

Why was the Swedish empire so short-lived?

Benjamin Eskola

16 Mar 2015

Around the turn of the seventeenth century, Sweden transformed itself from a regional power on the northern edge of Europe into a major player in European politics, the linchpin of the Protestant forces in the Thirty Years' War and a signatory of the resulting Peace of Westphalia. Yet within a century its "great power era" (*Stormaktstiden*) was over, after a series of crushing defeats at the hands of Russia. This essay will examine the nature and causes of Sweden's rise to power and attempt to explain why this "golden age" ended so suddenly.

The beginning of the period of expansion can be dated back to the second half of the sixteenth century. In the 1560s Sweden intervened in the war in Livonia, offering protection against the Russians in return for fealty; this led to the establishment of the Swedish Duchy of Estonia and the extension of Swedish interests in the Baltic.

More significant was the reign of Gustav II Adolf "the Great", from 1611 onwards, whose accession is usually taken to herald the start of *Stormaktstiden*. Gustav earned a reputation as a military leader, coming to the throne in the middle of three separate wars started by his predecessors (against Russia, Poland-Lithuania, and Denmark-Norway). As a result of these, Gustav was able to expand Swedish possessions in the Baltic, retaking the region of Ingria which it had previously held for a period during the 1580s and 1590s. This had the significant effect of excluding Russia from the Baltic and cementing Swedish control of both coasts of the Gulf of Finland. He was also able to earn Sweden an exemption from the Danish tolls through the Öresund strait between the North Sea and Baltic Sea, thus reducing Denmark's dominance over regional trade. He also was able to acquire Karelia, on the Finnish-Russian border, the important port of Riga

in Livonia, and later the remainder of Livonia. He then made the decision to involve Sweden in the Thirty Years' War, first by the relief of the Siege of Stralsund and later, after the conclusion of the war in Livonia, as the primary focus of Swedish foreign policy. Sweden was able to take the lead as a major Protestant force during the early 1630s and Gustav secured his reputation as a military commander until his death (in battle) in late 1632. Sweden was increasingly supported by France at this time, first through subsidies and then, from 1635, by direct military intervention against the Emperor. As a result, at the conclusion of the war Sweden was able to hold part of Pomerania and the bishopric of Bremen-Verden, giving it control of three major rivers (the Oder, Elbe, and Weser) and thus German trade towards the Baltic and North Seas.¹

However, 1648 marks almost the peak of Swedish achievement. Gustav II Adolf was succeeded by a regency for his six-year-old daughter Kristina, who reigned herself only from 1644 until her abdication in 1654. Her successor, her cousin Karl X Gustav, died only six years later, at the age of 37, to be succeeded by another regency for his five-year-old son Karl XI. He in turn died young, in 1697, to be followed by a short regency before his fifteen-year-old son Karl XII took power. Thus in the 65 years between 1632 and 1697, more than 25 years were spent in regencies (a problem also afflicting France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries).

The half-century from 1648 to 1697 was one of variable fortunes for Sweden. A further conflict with Denmark-Norway between 1655 and 1658 brought Sweden to its greatest territorial extent, with the acquisition of the southern tip of the Scandinavian peninsula (the provinces of Blekinge, Skåne, Halland, and Bohuslän), as well as the Norwegian province of Trøndelag and the Baltic island of Bornholm; however, these latter two were lost in 1660 in the face of Dutch support of Denmark-Norway and the death of Karl X. Sweden was, however, able to renew its exemption from the Sound Tolls, reinforced by its possession of the territories east of the Öresund.

It is at this point that Sweden begins to show signs of weakness. It was increasingly reliant on French subsidies, which naturally came with a requirement to support French interests; this led to Swedish involvement in the Franco-Dutch war of the 1670s, against the Netherlands' ally Brandenburg. Though Sweden was able (with French backing) to retain all its possessions, even those in Germany occupied by Brandenburg, it was at the

¹Michael Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus* (English Universities Press, 1973); David Kirby, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period: The Baltic World 1492-1772* (Routledge, 1990).

expense of its military reputation.² Sweden was already struggling to meet its demand for troops by this time, and the remainder of Karl XI's reign is notable for its reforms to address this lack.³

Karl XI maintained a policy of neutrality for the remainder of his reign, the longest period of peace during *Stormaktstiden*. This was in part aided by wars elsewhere in Europe; Poland-Lithuania and Russia were distracted by their wars with the Ottoman Empire, while the Germans were likewise concentrating on Louis XIV's *réunions* along the western frontier. Karl was able to initiate a wide-ranging land reform, the *Reduktion*, consisting of the reappropriation of former crown lands currently held by the nobility, taking noble-owned lands from around 2/3 of Sweden and Finland to around 1/3. This was accompanied by a reform of the military, intended to make it self-sufficient (the 'allotment system' or *indelningsverket*); all soldiers were granted a farm by the crown, the revenues of which were expected to support them. Thus by the end of Karl XI's reign the army was "perhaps the best-trained and best-equipped" it had ever been.⁴

However, the subsequent reign of Karl XII was nothing short of disastrous for Sweden. He has a (perhaps unsurprisingly) poor reputation in the Swedish popular memory, being called variously an 'ambitious madman' and a 'sociopath'. However it is not clear that this is entirely true; upon being attacked by opportunistic neighbours he initially took a defensive stance, forcing Denmark-Norway to withdraw from the conflict early on and winning a significant victory against Russia at Narva. He was then able to turn his focus to Saxony-Poland-Lithuania, reaching as far as Saxony itself and forcing the Elector of Saxony to relinquish the Polish-Lithuanian crown. Then he set his sights on Russia once more; although Tsar Piotr was willing to negotiate and return occupied Ingria, desiring only to retain newly-established Saint Petersburg at the eastern tip of the Gulf of Finland. Karl refused to negotiate, instead attempting to march on Moscow in the winter of 1708-09 and leading to the devastating defeat at Poltava in the spring of 1709. The Swedish forces retreated to Ottoman territory in the Balkans, effectively removing Karl from the war for the next five years; during this period Russia was able to make significant gains, occupying Finland and the Baltic territories. In the final years of the conflict Saxony and Denmark-Norway both re-entered, along with

²Kirby.

³Sven Lundkvist, 'The Experience of Empire: Sweden as a Great Power', in *Sweden's Age of Greatness, 1632-1718*, ed. by Michael Roberts (Macmillan, 1973).

⁴Michael Roberts, 'Charles XI', in *Essays in Swedish History* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967).

Brandenburg–Prussia and Hannover–Great Britain, who divided Sweden’s German territories between them. Britain and France then attempted to mediate to bring about an end to the war. The death of Karl XII hastened the end of the conflict, along with internal rivalry over the succession.

A significant contributing factor to Sweden’s failure is therefore the lack of international support. This can be explained by concerns over Swedish dominance of Baltic trade; this had already caused friction with the Maritime Powers of England (later Great Britain) and the United Provinces. The breaking of this monopoly was thus in the interests of many of the other European powers, and is emphasised by the reconquest of Bremen–Verden and part of Swedish Pomerania, removing Swedish dominance over German trade, and the ending of Sweden’s exemption from the Sound Toll. However, conversely, there was no desire for Russia to dominate; British intervention in the final stages of the war was an attempt to maintain a safe balance of powers in the region.⁵

Lundkvist further argues that in fact Swedish strength was never sufficient to achieve its foreign policy aims, ‘except piecemeal’, and its successes during the early seventeenth century were anomalous, largely due to Russia’s weakness as a result of its ‘time of troubles’. Once Russia was able to reassert itself, even the reforms under Karl XI were insufficient to maintain Sweden’s position in the Baltic; this was then exacerbated by Karl XII’s hubris in failing to negotiate, leading to the slow defeat of Sweden by attrition.

In such a view, therefore, the “golden age” can almost be said never to have happened; rather, a series of gains under a particularly successful leader were maintained for a few decades, firstly with French support and later through neutrality while potential rivals had their focus elsewhere.

References

- Kirby, David, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period: The Baltic World 1492-1772* (Routledge, 1990)
- Lundkvist, Sven, ‘The Experience of Empire: Sweden as a Great Power’, in *Sweden’s Age of Greatness, 1632-1718*, ed. by Michael Roberts (Macmillan, 1973)
- Roberts, Michael, ‘Charles XI’, in *Essays in Swedish History* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967)
- — —, *Gustavus Adolphus* (English Universities Press, 1973)

⁵Lundkvist.