

# Military and Strategy (Sweden)

By [Gunnar Åselius](#)

## Summary

The Russian navy was suspicious of Swedish neutrality in 1914, as Sweden had been arming itself for many years, and almost unwittingly dragged the country into the war. Russia was seen as the main threat to Sweden, but Germany and Britain were also perceived as potential aggressors. The navy bore the main burden of protecting Sweden's neutrality during the following years, and also played a major role during the Swedish expedition to the Åland Islands in 1918. However, Sweden failed to acquire Åland after the war, and eventually became disappointed in the League of Nations and collective security.

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## Sweden's Military Position and Strategies

At the outbreak of the First World War, Swedish defence expenditures had been growing steadily for decades. State revenue had increased through industrialization and through the introduction of tariffs in the late 1880s, and allowed for the extension of conscription from thirty to 240 days, the construction of modern coastal battleships and the building of Boden Fortress to protect northern [Sweden](#). The Liberal government under Prime Minister [Karl Staaff \(1860-1915\)](#), which came to power in 1911, was prepared to continue increasing defence expenditure. However, the Liberals soon found themselves locked in a bitter political struggle with the Conservative opposition over defence, which did not concern the levels of spending so much as the question of parliamentary control over the military. Staff appointed civilian politicians as ministers for the army and navy and organized parliamentary defence committees to review both costs and organizational structures in a long-term perspective. After [Gustav V, King of Sweden \(1858-1950\)](#) publicly expressed his support for a protest

march by Conservative farmers against the government's defence policy in February 1914, Staaff resigned. As there would be ordinary elections in the fall, the king appointed a caretaker government under [Hjalmar Hammarskjöld \(1860-1953\)](#), Governor of Uppsala County. Hammarskjöld tried to find a solution to the defence issue sympathetic to Conservative demands, and proposed a doubling of the army organization. Hammarskjöld's army bill would not have passed parliament, where Liberals and Social Democrats together controlled a majority of the seats, had it not been for the outbreak of war in August, which made the Left more generous regarding defence spending. The Hammarskjöld government also commissioned a new generation of coastal battleships for the navy, which had been a hotly contested issue in previous years.<sup>1</sup>

As Sweden stayed [neutral](#) during the First World War, at no single time in the years 1914-1918 did the Swedish army keep more than 13,000 men under arms (conscripts undergoing basic training are not included in this number). In the summer of 1918, for example, when the fighting culminated on the [Western Front](#) in [France](#), the Swedish army had less than 2,000 soldiers available. In 1939-1945, when there were major troop concentrations all around Sweden's borders and an almost constant fear of invasion, the military situation was entirely different. Then, the number of mobilized reservists never sank below 25,000 and at times even grew above 300,000.<sup>2</sup>

In the decades following 1871, newly unified [Germany](#) had come to replace France and [Britain](#) as Sweden's reassurance against alleged [Russia](#) expansion plans into Scandinavia. In spite of the strong Germanophile currents in Swedish society, however, segments of the Swedish security elite were also deeply suspicious of Germany.<sup>3</sup> The Swedish and German chiefs of staff secretly met in November 1910 to discuss a combined offensive against St. Petersburg, but failed to reach a binding agreement, although [Knut Bildt \(1854-1927\)](#) and his German colleague [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) knew each other well, having studied together at the Military Academy in Berlin in the 1880s. Bildt strongly advised the Swedish government against entering into any military treaty with Germany if this would include the stationing of German troops on Swedish soil in wartime. According to Bildt, the temptation to occupy some part of Swedish territory would then be too great for the Germans.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, in spite of strong pro-German sentiments in the Swedish establishment, there was no serious strategy in 1914 other than to stay out of the war. The function of the armed forces was to support that ambition by dissuading potential aggressors, Germany included.

## Threat Perceptions

A Russian invasion across the border with [Finland](#) in the northeast, or across the Baltic Sea

against the Stockholm region, were perceived as the main military threat, especially after 1912 and the passing of a new naval construction program in Russia. Russia's motive would be traditional [imperialism](#), and the wish to secure ports on the Atlantic Ocean. However, as the war progressed and Russia became increasingly occupied in other directions, there was a growing understanding in the Swedish General Staff that aggression from the east was not imminent.<sup>5</sup>

Before 1914, there were also fears of a German invasion in southern Sweden in case of a general European war, as Germany would find it necessary to block the Baltic approaches to British naval forces. However, the growing size of modern battleships and the increasing strength of the German navy made an intrusion by the British into the Baltic Sea ever more unlikely. In 1912, the Swedish naval staff finally discarded the possibility of British naval operations in the Baltic Sea during a major European war. Nonetheless, the Swedish general staff continued to plan for "Case Germany", trusting that the Germans would want to seize the Baltic approaches anyway. The general staff also prepared for "Case England", as the British would probably try to counter a German invasion of southern Sweden by landing troops on the Swedish west coast. When the conflicts with Britain over [neutrality](#) regulations sharpened during the course of the war, the Swedish General Staff started to plan for a fourth scenario in 1916, "Case Russia-England-Norway", based on the assumption that Russia and Britain would try to seize parts of northern Sweden together in order to open a direct link between them. Norway, which was under British influence, was expected to support such an undertaking.<sup>6</sup>

## Mobilization and Military Preparedness in 1914

On 2-3 August, the navy and the wartime garrison of certain fortresses were mobilised, as were elder reservists in the local defence forces in coastal areas and along the border with Finland. In addition, the annual call-up of reservists for refresher's training was issued, a few weeks earlier than scheduled. Certain statements made by the [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) to the Swedish king in 1913 gave reason to fear a German ultimatum upon the outbreak of a general European war, demanding that Sweden join the Central Powers. Therefore, on 8 August, a joint Swedish-Norwegian neutrality declaration was issued, seconding Sweden's own declaration of neutrality on 3 August. Nonetheless, rumours of Sweden's intention to enter the war were still in sway. On 9 August, the commander of the Russian Baltic Fleet, Admiral [Nikolai von Essen \(1860-1915\)](#) prepared to sail to the island of Gotland with his battleship squadron to deliver an ultimatum, demanding that Swedish naval forces should stay in port for the duration of the war. Only at the last moment did Russian Supreme Commander [Nikolai Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia \(1856-1929\)](#) call off Essen's

expedition (actually, there were no Swedish naval forces in Gotland at the time, as they had been concentrated to the main naval base in Karlskrona). When it became clear that the war would not spread to Scandinavia and there were no visible threats against Swedish territorial integrity, military preparedness was relaxed towards the end of September.<sup>7</sup>

## The Army, the Navy, and the Air Force

The 1914 defence bill meant that the Swedish army expanded from six to twelve [infantry](#) divisions, with a [cavalry](#) division deployed in southern Sweden, tasked with reconnaissance and raiding behind enemy lines. The six reserve infantry divisions were set up from 1916. In reality, there was never enough equipment, [weapons](#) or uniforms to supply the more than 200,000 conscripts now listed in the mobilization tables, nor enough officers and NCOs to command them. What actual combat value these additional divisions would have had is therefore uncertain. In 1914, the number of [machine guns](#) in a Swedish infantry division was about the same as that of a German or a French division – twenty-four. In 1918, however, a German division had 108 heavy and 216 light machine guns and a French division 108 heavy and 405 light machine guns. In the Swedish division, the number remained twenty-four. The average number of field cannon for support of each infantry battalion in the Swedish army in 1914 was also on level with that of the great powers: 3.6. In 1918, however, it had increased to 8.4 in the German army and twelve in the French army, while the average number of field cannon in the Swedish army remained the same. In conclusion, the firepower of the Swedish army was on par with that of the great powers at the outbreak of the conflict, but had lagged behind considerably by the end of the war.<sup>8</sup>

Few Swedes acquired any personal experience from the large-scale, industrial attrition [warfare](#) on the Western Front in 1914-1918. Most Swedish war volunteers fought with the Germans on the [Eastern Front](#) or in the [Finnish Civil War](#). The Swedish general staff sent out officers to the Eastern, Western and [Italian fronts](#) to study the fighting, mainly on the side of the Central Powers, and in 1918, an appendix on modern trench warfare was included in the army field regulation.<sup>9</sup>

The main burden of defending Swedish territorial integrity fell on the Swedish navy, and consisted of escorting cargo ships through Swedish coastal waters and defusing drifting mines. Russian [submarines](#), and British submarines operating from bases in the Russian Empire, were attacking German cargo traffic in the Baltic Sea, including Swedish ships carrying iron ore from Sweden to Germany. When the war ended in 1918, the Swedish navy had escorted 3,640 cargo ships along the Swedish coast for a distance equivalent to circling the globe sixty-four times. In addition, naval personnel had defused more than 2,800 mines,

a dangerous activity that caused most of the thirty deaths suffered by the Swedish navy during the war. Naval patrols defended Swedish territorial waters against violations, the most famous incident taking place in July 1915, when the German minelayer *Albatross* fled from Russian warships into Swedish waters and had its crew interned on the island of Gotland.<sup>10</sup>

From 1912 onwards, both the navy and the army had set up their own sections of [reconnaissance](#) aircraft, the naval air arm operating from Stockholm and the army air arm (belonging to the Army Telegraph Corps) from the city of Linköping. Many aircraft were donations, paid for through private fundraising, and quite a few manufactured by Swedish firms. From 1916, fighter aircraft were also included. In 1918, there were no more than a few dozen aircraft altogether, no official doctrine on air operations, nor any tactical training. Not until 1926 was the Swedish air force was set up as an independent service (which in an international context was still early).<sup>11</sup>

In 1917-1918, the armed forces experienced some unrest, inspired by events in Russia and by the general unrest in Swedish society at the time due to [food](#) shortage and the conflict over [suffrage reform](#). Soldiers protested against scarce food in military canteens, distributed revolutionary leaflets in the barracks or participated in protest marches for suffrage reform. Some senior officers perceived the situation as critical, but Swedish conscripts had not experienced the horrors of war or feelings of alienation towards the home front, and so the situation was not as desperate as in Russia, France, [Italy](#) or Germany. In 1918, when the supply of food increased and suffrage reform was under way, fears of military mutinies dissipated.<sup>12</sup>

## The Finnish Civil War and the “Åland Question”

When civil war between Reds and Whites broke out in Finland in the beginning of 1918, sympathies in Swedish society were divided, even within the newly elected Liberal-Social Democratic government. Consequently, Sweden adopted a non-interventionist policy. However, some 200 Swedish officers and 400 NCOs took temporary leave to serve as volunteers in the White Army, which was in great need of their professional competence – as staff officers in Marshal [Carl Gustav Emil Mannerheim's \(1867-1951\)](#) headquarters or as commanding personnel in [artillery](#) and engineer units. In addition, some 1,000 Swedes organized the so-called “Swedish Brigade”, a battalion-sized infantry unit, which played a crucial role during the decisive battle of the Finnish Civil War at Tampere, in late March-early April 1918.<sup>13</sup>

When fighting broke out in Finland, the Swedish navy engaged in evacuating Swedish citizens

from the town of Björneborg (Pori) on the west coast of Finland, as well as civilians from the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands. Altogether, some 2,785 people were evacuated to Swedish territory. The naval expedition to assist the civilian population in Åland, initiated on 13 February, soon developed into an effort to negotiate an armistice between the White and Red army units fighting there. There was also a Russian garrison remaining in the islands, which supported the Reds. To disarm both sides and assist in their evacuation, a battalion-strong Swedish expeditionary force landed on Åland on 25 February. By invitation from the White government, a German expeditionary force landed soon afterwards. The Swedes cooperated with the Germans in evacuating the Russians, and then withdraw in mid-March.<sup>14</sup>

The Åland intervention was inspired both by [humanitarian](#) and strategic motives. The Åland Islands are closer to Stockholm than to the Finnish mainland and therefore strategically important from a Swedish point of view. Although Åland was de-militarized after the Crimean War, Russia had started to erect fortifications there in 1916, which bothered Swedish public opinion. The fact that some 7,000 Ålanders had signed an address to King Gustav V, asking to become a Swedish subjects again as they had been before 1809, created an opportunity to solve a century-long strategic problem in a way, which would be acceptable to the new Liberal-Social Democratic government in Stockholm and in line with President [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\) fourteen points](#). In May, the [Nils Edén \(1871-1945\)-Hjalmar Branting \(1860-1925\)](#) government even signed a secret agreement with Berlin on demolishing the Russian fortifications on Åland, without involving the Entente.<sup>15</sup> As a German final victory still seemed a realistic possibility at that time, this meant accepting the notion of Germany as a regional hegemon in the Baltic Sea in exchange for the Åland Islands.

## Sweden, the League of Nations and Collective Security

Under the Liberal-Social Democratic coalition government, Sweden joined the [League of Nations](#) in January 1920. Conservatives and left-wing Socialists protested, as they considered the League to be an instrument for enforcing the [Versailles Treaty](#) upon great powers with which they sympathized – Germany and Soviet Russia respectively.<sup>16</sup> Liberals and Social Democrats, however, were firm believers in the Wilsonian world order and hoped the League would support Sweden in its efforts to acquire the Åland Islands. However, the League's verdict on Åland in May 1921 favoured Finland. The interests of Sweden and the islanders were met through an international treaty concluded a few months later, which secured the demilitarization and political and cultural autonomy of the islands.

The Swedish military was sceptical of the League and its prospects of securing peace, and hoped that post war-reductions would be postponed. With the defence bill of 1925, however,



the army's fighting strength was drastically reduced from twelve to four divisions, and the training time for conscripts radically shortened to 150 days. In addition, a large portion of each year's graduating class was to be exempted from basic training.<sup>17</sup> From 1930, a group of young general staff officers tried to convince the politicians that the League's principle of collective security obliged Sweden to maintain modern military forces in order to be able to contribute to military sanctions against aggressors.<sup>18</sup> Swedish politicians were more interested in the League's disarmament conference, which convened in Geneva in 1932. However, when Germany left both the conference and the League in 1933-1934, it became clear that no substantial results were to be expected.<sup>19</sup> For Sweden, as for other small European states, Italy's unpunished aggression against Abyssinia in 1936 signalled the final goodbye to collective security.<sup>20</sup> In the same year, Sweden started to re-arm its military forces and prepare for next war.

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## Notes

1. The literature on the domestic political conflict in Sweden in 1914 is vast, but in this specific context it is sufficient to refer to Zetterberg, Kent: *Militärer och politiker. En studie i militär professionalisering, innovationsspridning och internationellt inflytande på de svenska försvarsberedningarna 1911-1914* [Soldiers and Politicians. A study of professionalization, the spread of innovation and international influence on the Swedish defence committees, 1911-1914], Stockholm 1988. ↑
2. Cronenberg, Arvid: *Första världskrigets lantmilitära beredskap* [Military preparedness of the ground forces during the First World War], in: Engström, Johan / Ericson, Lars (eds): *Mellan björnen och örnen. Sverige och Östersjöområdet under det första världskriget, 1914-1918. Föredrag hållna vid symposium i Visby, 4-7 augusti 1993* [Between the Eagle and the Bear. Sweden and the Baltic Region during the First World War, 1914-1918], Visby 1994, pp. 87-116. ↑
3. Åselius, Gunnar: *Storbritannien, Tyskland och den svenska neutraliteten, 1880-1914* [Britain, Germany and Swedish Neutrality, 1880-1914], in: *Historisk tidskrift* 114 (1994), p. 2. ↑
4. The Swedish-German staff conversations were first described in: Lindberg, Folke: *De svensk-tyska generalstabsförhandlingarna 1910* [The Swedish-German Staff Conversations in 1910], in: *Historisk tidskrift* 77 (1957). A more cautious interpretation of the evidence can be found in Carlgren, Wilhelm M.: *Neutralität oder Allianz. Deutschlands Beziehungen zu Schweden in den Anfangsjahren des Ersten Weltkrieges*,

Stockholm 1962, pp. 11-17. Most authors agree with Carlgren's view that the meeting between Bildt and Moltke was a unique event without lasting consequences – Sverker Oredsson, however, has asserted a continuity from 1910 to the pro-Finnish activism of some high-ranking Swedish officers during World War II – see his article Stormaktsdrömmar och stridsiver. Ett tema i svensk opinionsbildning och politik 1910-1942 [Great Power Dreams and Longing for Battle. A Theme in Swedish Public Opinion and Politics, 1910-1942], Scandia (1993), pp. 257-296, 335-336. ↑

5. On Russia in Swedish strategic thinking before the First World War, see Åselius, Gunnar: The Russian Menace to Sweden. The Belief System of a Small Power Security Elite in the Age of Imperialism, Stockholm 1994; on defence preparations against Russia in northern Sweden during the war, Ericson Wolke, Lars: Rysslands gräns står kall och skarp vid Torneå och Karungi. Svensk neutralitetsvakt i övre Norrland, 1914-1918 [The Border of Russia stands Cold and Sharp at Torneå and Karungi. Swedish Neutrality Guard in far northern Sweden, 1914-1918], in: Engström / Ericson, Örnen och björnen 1994, pp. 209-222. ↑
6. Cronenberg, Arvid: Säkerhetspolitik och krigsplanering. Huvudlinjer i arméns operativa planering 1906-1945 [Security Policy and War Planning. The main directions in Army Operational Planning, 1906-1945], in Hugemark, Bo: (ed.), Neutralitet och försvar. Perspektiv på svensk säkerhetspolitik 1809-1985 [Neutrality and Defence. Perspectives on Swedish Security Policy, 1809-1945], Stockholm 1986, p. 51. ↑
7. On Sweden and the outbreak of war, Gihl, Torsten: Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia IV, 1914-1919 [History of Swedish Foreign Policy IV, 1914-1919], Stockholm 1951, pp. 39-43; Nilsson, Sam: Gärna förvarning men först en rejäl brunnskur... Från Sarajevo till krigsutbrott – en studie i förvarningen sommaren 1914 [Gladly a Warning but First a thorough Water Cure. A study of Warning in the Summer of 1914], in: Militärhistorisk tidskrift (2000), pp. 57-135; on Essen's expedition, see Åselius, Gunnar: Den ryska Östersjöflottan och Sverige [The Russian Baltic Fleet and Sweden], Karlskrona 2017. ↑
8. Engström, Johan: Svensk armémateriel och arméorganisation inför och under det första världskriget [Swedish Army Material and Army Organization before and during the First World War], in Engström / Ericson, Mellan björnen och örnen 1994, pp. 117-134. ↑
9. For the Swedish reception of the new way of war, see Ericson Wolke, Lars: Krigets idéer. Svenska tankar om krigföring [Ideas of War. Swedish Thoughts and Warfare], Stockholm 2007, pp. 321-349. ↑
10. The official report after the war on the navy's protection of Swedish neutrality remains useful: Öberg, Erik et al.: Flottans neutralitetsvakt. Redogörelse för flottans verksamhet för neutralitetens upprätthållande samt sjöfartens och fiskets trygghet under världskriget 1914-1918, innefattande jämväl redogörelse för vissa åtgärder av



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11. Norberg, Erik: De svenska flygstridskrafternas uppkomst på 1910-talet [The Origins of Swedish Airpower in the 1910s], in Engström / Ericson, Mellan björnen och örnen 1994, pp. 135-144. [↑](#)
12. The unrest in the Swedish army in 1917-1918 is treated from a sociological perspective in Borell, Klas: Disciplinära strategier. En historiesociologisk studie av det professionella militärdisciplinära tänkesättet [Disciplinary Strategies: a Historical-Sociological Study of the Professional Way of Thinking regarding Military Discipline], Uppsala 1989. [↑](#)
13. Juhlin, Magnus: Svenska frivilliga till det vita Finlands hjälp. Stabsofficerare och svenska brigaden [Swedish Volunteers in Support of White Finland. Staff Officers and the Swedish Brigade], in: Militärhistorisk tidskrift (1998), pp. 7-73. [↑](#)
14. Lindholm, Rolf H: Ålandsexpeditionen 1918 [The Åland Expedition in 1918], in: Tidskrift i Sjöväsendet 2 (2008), pp. 149-159. [↑](#)
15. Rystad, Göran: Die deutsche Monroedoktrin der Ostsee. Die Alandsfrage und die Entstehung des deutsch-schwedische Geheimabkommens vom Mai 1918, in: Rystad, Göran / Tägil , Sven (eds): Probleme deutscher Zeitgeschichte, Stockholm 1970, pp. 1-75. [↑](#)
16. The debate on Sweden's entrance in the League is described in Norman, Torbjörn: Ansiktet mot öster. Svensk nationalism mot Nationernas Förbund [The Face towards the East. Swedish Nationalism versus the League of Nations], in: Engman, Max (ed.): Väst möter Öst. Norden och Ryssland genom historien. Festskrift till Sune Jungar 8.10 1996, [West meets East. The Nordic Countries and Russia through History. Studies in Honour of Sune Jungar, 8.10.1996], Stockholm 1996. [↑](#)
17. Wieslander, Hans: I nedrustningens tecken. Intressen och aktiviteter kring försvarsfrågan 1918-1925 [In the Sign of Disarmament. Interests and Activities related to the Defence Issue, 1918-1925], Lund 1966. [↑](#)
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## Metadata

### Regional Section(s)

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### Author Keywords

neutrality; border threats; navy

### GND Subject Headings

[Schweden ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

### LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Sweden](#)

### Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Suède](#)

### Key Person(s)

[Gustav V, King of Sweden](#); [Hammar skjöld, Hjalmar](#); [Edén, Nils](#); [Branting, Hjalmar](#); [Staaff, Karl](#); [Essen, Nikolai O.](#); [Bildt, Knut](#); [Wilson, Woodrow](#); [Nikolaï Nikolaevich, Grand Duke of Russia](#); [Wilhelm II, German Emperor](#); [Moltke, Helmuth Johannes Ludwig von](#); [Mannerheim, Carl Gustaf Emil](#)

### Key Location(s)

[Stockholm](#); [Karlskrona](#); [Linköping](#)

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## Article Type

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## Classification Group

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