

Wartime and Post-war Societies (Sweden)

By [Lina Sturfelt](#)

Summary

The First World War and its aftermath had a profound and enduring impact on Swedish society. As a neutral state, Sweden did not have to deal with the vast consequences of mass death and destruction, but the dire effects of total war were still felt. Inflation, food scarcity, epidemics, rampant inequality, and revolution abroad led to violent conflict, paving the way for democracy, women's enfranchisement and the expanding welfare state, but also generating deep societal and ideological polarization that lasted for decades.

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Introduction

"A starving people are waiting outside/A burning world is waiting outside". In May 1917, three months after the [February Revolution](#), in the fourth year of war, these dramatic stanzas by [Ragnar Jändel \(1895-1939\)](#) were read at the constituting congress of the Swedish Social Democratic Left Party.¹ And waiting they were: for [food](#), for peace, for democracy, for political and social rights; to come inside, figuratively speaking. Jändel's poem captures the tension in wartime [Sweden](#) between the escalating popular mobilization from below for social rights and reforms at home, and the rising pressure of war and [revolution](#) abroad on the neutral bystander.

This article examines the war's deep impact on Swedish society during and after conflict, focusing on how it affected gender, class, political, and [urban-rural](#) relations. First, it discusses social movements and democratization with regards to women's enfranchisement and the revolutionary "Hunger Riots". Second, it considers the everyday wartime experiences of inflation, food shortages, and the Spanish influenza. Finally, it sketches the post-war transformation into a more democratic – but socially and politically highly divided – fragile Swedish welfare state. In addition, some of the historical debates on the war's legacy in Sweden are briefly discussed.

Social Movements and Democratization

In Sweden, the war experience was entangled with an accelerating democratization process. The traditionally strong Swedish social movements played an important role in that development, both encouraging and disciplining popular mobilization and radicalization.

Gender (Dis)order and Women's Enfranchisement

Feminist scholars have long challenged the entrenched idea of the First World War as a watershed in gender relations in European societies. Instead, a paradox of progress and regress characterized women's enfranchisement and citizenship during and after war.² The Swedish case serves as an example.

As only relatively few men were mobilized in Sweden, the impact of the war on gender relations was quite small. Nevertheless, mobilization expanded the domain within which women could and were expected to participate in wartime. A national service obligation for women was frequently proposed but never implemented. According to Madelene Lidestad, women's tasks were designated in a way that both challenged and confirmed more traditional conceptions of the male defender, the male provider, and the masculine state and public sphere. [Labour](#) market programs for women were organized by the *Statens krigsberedskapskommission* (National War Preparedness Commission) and by voluntary organizations such as *Kvinnlig krigsberedskap* (Women's War Preparedness) and *Kvinnornas uppbåd* (Women's Mobilization). Women also worked within the *Statens folkhushållningskommission* (National Economization Commission) on economization at the level of the private household, mainly providing consumer advice and home consulting. Furthermore, women served within [military](#) care services as [nurses](#), assistant nurses, physiotherapists, [animal](#) caretakers, veterinary assistants, cooks, and seamstresses. The [Red Cross](#) and private initiatives provided the army and reserve troops with [medical](#) care and uniforms.³

In sum, women's roles within national mobilization reproduced the existing gender division of labour. A domestic ideology and traditional notions of motherhood were fundamental to all wartime constructions of femininity. At the same time, however, women became more integrated in the national community. The tens of thousands of women engaging in mobilization and voluntary defence saw their patriotic commitment and active service as a strengthening of women's position in society, and as a qualification for suffrage and full citizenship.⁴ According to Kjell Östberg, the shared mobilization experience of the politically and ideologically divided women's movement paved the way for later collaboration on gender issues, often in close cooperation with the developing welfare state.⁵ The (imagined or real) gender disorder was also meditated in the popular press, where "the modern woman" was a hotly debated topic.⁶ Fears of a national and individual "crisis of masculinity" were frequently expressed, due to the "feminizing" bystander position of the neutral country, which was deprived of a seminal "warrior experience".⁷

For the women's movement, the war served as a catalyst for emancipation by putting electoral reform on the political agenda. After a long struggle, Swedish women were finally granted suffrage in the constitutional reforms of 1919-1921. Further legal reforms in the 1920s ensured equality for married women and the right to higher education and higher public office. Women also advanced in the labour market and became increasingly self-sufficient, especially in the big cities. However, formal rights did not equate to political influence, to the disappointment of the suffragists. The first decade after the democratic breakthrough was partly a backlash against the women's movement. Women were still discriminated against with regards to nationality, guardianship, wages, and state pensions. Unequal gender relations prevailed and the fact that feminists had entered the public sphere did not automatically mean that male and elite political power was challenged. The proportion of women in [politics](#) actually declined after 1921. Instead, Swedish post-war politics was segregated into an extensive female "counter public" with separate women's organizations, unions, parties, and issues (mostly family, sexual, housing, and welfare politics).⁸

Popular Mobilization: The Hunger Riots

In the final war years, political and social tensions escalated. In 1917, the country was shaken by the violent protests known as the Hunger Riots, inspired by the Russian February Revolution. For ten days in April, over 250,000 people gathered in mass demonstrations nationwide. Fierce confrontations with the police, forced inventories and purchases of food supplies, looting, strikes, and arrests followed. As in other European cities, women were the

leading figures in direct actions against farmers, shopkeepers, and the local crisis management administration. The worker protests soon spread to the garrisons, where soldiers objected to insufficient rations with demonstrations and hunger strikes. The army and navy mobilized and an anti-Bolshevik counter-revolutionary militia was set up in Stockholm. The leader of the Social Democratic Party (SAP), [Hjalmar Branting \(1860-1925\)](#), fresh from revolutionary Petrograd, upset the Conservatives in parliament, greeting them as "*Citoyens!*" in a speech for universal suffrage.⁹ The patriotic unity of August 1914 was definitely broken.

The labour movement as a whole was strengthened by hardening social tensions and the subsequent political radicalization. However, the growing strain between reformists and revolutionaries within the party led to a split in the spring of 1917. The new Left-Socialist Party pressed for outright revolution, while the SAP tried to discipline the uprisings in order to take parliamentary advantage of the situation. In the autumn elections, the SAP became the biggest party, with 31 percent of the vote, and formed a coalition government with the Liberals.

The historical assessment of this "Swedish revolution" differs. To Yvonne Hirdman, the hunger riots were more of a political demonstration by the SAP and syndicalists than an expression of a serious state of famine within the working class. Carl Göran Andræ emphasizes the strong mutual understanding and respect between the workers and the authorities. The municipal economizing boards soon welcomed SAP representatives; a local democratic breakthrough that helped disarm the revolt. If it was a revolution, it was "a Swedish revolution, a revolution granted permission by the police chief". To Östberg, finally, the uprisings were the most radical example of popular mass mobilization in Sweden so far, a (primarily women's) response from below to hunger, want, and gender-discriminatory rations. At the 2017 centenary, he stressed the critical role of the masses and the Left-Socialist Party for the democratic breakthrough, challenging the conventional consensus narrative of cooperation and reform from above.¹⁰

The workers' trade union, having lost nearly half of its members after the defeat of the General Strike (*Storstrejken*) in 1909, grew steadily during the war and, in 1919, an eight-hour-working day was finally realized. In the interwar period, British influence on the Swedish reformist labour movement increased, as the ideas of [John Maynard Keynes \(1883-1946\)](#) and [Alfred Mond \(1868-1930\)](#) became fundamental to the so-called Swedish Model.¹¹

Everyday Wartime Experiences

The war led to a tremendous increase in state expenditure and governmental control in both

belligerent and non-belligerent countries. State bureaucracy and administration expanded, and emergency legislation on price regulations and government expropriation was introduced.¹² The need to both maintain [neutrality](#) and uphold [foreign trade relations](#) posed serious challenges to Sweden, where inflation led to an explosive rise in prices, costs, and taxes, especially in the cities. There was a huge redistribution of wealth to employers, while employees' real wages matched the levels of the 1870s. Impoverished workers, lower officials, and pensioners saw their standard of living radically decline. This very visible gap between the rich and the poor – and the fact that some people made a lot of profit out of the crisis (both legally and on the burgeoning black market) – led to popular anger and scorn for profiteers such as the upstart “goulash barons” and the farmers, who were accused of withholding food. The difference between urban and rural areas increased, and, finally, the war fomented tensions between town and country.¹³

Food Shortages and Lowered Living Standard

The Swedish authorities expected the war to be short and did not initially take any special rationing or stockpiling measures. As the situation worsened, a National Economizing Commission was appointed, in 1916. It employed 3,389 officials in thirty national sections, three regional agencies, and 2,500 local food boards, one for each municipality. The commission was highly unpopular and was accused of being too bureaucratic, repressive, ineffective, and even counter-productive. Historians generally confirm this negative assessment of the 1914-1918 Swedish food policies as a failure, especially compared with 1939-1945.¹⁴

During the first two war years, commonly known as *dyrtiden* (“the dear times”), the most pressing issue was price increases, rather than scarcity. Pork went up by 230 percent over pre-war prices, while bread stayed at 60 percent due to state-regulated maximum prices. Milk, fish, fuel, clothes, and shoes became very expensive. The bad harvests of 1916 and 1917, combined with [Germany's](#) unrestricted [submarine warfare](#), meant a severe shortage of basic foodstuffs such as potatoes, grain, and sugar. Sweden literally got darker: candles and gas were rationed and there was a constant lack of kerosene. Trains and trams reduced both their speed and departure frequency. 1918 was the worst year, with the hardest winter since the 1860s. *Nödtiden* (“the emergency times”) had arrived. Living costs were two-and-a-half times higher than in 1914. Sugar, [coffee](#), bread, flour, milk, and even potatoes were rationed. There was a continuous shortage of potatoes, grain, fat, milk, cheese, eggs, and pork until early 1919. The authorities tried to solve the situation by encouraging substitutes and allotments, cultivating park areas for potatoes and turnips, and running communal pig and rabbit farms, black pudding industries, and kitchens serving 25,000 people a day.¹⁵

In the contemporary [press](#) and in memoirs, wartime Stockholm is described as a besieged city, wherein people starved and despaired. But did the Swedes really starve during the First World War? From a nutritional perspective, based on health and mortality statistics, Hirdman's answer is no: people were hungry, some suffered from malnutrition, and there was a radical change in diet (less pork, milk, bread and potatoes, more vegetables and fish), but the prevailing image of "the hunger years" was mainly the work of SAP [propaganda](#) against the Conservative government under Prime Minister [Hjalmar Hammarskjöld \(1860-1953\)](#), who was nicknamed "*Hungerskjöld*". Expressions like "the starvation system", "the hunger regime", and "the mismanagement" won broad popular support at a time when the left was attempting to force the Conservatives and the king to accept democratic constitutional reform. Once the SAP was in power in 1918, hunger protests decreased, despite the fact that the food situation was much worse than in 1917.^{[16](#)}

From 1919, the situation slowly normalized. The Nationalizing Commission was finally dismantled in the summer of 1920. When peace came, people quickly reverted to old eating habits. The consumption of butter, bread, and potatoes increased by 40 percent compared with pre-war figures.^{[17](#)}

The Spanish Flu

Although it is difficult to measure the general [health](#) of Swedes during wartime, there was no increase in the endemic diseases related to poverty; rather, the opposite was true. Childhood diseases, diphtheria, tuberculosis, pneumonia, and gastritis all show a steadily decreasing curve during the war. The big exception was the influenza outbreak in 1918.^{[18](#)} The influenza pandemic, known as the Spanish Flu, reached Sweden around the middle of summer in 1918 and quickly spread over the country. Within a year, 34,378 people died – the highest mortality since 1880. In total, there were 37,573 reported influenza deaths in 1918-1920. In all probability, the official figures were too low, as was the total number of sick reported (516,000, or 9 percent of the population). The northern counties, especially Jämtland, were the most impacted.^{[19](#)}

Due to its extensive range, the influenza created a social emergency as much as a medical one. "War – pest – famine, the classic pests. Such is the situation! A ghastly mood is spreading among the masses", the Naval Minister [Erik Palmstierna \(1877-1959\)](#) noted in October 1918, the deadliest month of the epidemic.^{[20](#)} The group that attracted the most attention was the conscripts; 50,000 were called up for training in September 1918, just before the peak of the epidemic. Within a few weeks, so many conscripts had fallen ill that all planned military activities had to be cancelled. Criticism of the army and the government was

intense in the socialist press, which talked of “mass murdering in the barracks”.²¹

From an international perspective, the effects of the Swedish epidemic were no different than in the rest of Europe. Sweden had no significant advantage from remaining outside the war. To contemporaries, the pandemic was an integrated part of the conflict that did not discriminate between the belligerents and the neutrals. “It reminded of an ordeal, sent to teach the healthy and the neutrals fear, to teach them that no one is safe”, as a Danish author later wrote.²²

Post-war Landscapes: The Polarized Welfare State

It has recently been argued that the dramatic year of 1918 saw the birth of modern Sweden, the equal welfare state.²³ Despite widespread resentment of emergency national regulation and legislation, one lasting effect of the war on Swedish society was the state’s expansion on behalf of the [church](#), civil society, and local authorities. The war accelerated the external and internal nationalization of Sweden. State intervention in agriculture and labour continued in the interwar years. New authorities such as the *Socialstyrelsen* (National Health Authorities) increased the state’s ability to intervene in people’s lives. In 1917, a state monopoly on selling alcohol was introduced that is still in place today. The elementary and grammar [school](#) reforms of 1919 and 1927 strengthened the state’s hold on higher education. The nationalization of the police began in 1925, partly in order to neutralize the military and violent right-wing militias.²⁴

The war saw the advance of a strong central government with broad responsibilities for [economic](#) planning and the welfare of its citizens. In Sweden, a new progressive taxation system allowed for the further development of the public welfare system, especially child and family allowances. The dramatic decline in Swedish birth rates facilitated pro-natalist policies and social reforms such as free school meals, maternal support, school health care, and state-subsidized housing for large families. Public health care expanded, with residential homes, birth clinics, [hospitals](#), and asylums.²⁵

The conflict also changed the political landscape in Sweden. It accelerated the democratization process and the post-war state became more inclusive under pressure from radical movements. Important long-term political reforms that had previously been blocked by political impasse were resolved. Pressed by the revolutionary upheaval abroad (especially in Germany) and at home, the opposing right and the king were, in December 1918, finally forced to accept constitutional reform: universal and equal suffrage, parliamentarism, and consultative referendums. To return to Jändel’s poem, the waiting people forced themselves

inside, claiming “the land we dreamt of to be ours”. New coalitions and rivalries formed. Yet the social divide opened up by the war had lasting consequences. The establishment of the Farmer’s Party in 1921, the escalating schism between reformists and revolutionaries within the labour movement and the ongoing radicalization of the masses (especially in the north and the big cities) anticipated the political and regional controversies of the turbulent interwar years.²⁶

In some ways, the neutral experience of being “outside” the war produced a more inward-looking Swedish post-war society, increasingly centred on the national *folkhem* (People’s Home). There was nostalgia for the peaceful, small-town idyll, evoked by Birger Sjöberg’s (1885-1929) immensely popular *Fridas bok* (Frida’s Book) in 1923, where Frida famously states, “I want to be neutral until my death”. Around 1930, this insular tendency of forgetting was increasingly challenged by both a new internationalist generation of working-class intellectuals and authors, and by the peace movement, which used the memory of the war in its disarmament propaganda.²⁷

Conclusion

It would be fair to say that in today’s Sweden, like in other then neutral countries, the First World War is politically insignificant, as “a war of others”.²⁸ The Swedish centenary commemoration has generally focused on domestic issues, mainly the intertwined virtues of neutrality, peace, and democracy. The fact that peace coincided with domestic constitutional reform and universal suffrage – making Sweden safe for democracy – has strengthened this connection in public memory. Still, it is striking that the war’s social influence on non-belligerent Sweden largely followed general European patterns. Most scholars seem to agree that total war had a long-term impact on Swedish society, which was only overcome after the Second World War.

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External Links

- [Sjöberg, Birger \(in Swedish\): Fridas bok, Stockholm 1922 \(Litteraturbanken\) \(Book\)](#)

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