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# The Strengths and Weaknesses of Seventeenth-Century Sweden in Light of Recent Research

In Swedish historiography, the seventeenth century is known as the *Stormaktstiden*, the Age of Greatness. The beginning of this historical period is difficult to determine, but it is still possible to distinguish two events indicative of a change in the balance of power in the North in favour of Sweden: the Peace of Stolbova (1617) concluded with Muscovy enabled Sweden to acquire Ingria and ensure the safety of the kingdom's eastern border; and then, in 1621, the taking of Riga gave Swedes control of the main port in the Eastern Baltic and the rich province of Livonia.[1] This new position of strength allowed Sweden to participate in the Thirty Years' War and to emerge as a true European power. The end of *Stormaktstiden* is, in turn, easier to determine. The twilight of Swedish power, starting from the defeat of Charles XII at Poltava (8 July 1709), took a definitive turn with the Peace of Nystad (1721), which marked the transfer of supremacy in the North from Sweden to Russia.

About a century separates these events, during which Sweden became a major player in the political, diplomatic, economic and military life of the European continent. In the mid-seventeenth century, the kings of Sweden extended their authority over territories located around the Baltic sea to form the so-called Swedish Empire. Its origins can be found in the intervention in Estonia in 1561, which marked the beginning of Stockholm's involvement in Baltic affairs. Thereafter, in the first half of the seventeenth century, Sweden intervened in Poland and Germany. In

[1] Nils Erik Villstrand, *Sveriges Historia, 1600-1721* (Stockholm, 2011), 9.

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one century, they managed to gain control the majority of Baltic Sea coastlines. At the peak of the Empire in 1660, Swedish monarchs ruled over two types of territories. First, there was the Kingdom of Sweden proper, including the Swedish peninsula and Finland, which had been integrated into the kingdom from the Middle Ages. During the middle decades of the seventeenth century, the Swedes managed to conquer Norwegian territories and the southern provinces of the Scandinavian Peninsula from their enemy, Denmark. These conquests gave them control of the north shore of the Sound Strait and the waters of the western and southern Baltic. The second group of territories were sub-Baltic provinces that were not legally speaking an integral part of the kingdom, although the Swedish kings exercised authority over this area. These territories included the Baltic provinces (Ingria, Estonia and Livonia) conquered from the 1560s. Secondly, in the southern Baltic, the Swedish kings controlled the German territories that were ceded to them in 1648. These lands not only enabled Swedish kings to protect their kingdom from the south, but also to intervene in the Empire and, therefore, to play an important role in European politics.

In many respects, this group of territories subject to the King of Sweden has characteristics that enable it to be considered as an empire.[2] It was driven by a logic of expansion that led to grouping different peoples and lands together. Yet with Sweden, more than elsewhere, heterogeneity was a distinctive character that distinguished this empire from its contemporary equivalents. One of its main features is its exclusively European nature, as the Swedish presence overseas was negligible in the seventeenth century.[3] The territories that became Swedish between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century were neither empty of inhabitants nor were they virgin lands, and the monarchy in Stockholm had to deal with a context that was heterogeneous in many ways. There was first the great human and cultural diversity, with Finns, Russians, Estonians, Latvians, Danes and Germans. Only Lutheranism, by far the majority religion, and the German language, which was more spoken than Swedish, could serve to link the different populations controlled by Sweden. There were also sharp contrasts between the different provinces, for example, Orthodox Ingria, sparsely populated and with almost no development; rich Skåne with Renaissance castles and civilized aristocracy; and Livonia, which became the bread basket of Sweden, with its port of Riga and its

[2] This concept here is understood in the sense explained in Frederick Cooper and Jane Burbank, *Empires in World History : Power and Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J., 2010). It should be noted, however, that the authors do not mention the Swedish Empire.

[3] In the middle of the seventeenth century, Sweden possessed few territories on other continents: the trading post of Carolusborg, in the current state of Ghana, which was founded in 1650 and definitively lost in 1663; and New Sweden (Nya Sverige) in the current state of Delaware, US, from 1638 to 1655.

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German bourgeoisie jealous of its privileges. In the sub-Baltic provinces under their authority, the Swedish kings had to deal with specific situations and unique privileges. Stockholm was not free to impose its political will, its culture, its economic mode of production, nor its social organization. That is why the relationship between Sweden and its outlying territories cannot be thought of in terms of colonialisation, but more as a conglomerate State.[4] There was no internal commercial exchange linking together the various Swedish possessions, and the variety of local privileges did not allow Sweden to broaden its tax base or to recruit more men to serve in its military.

Intense historical debate has questioned the nature of the Swedish empire, which has the distinction of being maritime while being exclusively European. The heart of the debate focuses on the priorities and motivations that governed the Empire's formation. The oldest theory focuses on military motivations. In this line of argument, the creation of the Swedish empire was a reaction to threats from Denmark and Russia in the second half of the sixteenth century, and then from northern Germany from the 1620s. They argue that the purpose of Swedish expansion was to create a wide corridor along the southern Baltic coast to ensure the kingdom's security. Another theory emphasizes economic motives. This theory argues that Sweden primarily sought to control commercial channels leading to the Baltic, in order to establish taxes along those routes to feed the royal treasury. A third hypothesis insists on social factors, explaining that Swedish expansion was primarily driven by the nobility's desire to acquire new lands and obtain civilian and military offices in the conquered territories to consolidate their wealth and prominence in Swedish society.[5] Finally, the last interpretation emphasizes the quest for respect in the eyes of the great European courts. This theory posits that Gustavus Adolphus, in particular, sought to win military victories so that the power and dignity of his kingdom would be recognized.

In the seventeenth century, Sweden achieved great power status due to the extent of its territories, its economic importance, and the power of its military. Yet, this flattering image had a dark side: Sweden had to face a hostile environment, since the other powers on the shore of the Baltic were on the constant lookout for an occasion to take their revenge. The Swedish treasury had major military expenses,

[4] Harald Gustafsson 'The Conglomerate State: A Perspective on State Formation in Early Modern Europe', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 23, no. 3-4, 1998, 189-213.

[5] For a historiographic survey of this issue, see Stephan Troebst, 'Debating the Mercantile Background to Early Modern Swedish Empire-building: Michael Roberts versus Artur Attman', *European History Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1994, 485-509 and on recent developments in Swedish historiography, see Erik Thomson, 'Beyond the Military State: Sweden's Great Power Period in Recent Historiography', *History Compass*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2011, 269-283.

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including the maintenance of a war fleet giving it superiority in the Baltic, the *dominium maris baltici*.[6] However, Sweden had only limited resources and less than one and a half million subjects. Moreover, the country only had fifty years of peace in the period from 1560 to 1721. Wars, and their demographic and fiscal consequences, are at the heart of the history of seventeenth-century Sweden.[7] In the Europe of the time, Sweden was an unusual case. While the international situation imposed considerable financial and demographic requirements, the country experienced no popular uprisings similar to those in other parts of the continent, if not the world.[8] Two explanations for this divide Swedish historians. First, there is the conflict thesis (*konfliktperspectiv*), according to which it was constant pressure from the State and the nobility that enabled them to impose heavy burdens on Swedish society without triggering uprisings. The second is the consensus thesis (*konsensusperspektiv*), in which the role of the Riksdag in determining foreign policy and the ideological control of Swedish society by royal propaganda, as transmitted by the Lutheran clergy and discussions at the local level about military conscription and taxation, hindered discontent, particularly in rural areas. In the end, it seems that Sweden's career as a great power remains a special case for both the speed of its arrival as well as its sudden decline. The brevity of this episode has been, and remains, a continued subject of interest for scholars. The articles in this issue offer new approaches to the major issues in Sweden's *Stormaktstiden*. They revisit several questions related to its international status, its military capabilities, the quality of its administrative organisation, and its internal tensions.

To become a real European power, Sweden had to earn the respect of other major European countries in addition to its military victories. Cécile Peter's article focuses on Sweden's quest for recognition, in particular from its French ally. At a time when France was triumphant, Swedish demands to recognize the dignity of their language or their sovereign invite us to reflect on the notion of power, which encompasses much more than the battlefield. This broader notion of power enables us to examine the role that the Swedes, crowned with success in the Thirty Years' War, ascribed to themselves on the European stage and the place that the other

[6] Jan Glete, *Swedish Naval Administration, 1521-1721, Resource Flows and Organisational Capabilities* (Leyde-Boston, 2010).

[7] Jan Lindegren, 'The Swedish 'military state', 1560-1720', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1985, 305-336 and by the same author, 'Les hommes, l'argent, les moyens (Danemark, Finlande, Norvège, Suède, XVIe -XVIIIe siècles)' in Philippe Contamine (dir.), *Guerre et concurrence entre les États européens du XIVe au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1998, 122-166). See also Jan Glete, *War and State in Early Modern Europe : Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as fiscal-military states, 1500-1660* (London-New York, 2002).

[8] Geoffrey Parker, *Global crisis. War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, London, 2013).

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states of the continent wanted to assign them. The perception of Sweden's power depended largely on the military capabilities of its kings. Yet, for a rather poor and sparsely populated kingdom, building a quality army was a recurring challenge. This observation has lead Magnus Linnarsson to question Sweden's ability to have effective troops during the Thirty Years' War, by looking at the question of mercenaries. In this period, the decision to use mercenaries raised multiple questions about how to control them, find financing, and their service compared to conscripted king's subjects. The issue of mercenaries also raises questions about the extent to which Gustavus Adolphus' success was 'Swedish', and finally, to ask whether Sweden could really afford to launch a full-scale war policy.

At the end of the seventeenth century, these kinds of questions were asked in different circumstances. In the 1680s, Charles XI's reforms enabled Sweden to rethink its military base by creating the Indelta (*indelningsverk*). Thus, an essential part of the financial and demographic needs of the army was transferred to rural communities in Sweden and in the provinces. It is from this perspective that Kalle Kroon examines the military involvement of Estonians and Latvians in the late seventeenth century and during the Great Northern War (1700-1721). In the Baltic provinces, using peasants in the army revealed a conflict between the privileged local nobility on the one hand, which intended to keep the peasants in their service and, on the other, the monarchy, which counted on being able to use its subjects in case of war. The study of Estonian and Latvian regiments in the Great Northern War highlights the contribution of these regions to the defence of Swedish territories and the price paid by their inhabitants in Charles XII's service. It also raises questions about the role of the army and the war in the genesis of what we might call pre-nationalist sentiment within the Baltic populations in the early eighteenth century.

The assertion of Sweden's military power during the seventeenth century was accompanied by significant internal political changes. Similar to what was happening in other European countries at this time, the need to mobilize the resources required for an offensive foreign policy accompanied a process of strengthening the Swedish state, symbolized by the advent of a so-called 'absolutist' regime. This process had local repercussions that Karl Bergman illustrates in his study of Karlskrona. In 1680, the foundation *ex nihilo* of this military port in southern Sweden responded to the need to have an ice-free naval base that would enable the Swedish fleet to control the central and southern Baltic. The city and port were placed under the authority of the Admiralty, which established its headquarters there and imposed its regulations. Yet, behind the discourse of authority, there were negotiations and accommodation with the local community of merchants, whose collaboration was needed for supplying the city and therefore, for the Navy's

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effectiveness. The development of an arsenal and a shipyard in Karlskrona required inventing a new economic organization and a concentration of diverse resources and skills into a single place. Between 1710 and 1712, the plague epidemic, which affected Sweden during a particularly difficult military context, reveals the force of the modernization process that had begun in Karlskrona.

In general, the Age of Greatness changed the economic and social balance in Sweden by imposing heavy burdens on rural populations who bore the brunt of fiscal and demographic demands. Yet, although many popular revolts broke out in Europe in the seventeenth century, Sweden was spared from rural uprisings of great magnitude. However, as Miriam Rönnqvist shows, the Swedish elite lived in constant fear of a rural and popular revolt. Their fear was based on Swedish peasant protests in response to the demands imposed on them, but also by the news of revolts in other countries. Within the Royal Council (*Riksråd*), diplomats' dispatches recounting the peasant uprisings on the continent fed the fear that revolts could spread to Sweden. The events that took place abroad served as examples. Therefore, in order to continue to have the peasant masses bear the burden of the country's power politics, Swedish elites conceived of a paternalistic system of social regulation, combining firmness and magnanimity, to ensure the peasants did not rebel.

While it is true that Sweden did not experience popular uprisings, we should not deduce that Swedes calmly accepted the decisions of their king. This was particularly the case during the Great Northern War, the subject of Joakim Scherp's article. After Charles XII's defeat by the Russians at Poltava, he took refuge in the Ottoman Empire although the Swedish territory was more than ever under threat. The meeting of the Riksdag in Sweden between March and June 1710 enabled the four estates of the realm (nobility, clergy, urban bourgeoisie, and peasants) to express their wishes about the country's government. In the absence of the king, members voted on various topics related to the war, the tax system and trade legislation. Examining the archives of the debates enables us to understand the political culture of Swedes at the end of the Age of Greatness and to bring to light the fact that, beyond the satisfaction of their own interests, there was a general, shared analysis of the country's situation and of the solutions to implement. It shows evidence of a strong desire for reform and the existence of a dynamic modernization of the State and the economy that was widely shared.

These contributions reflect the new fields of research on the history of seventeenth-century Sweden. These approaches enable us to understand the foundations of the Swedish state, the context in which it existed, and its limits. This research takes a perspective that goes beyond the glory of the military to shed light on the consequences and on the changes in the political, military and social

organizations of the country, both during the Age of Greatness and over the longer term. In this sense, the authors offer us not only a re-reading of the conditions that allowed Sweden to play a leading role in Europe, but also more generally, reflection on the relevance of the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy.

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