

Film/Cinema (Sweden)

By [Ulf Zander](#)

Summary

Sweden succeeded in remaining a non-combatant through the First World War. However, the conflict affected the nation in many ways, for example in terms of film production and film consumption. The Swedish film industry was growing rapidly already before the outbreak of the First World War. The number of cinemas increased every year. It is estimated that there were 700 cinemas in Sweden in 1919, twice the amount compared to 1914. Probably because Sweden did not take an active part in the war, it was, with a few noteworthy exceptions, rare that films produced in Sweden commented on the ongoing conflict.

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The Swedish Film Industry before and during the First World War

Although [Sweden](#) did not take part in the First World War, the war was very much present in the everyday life of many Swedes. An important reason was, as in most other parts of the Western world, new [technological](#) advancements, not least [film](#). Another was an increased literacy among the citizens. Thus, many could understand war stories in [newspapers](#) and journals, but also in movie theaters since watching films had increasingly become an alternative, even a rival to the written word, especially among those who still had trouble reading and writing.¹

In Sweden, the 1910s was an expansive period for the film industry. This decade also brought considerable success for the company Svenska Bio (*Swedish Cinema*), not least because the company got exclusive rights to distribute American movies. Following the assassination of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) and his wife in [Sarajevo](#), [Charles Magnusson \(1878-1948\)](#), head of Svenska Bio, feared that it would no longer be possible to

import dailies.² The first reaction was to close down Svenska Bio's film production, but soon it turned out that Magnusson's initial fears were exaggerated. Not only did Svenska Bio succeed, but also during the war years, new Swedish film companies were established, despite fierce competition. The number of permanent movie theaters increased year by year, from about 200 in 1911 to 350 in 1914 to 700 in 1919.³ One of few declines in movie attendance appeared in the autumn of 1918. Because of the [Spanish flu](#), many cinemas in Sweden had to close since the authorities feared an outbreak of the epidemic when people gathered in crowded cinemas. In some Swedish cities, the cinemas remained closed for several months.⁴

So far, there has not been much research on film in Sweden during the First World War. The [censorship](#) of newsreel showing the ongoing war is one of few exceptions.⁵ For obvious reasons, Swedish-produced films about the ongoing war was a scarce commodity because of the Swedish non-participation in the war. Another explanation is the lack of surviving source material. Most cinema owners and their staff treated the newsreels as disposable, which meant that few of them survived. There certainly existed an awareness of this problem in Sweden in the late 1910s. An organization was created in 1918 with the expressed ambition to preserve film and music material, but after only three years, it ceased to exist.⁶ Another problem was the nitrate in the films, which meant a high fire risk. In a large fire in 1941, many of the preserved films went up in flames as the central storage outside Stockholm burned down to the ground.

In general, the First World War favored Swedish film production. As it became more difficult to import films, more and more domestic movies were produced and many of them were thereafter exported. During the war years, Svenska Bio exported 70 films and other companies were also successful on the international market. The change was dramatic compared with the season 1918-19 when it was obvious that it was the other way around. There was a great demand for foreign films and the amount of films produced in other countries increased in large numbers.⁷

War Films and Swedish Censorship

Early on, reports from battlegrounds were common at the cinema. In Sweden, audiences could see newsreels or reenactments from the Spanish-American War (1898), the Boer War (1899-1902), the [Russian-Japanese War](#) (1904-05), the [Libyan War](#) (1911) and the [Balkan Wars](#) of 1912 and 1913. After the outbreak of the First World War, film photographers had at first great opportunities to shoot near the frontline. Thereafter came a period of restrictions

which were eventually eased.

The military leadership in all belligerent parties controlled the content of the films. However, audiences, including in [neutral](#) Sweden, saw them most of the time as objective statements in accordance with the expression, “the camera never lies”. Advertisements from Swedish newspapers during the war years illustrate this; promises of “authentic war images” and “real war pictures” are just two of many examples. Film’s great credibility resulted in countermeasures from the authorities.⁸ Sweden was the first nation in the world in which State imposed film censorship in 1911. In 1914, a new regulation was introduced which stressed that films could not be approved if they showed content which could be seen as improper in relation to Sweden’s relations to foreign powers or if they showed the strength of the Swedish [armed forces](#) on land or by sea.⁹

During the war years, the censors examined all war films. The censors, like most other moviegoers, seemed to have had a great belief in the trustworthiness in the pictures but less so when it came to the accompanying subtitles. If the censors found cause to edit the newsreels, they most likely excluded the title cards. In a few cases, they edited newsreels in order to make them admissible for a young audience. Altogether, the censors made 120 cuts in newsreels and banned 17 films. Of these, 15 were feature films and two were newsreels, both of them of Russian origin.

One of the films that the Swedish censors censored was the British-produced [The Battle of the Somme](#), which was a great success in [Great Britain](#).¹⁰ In Sweden, it was released both in an hour-long version and in five acts. In the fourth act, scenes captured dead soldiers on the battlefield, but the Swedish censors removed them. Moreover, the censors altered the words in the title cards from a mobilizing tone to a deterrent language or exchanged it for pacifistic messages with a very different reading of the film as a result. One reason for this manipulation was to show films that were in accordance with the rules of censorship, another was to adapt the films to promote a war deterrent point of view. Such a perspective seems to have been more successful as the war went on, mostly because of growing support for a continuing Swedish [neutrality](#) in order to stay out of the brutal war.¹¹

War Films in Swedish Cinemas

Despite the difficulties, Swedish cinema owners imported a great number of films, many of them with war themes. Indeed, as in the likewise (until 1917) neutral [USA](#), the combatants tried to win the audiences in neutral countries over to their own causes.¹² In addition, there was a great interest in the conflict in Sweden. As a result, many newsreels from both sides in

the war were imported, more often than not as one part of a package. The first part was newsreels about the war. Since the camera equipment was heavy and hard to handle, the films were limited in their performance and the cameras needed optimal light conditions, there were many difficulties in filming actual combat. Instead, the newsreels usually showed mobilization, current front lines, the everyday lives of the soldiers in or behind the trenches, war-torn landscapes and injured or [captured soldiers](#). One of the most common themes was devastation and pillage, often with the frontline in [France](#) as an example. Many directors of newsreels depicted the results of the war by slowly panning towns, villages and landscapes marked by the ongoing artillery bombardment or other forms of fighting. Some examples of newsreels shown in Swedish cinemas were *Tyskland under fanorna* (Germany beneath the Flags, 1914), *Med engelska armén i Frankrike* (With the English Army in France, 1916), *General Mudra hälsar en segerrik stormbataljon* (General Mudra Greets a Victorious Storm Battalion, 1916) and *De allierades läger vid Saloniki* (The Allied Camp at Saloniki, 1918). The newsreels were usually followed by melodramas.

Despite the process of censorship and the fact that [transportation](#) from the front line to Sweden was not an easy task, audiences frequently saw quite recently filmed newsreels. In addition, a few Swedish produced films commented on the ongoing war or Swedish efforts to stay out of it. One that got some press reactions was *För fäderneslandet* (For My Country, 1914), a cloak and dagger drama that best is described as a Danish-French production rather than a Swedish one, which was filmed before the outbreak of the war. Even so, it commented on the tense political and military situation. [Ragnar Ring \(1882-1956\)](#) and [Georg af Klercker \(1877-1951\)](#), directors of the film, criticized the Swedish government in late 1913 because it was too “nervous” resulting in censorship of the film in its early stages. The film premiered eventually in Sweden in April 1914. Other Swedish films with a war perspective are *Svenskt militärliv* (Swedish Military Life, 1914/15), *Minlotsen: en händelse från krigets dagar i tre akter* (The Mine Pilot, 1915) and *För hem och härd* (For Home and Hearth, 1917). The first depicts the state of the Swedish armed forces, emphasizing that Swedish soldiers were well fed, trained and motivated. Swedish soldiers were also main characters in films like *Hämnden är ljuv* (Sweet Revenge, 1915) and *I kronans kläder* (In Army Uniform, 1915), but they are examples of army farces, a genre that was also very popular in Sweden before, during and after the Second World War.

Minlotsen, which has not been preserved, is one of few Swedish films from the period that takes place during a war when a young millionaire sails in enemy waters. Afraid of sailing into a minefield, he cast anchor. A pilot comes aboard. At gunpoint, he forces the millionaire and his crew to sail into the minefield. The boat explodes, but the pilot, his fiancée Maria and the millionaire survives. A fight between the pilot and the millionaire takes place, but Maria saves the millionaire, who manages to escape from the pilot. Like *Minlotsen*, *För hem och härd* is

also a film about a country in a state of war. Sweden is threatened by an invasion, but because of the watchfulness of Sven, the hero in the film, the Swedish soldiers avert the attack. The film ends with soldiers proudly marching and displaying the Swedish flag.

Between 1915 and 1922, around 63,000 wounded soldiers passed through Sweden by train. The trains of crippled soldiers got a lot of attention in the Swedish media, and the haunting images of battered soldiers were a recurrent theme among Swedish authors in the years to come.¹³

One Swedish-produced newsreel was about the exchange of prisoners of war that took place in four Swedish cities, Torneå, Haparanda, Hallsberg and Trelleborg. *Krigsfångautväxlingen genom Sverige* (The Exchange of Prisoners of War through Sweden) premiered in September 1915. Besides a focus on visiting royalties, especially the Swedish Queen Victoria, Swedish moviegoers got glimpses of the horrors of war in the shape of wounded soldiers from both sides. Many reviewers were deeply affected. They commented repeatedly on the horrifying scenes that ought to lessen the enthusiasm among those who still wanted Sweden to take part in the war.

Conclusion

Many films shown in Sweden during the war years actively contributed to making film accepted among the majority of Swedes, including the middle and upper classes who had been more skeptical towards moving images before the outbreak of the war. As in many other countries, authorities in Sweden realized the political and [propagandistic](#) potential in films. Most importantly, films contributed to the spread of influential images of the nature of [modern warfare](#) since they depicted the conflict in different ways compared to newspapers or books. A little more than a decade after the end of the First World War, a film put a new light on the First World War in Sweden. *Krigets verkliga ansikte* (The True Face of War, 1929), set out to depict new truths about the war. The shock that moviegoers got when confronted with the horrors of war was also a final recognition that film was a media that could depict the First World War in a way as no other media could.

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External Links

- [De allierades läger vid Saloniki \(in Swedish\), France 1918 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)
- [För fäderneslandet. Svensk konstfilm \(in Swedish\), Sweden 1914 \(The Swedish Film Database\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Hämnden är ljuv \(in Swedish\), 1997 \(The Swedish Film Database\) \(Article\)](#)
- [I kronans kläder. Lustspel i 2 akter \(in Swedish\), 1915 \(The Swedish Film Database\) \(Article\)](#)

- [Klercker, Georg af \(in Swedish\): För hem och härd, Sweden 1917 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Krigsfångeutväxlingen genom Sverige \(in Swedish\), Sweden 1915 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Med engelska armén i Frankrike \(in Swedish\), Great Britain 1916 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)
- [Messter film. General Mudra hälsar en segerrik stormbataljon \(in Swedish\), Germany 1916 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)
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- [Svenskt militärliv \(in Swedish\), 1914 \(The Swedish Film Database\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Tema. Första världskriget 1914-1918 \(in Swedish\) \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Tyskland under fanorna \(in Swedish\), Germany 1914 \(Filmarkivet.se\) \(Video\)](#)

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