

Sweden

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Summary

For Sweden, the impact of the war was twofold. On the one hand, it was a test to the neutrality policy. Concessions and violations of neutrality got consequences for both foreign affairs and the economy. On a domestic level, it meant shortages and inflation. On the other hand, war influenced the democratization process, as the unrest at home and abroad made people want changes. The constitutional reform in 1919 resulted in universal suffrage and the adoption of the principles of parliamentarism.

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Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Sweden was a small state that had enjoyed 100 years of

peace. It had not engaged in any armed conflict after signing the Treaty of Kiel in 1814, under which [Denmark](#) was forced to cede [Norway](#) to Sweden. To declare its [neutrality](#) at the war's outbreak was therefore a plausible move. However, this identity of a peaceful nation was actually quite new. Sweden had gone from being a military state in the 17th century with an aggressive expansionist policy to a small state with strivings toward peace and a changed attitude to the use of violence as a political instrument. Nevertheless, its identity as a peace apostle was not universally held at the beginning of the war. The sentiment of Sweden as a war nation lingered and deepened in some circles during the war years. It was actually Sweden's experiences in the two world wars that formed the foundation of the neutrality discourse that dominated Swedish self-image in the latter half of the 20th century. These experiences influenced the defence and security debate and promoted virtues such as cooperation and compromise. The neutrality policy had both linguistic and physical facets, and was intimately connected with Sweden's modernization.¹

Swedish [historiography](#) on the First World War (WWI) largely follows the international paradigm: military and diplomatic history was followed by social history, and then, at the turn of the century, by cultural history. But unlike in the belligerent countries, research on WWI in Sweden is scarce, especially in social history. Foreign policy studies have dominated the field. The fact that Sweden never actively participated in the war does not suffice as an explanation, because the Second World War (WWII) is well explored. Neutrality, on the other hand, has elicited interest, especially as an important part of Swedish identity and self-perception, and the "neutrality myth" has been regarded as a construction primarily created to give importance to the WWII appeasement policy. However, in recent years there has been an increased interest in WWI's cultural history. By studying [literature](#), poetry and the popular press, the contours of a mental history of Swedish war experience have emerged.

The aim of this article is to show how the war experience in Sweden is deeply intertwined with both neutrality and the democratization processes. The article will focus on the economic, political and cultural impacts of the war on Swedish society. Equal emphasis is put on opinions, ideology and mental processes as well as on events and external processes.

Sweden in 1914

Democratization and Industrialization

In the first decade of the 20th century, the political, economic and social changes initiated during the second half of the 19th century continued and developed. Industrialization caused people to move to the [cities](#), although nearly three quarters of the 5.7 million inhabitants still

lived in the countryside. Agriculture provided a living for a large part of the population, but more and more people supported themselves as industrial workers. Iron and timber were the two main export commodities. As an open economy, Sweden was highly dependent on foreign trade. [Britain](#) and [Germany](#) were its two most important trading partners: Germany first and foremost as an exporter to Sweden, Britain as an importer of Swedish products.

The labour movement and other social movements challenged the political order and demanded a changed constitution. In 1909 universal male suffrage for the *Andra kammaren* (Lower House) of the *Riksdag* (Parliament) was adopted, but plutocratic principles governed suffrage for the *Första kammaren* (Upper House) in 1914. The Swedish democratization process was slower compared to its Scandinavian neighbours, as Swedish women were not given the right to vote until after the war in 1919/1921 (Finland introduced universal female suffrage in 1906 and Norway in 1913).

Farmers' March and Bailey Crisis

The peaceful dissolution of the political union between Sweden and Norway in 1905, a union that had united them since the Napoleonic Wars of 1814, further reinforced the perception of Sweden as a peace-loving and tranquil country. Even so, there were disagreements and political tension. The General Strike in 1909, where workers all over the country stopped working for four weeks, ended in a defeat for the trade unions and led to both sharpened differences between left and right and to a conservative mobilization. In early 1914, conflicts over defence issues escalated. The Conservatives wanted to spend more money on [armaments](#) and they disapproved of the new parliamentary control over the military. The military no longer answered directly to the monarch but to civilian politicians. The Conservatives were supported by the peasantry, and in February 1914, 30,000 farmers from all over Sweden marched through Stockholm to protest against the liberal government's defence policy. When they arrived at the castle in Stockholm, [Gustav V, King of Sweden \(1858-1950\)](#) sided with them in a speech known as the Bailey speech. This forced [Karl Staaff \(1860-1915\)](#) liberal government to resign.

The Farmers' March (*Bondetåget*) and the so-called Bailey Crisis (*Borggårdskrisen*) have been interpreted differently, either as a reactionary setback on Sweden's road to modern democracy or as a sign that the country accepted the rituals and symbols of mass democracy. After all, the demonstration was organized at the grassroots level and was a manifestation of the people's will.² When the liberal Staaf government resigned, a caretaker government was appointed to rule the country until the regular elections in autumn 1914, but the outbreak of war forced it to stay on. [Hjalmar Hammarskjöld \(1860-1953\)](#), governor of Uppsala county, became prime minister; his cabinet consisted of conservative high officials

and businessmen without previous political experience.

A Benevolent Neutrality

On Sunday afternoon, 2 August 1914, church bells all over Sweden rang to mobilization. The outbreak of the war naturally aroused concern and fear. Would Sweden be drawn into the conflict? Was Sweden threatened from the east? The navy and garrisons of coastal fortresses were mobilized and reservists in the local defence forces (*landstormen*) were called to guard bridges and railroads. On 3 August 1914 the government proclaimed Sweden neutral. Because of its non-interventionist policy, its trade dependence on the belligerents, and its status as a small state, neutrality was a natural choice. Its geographical position made Sweden, together with Denmark and Norway, interesting for both Britain and Germany. It was a matter of controlling fairways and access to ports. In other words, both British and German diplomats were interested in good relations with Sweden. But there were also military elites that included Sweden – and Scandinavia – in their plans and scenarios of war. In a recently published anthology on Scandinavia in WWI it is stated: “What matters here is that the Scandinavian countries escaped war with a much narrower margin than that was generally realized in the immediate aftermath of 1918.”³

Activism

The majority of the Swedish population was in favour of the neutrality policy: non-alignment in peace and neutrality in war. In the pre-war years, Sweden had also been engaged in promoting an international neutrality law. However, Sweden’s security policy was not only a result of legal efforts, but also of fear of their powerful neighbours, Germany and [Russia](#).

During the final decades of the 19th century, Sweden and Germany had grown closer, partly as a result of Sweden’s cultural orientation, and partly as a consequence of dynastic ties ([Victoria, Queen, consort of Gustav V, King of Sweden \(1862-1930\)](#) was [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) first cousin). The upper class and parts of the middle class had strong sympathies for Germany and German culture. The army and especially the activist officer’s corps held favourable sentiments toward Wilhelmine Germany. But pro-German sentiments could also be found in the working class, since German social democracy was a model for the Swedish labour movement. However, there was a difference between admiring Germany or identifying with German culture and being prepared to side with Germany in war. Only a small group, the so-called Activists, went that far.

The Activists were not a uniform movement. The ideology had its roots in the [nationalism](#) of the 1890s. Adherents were anti-democratic and saw the war as something ennobling. One of its spokesmen, political science professor [Rudolf Kjellén \(1864-1922\)](#) formulated its program

in a much discussed and widely circulated article series entitled “The ideas of 1914” (“1914 års idéer”). Here, the war was represented as a struggle between 1789 and 1914, where the French ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity had played out their role and should be replaced with new ideals: order (a strong state), justice (in a Platonic sense), and nation (state and family as a home). The so-called “young right” (*unghögern*) in Gothenburg were ardent adherents of Kjellén and developed the activist program further in the newspaper *Det nya Sverige* (The New Sweden). The publisher, [Adrian Molin \(1880-1942\)](#), was also editor of the famous “activist book” (*Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, 1915) in which he outlined a new Scandinavism with Sweden as a leading and unifying force. These activists repeatedly exhorted to “courageous participation on Germany’s side”. Three leading members of the Social Democratic Party were expelled in 1915 for this exhortation. However, this early activism peaked during the summer of 1915 in conjunction with the German success at the [Eastern Front](#), but was moderated when the offensive stagnated in autumn 1915.

One well-known Swede represented the pro-German and pro-war inclinations particularly clearly: [Sven Hedin \(1865-1952\)](#), the famous explorer, writer and member of the Swedish Academy, and also author of the Bailey speech. In 1913 he wrote a pamphlet warning the Swedes of a Russian invasion, *Ett varningsord (A Word of Warning)*. Another widely circulated pamphlet followed in 1914, *The Second Warning*. More than 800,000 copies were printed of each brochure and distributed as a supplement to conservative papers. Hedin’s pro-German and nationalist [propaganda](#) increased the already widespread Russophobia (*rysskräcken*). At the outbreak of the war, Hedin travelled to the [Western Front](#) and shared his impressions with Swedish readers in an 800-page book. Hedin was deeply attached to Germany, its culture and its people, and dedicated the German edition to the German army.⁴

A second branch of activism took a more cautious stance. More academic in nature, it was characterized by commitment to a strong Swedish defence, active and conditional neutrality, and, later on, explicit support for Finland. Demands for Finland’s liberation from Russia and a closer relationship with Sweden dominated its agenda. When the [Finnish Civil War](#) broke out, they openly demanded Swedish intervention. From 1916 the Activists had a joint magazine, *Svensk lösen*, where opinions and critique regarding Swedish foreign policy, its trade policy with the Entente, and the peace movement were formulated.⁵

There were also activist tendencies in the military. The neutrality policy was not regarded as a way to maintain national security; what was needed was a strong military force and powerful allies.⁶ Many of the officers in the corps dreamed of a future alliance with Germany. However, their perception of threats and their aspirations – especially regarding the Russian

enemy – changed after 1905. In the period before, Russia's expansionist plans were set in a global context: the Czarist Empire competed for world domination and needed to reach the Atlantic and the Norwegian harbours. Northern Sweden was therefore threatened. But at the outbreak of the war, hegemony in the Baltic and Scandinavia was regarded as Russia's primary goal. In this more regional context, Sweden's possibilities to resist an aggression militarily were thought of much more optimistically. This increased self-confidence of the General Staff was partly a consequence of strong nationalist currents in society. Thinking of Russia's expansionist plans in a regional instead of a global context was a strategy to boost national pride and recuperate military (and political) power.⁷

A consequence of this shift of focus was a growing political and military interest in the Baltic region. Only a few days before the beginning of the war, the General Staff chief gave the government a report regarding the defence of Gotland, a Swedish island located in the Baltic Sea, and the value of its fortifications. Because of its exposed location, there were fears of an occupation of the island or of an attack on a harbour in order to use it as a naval base.⁸ Reinforcements from the mainland to Gotland in case of war were already defined in 1913, and on 3 August 1914, when the Swedish Government ordered the mobilization of the main part of the naval force, it also ordered the mobilization of 360 men of the *landstorm* on Gotland. The feared attack never came, but there were incidents, as for example when the German mine cruiser Albatross ran ashore in Swedish territorial water. The crew was interned on Gotland and the wounded were taken care of by the Swedes. After this, Swedish warships were permanently located at Gotland to prevent further neutrality violations.⁹

Diplomacy: Concessions and Violations

If declaring itself neutral was an easy choice, it was not easy to maintain. The most difficult aspects to handle were trade politics and pressure from Germany. The war-induced restrictions on exports and imports and the ensuing supplies shortage took Sweden by surprise. Already in autumn 1914, the British and German contraband lists affected Sweden. Its main exports, iron and timber, were both on the lists. Swedish ships were brought to German harbours and examined. However, since Germany and Britain wanted to continue their imports from Sweden, they were forced to accept the fact that Sweden traded with both camps.

Mobilizing the neutrality guard meant first and foremost engaging the navy. The army had, thanks to Hammarskjöld's Army Bill of 1914, doubled its organisation, but still did not keep more than 13,000 men under arms. This can be explained by the few visible threats to the country. Few Swedes volunteered in the war, and those who did mostly served either with the

Germans on the Eastern Front against Russia or with the Whites in the Finnish Civil War. In terms of human losses, the merchant marine suffered most. As a consequence of the German [submarine warfare](#) as well as Allied mines, some 700 Swedish sailors were lost at sea. During the Civil War in Finland the navy evacuated Swedish citizens from the west coast of Finland and from the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands.

There are at least two sides of Swedish neutrality during the war: the official image and a more internal and pragmatic one. When the three Scandinavian kings met in the southern Swedish city Malmö in December 1914, it was a symbolic event, initiated in order to show unity and a common front against the belligerents. It was more of a façade though, and the three countries handled the neutrality quite differently because of differences in geographical position and in regard to economic and foreign relations to the belligerents. In fact, Sweden was far from neutral in its foreign policy during the war. Already at the war's onset, Swedish foreign minister [Knut Agathon Wallenberg \(1853-1938\)](#) had concluded a secret agreement with the government in Berlin in which Sweden promised to observe a "benevolent" attitude towards Germany. Possibly it was a concession made of fear for a German ultimatum that would force Sweden to side with Germany. This benevolent attitude meant that Sweden agreed – sometimes after an initial refusal – to German demands and requirements: Swedish lighthouses were blacked out, the Sound between Denmark and Sweden was mined, and a transit ban on military equipment across Sweden was adopted to hinder British and French exports to Russia. Furthermore, Sweden was the only neutral country where violent German acts were defended: the violation of Belgian neutrality, the deportation of civilians in [Belgium](#), submarine warfare and the [sinking of Lusitania](#) in May 1915.¹⁰ In retrospect, the Hammarskjöld trade policy has been described as pro-German and guided more by policy concerns rather than by [international law](#).¹¹

By 1916 the [British blockade](#) was felt severely, and unemployment and serious food shortage threatened the country. Swedish ships were kept in British harbours and prevented from returning home. Britain had blacklisted Swedish firms and businessmen who were said to be trading with the Germans and they refused to let goods through without guarantees that they would not be re-exported from Sweden to Germany. Hammarskjöld, in turn, refused to accept the British conditions of non-re-export-guarantees and transit rules, and his way of handling the conflict created tension within the government. When the *Riksdag* turned down a government plea for more money for the armed forces in early 1917, the Hammarskjöld government finally resigned. Negotiations with Britain resumed in spring 1917, but although the parties came to an agreement it was not until May 1918 that the discord was finally resolved and Sweden offered guarantees against re-exports to Germany.

Although this can be seen as a rapprochement to the Entente, Sweden's pro-German orientation remained. In September 1917, the [Luxburg Affair](#) was revealed, and both the [US](#) and Britain considered it a serious violation of neutrality. Diplomatic cables from a German diplomat in Argentina had been secretly transmitted with the help of the Swedish consular service. This was mortifying for the new Conservative government and Prime Minister [Carl Swartz \(1858-1926\)](#), and he lost the elections (although not for this reason alone) a few weeks later. But the succeeding Liberal-Social Democratic government under [Nils Edén \(1871-1945\)](#) also displayed indulgence towards Germany. It approved of – or at least did not protest against – Germany's intervention in the Finnish Civil War. Later on, it signed a secret treaty according to which Germany would help Sweden demolish the Russian fortifications in the Åland Islands. As a return favour, Sweden would accept German domination in the Baltic region.

Social Movements

The Peace Movement

Although the Activists were loud and noisy, they only represented a minority of the public opinion. And they were not unchallenged. The Swedish Society for Peace and Arbitration (*Svenska Freds- och Skiljedomsföreningen*, SFSF) was a persistent though not so influential voice during the war years. The SFSF was founded in 1883 and rooted in the liberal tradition. Despite its political independence, its leading representatives were, at the outbreak of the war, Social Democrats, many of them leftist socialists. They organized protest meetings and fundraisings, but one of their most important contributions was the publication of writings on peace. Between 1907 and 1919 they issued about 100 publications (*Fredsskrifter utgivna av Svenska Freds- och Skiljedomsföreningen*), sometimes by highly esteemed authors with the potential to be widely read; among them one of Sweden's most well-known authors, [August Strindberg \(1849-1912\)](#). His short story from 1884, *Samvetskval* (*The German Lieutenant*) was republished the year of his death, 1912.

The Swedish peace movement did not adhere to a homogenous ideology. It had links to nearly all other growing social movements such as the labour, Christian and women's movements. Socialist anti-militarism or defence nihilism, radical Christian [pacifism](#) and [feminist pacifism](#) intermingled with liberal versions of a defence-friendly neutrality ideology. Admittedly, there were tensions and controversies between these different branches, but there was also cooperation with the Scandinavian neighbours.¹²

The women's peace movement played a prominent role during the war in criticizing the belligerents and the Swedish war policy. Thanks to strong and charismatic spokeswomen,

they reached a wide audience. [Ellen Key \(1849-1926\)](#), a feminist and public intellectual, was their most important representative and had written and spoken on education, ethics, children and parenting, women's [suffrage](#) and peace since the 1880s. As with many Swedish liberal- and socialist-influenced intellectuals, for example the Social Democratic leader [Hjalmar Branting \(1860-1925\)](#), she sided with the Entente and regarded Germany as the aggressor. The attack on neutral Belgium especially upset and outraged many, and Belgium became a symbol both of unjust [warfare](#) and the neutral's vulnerability. The Swedish women's peace movement was inspired by Key's theory of social motherhood (*samhällsmoderlighet*), which argued that women had developed certain capacities as mothers (tenderness, compassion, nursing etc.) that would and should benefit the whole society, and should as a result have the right to vote and participate in society. These capacities would also, in the long run, lead to a peaceful society. Similar ideas developed all around Europe, in which motherhood and maternal care were highlighted as invaluable for founding a peaceful world.

Female writers were also involved in the movement and portrayed and developed the ideas further in novels, short stories and articles. [Elin Wägner \(1882-1949\)](#), an up and coming novelist and member of the Swedish Academy as of 1944, was one of them, and continued to work for feminism, peace and nature during WWII. Wägner participated in several of the collective actions organized by women. The biggest manifestation was the so-called Women's Peace Sunday on 27 June 1915, which drew 88,000 women; meetings were held in 343 places all over the country.¹³ The initiative came from the Association for Women's Political Right to Vote (*Landsföreningen för kvinnans politiska rösträtt*). Swedish peace women were also members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and attended the international women's congress in The Hague in April 1915. Back home, they proposed to Foreign Minister Wallenberg that Sweden should initiate an arbitration conference. They cooperated with Hungarian suffragists and peace activist [Rosika Schwimmer \(1877-1948\)](#); the very much talked about Ford expedition travelled through Sweden and was enthusiastically received in Stockholm. Wägner wrote about the peace efforts in several women's magazines (*Idun*, *Rösträtt för kvinnor*), initially with great optimism, but as time passed and the peace activists' claims were ignored and they were derogatorily referred to as peace sheep, with greater despair.

The Labour Movement

As historians have pointed out, the war brought about democratization in large parts of Europe, which led to extended citizen rights and women's entry into society. In Sweden, the labour movement played an important role in this struggle. The Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party (SAP) was formed in 1889 and its first member of parliament, Hjalmar Branting,

was elected from a liberal electoral list. Universal suffrage and the eight-hour working day were their most important demands. However, there was disagreement on how to reach these goals. As in the international labour movement, there were tensions between revolutionaries and reformists.¹⁴ The antagonism increased during the first decade of the 20th century when the youth league joined the revolutionary side. They were influenced by anarchist ideals and advocated direct action against the ruling class. Their leader, [Hinke Bergegren \(1861-1936\)](#), was excluded from the SAP in 1908. During the war years, they were at the same time anti-militarists and revolutionaries, which meant that they could condemn the belligerents for using violence as means for resolving conflicts and advocate another kind of war, the war of classes, at the same time. This socialist anti-militarism claimed that class struggle was intimately connected to the struggle against war. The socialist paper *Social-Demokraten* had repeatedly argued since 1890 that [militarism](#) could never be combated if its basic cause, the class society, was not replaced by a socialist society. But the anti-militarists went even further and implied that a revolution was required to achieve a peaceful society – a kind of militant anti-militarism.

During the war years, tensions within the SAP escalated. The igniting spark was the [conference in Zimmerwald](#) in 1915, where thirty-eight Leftist Socialist delegates called for self-determination and adopted a manifesto that propagated a peace without conquest and indemnities. When three young Swedish socialists took up the manifesto and campaigned for anti-militarism at the Social Democratic Youth Federation Peace Congress the year after, they were charged with high treason and convicted to hard labor for between one and three years. In May 1917, the leftist socialists were excluded from the Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party and formed Sweden's Social Democratic Left-Wing Party (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska vänsterparti*), which would later on become the Swedish Communist Party. The rivalry between the two marked domestic policy for years to come.

The revolutionary atmosphere was increased by the [overthrow of the Czar in Russia](#) and by hunger demonstrations at home. Hjalmar Branting and the reformist Social Democrats tried to take advantage of the situation and have their demands of democratization satisfied. In a widely cited speech on 1 May 1917, *The Wave Rises (Vågen stiger)* and in the *Andra kammaren* in the *Riksdag*, Branting repeated the claims for universal suffrage and a constitutional reform. On 5 June 1917, people gathered in front of the *Riksdag* to hear Prime Minister Swartz's answer, that this was not a question for the present government but would be decided after the elections in the autumn. The demonstrations outside were heated and after several incidents, mounted police went straight into the crowd. At the autumn 1917 election to the *Andra kammaren* the Social Democrats became the largest party with 31 percent of the votes. The conservative party (*Allmänna valmansförbundet*) had their worst election ever with 25 percent. The liberals, with 28 percent, were asked to form a

government, and their leader Nils Edén picked four Social Democrats, among others Hjalmar Branting, who unwillingly became the finance minister. It was not until November 1919 that the new constitutional reform including universal suffrage was ratified, but it was the change of government that made it possible. And from now on, the King had nothing to do with the formation of government. The king and all major parties acknowledged the principles of parliamentarism.

Wartime Politics

Wartime Economy

One way of describing the war's significance in Sweden is that it brought about a crisis.¹⁵ Sweden suddenly became aware of its dependence on other countries. The economy was built on exports, not just of iron and timber, but also of food, primarily pork and butter. Sweden was not self-sufficient and imported one third of its grain from Germany, Denmark and Russia, as well as colonial products such as coffee, tea, cacao and spices. However, the crisis did not arrive until the third year of the war. In the beginning, everybody thought that the war was going to be over soon. No government measures were taken. But when the harvest of 1916 failed and Germany declared unrestricted submarine warfare, which led to choked imports and torpedoed merchant ships (280 of which were Swedish), food shortages became noticeable. There were not enough staple foods such as potatoes, bread and sugar. When the US joined the war in April 1917 all trading with the neutrals was banned and in October 1917 Britain tightened the ban on export. 1918 was the hardest year of the war for Swedes. Broad sections of society suffered a decline in living standards.

If the war meant crisis for ordinary people, it did not mean crisis for everyone – not even for the Swedish economy as a whole. In a discussion of the overall economic impact of the war in Scandinavia, the difficulty of evaluating its effects is stressed:

Disruptions to supplies and international trade had a serious impact on open economies dependent on exporting goods and services, and certain sectors were obviously depressed. But on the other hand, the belligerents' insatiable demand for raw materials, foodstuffs, and shipping opened up extremely profitable opportunities which shipowners, mining companies, industry, and agriculture were quick to exploit. ... Given the present state of research, it is only possible to indicate general conclusions about the social impact of the war. The bulk of the income generated in sectors that profited from the war seems to have found its way into the pockets of the owners – with the probable exceptions of agriculture, forestry, and fisheries.¹⁶

Prices rose steadily throughout the war and inflation was a reality. In Sweden prices rose up to 250 percent. In combination with the shortage of consumer goods, this fuelled a burgeoning black market. The Hammarskjöld government's regulations and monetary policy made things even worse.¹⁷ Official maximum prices were consistently set too low, and instead of selling their meat, farmers withheld their goods or were tempted to sell them illegally. Some people made huge profits on the black market and the *nouveaux riches* merchants in the cities were soon referred to as the "goulash barons", originally a Danish designation for [profiteers](#) that sold low-quality goulash to the Central Power armies. It then came to be used in a figurative sense for adventurers who engaged in questionable business during wartime. This new profession was caricatured in [Henning Berger \(1872-1924\)](#) *Gulaschbaronerna* from 1916 (*The Goulash Barons*), where the main character was a rich bully who lived in the city and earned his living by taking advantage of the war and his neighbours.

Food Shortage and Riots

In an attempt to come to terms with the food shortage, sugar and bread were rationed, followed by meat, eggs, milk and butter. But the real problem was that there was not enough food to buy. People had to change their diet and an animal-based diet was replaced by a non-fat protein-rich diet based on potato flakes, mushrooms, carrots and the like. For workers used to a dinner with potatoes, pork and butter it was hard to adjust to herring and turnips. In 1907, each citizen ate on average 126 kilos of meat; in 1917 only twenty-six kilos. Likewise, the average Swede ate forty-six kilos of butter in 1907, down to three kilos ten years later.

When the situation worsened in spring 1917, people gathered all over the country in protest meetings. Women initiated the strike; they left their work and went out demanding food for their children. Men, organized workers and syndicalists joined forces and handed over petitions to those responsible for the food supply. These hunger marches lasted for two months, and rumours of revolution circulated, inspired by the recent revolution in Russia. The demonstrations culminated in May 1917 at Seskarö, a small island outside of Haparanda in northern Sweden, when inhabitants extorted bread from the local bakery. There were outright fights between the inhabitants and the military, and the police had to intervene. The uprising was not settled until a shipment of food reached the island. Some men were sent to prison for three to five months.

The dissatisfaction did not end with the new parliamentary-appointed government, and the food shortage and the tensions continued in 1918. People demanded social reforms, such as improved living conditions and the eight-hour workday. There were strikes, but no hunger riots – partly because the Social Democrats were now part of the government and did not foment the disturbance as they had previously done.

The Finnish Civil War

Finland's declaration of independence on 6 December 1917, shortly after the Bolshevik takeover in Russia, went peacefully, but in January 1918 the [White-Red civil war](#) broke out. For the Whites it was a fight for independence against the Russian troops still in the country and against the Red guards, Finnish socialists who supported the Russians. For the Reds it was a fight against the bourgeoisie and for a socialist society.

In Sweden, the war was greeted with concern and, from some, enthusiasm. The Social Democrats faced a difficult balancing act: from a democratic perspective, the White government was the legal one and should therefore be supported; from a class perspective, the Red side was united with the Social Democrats in the fight for a classless society. But Hjalmar Branting sided with the Whites, condemning the Reds as undemocratic. A small group of Swedish activists urged participation. Business leaders engaged on behalf of the Whites and formed a society for recruiting Swedish volunteers, Finland's Friends (*Finlands vänner*). Approximately 1,000 Swedes volunteered to fight with the Whites. Although the Liberals did not go so far as to intervene in the conflict, they wanted to assist the Whites with weapons. Even if the Social Democrats expressed support for the White side, in action, they wanted to keep strictly neutral. After threatening to resign, liberal Foreign Minister [Johannes Hellner \(1866-1947\)](#) got his way, and Swedish war material was secretly shipped to Finland. An extensive illegal arms trade was also going on, silently accepted by the government.

Gradually, the Social Democrats' attitude towards the Reds changed, partly because of the Whites' persecution and violent revenge attacks by the end of the war, when the Reds were nearly defeated. In the leftist-socialist newspaper *Politiken* there were calls for helping their class comrades on the other side of the Baltic, but very few Swedes went over to fight for the Reds. The Leftist Socialists' main focus was to counter the voluntary movement and obtain information of the illegal arms trade. One reason for not intervening was the fear of being dragged into the war on Germany's side - and of losing the long-desired trade agreement with Britain. But still, the help to Finland was far more than formal neutrality would allow.

War and Culture: Making Sense of the War

How did Swedish people react to the war? How did they understand what was going on? Newspapers, magazines and books from this period present a broad spectrum of opinions, perceptions and understandings. In fact, one could argue that the war began in literature long before it did in the physical world.¹⁸ Already in the late 19th century there were poems warning of a future war or greeting it as a blessing. In plays, the peace movement was depicted as being strong enough to avert war. The thought of a future war occupied many

intellectuals' thoughts, among them [Verner von Heidenstam \(1859-1940\)](#), the leading national poet at the turn of the century. He wrote one of his most famous (and notorious) poem suites, *Ett folk (The people)* in 1899, in which he invoked war as something positive and purifying (particularly in the poem *Invocation and Promise (Åkallan och löfte)*). Heidenstam's attitude towards war – or his ideological inclinations – was not as unambiguous as it appeared at first glance. But the point here is that there was an ongoing mental militarization, which had consequences for the responses to the war. The war's outbreak shocked many Europeans, but the ideas, expectations and fears had been present for a long time.

News and the Press

During the first weeks of the war, there was a pro-German bias in the news reports, especially in the conservative newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Aftonbladet*. Telegrams about war events were nearly always of German origin. The papers were reprimanded and from then on, the foreign ministry did its best to persuade the press to present and uphold a neutral position. Only one third of the prosecutions against printed publications during the war years (thirty out of ninety-nine) concerned Sweden's relations to other countries. Nineteen led to convictions. Newspapers of all sorts were affected, but most of the convictions concerned propaganda pamphlets and brochures produced by the belligerents. The wartime [censorship](#) of telegrams has been described as defensive, directed towards maintaining neutrality.¹⁹ The Swedish News Agency (*Svenska Telegrambyrå*) and the foreign ministry had an agreement from 1912, which meant that the agency had a monopoly on the distribution of telegrams, and in return, the foreign ministry had the final say on censorship decisions. Telegrams that contained excessive accusations from one belligerent against the other were suppressed, as well as domestic telegrams that contained sensitive information about military measures or ship movements in territorial waters. However, accusations of pro-German sympathies were directed towards the head of the Swedish News Agency, [Frans Gustaf Theodor Eklund \(1868-1943\)](#), a Germany adherent. Further, German stakes took over the majority holdings in the newspaper *Aftonbladet*. But in 1915, two competing news agencies were founded, one of them with the Entente's support.²⁰ Later research has shown how systematically the Germans worked in moulding Swedish public opinion; the German Stockholm legation actually set up a department whose task was to select articles from German newspapers, translate them into Swedish and distribute them freely to Swedish newspapers, mainly conservative papers in the provinces. They even employed a Swedish journalist to ensure the quality of the articles.²¹

In terms of debate and opinion making, the [press](#) material was rather divergent and

sometimes radical. The debate was lively, and renowned writers, critics and academics participated. In these debates, and in the reporting from various peace manifestations, the newspapers' different sympathies towards the belligerents are visible. When the writer [Marika Stiernstedt \(1875-1954\)](#) held a lecture and talked about her front visit in France in 1916 (*Ensam kvinna vid fronten*), the conservative and pro-German paper *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* remarked on the lecture's pro-French character: "An inappropriate lecture that should not be repeated". The writer referred to Swedish neutrality and the precautions taken by the authorities in its wake, including the prohibition of all that could be taken for a manifestation, and wondered if the situation that gave rise to these rules had really disappeared. The liberal *Dagens Nyheter*, on the other hand, applauded Stiernstedt for a "captivating and well formulated delivery".²² These postures corresponded to the overall attitudes in the Swedish press during the war years. The conservative papers were more or less pro-German while the left and liberal press were Entente-friendly. The largest paper, *Stockholms-Tidningen*, was the most neutral and loyal to the government.

Popular Culture and Literature

Sweden viewed the war from the outside, alternately with horror, envy and incomprehension. In a study which analyses the cultural impact of WWI in Sweden, it is argued that the contexts of neutrality and non-participation were crucial for interpreting Swedish war narratives and the construction of a collective self-understanding: "In Sweden, the First World War was indeed an [imagined war](#), experienced indirectly, as a passive neutral bystander. However, the subject of neutrality and its content, how it should be interpreted and whether it should last, was a matter of constant debate, doubt and anxiety."²³ When studying the images of the war in Swedish popular press, four dominating war narratives can be discerned. The fatalistic narrative depicted the war as a natural disaster or God-given calamity, something man had to endure, while the heroic narrative focused on the war as a male adventure or great sacrifice. The idyllic narrative described war as a fun picnic, and is perhaps best illustrated by the variety of jokes, competitions and games in the magazines. The tragic narrative understood war as a meaningless mass slaughter, an expression of a degenerated modernity.²⁴

But even more interesting, given Sweden's position, are the different neutrality narratives. The negative neutrality narrative associated neutrality with passivity, cowardice and degeneration, and dreamt of a glorious past when Sweden was a proud warring nation. The most recurrent cliché was to depict Sweden as "the sleeping nation". Racial thinking and German sentiments were common ingredients in this narrative. The positive neutrality narrative saw Sweden as an idyllic place, a peaceful exception to conflicted Europe. Swedes

were a chosen people, neutrality was equivalent to moral superiority. The fate of neutral Belgium played an important role as a warning example: "In sum, the shocking experience of the First World War fostered a heroic, activist understanding of neutrality."²⁵

These narratives from the popular press also recurred in other genres. A short-lived but extremely popular genre was invasion and spy novels, narratives that depicted Sweden being attacked by an aggressor of some kind. In the course of one year, from the outbreak of the war to September 1915, Radscha ([Iwan Aminoff \(1868-1928\)](#) pseudonym) published fifteen novels that played out at the war front.²⁶ These novels combined entertainment and propaganda, and had a political purpose: to guide the sympathies of the reader in a German-friendly direction. However, as a German victory seemed more and more distant, and as people realized the brutal realities of the war, the genre became impossible and disappeared.

Many writers regarded literature as one of several modes of war critique. Three of the most persistent war critics were Elin Wägner, [Anna Lenah Elgström \(1884-1968\)](#) and Marika Stiernstedt. An examination of their peace writings shows that the war question was intimately connected to political questions. In her novel *Släkten Jerneploogs framgång* in 1916 (*The success of family Jerneploog*) Wägner portrayed a Swedish city during wartime, shedding light on the ideological conflicts between left and right, intensified by the war and the on-going democratization process. Elgström understood war alternately as the patriarchy's abuse of power and as the capitalist and mechanical society's degeneration. The idea of a maternal pacifism, inspired by Ellen Key and shared by Elgström and Wägner, offered an alternative. Stiernstedt finally saw war as a consequence of conservative and military ideals, where Germany served as a scapegoat, as opposed to the Social Democratic ideology, which is a prerequisite for peace.²⁷

With the position she held, the Nobel Laureate [Selma Lagerlöf \(1858-1940\)](#) felt the pressure, especially from the women's peace movement, to speak up against war, but at the same time she feared being misunderstood by the establishment and scorned as a "peace sheep". When the long-awaited novel *The Outcast (Bannlyst)* was finally published in 1918, it did not become the success she had hoped for. The intention was to create a new taboo. If people could be made to feel the same disgust toward killing in war as they did toward eating human flesh, all future wars might be avoided.²⁸ Today, the anti-war novel has been interpreted as a "construction of an ignored and silenced female voice, which urgently speaks against all war. Just like the suffragettes, Lagerlöf argued through her authorship that the repressed female voice could offer a new and humane order of society, if only it was given credence."²⁹

The young British, French and German soldiers participating in the war established [war poetry](#) as a genre. Swedish poets did not have personal experience from the war; instead they used war poetry as a political platform to form opinions in the discursive battle of conservatives, liberals and socialists.³⁰ Three of the most prominent “war poets” were [Karl Gustav Ossiannilsson \(1875-1970\)](#), [Bertil Malmberg \(1889-1958\)](#) and [Ture Nerman \(1886-1969\)](#). While Malmberg and Nerman were consistent in their conservative-nationalist and socialist-antimilitaristic ideology, Ossiannilsson covered the whole spectrum: [hero cult](#), idealisation of war, critique of godlessness, individualism, pacifism and anti-militarism. In a way, he can be said to embody the turbulent and rapidly changing political landscape at the time.

In the Aftermath

The neutral states did not take part in the peace negotiations, but were invited to join the newly formed [League of Nations](#). Sweden became a member in January 1920, against the protests of the Conservatives and Leftist Socialists. They found the League of Nations disadvantageous to Germany and Russia, while the Liberal-Social Democratic coalition expected support from the League in securing the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands, which had asked to become a part of Sweden again at the outbreak of the Finnish Civil War. The Ålanders had presented an address to King Gustav V, following which Swedish troops arrived at the islands to prevent a spread of the civil war. They left within a month after having negotiated an armistice between the Whites, the Reds and the Russians. In retrospect, it has been pointed out that the intervention “had been dictated by the honest wish to protect the civilian population, but there had also been more opportunistic motives. If the Åland Islands could be annexed in a coming peace settlement, the strategic situation of the Swedish capital could be considerable improved.”³¹ But to the government’s disappointment, the League of Nations judged in favour of Finland in May 1921. All in all, Scandinavia had a somewhat naïve opinion of the League’s internationalism during the interwar years. Instead of recognizing that Britain and France had imperial interests on their agenda, they regarded the League as a commendable and altruistic institution. Furthermore, the Scandinavian policy of non-alignment and neutrality did not gain support within the Covenant, and ultimately, in 1938 the Scandinavian countries declared themselves free from the League’s sanctions regime.³²

If internationalism proved difficult, not just for Sweden but for all European countries, what lessons did Sweden draw from the war years and what were the long-term consequences of the war? As previously stated, the domestic strife led to a constitutional reform after the war. This reform did not just implicate universal suffrage but also a change in the balance of power between the *Riksdag* and the executive. From now on, with the creation of the

Utrikesnämnden (permanent committee on foreign relations) in 1919, the *Riksdag* controlled foreign policy. And when WWII broke out, a four-party coalition was immediately formed, which this time kept together and showed a united front throughout the war years. The demands for public consensus on foreign and security policy that had guided the Hammarskjöld government continued to be important, but the government demonstrated a more pragmatic attitude towards international law than in 1914-1917 and more thoroughly questioned the neutrality policy. This could be related to the refusal to recognize that neutrality had been compromised in WWI. In spite of its being an undeniable fact, Sweden never admitted any violations. Another consequence was reduction in military spending due to a combination of international security efforts and economic depression. The army's fighting strength was reduced from twelve to four divisions; the service time was shortened to 150 days and fewer young men received basic training.³³

Another important perspective concerns the change in the cultural understanding of war. Just like in other European countries, some narratives were made impossible (for example the idyllic narrative), and new ones emerged (narratives of [shell shock](#) culture and a lost generation).³⁴ Even if tragic understanding remained the dominating war narrative, this did not mean that the war was perceived as meaningless – there was also reconciliation and sometimes a hope for a utopian future. Distinctive for the Swedish narratives was a discussion of who had the right to speak about the war in a country which had not participated. Some young poets identified with the European soldiers and expressed a kind of guilt for having survived. Sweden, which got away “shamefully cheap”, had a particular responsibility to remember. Very much debated was also the Swedish peace movement's film campaign in 1929, *The Real Face of the War* (*Krigets verkliga ansikte*). The opponents did not disagree on the image of war as a dreadful and meaningless slaughter; what they argued about was the neutrals' role in handling the memory of the war. Some thought that these abhorrent images would scare the Swedes into passive pacifism; others claimed that the same images would force them to take side and thereby abandon neutrality. The negative notion of neutrality was related to cowardice, passivity, exclusion, something shameful, and a missed opportunity, which led to feelings of inferiority. The positive neutrality, here represented by the peace movement, was associated with Swedes as a peace-loving, progressive and morally superior people. That identity grew stronger for years to come, but it is also an identity that has rightly been challenged and that Sweden has been, and still is, compelled to reconsider.

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Notes

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