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Making Sense of the War (Sweden)

By [Anne Hedén](#)

This text gives a brief overview of the Swedish intellectual, literary and media responses to the war, and also of the Swedish responses to the new peacetime order in Europe. By the end of 1918, Swedish neutrality was often perceived within domestic discourse as representing a development where, in spite of being a small regional power, Sweden exercised a strong influence due to the country's peace building efforts, extended civil rights and humanitarian orientation. In practice, however, this new humanitarian neutrality was an ambiguous phenomenon, and in the interwar period Sweden returned to its earlier isolationism.

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The Meanings of War

In the Swedish context, one of the main challenges of the First World War was how to understand the issue of [neutrality](#), an area of ongoing contention primarily between the right wing and the workers movement. A parallel process was how the frameworks of national identity and citizenship

were renegotiated during the war period, firstly by the breakthrough of parliamentarism in 1917 and then following general suffrage implemented in Sweden shortly after the war ended.

When the First World War started, the Scandinavian countries declared themselves neutral.^[1] Like [Denmark](#) and [Norway](#), [Sweden](#) had a largely export-based economy. Sweden's biggest trading partners were [Great Britain](#) and [Germany](#). For most of the war period, Sweden exercised "benevolent neutrality" towards Germany.^[2]

While the more moderate right wing held on to the neutrality policy, albeit with distinct good will towards the Central Powers, the more radical activists to the right advocated Swedish participation in the war by the side of Germany, thereby trying to secure a more prominent position for Sweden in post-war Europe.

Sympathy for the Entente powers was greater among the liberals and the moderate socialists. In the socialist camp in general, criticism of the war was widespread, with a pronounced anti-militarism in both the moderate and the radical workers movement.^[3] Among those who were critical of the war was also the majority of the women's movement, which included radical socialists, pacifists and Entente-sympathizers, who organized a campaign against the war in 1915, known as the Women's Peace Sunday (*Kvinnornas fredssöndag*).^[4]

Mental Mobilisation: Neutrality and Allies

Swedish neutrality was not a homogeneous phenomenon. For example, organising help for the exposed areas in Eastern Prussia was a concern mainly for the pro-German set, while the humanitarian campaign for [Belgium](#), conducted by the women's magazine *Idun*, became a project chiefly for leftist Liberals and Social Democrats. Some other humanitarian projects, like supporting [Poland](#) and [Lithuania](#) – not yet nation states – were slightly less politicised, and gathered support from both camps.^[5]

According to historian [Lina Sturfelt](#), a tragic narrative of the war was more common in Sweden than in many other countries, where the narrative of war as a disaster mainly developed after the great battles of Verdun and [Somme](#) in 1916.^[6] In addition, [pacifist](#) advocacy at the beginning of the war was not as suppressed in Sweden as in other countries, while aggressive [nationalism](#) was in general a bit more subdued.

A group whose political standpoints were not always publicly expressed, but which were dictated by the need to keep trade and production going, were the industrialists and financiers. They made a discreet but profound impact in the political sphere through their informal networks among both the government and the opposition in both chambers of parliament – especially when, in 1917, import was restricted because of the British blockade of goods to the neutral countries. The blockade led to escalating political mobilisation on the part of the workers movement, considerable social unrest and

also greater influence on behalf of the industrialists in the political sphere, after the shift in government in March 1917.^[7]

Intellectual Responses

While the political establishment - conservatives, liberals and socialist alike - did not want Sweden to join the belligerents, the activist circles, and among them some prominent academics, regarded it as Sweden's historical mission to support Germany in the war. One example was the well-known right wing political scientist [Rudolf Kjellén \(1864–1922\)](#), who, together with other prominent conservatives, claimed that [Russia](#) had for a long time been preparing an attack on Germany and [Austria-Hungary](#).^[8] Another was the famous explorer, author and activist [Sven Hedin \(1865–1952\)](#) who not only took part in writing pamphlets on the need for the armament of the Swedish military but also, in 1914–1915, went on reporting trips to the fronts and published lengthy books on his experiences, and of the heroism of the German nation. Hedin often, in his texts, connected the German war campaign with Swedish warfare in the 17th century, when Sweden was one of the great powers in Europe. His main message was that Germany had taken the torch from Sweden in battling Russian expansionism.^[9]

This vision of a Great Swedish past being resurrected during the world war also influenced the activists who supported the magazine *Svensk lösen* (*Swedish Salute*). Several of these activists also contributed opinion articles in the conservative press. Not all the activists, however, belonged to the far right circles: even some German-friendly Social Democrats contributed to the most widely discussed activist pamphlet at the time, *Svensk utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning* (*Swedish Foreign Policy in the Perspective of the World War*), published in 1915.^[10]

In the liberal camp, one of the prominent [war reporters](#) was the journalist and author [Gustaf Hellström \(1882-1953\)](#) who wrote features from the French home front and frontlines for the liberal *Dagens Nyheter* (*The Daily News*), where he forcefully questioned the then ubiquitous idea of war as an invigorating process for Western civilisation.^[11] The radical author and feminist [Marika Stiernstedt \(1875-1954\)](#) wrote reports from the French front in much the same manner as Sven Hedin on the German side, but from a radical perspective. She also published novels about the war period.^[12] Literary scholar [Sofi Qvarnström](#) points out the main themes in the writings of the women war critics in the Swedish literary circles at the time. These authors endeavoured in their books to depict the conflicting views on the war: armament supporters against peace advocates, supporters of democracy against the aristocracy, social liberalism against conservatism and, and also the socialist ideas of a new society against the enthusiasm of the conservative elites for imperial Germany.^[13]

Understanding the War: Press, Propaganda, Censorship and Popular Culture

The start of the war created disquiet also in Sweden, which led to people stockpiling foodstuffs and withdrawing their savings from the banks. Nevertheless, many articles and features in the Swedish press also expressed an optimistic, almost excited attitude about the war.^[14] The Swedish public understood the war in a variety of ways: as a disastrous scourge, a heroic fairytale, a tragedy, or simply as a meaningless industrial slaughter, where optimistic interpretations became increasingly subdued as the conflict wore on.^[15]

Prior to the conflict, there was increasing public interest in the popular culture of war and warfare. According to literary historian Claes Ahlund, this could be explained by the changes in power balance and the arms race escalating in Europe after the Franco-Prussian War in 1870–1871. The outbreak of war in 1914 also created demand from the general public for information on military matters, maps, parlour games, photographs and books.^[16] Popular genres were patriotic poetry and the invasion narrative in novels and short stories of the time. Ahlund refers to what he calls a “mental militarization” and points out that this was a process taking place also in neutral countries like Sweden.^[17] One example of news reporting and fictionalised narratives merging into one another during the first period of the war was a series of popular adventure novels, produced for the broader public by the character *Radscha*, aka Iwan Aminoff (1868–1928). Aminoff was a journalist and an author of popular novels and his pro-German books were advertised as objective and correct depictions of the war process.^[18]

Until the outbreak of the First World War, news about foreign affairs had received limited attention in the Swedish press. Once the war had started, news reporting from abroad gained a new standing and the big newspapers began to send regular correspondents to the belligerent nations and to the frontlines.^[19] In the weeklies and the womens’ magazines, the war was vividly captured in drawings and painted scenarios. In the cinemas, newsreels featuring the main events of the war were important sources of information.^[20]

In general, the degree of state intervention in the cultural sphere increased during the war, not least when it came to issues of information and propaganda, where one important goal was to protect the export industry.^[21] In the name of neutrality, communication between the wartime government and the media was all about keeping a balance in the information process; the Foreign Office dictated a “duty of neutrality” to the press, which meant that the telegrams and news from the belligerent countries were to be given an equal amount of space and attention. The Foreign Secretary in the government of Hjalmar Hammarskjöld (1862-1953), Knut Wallenberg (1853–1938), along with the Prime Minister, directed a plea to the most prominent Swedish newspaper editors, including those who were German-friendly, to ensure a balance in their news reporting. The government also intervened against certain articles and telegrams deemed as politically inappropriate, and even cooperated with a Danish news agency in order to modify or censor telegrams from Sweden – for example on the issue of the hunger protests in 1917.^[22] However, German war propaganda had strong advocates in the conservative press. In Sweden, a pro-German news agency translated and

distributed articles from the German press to local Swedish papers. Most prominent of the conservative pro-German dailies was the evening paper *Aftonbladet* (*The Evening Paper*), of which the greater part of the shares in 1915 were sold to the [German government](#); a fact unknown to the Swedish public. Not satisfied with the media situation in general, the Social Democrats started their own news agency in 1915.^[23]

The Entente also took part in the [propaganda warfare](#). In September 1917, the British revealed that the German mission in Argentina had used Swedish diplomatic channels for messages concerning German military actions. The timing of the disclosure had an impact on the result in the following Swedish elections, after which a coalition of Social Democrats and Liberals formed government.^[24]

An example of increased public interest in the war reporting and of the political polarization taking place in Sweden during the world war was the media coverage of the [civil war in Finland](#) in the spring of 1918, and the many articles on the volunteer corps, the Swedish Brigade and the Swedish humanitarian help expeditions. The papers of the radical left wing in the workers movement published articles in favour of the Reds, while the Social Democratic Party dailies saw the Whites as the legal side but criticized their brutality, thereby distancing themselves from the conservative press.

Poet and journalist [Walter Hülphers \(1871–1957\)](#) published a book about his experiences with the Swedish Brigade, where he, like Sven Hedin, invoked the Swedish heroic narrative from the Great Power-period. However, he was also more ambivalent towards the increasing German influence in Finland, labelling the Finns – Reds and Whites alike – Mongolian, meaning an inferior race in terms of character.^[25] The journalist [Ernst Klein \(1887–1937\)](#) who worked as a war correspondent for *Svenska Dagbladet* (*The Swedish Daily Paper*) also published a book in 1918 where he gave a more critical view of the civil war. While sympathizing with the Whites, he still criticized their brutal treatment of the Reds in the aftermath of the conflict.^[26]

Sweden's Role as a Neutral Country

In international debate, the neutrality concept had been established in 1907 in the context of the [conventions of The Hague](#). Even before the First World War, two different interpretations of the neutrality concept had been developing in Sweden, according to historian Bo Stråth: one that defined neutrality as a vehicle for disarmament, the other as a defence doctrine, where a strong army was the guarantee for upholding neutrality.^[27] Lina Sturfelt has identified different ways of relating to Swedish neutrality in popular culture during the First World War. The first saw Swedish neutrality as being a consequence of the fear of war and an indifference to the suffering of others rather than the characteristic of a peace-loving country.^[28] The second translated neutrality into an isolationist, introverted and self-sufficient small state position in the midst of the global storm. The third image was that of a modernized, updated Grand Swedish position where Sweden was perceived as a morally great power and an arbiter of peace. What these divergent interpretations of neutrality had in

common was an understanding of Sweden as different from the rest of Europe.^[29]

Humanitarian Sweden: A Paradox

During the war, Swedish neutrality had generally come to be defined as a special path, where the relative peacefulness of Swedish society was what made Sweden significant. At the same time, towards the end of the war, turbulent developments in the region created new areas of humanitarian responsibilities for Sweden to be involved in, which further contributed to Swedish notions of exceptionalism. The [Red Cross](#) delegate [Elsa Brändström \(1888–1948\)](#) became an important exponent of this re-defined Swedish self-image: as a nurse she worked with various [humanitarian](#) projects, and took part in the Red Cross exchange of the injured and wounded [prisoners of war](#) between Russia and the Central Powers. Until 1921, she worked in the big refugee camps in Russia as a representative of the Red Cross and later, when living in the [USA](#), helped Jewish refugees from Germany. Elsa Brändström was, according to Sturfelt, often characterized as a true Carolinian soldier, but was at the same time also seen as a representative of a new Grand Swedishness, where the idea of Sweden as a great humanitarian power had come to replace ideas of expansionism and violent conquest.^[30]

This modernized Swedish self-image was, however, ambivalent in governmental practice, especially when it came to the [issue of citizenship](#). Due to the war situation in Russia and the Baltic region, many migrants came to Sweden. Some were on their way to other countries, some hoped to stay. This caused disquiet and suspicion and the parliament passed new laws to regulate immigration. There was also increasing surveillance and control of immigrants and a more extensive list of requirements was passed for those applying for Swedish citizenship. When the breakdown in Germany paved the way for general suffrage in Sweden (proposed in 1919, first elections in 1921) and citizenship in this way became more inclusive, it also – due to the creation of a stricter immigration and refugee legislation – became more difficult to claim citizenship or the right to residence in Sweden. Control of immigration increased and continued in the same way when the war was over; it was further extended and became even more stringent in the interwar period. New practices and procedures were finally codified in 1927 in the Aliens Act, when the visa system was replaced by labour and residence permits. Indeed, Swedish immigration policy could be summed up by the right wing slogan of the time, “Sweden for the Swedes”.^[31]

The Legacy

Swedish newspaper reports of the Armistice in November 1918 give evidence of some moderate and cautious hopes for a lasting peace as well as some serious concerns about the situation in Germany and the [civil war in Russia](#).

In the Swedish historical narrative, the modernization of society has often been connected to the workers movement and the Social Democratic dominance during the Folkhem (*Peoples' home*)

period when progress, social welfare, neutrality and humanitarian missions became defining traits. The ongoing scholarly discussion has, however, pointed out that this definition is too narrow. Sturfelt and others have for example dated the starting point of the modern Grand Swedish narrative somewhat earlier, emanating in the period of the First World War.^[32] Sweden, as well as the other Scandinavian countries, became a member of the League of Nations from its establishment in 1920, and remained a member until 1938; in spite of the fact that the Åland issue, settled in 1921, was not resolved to Sweden's advantage. This way of taking part in the international security system made it possible for Sweden to reduce military spending and engage in peace building efforts. In the 1930s the League of Nations was weakened through a series of international crises. In 1938, Sweden, Norway and Denmark withdrew from the organisation, and by this time Sweden as a nation had returned to a more strictly neutral position.

In the interwar period, the memory of the Great War as an industrialised, dehumanizing and cruel struggle became more dominant in Swedish public discourse, at the expense of other narratives.^[33] Geopolitical perspectives had also changed; Europe was by now perceived as more distant from Sweden and Scandinavia – a reflection of the increasing European tensions of the time, and of growing Swedish isolationism.

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Notes

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