

# Domestic Politics and Neutrality (Sweden)

By [Anne Hedén](#)

**This article focuses on how the Swedish neutrality policy during the First World War became a contentious topic in Swedish domestic politics. The food crisis in 1916–1917, social disquiet in connection with the Finnish Civil War, and the German revolt in 1918 steered Sweden away from benevolent neutrality towards Germany and into a more pragmatic orientation. All of this finally led to universal suffrage in 1918–1919. The article suggests that this transformation was more an issue of bourgeois reorientation than a revolutionary situation halted at the last minute.**

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## Introduction

[Sweden](#) was not a belligerent in the First World War. It was spared the hardships of armed conflict, but nevertheless antagonisms and tensions similar to the rest of Europe had developed during the Swedish modernization process. The brisk pace of industrialization and urbanization during the

decades before 1914 had created increasing social polarization. The workers' movement was growing in numbers and influence, although a big setback occurred when the general strike of 1909 ended in major setbacks for employers. As the international situation deteriorated leading up to the First World War, the Conservatives in Sweden continued their mobilisation, focusing on defence and armament issues, while the workers' movement organizations in general were more anti-militaristic in their outlook.

## 1914: The Farmers March and the Bailey Crisis

By February 1914, when tensions were increasing among the Great Powers of Europe, due to the Second [Morocco Crisis](#) in 1911 and the [Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913](#), the Liberals in government – who had effectively won the elections in 1911 by campaigning for a moderate pace of armament – had to agree to a speedier process. A minor reservation on the matter of training periods for conscripts became an issue of conflict when the right-wing opposition started a campaign where 30,000 participants in the so-called Farmers' March trooped through Stockholm and were favourably received at the royal palace by Gustav V, King of Sweden (1858–1950). The king held a speech in the inner bailey – hence “the Bailey Crisis” – where he criticised the government's defence policy, thereby causing a constitutional conflict on the issue of the boundaries between the king's mandate and that of the elected Parliament. A few days later, the Social Democrats held a workers' march with 50,000 participants, in support of Liberal Prime Minister Karl Staaff (1860–1915) and his cabinet. Despite this, Staaff and his colleagues resigned and were succeeded by a caretaker government. Hjalmar Hammarskjöld (1862–1953), the Uppsala county governor, was appointed prime minister. Conservative high-ranking officials and representatives from the business community were among the new cabinet ministers.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Declaration of Neutrality and the Pro-German and Pro-Entente Parties

At the outbreak of the First World War the Scandinavian countries declared themselves [neutral](#).<sup>[2]</sup> In Sweden a consensus had developed in the political establishment where neutrality was regarded as necessary. How this neutrality policy should be defined, on the other hand, remained a matter of discord between the left – at this time the Social Democrats and the Liberals – and the right.<sup>[3]</sup> Meanwhile, [Germany](#) for example mined the territorial waters close to the Swedish border and made Sweden mine the so-called Kogrundsgräns in Öresund, which led to several Entente ships being trapped in the Baltic.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Entente had more support among the Liberals than among the Conservatives. Many industrialists and bankers viewed trading relations as a priority and hence during the war became more positive towards the Entente Powers.<sup>[5]</sup> A number of women with liberal views in the feminist movement also supported the campaign for Swedish armament, from a pro-Entente standpoint.

*Fredrika Bremer Förbundet* (Fredrika Bremer Association), the biggest female organization, even propagated military conscription for women, while women in the various voluntary defence organizations held opinions closer to traditional conservatism.<sup>[6]</sup> Even if there was a general understanding of the necessity of neutrality in the bourgeois camp, most of the Conservatives sympathized with Germany and the Central Powers.<sup>[7]</sup> This included the caretaker Prime Minister Hammarskjöld, who, besides being guided by the expectation of a German victory in the war, clearly represented the emotional and cultural closeness to Germany that those belonging to the Swedish upper levels of society in general felt during this period.<sup>[8]</sup> The more radical right wing shared this sentiment. But they argued also, in a grand Swedish manner, for Swedish participation in the war and an expansion of Swedish territory following expected German victory.<sup>[9]</sup> This smaller grouping was few in number but actually exercised some influence due to their support in the media, royal circles, officers' corps, and among influential people in the fields of the arts, culture and science. Among them were the explorer Sven Hedin (1865–1952) and a group of officers who had recently started *Karolinska Förbundet* (Carolinian Association), an association for the study and commemoration of Charles XII, King of Sweden (1682–1718) and his predecessors.<sup>[10]</sup> The activists were in close contact with the German representatives. German influence in Swedish politics was clearly perceptible. It was for example noted by Erik Palmstierna (1877–1959), later naval minister in the Liberal-Social Democratic Edén-Branting cabinet (October 1917–March 1920), that the German representatives in Sweden already tried in 1915 to influence key groups regarding the need for a more extensive Swedish contribution to the German war effort.<sup>[11]</sup>

Even the [German Social Democratic party](#), which before 1914 had been a strong role model for the Swedish Social Democrats, sent representatives to Sweden, trying to persuade their Swedish colleagues to support Germany's war effort. Meanwhile, Sweden was perceived by the Entente Powers as a supporter of Germany, albeit non-belligerent, and English [newspapers](#) voiced complaints about the pro-German opinion in Sweden.<sup>[12]</sup>

## The Hammarskjöld Government and the Hunger Riots

From the onset of the war, the Liberals had supported the caretaker government under Prime Minister Hammarskjöld. During the first years of the war, the Swedish export economy expanded, due to the belligerent nations' need for goods like textiles and shoes, metal ware, machinery and equipment, paperboard and wood pulp. Swedish everyday life was not seriously affected by the conflict in Europe.<sup>[13]</sup> However, the issue of neutrality became more complicated to handle as the Hammarskjöld trade policy towards Germany provoked the Entente Powers, especially [Great Britain](#). The British blockade led to Swedish ships being held back in British harbours and also to the blacklisting of Swedish firms trading with the Germans. Hammarskjöld refused to accept the British conditions of non-re-export guarantees and transit rules.<sup>[14]</sup> This in turn worsened the state of unemployment and food shortages in Sweden in 1916. Further contributing to societal discontent

were the bad rye and potato harvests, which increased food prices. Sugar was rationed in the autumn of 1916, followed in January 1917 by the rationing of bread and flour.<sup>[15]</sup> The situation was aggravated with the start of German [submarine warfare](#), launched in March 1917. The import of British goods was reduced further, as was Swedish export to Germany.<sup>[16]</sup> Rising food prices as well as hoarding and profiteering transformed discontent into political and social unrest, frequently with women at the forefront. Often conscripts from the local garrisons, where the food situation was not any better, protested too.<sup>[17]</sup> The hunger manifestations were in part organized by left-wing radicals and Social Democrats in order to mobilize against the government's handling of the food crisis, as well as against the private bakeries profiteering from the situation.<sup>[18]</sup> At the same time, parliamentary opposition heavily criticized Hammarskjöld in 1917 for his unwillingness to meet the Entente's demands. Similar complaints came from the industrialists, who feared an increasing lack of [raw materials](#) for their production.

The discontent of the industrial sector, as well as the protests of the workers' movement and the objections of the Liberals and the Social Democrats in Parliament, led to a shift in power in March 1917. The Hammarskjöld cabinet was replaced by a conservative government. The main task of this new administration under the leadership of businessman and moderate conservative Member of Parliament [Carl Swartz \(1858–1926\)](#) was to negotiate a new trade deal with Great Britain, a process which resulted in an easing of the unfavourable conditions and, a year later, with a final agreement.

Still, huge manifestations with up to 250,000 participants took place during the last ten days of April 1917 in about a hundred Swedish towns and municipalities; activities that carried on well into May 1917. The protesters carried through forced purchases of food, situations that in some cases lead to confrontations, as for example in the well-known incidents on the Seskarö Island in northern Sweden, where military troops were sent to keep up law and order.<sup>[19]</sup> Recent research, however, points to the fact that in many places the protesters were integrated in the local provisions and wartime boards. This was encouraged by the Social Democrats and even in some cases welcomed by the bourgeois parties in the local municipalities.<sup>[20]</sup> However, in September 1917, the new government's position was weakened as it was revealed that diplomatic cables from a German diplomat in Argentina had been secretly transmitted with the help of the Swedish foreign office and consular service. The so-called [Luxburg Affair](#), as well as the hunger riots in the spring, contributed to the Conservatives losing the elections in the autumn of 1917. After having tried unsuccessfully to form a government with Liberals and Conservatives, the king had to let the Liberals and Social Democrats establish a coalition, and for the first time ever a Swedish government actually reflected the balance of power in the Lower Chamber of the parliament.

## **New Challenges for Neutrality: The Finnish Civil War and the Åland Question**

The new Liberal-Social Democratic government was more cautious in its foreign policy. However, in

late January 1918 it had to deal with severe internal discord due to the outbreak of the [Finnish Civil War](#).<sup>[21]</sup> The Liberal foreign minister, [Johannes Hellner \(1866–1947\)](#), was all for the demands from the Finnish Whites for a Swedish intervention. Among the Social Democrats, party leader [Hjalmar Branting \(1860–1925\)](#) and Naval Minister Palmstierna actually supported the Whites in [Finland](#), but did not wish to alienate the Swedish workers' movement and the trade unions, where sympathies for the Reds dominated. An ambiguous compromise ensued. The government refused to send regular troops, but supported the Whites on the side by letting the Swedish navy oversee the German consignment of weapons and [Jaegers](#) – Finnish troops trained in Germany – to Finland, and also overlooked the fact that gun running was operated on Swedish territory. A volunteer corps, the Swedish Brigade, was formed, financed mainly with the support of the business sector. Over a thousand Swedes volunteered, of whom about half took part in the actual fighting.<sup>[22]</sup>

In February 1918, Swedish regular troops were sent to the Åland Islands to protect the Swedish-speaking Ålanders from the ongoing civil war. This met with strong reactions from both the White and Red sides in Finland. The Whites' consternation was a response to the Swedish troops treating the Reds as legal combatants in the conflict. The Reds as well as the Whites regarded the Swedish expedition as a part of a possible Grand Swedish scheme to appropriate the Åland Islands. In Sweden, the Conservatives and activists were critical of the government's move, as it interfered with the German campaign in the area. Indeed, when the Germans, invited by the Finnish government to invade Finland in March 1918, landed troops on the Åland Islands, the initiative slipped out of the Swedish government's hands, and after a few weeks the Swedish troops returned home.

Meanwhile, the Swedish workers' movement launched a campaign for strict Swedish neutrality in order to keep the activists at bay.<sup>[23]</sup> The left wing of the Social Democratic Party had formed their own party organization in May 1917 and in general advocated a more radical program than the Social Democrats. In the spring of 1918 they became the driving force behind the campaign for Swedish neutrality and non-intervention in Finland (and Åland). In the workers' movement as a whole, there was a fear that the activists and Conservatives in Sweden through their pro-German and expansionist attitudes, together with the royals and the officers' corps, were going to drag Sweden into the war on Germany's side. On the other hand, the reformist Socialists in government regarded their own positions in the cabinet as a guarantee that this would not happen. They also took a legalist stand on the government issue in Finland, and criticized the Finnish Social Democrats for taking part in the insurrection.<sup>[24]</sup>

## **The Swedish “Revolution” and the Constitutional Reform of 1919**

For the Edén-Branting government, the Finnish Civil War became an issue where domestic and foreign policy merged and where the top priority was to preserve the unity of the Liberal-Social Democratic alliance. This alliance was crucial when it came to implementing constitutional reform, which both Liberals and Socialists had been striving for since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the

spring of 1918 the Liberal-Socialist government put forward a bill of general suffrage, which was voted down by the Conservatives in the Upper Chamber of Parliament. The issue was brought forward again in the autumn of 1918 after the failed [revolution in Germany](#). At this point, the Social Democrats and Liberals actually gained support from a prominent group of industrialists and bankers who took part in persuading conservative party leaders of the urgency of the matter. The finance and industry sector saw the smooth running of the economy, as opposed to recent and ongoing experiences of stoppages, strikes and general unrest, as a prioritized area. They used their influence to convince the right-wing party leaders to broker a compromise – a solution to which the king, fearing revolutionary developments like in Germany, was also partial. An agreement was made on the issue of general suffrage and the proposed bill was successfully put forward in 1919.<sup>[25]</sup>

When the German Revolution broke out in November 1918, left-wing Socialists in Sweden published a petition, where they called on the formation of a Socialist government and demanded support for soldiers' and farmers' councils, and workers' control of industry. A month later they called for a republic and, again, for a socialist government. Still, a revolutionary situation did not arrive.

Swedish historians have come up with different explanations answering the question why there was not a revolution in Sweden during the last stages of the First World War, in contrast to Finland and Germany, for example. Some have referred to a long tradition of negotiation, reform and compromise in the political culture of the Scandinavian countries, and also to the sense of responsibility in the Swedish popular movements of the time.<sup>[26]</sup> Others have stressed the tradition of the radical left of a strong democratic pathos, largely the result of criticism against the bureaucratic tendencies of the Social Democratic Party leadership. Another suggestion is the organizational division of the protesters, who actually did not merge into one movement. The soldiers marched on their own, the women in the food riots protested in another context, and the strikers also organized themselves separately.<sup>[27]</sup> A parallel explanation offered is that the Social Democrats worked hard to channel the popular discontent of 1917 and 1918 by creating workers' committees as a bridge to the existing organizational structures in the workers' movement, as well as supporting the integration of the protest movement into the local war administration boards.<sup>[28]</sup> These explanatory factors tend to complement one another – but it can be argued that too little emphasis has been put on the top-level networking between the Social Democrats and Liberals with the finance and industry representatives in the last two years of the war.

## Conclusion

The hunger riots and the collapse of the German Empire contributed to the democratic break through in Sweden, which entailed a fundamental change: universal suffrage. It also meant that the political power balance in a more obvious way had shifted from the old elites – court, king, officers and landowners – to the newer ones – industrialists and bankers – and to the Parliament, where the possibilities for the Upper Chamber to obstruct important reforms had now lessened considerably.

The issue of neutrality in this process became a matter of controversy and negotiation rather than a

fixed dimension in Swedish domestic politics. The upheaval in Sweden could, in this perspective, also be regarded as more of a bourgeois transformation than a failed workers' revolution, and dictated more by pragmatic needs in relation to the European export market than any Grand Swedish – or for that matter revolutionary – scheming.

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## Notes

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