

Chapter 3 : The aftermath

CHARLES XII ON THE CENTENARY OF HIS DEATH 1818

*King Charles, the conquering boy,
Stood up in dust and smoke;
He shook his sword for joy,
And through the battle broke.
How Swedish iron bites,
We will make trial new;
Stand back, you Muscovites;
Forward! my own true blue!*

Esaias Tegnér (1818) Translator: J.E.D.
Bethune (1848)

The Swedes remember their Golden Age of Empire (1611-1718), especially Charles XII. However, it has been difficult to reach a consensus on how to assess the period. The right-wing position is that the Swedes should be proud of their history. The left-wing position of the left is that Charles XII is an embarrassment. And so it has remained. The long time span (1718 to 2018 = 300 years!) makes it difficult to describe the debate. All arguments are modified, shift shape, and reappear. I stick to what I perceive are the main issues:

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War & Peace

The Swedish Empire is traditionally defined as the period between Gustav II Adolf's accession to the throne (1611) & the Death of Charles XII (1718) but is easier to describe if extended to 1809. It's legacy was the spoils of war, a number of stately castles & country homes, an effective administration, the country's "Polish" partition into the Swedish rump state & Finland, two heir enemies Russia & Denmark, the German Protestants' (posthumous) gratitude and a dangerously unrealistic self-image. The neighbouring states experienced the Swedish armed theocratic state with the king in person leading his troops into battle as both peculiar & exotic. A throwback to olden times. Almost a Nordic variant of Sparta or the crusades. Here I restrict myself to the aftermath however:

- 1741-1809 : Sweden fought three separate revenge wars: 1741-1743 the Russian War of the Hat-party that ended in Swedish defeat. 1788-1789 Gustaf III's Russian war that ended in a draw, but with the Russian concession to no longer assert their right from the Treaty of Nystad in 1721 to intervene in Swedish domestic politics. 1808-09 Gustaf IV's Russian War that ended in the "Polish" partitioning of Sweden.
- 1809-1844 : Sweden accepts the loss of Finland, but attacks Denmark-Norway to force Norway into a union. Sweden accepts Russia as guarantor of the Union. The so-called 1812 policy.
- 1845-1872 : Oscar I & Charles XV plan to recapture Finland & to include Denmark in an enlarged union, but have no support for this policy. The 1812 "pro-Russian" policy of subservience is replaced by a "pro-Western" policy of neutrality.
- 1872-1950 : Oscar II & Gustaf V continues with the policy of neutrality, an active diplomacy & a strong defence against Russia.

No one has had anything good to say about the Russian War of the Hats or that of Gustav III, but the Finns have praised the War of 1809 as the birth of the Finnish Nation. The Swedes, for their part, have cultivated a mixture of battle glory, Caroline romantics, selective amnesia & anecdotes. Poltava has been given the status of a Swedish equivalent of Thermopylae or Culloden & the Russians ravages in the Swedish archipelago 1719-1721 have been a national trauma ever since. The same applies to the 1809 Russian invasion of Norrland and the Cossack Colonel Kulnev's attack on Grisslehamn. Kulnev was long remembered as "the last enemy on Sweden's soil". However, the German transit during World War II changed all that.

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It has since been perceived as strange that Sweden's "Polish partition" aroused so little opposition. There are a couple of prison sentences against those who tried to stir up a debate, but otherwise it was silence until Oscar I. The interpretation has been that Sweden lacked national sentiments & that no essential economic interests were at stake, as evidenced by Charles John's inaugural speech upon arrival. There was, however, a military strategic concern that Åland was too close to the mainland and the Swedish capital for comfort, why Charles John had Karlsborg fortress built in the middle of the country as a "reserve capital". Oscar I succeeded in turning Åland into a demilitarized zone after the 1856 Russian loss in the Crimean War, the so called Åland-constraint. During the 1918 Finnish Civil War, the Ålanders tried to join Sweden, but an international arbitration worked against it. The constraint is still there though.

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Hating Russia

It is difficult to separate the Swedes hatred of Russia from their hatred of Danes. I quote from the academic Horace Engdahl's 2009 speech on the subject of the 1809 marker year:

"Gustav IV Adolf's way of leading the Swedish national defence has been severely blamed. Among other things, he is said to have overestimated the Danish threat and undervalued the Russian and therefore hesitated to deploy the entire armed forces to the east, as he should have done. We have forgotten that it was Denmark that for centuries had been the real heir enemy, not Russia. The eastern neighbour was perceived as beatable. When there was discord, you always dealt first with the Danes. So did Charles XII and so did Gustaf IV Adolf.

Two centuries away, when we know how it went, the threat does not seem so dangerous. However, the situation could well have developed from the mutilation of Sweden to downright partition. The fate of Poland was still fresh in our memories, how the great powers took turns to do so. Erik Lönnroth used to refer to the loss of Finland in 1809 as "Sweden's first partition". Fortunately, there would never be another. But that was hard to know in 1808, when the enemy armies marched on you from two directions."¹

The Swedish policy of appeasement of 1812 complicated the issue. Hatred of Russians came in two varieties: Internal & External Russia (read: Charles John & the czar). 1838-1839 there was a debate in which Erik Gustaf Geijer agonized over the criticism of Charles John & defended the policy of 1812 as at least a better alternative than the 1721-1743 appeasement,

¹ Engdahl 2009.

when the Russians through the peace in Nystad took the right to interfere in Swedish domestic politics, ferment division & 1743 even force the country to accept their own choice of heir. The liberal opposition was unimpressed. In particular, it objected to Charles John's personal *tête-à-têtes* with the Russian state leadership. Not so suitable when, because of his immunity, he could agree to virtually anything.² During Oscar I, the criticism continued in the same vein. In 1855, during the Crimean War, like this:

”[The Parliament must act.] This applies to both internal and external Russia. The humiliating shackles and ties which have surrounded us from outside and inside for for years must be torn down and broken, both one and the other. The anti-national, demoralizing policy of the [1812] 'family treaty' in both internal and external policy must be brought to an end once and for all. A national and not exclusively dynastic policy must henceforth lead Sweden's destiny, and the fundamental laws must become fundamental and not a plaything for autocracy.”³

Hating Russia thus had both internal and external aspects. As an internal political issue, it was defused by the Treaty of Paris in 1856 and the constitutional reform of 1865. It continued as a foreign policy issue, but assumed symbolic significance. The cause has been assumed to be the nascent Swedish nationalism. Sweden demanded a self-image, which became Charles XII. In 1860 the Swedish army erected a memorial of his death place in Fredrikshald. In 1862, extensive tributes were organized, in which the speeches tried to tie the defeat at Poltava to current issues. Finally, it was proposed to erect a statue. It has been standing in the Royal Garden since 1868, pointing towards Russia.

The Russians do not accord Poltava the same importance as the Swedes, but the victory is since 1739 a holiday. For a few years, the Russian army has carried out ”memorial manoeuvres”. There is a record that in 1862 all such commemorations were abolished except for Poltava. During the Soviet era, celebrations were halted, but resumed during the federation. In popular speech there is an expression ”it went as for the Swedes at Poltava”, when something irrevocably goes FUBAR.⁴ The Swedes have neither forgotten, nor forgiven. June 2022 the proportion of Swedish Russia haters was 95 percent. Only bested by Poland 98 percent.⁵

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The Charles XII-cult

It was long impossible to form a realistic idea of Swedish imperial history including the Finnish wars. Historian Sverker Oredsson and others describe the literature as an impenetrable mixture of propaganda, wishful thinking & ”unswedish” personality cult.⁶ A bit unfair. 18th & 19th century Charles XII-panegyric is unbearable - in its worst moments a genuine death cult,⁷ but the historians laboured on:

The Charles XII picture of the Enlightenment was essentially very negative. In particular, it pointed out his complete lack of strategy. The warfare was summarized

² Geijer 1838; Aftonbladet 1839: ss. 3-4.

³ Friskyttan, 1855-09-29: s. 1.

⁴ Poltava, <ru.wikipedia.org> (2020-01-01).

⁵ Pew Research Center. Sharp decline in favorable views of Russia. <pewresearch.org> (2022-06-22).

⁶ Lindberg 1918; Oredsson 1992; Oredsson 2001a & 2001b; Hellström 2015

⁷ Westerlund 1951; Brantly 1999; Rodell 2002: ss. 133-160.

as nine years of victories followed by nine years of setbacks & then it was over: The Empire project as a whole was both foolhardy & dangerous to the country. In Sweden, this stance was known as the "old school" and dominated until the 1890s. Leading names were Anders Fryxell (1795-1881) & F F Carlsson (1811-1887).

From the 1890s, the "new school" dominated. Leading names were Harald Hjärne (1848-1922) & Arthur Stille (1863-1922). Hjärne searched the Russian archives in an effort to describe Charles XII as statesman & strategist. Stille was chairman of the Caroline Society.

In parallel, there was a third school of military history with Julius Mankell (1828-1897) & Carl Bennedich (1880-1939) as main names. Mankell likened Charles XII to Napoleon. Brilliant as a commander. Not so much as a politicians. Bennedich headed the General Staff's War-Historical Division which, in connection with the commemoration year 1918, published four volumes about Charles XII's tactics on the battlefield.

Later research has tried to take a "history materialistic" approach.⁸ Translated from Marxist to Swedish, the moral reads: (1) As long as it went well, the Swedish Empire was self-sufficient. When things went bad, the country could no longer afford it. (2) The long period of warfare destabilized Central Europe. Charles XII was therefore, at least indirectly, responsible for the partition of Poland.

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In 1897, Hjärne published a long article in which he criticized the consequences for history research of the contemporary "all permeating jingoism" & "quasi-patriotic boasting". To make Charles XII a hero without faults was to make him incomprehensible. To understand Charles XII was necessary to portray him as a product of the time, environment and politics he lived in.⁹ In Hjärnes interpretation, Charles XII grew from a purely Swedish concern to become a portal figure in the power struggle between West and East. This attitude caused the Germans in general and later the Nazis in particular to take an interest in him, which has considerably greatly soiled his legacy.

As Charles XII was synonymous with the will to defend your country, he was praised by such groupings, even when they otherwise lacked a monarchic agenda. The Lund *30-November Association*, known for its annual torchlight procession in honour of Charles XII, became after World War I a joint committee for various monarchist, national and Nazi groups. This has continued. In the 1970s, Sveriges nationella förbund (SNF), Nysvenska rörelsen (NSR) & Nordiska rikspartiet (NRP) have organized tribute marches. The slogans were a mixture of national sentiment, masculinity cult and hating Russia & the Jews. Non-political associations such as the Caroline Society (1910-), the Narva League (1970-2000) and the Lützen League (1976-1989) have had difficulty making themselves heard.¹⁰

The cult of King Gustaf II Adolf was during King Oscar II included in the official "German diplomacy". The cult of Charles XII never had the same status, but different groups thought they saw parallels with the past: Like Charles XII, Hitler was the western bulwark against

⁸ Andersson 1980: ss. 173-191.

⁹ Hjärne 1897.

¹⁰ Lööw 1998; Karl XII-firandet, <expo.se> 2018-12-03.

Russian barbarism. In 1939, a delegation from the German-Swedish Association & the Manhem Society courted Adolf Hitler on his 50th birthday April 20...

”...with a statuette of a purposefully marching Charles XII with the sword on high alert. It was along these lines that we sent a message. Hitler learned from it that Swedish men and women saw him as the saviour of Europe, who in his struggle for the founding of a Greater Germany was inspired by the same spirit that guided Carolus during his hard historical struggle.”¹¹

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Charles XII never became the national icon that the advocates wanted. The views on him were too divided. Liljegren (1998) has a very pedagogical diagram showing that the judgments in the Swedish school books faithfully followed the research. During the years 1914-1968, the Charles XII's picture was generally positive. Before and after it was negative. However, it was always fragmented. The trend in Tingsten (1969) is the same. There are also some statistics where the interest in Charles XII is compared with the interest in other kings, mainly with Gustaf II Adolf:

According to the KB's newspaper database, interest in Gustaf II Adolf began in earnest during Charles XV, continued during Oscar II, but declined after the dissolution of the union. There are two late peaks: The 300th anniversary of GIIA's birth (1894) & 300th anniversary of his death (1932). According to the same source, interest in Charles XII began at the 100th anniversary of his death (1818), then grew slowly until the dissolution of the Union, was relatively constant until 1935, and then waned. The 200th anniversary of his death in 1918 was greatly fêted, but had little media impact.

Measured as the number of publications = entries in the Libris literature database, the development is slightly different. Interest in GIIA & Charles XII was equal until the dissolution of the union, when the interest in Charles XII grew. After World War II, the advantage for Charles XII was a factor 4 to 5. Much of the interest seems to be due to Peter Englund's and Herman Lindqvist's popular summaries but with different tendencies. Englund is critical. Lindqvist belongs to the admirers. Charles XII by now is all things to everybody.

The Swedes in general, however, seem to have a limited interest in their historic warrior kings. The ranking in 1958 (percent of the population over 15 who puts this king first) was: Gustaf VI (37), Gustaf V (24), Gustav Vasa (21), Gustaf II Adolf (9), Charles XII (4), Gustaf III (3) & Kristina (1).¹²

As for schoolchildren, there are three surveys from 1910, 1912 & 1920 on historical "heroes". The students' average ranking was: Gustaf II Adolf (1st), Gustaf Vasa & Oscar II (shared 2nd), Charles XII (4th). Gustaf II Adolf's prominence was assumed to be due to the annual commemoration of his death on November 6. One of the researchers compared his status as the preferred national hero to that of George Washington.¹³

¹¹ Zander 2001: s. 265.

¹² [Hans Zetterberg.] Historiska krigsbedrifter entusiasmerar ej längre. Sifo-artikel, 1958-12-30.

¹³ Anonym 1910; Brandell 1912; Wenner 1920.

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Summary

The stories of Empire included in a Swedish canon are Voltaire's Charles XII biography (1731), Verner von Heidenstam's "Karolinerna" (1897-98), Frans G Bengtsson's Charles XII biography (1935-36) & Peter Englund's books on Poltava & the 30-year war. They all downplay the personality cult, but that does not mean that it is absent. Not even Axel Strindberg's (1937) "Peasant Squalor and Dreams of Empire : studies of the period 1630-1718" can avoid it. Charles XII hovers over everybody.

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The 20th-century monarchic debate has been described by Ulf Zander (2001). The portal figure is political scientist and politician Rudolf Kjellén with the conservative agenda to use Swedish history & culture for national cohesion.¹⁴ The Social Democrats preferred until the party split in 1917 a class struggle perspective, which Kjellén considered to be tantamount treason. Politics existed to unite the country, not to saw dissent. More on this later.

The cult of Charles XII appears above all to have been important for the Bernadotte, in making the Swedish monarchy a national prestige project whose existence could no longer be questioned. Except then possibly when one suspected Nazi sympathies. The Nazi interest in Charles XII was interpreted as there being ideological similarities, identical ambitions or at least a spiritual community between the Swedish monarchy and the German führer system. Several members of the royal family have been accused of being Nazis, of socializing with Nazis, of sympathizing with them or not strongly enough condemning them. The debate is messy & not a little infected (see chapter 29).

¹⁴ Kjellén 1916.

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