The Esperanto Movement*, pp. 197–205. The SAT is active to this day.

38 Gogman, "Mellan Babels torn," 59.

tions in the USSR and Central Europe. Under these circumstances, Adamson faced a hard time, as he ran an atheist organisation that was inclusive of all fractions of the political left and had been formed as part of a web that had now disentangled. Unsurprisingly, his position and influence waned under these new conditions.

7 Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the aim of this article was threefold, and I will conclude by discussing these three threads. Firstly, I hope to have contributed to the historiography of atheism in Sweden during the interwar years. During this period, active and explicit campaigning for atheism, freethought and secularism, against Christianity, was relatively weak, compared with that at the turn of the century and in the early post-war period. But there were some noted atheist activities, mostly in the form of 'godless' 'anti-religious propaganda', which refers to Soviet-inspired atheism. This influence must be taken into account in any story of Swedish non-belief, although such stories have thus far been more focused on the cultural radicalism of the late 19th century, and post-war debates.

Secondly, I aimed to discuss and use the concept of entangled atheism as a way of connecting discussions of entangled history with the field of the history of atheism, secularism and humanism. The fact that Swedish atheism in the interwar period must be understood within the context of the European-wide reach of the USSR is one example of how atheism cannot be understood nationally but must be viewed as entangled across borders. In the case studied herein, the very transnational movement of Esperanto—or, more specifically, left-wing Esperanto—had a decisive influence on atheist activity in Sweden, even locally in Gothenburg, demonstrating another form of geographical entanglement. Still, both of these examples are not solely about connections between atheists in different countries; they are also about what I have discussed as entanglements of issues, ideas and engagements. For Einar Adamson, atheism, communism and Esperanto (and, one might add, temperance and pacifism) formed an entangled web of ideas and issues, connected by a form of utopian energy.³⁹

This web of issues was specific to a certain time and place. At other times, of course, non-belief was not as strongly linked with Soviet Communism in West-

39 This can be related to Todd Weir's discussion of 'worldview secularism' and 'red secularism', where he mainly connects secularism to socialist culture and politics. Esperanto is mentioned only in passing in Weir, *Red secularism*.

ern Europe, and there was never again as strong an Esperanto movement that incorporated non-belief as a sub-issue. However, atheism has been connected to other political and cultural ideals—whether natural science, other fields of knowledge such as the humanities, or the women’s movement—as has been discussed in earlier research.⁴⁰ Atheism is about individual personal belief in God. From a historian’s perspective, however, atheism is much more than this, and one task of the scholar of atheism is to unlock and uncover how different entanglements of atheism appear in different contexts.

And, coming to the third aim of the article, biography can be a very useful tool to accomplish this, as biography lets us cut through divisions between topics, issues and engagements. Noted people in history do not live their lives in sealed-off compartments but combine engagements and interests. Thus, taking an individual as a starting point is a useful approach for a historian, in both empirical exploration and narration or exposition, and can reveal entanglements which may be less visible in histories focusing on one idea or issue.

Of course, then, it is necessary to consider what kind of person is in focus. Einar Adamson was not an anonymous brick in the wall of some well-oiled organisational machine; he was an entrepreneurial and opinionated activist who sometimes went his own way. Still, he did so in a manner that fit very well into the context surrounding him. Although the organisation *Svenska Fri-tänkareförbundet* might not have existed without Adamson as an individual, conditions existed at that time that made its foundation reasonable and historically understandable. Individuals act, but do so under circumstances that exist outside of themselves; and it is this space ‘between structure and agency’, as one influential book on the topic puts it, that biography explores.⁴¹

40 See e.g. Stephen P. Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Anton Jansson, “Humanister på apologetikens scen: Ateism och kristendomskritik i efterkrigstidens offentlighet”, in *Humaniora i välfärdssamhället: Kunskapshistorier om efterkrigstiden*, ed. Johan Östling, Anton Jansson and Ragni Svensson Stringberg (Stockholm/Gothenburg: Makadam, 2023); Kimberly A. Hamlin, *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020).

41 Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig, ed., *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

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