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978-0-521-57390-0 - Charles XI and Swedish Absolutism

A. F. Upton

Excerpt

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I

Introduction: the historical background to Sweden's seventeenth-century crisis

The kingdom of Sweden, which then included Finland, had a rich historical past. It was unusual in early modern Europe in having a written constitution, the Land Law of Magnus Eriksson. Some time in the early fourteenth century this king had ordered the collection of the kingdom's provincial laws and customs and formed them into a comprehensive national code of laws, which was in public use by 1352. The Land Law stated that there was a unitary kingdom, 'a kingdom called Sweden', and that 'over all Sweden there shall not be more than one crown or king'. The king held his kingdom in trust for he could not alienate any of his rights, but he was the executive ruler and 'all those who live and dwell in his kingdom shall yield him obedience, conduct themselves according to his command and be at his service, especially to defend the kingdom'. The kingdom was elective and not hereditary and it was contractual. At the election of the kings the incoming ruler exchanged oaths with his subjects. The king's oath was sworn to all who dwell in the land, confirming that all the inhabitants were free subjects of the king and protected by his laws. The limits of royal power were specified: 'he shall be true and faithful to all his subjects, and he shall not harm anyone poor or rich, except according to law and after legal process'. The king would live off his assigned revenues and would not seek additional taxation except for specified contingencies and by negotiation with the subjects. The king was to uphold 'all the ancient Swedish laws which the subjects have adopted'. The reciprocal oath from the subjects pledged them to obey and support the king and to pay their taxes freely and without prevarication.¹

The Land Law stated that there was to be a Council of native-born clerics and noblemen, chosen by the king but holding office for life and the king governed the kingdom 'with the advice of the Council'. The Council also acted as a guarantor of the constitution, while their main function was 'to advise the king what they know before God to be useful and advantageous for him and his realm', and to do this without fear or favour. They were also to assist the king to keep his oath to the kingdom and the subjects to keep their oath to the king. The Law stated further that for major policy decisions over war and peace, changes to the laws, or supplementary taxation, the king should seek the advice and consent of the

¹ Å. Holmbäck and E. Wessen, eds., *Magnus Erikssons Landslag: i nysvensk tolkning*, Rättshistoriskt bibliotek 6 (Lund, 1962), 3. Konungsbalken, pp. 1–6.

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community of the realm. Thus, Sweden was a community with a strong executive kingship, which could command the unquestioning obedience of its subjects, was sustained by independent revenues, but was controlled by a rule of law which protected the rights of the subjects, and prescribed consultation between the king and his subjects on major policy decisions. The Land Law stood as a rule-book of government which the whole community accepted as a fundamental law. The effect of the Land Law was reinforced in 1608 when an official text was printed and became generally available in the authorized version.²

The social reality behind this formal political structure was that Sweden was a peasant society to a degree that was unusual even in early modern Europe. In France, peasant agriculture supported some 70% of the population; in Sweden it was 95%. Sweden had a small population spread thinly over a large geographical area. A typical settlement was of three to six farmsteads with a fringe population of cottagers, labourers and farm servants attached. The Swedish peasant was always a tenant, but there were three main types of tenure: tax-peasants, crown peasants and nobles' peasants. The tax-peasants were virtually freeholders, since provided they met their fixed obligations to the crown they had security of tenure and could sell, lease or mortgage their holdings; it required three successive years of default before they could be legally evicted from their farms. They were a large sector of the peasant population, about a third overall. Because of their favourable conditions their farms tended to be larger and more affluent than the other categories and they were the natural leaders, providing peasant society with its spokesmen, office holders and jurymen. The other two categories were tenants at will of the crown and the nobility respectively and rendered dues in money, produce and labour services, which were negotiable but often established by local custom. As tenants at will they were more exposed to exploitation by their landlords, but this was constrained by other aspects of Swedish conditions. Economic circumstances meant that there was little inducement for landlords to engage in demesne farming so that nearly all productive land was let out to peasant farmers. Labour services were most commonly used for building work and transportation. Then Sweden was very thinly populated with about 1 million inhabitants in 1600 rising to a little under 2 million in 1700. The evidence points to a general shortage of manpower and since all peasants were legally free men their bargaining position relative to landlords and employers was relatively favourable. The great European population boom had had limited impact on Sweden, and the frequency in the crown's books of untenanted farms and the persistent complaints of all kinds of employers about the difficulty of hiring labour further suggest that the common man had a fairly good bargaining position.

Thus economic realities underpinned the status of the Swedish peasant as a free subject of the crown. Axel Oxenstierna remarked in 1642 that 'in Sweden our peasants are born free so that it is an honour to be the son of a peasant'. His fellow

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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magnate, Krister Bonde, complained in 1652: 'it is strange that people whom God has created for service, should be regarded as free'. However, it was public policy, to maintain peasant rights: Charles XI wrote in his instructions for the provincial Governors: 'you shall at all times be diligent and unremitting in hearing the grievances of the people and help them to secure justice, so that none may have reason to complain that he was not listened to or assisted in what is right and feasible'.³ Then there were in Sweden institutions which assigned an active role in government to the common people. Two were at local level, the district court (*häradssting*) and the parish council (*sockenstämma*), and at national level there was the Peasant Estate in the Diet. The district court was a populist institution which handled civil and criminal cases and in addition took a broad range of local administrative decisions. Its formal core was the jury (*nämnd*) of twelve local householders presided over by a crown official (*lagman*), appointed after local consultation. The jurymen were chosen or emerged by various processes and could be deselected, but were generally an elite group of local worthies. The general public attended the court sessions and much evidence suggests they could make their opinions known to the jury. These peoples' courts, which settled disputes between subjects and between them and crown officials and landlords gave common folk a voice in government and the rulers had to take them into account. Even in the Catholic period Swedish parishioners had been consulted over the appointment of the parish priest. In the Lutheran period the clergy had chosen to develop an element of popular participation through the parish council of all the householders. This too had a core body, a jury (*sexmän*), but the council made most of the decisions. The parish priest, who presided in the council, was not freely elected, both the bishop and the crown and sometimes the local nobleman had powers to nominate or veto candidates, but in all cases it was accepted that the parishioners too had a voice and candidates were expected to present themselves for a trial performance before the parish. It was perhaps more important that the parish council controlled the economic administration of the parish. They decided such matters as poor relief, maintaining the fabric of the parish buildings and participated with the priest in upholding religious discipline. Offenders against the prevailing moral codes were accused and had their cases determined in the parish council which also decided the penalties. The Swedish Church, like established churches everywhere in Europe, was one of the main instruments of social control, discipline and indoctrination and it was important that it had this element of popular participation built into its structures. Finally the Swedish peasants participated in the national representative institution, the Diet of four Estates. The delegates who formed the Peasant Estate were elected at the district court and were answerable to it. The crown had tended to uphold their right to free elections. In 1680, Charles XI, in response to petitions from the Estate, ruled that crown officials

³ E. Ingers, *Bonden i svensk historia*, 2 vols. (Stockholm, 1949), I, pp. 275, 312.

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must not interfere in the freedom of choice and the peasants were allowed to use 'their own pleasure and discretion'. It will be seen that the Peasant Estate took a realistic view of its role; they tenaciously sought to fend off new burdens on their constituents, but in matters of high politics tended to evade involvement on the grounds that they were poor, uneducated folk who were not qualified to judge. Their most useful power was the right to present grievances. These were initiated in the election meetings and then collated at the Diet as the corporate grievances of the Estate. The crown was obliged to return a formal public response which became a matter of record. Here too Charles XI favoured free expression; he ruled that the peasants 'cannot be denied at a general Diet to present all their grievances and complaints'. There were ways by which the crown and the ruling elites could seek to subvert the legal protections enjoyed by the Swedish peasants, but their rights were sufficiently entrenched in ancient law and custom, and in functioning institutions to protect the peasants from the extremes of exploitation that were the common experience of their fellows in less favoured parts of Europe, a fact of which the Swedish peasants were well aware.⁴

Above the peasantry there was a thin layer of the groups who constituted the ruling elites of the society. First were the clergy. The Catholic Church had developed in Sweden on the patterns laid down in Rome and over the years it had acquired a large landed endowment and was further sustained by its income from tithe and fees. It had a place in government and its bishops shared power with the nobility in the Council. In 1523 some 20% of peasant farms were assigned to the Church. The commercial and industrial component of Swedish society was marginal. There was a primitive mining industry exploiting deposits of silver, copper and iron, while trading, particularly foreign trade, was mostly in the hands of aliens, who dominated such urban centres as existed. The burghers were an exotic element in a society that really consisted of a cluster of local subsistence economies generating little exchange of goods and services, but they were recognized as an Estate and it was the consistent endeavour of the crown to encourage and expand the urban, trading sector in society. Finally there was the emergent landed nobility – those who enjoyed *frälse* status, and who were exempted from taxation in return for the obligation to cavalry service. Anyone who qualified could claim the status, which was not hereditary and could be lost if the condition were not fulfilled. But the crown had developed a policy of donating land as a reward for public service; this too was in principle revocable if the service ceased, but the recipients tended to treat these grants as allodial property and through this process there had emerged a small elite of leading landed families which competed among themselves for control of the royal government and its patronage. In 1523 the number of peasant farms held by this nascent nobility roughly equalled the 20% held by the Church.⁵

⁴ S. Grauers, *Sveriges Riksdag: förre avdelningen: Riksdagens historia intill 1865: fjärde bandet, Riksdagen under den karolinska tiden* (Stockholm, 1932), p. 206.

⁵ Holmbäck and Wessen, eds., *Landslag*, p. 9; Ingers, *Bonden*, p. 173.

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During the later middle ages the strong executive monarchy described in the Land Law failed to develop because Sweden–Finland was joined with Denmark–Norway in a loose Scandinavian Union with the king of Denmark as its head, which put Sweden under a series of regents and blocked the development of a national monarchy. This all began to change after 1523 when the leader of a major magnate family, Gustav Vasa, was elected king of Sweden and waged a successful war of independence from Denmark. To sustain his efforts he took advantage of the Reformation to break with Rome and reendow the crown with the assets of the Church; all its landed property and two-thirds of tithe income were transferred. Gustav Vasa used the prestige and resources he had acquired to reassert the primacy of the king in the government of the realm. He defied the Land Law by employing aliens in his government and told the peasants of Uppland in 1539 not to interfere with his government since ‘We as a Christian king will set commands and regulations for you and all other Our subjects, and will that you, if you wish to escape Our severe punishment and wrath shall be attentive and obedient to Our royal commands in both secular and religious affairs.’ He went on to crush the last major political revolt of the commoners, under Nils Dacke, in 1542–3, using his German mercenaries to defeat the rebels, and in 1544 he secured the agreement of the Estates to make the kingship hereditary in the Vasa family. This act of 1544 was the turning point in the history of Swedish monarchy, for all educated Europeans acknowledged that an hereditary king was truly king by the grace of God and all Christian subjects owed him unreserved obedience as a religious duty. The servants of Charles XI would repeatedly emphasize the significance of the act of 1544, which they presented as liberating the kingdom ‘from the dangers and uncertainties of elective monarchies’.⁶

It was an irony of history that the achievement of Gustav Vasa was nearly undone by the rivalries of his three sons. The dynasty embarked on a policy of eastward expansion at the expense of a disintegrating Muscovy and the collapse of the Teutonic knights. Sweden acquired in the outcome the provinces of Kexholm, Ingermanland and Estland, giving her full control of the eastern Baltic. But the policy also created a major problem. Johan III married his son Sigismund to a Polish princess and then secured his election as king of Poland with the idea of establishing a Polish–Swedish union that could establish hegemony in eastern Europe. However in 1593, after decades of ambivalence, the Swedish Church adopted the Augsburg Confession and the Diet made the evangelical Lutheran faith the exclusive national religion. This led to civil war between Sigismund, now a committed Catholic, and his uncle Charles, acting as regent. Sigismund’s faction was defeated and he was deposed and Charles eventually became king as Charles IX. This created a standing feud between the Swedish and Polish Vasas that was not resolved until 1660. The weakened monarchy was then challenged by a

⁶ Ingers, *Bonden*, p. 160.

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resurgence of the nobility. By the early sixteenth century the traditional informal acquisition of noble status by cavalry service began to be supplemented by the issue of formal letters of recognition from the crown, which conferred on the grantee and his descendants noble status in perpetuity. This was followed in 1563 by the institution of titles of count and baron, which were conferred on an elite of noble families. These titles were endowed with grants of crown lands, over which they were given quasi-seigneurial powers, thus distinguishing the holders from the more numerous, untitled noblemen. In the political instability of the 1590s some leading families put forward claims for the recognition of the nobility as a third force in society, entitled as of right to the senior offices in the kingdom, and acting as mediators between the king and the commoners. Charles IX had met this challenge by adopting a style of chauvinistic, populist kingship. He forced a confrontation and with the help of the three commoner Estates had his leading aristocratic opponents judiciously murdered at the Diet of Linköping in 1600. This was a dramatic reassertion of the power of the crown, but was also deeply divisive.

The accession of Gustav II Adolf in 1611 resulted in a healing of this division. The king established a partnership with the magnate leader, Axel Oxenstierna, who became his Chancellor and intimate friend, and after the king's death in 1632, was effectively regent for his daughter Christina. The first step was the grant of a generous charter of privileges to the nobility in 1612. This confirmed their exemption from taxation and gave them priority in selection for the higher public offices, which were to carry regular salaries. In 1627 the nobility were formally incorporated as an Estate by the establishment of the Riddarhus, which was to be their chamber during sessions of the Diet and would house the register of noble families, with their titles and precedence. In future, nobility would be conferred exclusively by royal letter, but this in turn had to be recognized by a vote of the Riddarhus to include the new entry into the register. The nobility was also formally divided into three Classes, first the titled nobility, second all other noble families who had had a member on the Council of State and third the rest of the untitled nobility. The Riddarhus voted by Class, not by head, so that the magnate families in Classes I and II could generally dominate the Estate. These developments had confirmed that the nobility were the ruling elite in Swedish society but at the same time institutionalized the oligarchic structure of this elite. Studies have shown how, prior to the accession of Charles XI, a group of nine families, distinguished by their wealth and tenure of the highest offices, and an outer group of twenty-three families with whom they intermarried, dominated public life in Sweden.⁷

The next stage was to take Sweden into a phase of predatory, militaristic expansion and to engage the nobility as partners in the enterprise with the crown.

⁷ B. Asker, *Officerarna och det svenska samhället 1650–1700* (Uppsala, 1983), p. 14; K. Ågren, 'The rise and decline of an aristocracy: the Swedish social and political elite in the 17th century', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 1 (1976), pp. 63–75.

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The Swedish armed forces were remodelled as a professional force of native conscripts, drilled to execute new tactics which, for a time, enabled Swedish armies to dominate the battlefields of northern Europe. This was underpinned by a further factor, that war should pay for itself by being fought on foreign territory from which the necessary resources could be extracted, either as subsidies from clients and allies, or requisitions from occupied enemies. The policy seemed to work. The conflict with Muscovy was settled at Stolbova in 1617. Accounts were then settled with the Polish Vasas, bringing Sweden the city of Riga and the province of Livland in 1629; this cleared the way for the intervention in Germany after 1629. It can be argued that the German enterprise was initially a defensive strategy to forestall the establishment of a Habsburg naval presence in the Baltic, but it soon turned into a policy of predatory expansion. This was brutally demonstrated in 1643 when Sweden turned on Denmark. Christian IV of Denmark had naturally seen the rise of Swedish power with apprehension and contemplated means of restraining it. So in 1643, Swedish armies invaded Denmark and at the peace of Brömsebro in 1645 forced Denmark to cede territory to Sweden. This proved that Sweden had now replaced Denmark as the leading Scandinavian power, but it left Denmark a humiliated and implacable enemy. The culmination came with the treaties of Westphalia in 1648, in which Sweden stood with France as a co-guarantor of the settlement and was recognized as an international power. Sweden received a huge monetary indemnity and the king of Sweden became a prince of the Holy Roman Empire, invested with the territories of Bremen-Verden and Pomerania with Wismar. This made Sweden a force in north Germany and gave her control of most of the southern shore of the Baltic.

The domestic component of these policies was a reorganization of government led by Oxenstierna. This was established by the Form of Government of 1634, which purported to have been worked out and confirmed by Gustav II Adolf before his death. The preamble claimed that the king had recognized a need for clear rules of government and had consulted the Council about this and 'the other Estates who are concerned, and thus after timely consideration, advice and consent caused to be set up an ordinance and statute, which shall be observed and taken into account for ever more'. It has never been proved that the king had consented to the Form of Government, certainly no subsequent ruler gave it formal confirmation. It has been argued that the scheme was only intended to operate during a regency, though the text of 1634 does not give that impression. The Form of Government described a fully bureaucratized structure of central and local government, centred in Stockholm and run by salaried public servants. Justice was centralized by a system of High Courts presided over by the Justiciar. The administration was divided among four collegiate ministries, the Chancellery, the Chamber, the War and Admiralty Colleges presided over by the Chancellor, Treasurer, Marshal and Admiral respectively. The kingdom was divided into provinces, each of which was supervised by a royal governor. The whole structure was overseen by the Council of State,

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composed of native-born noblemen, who would include the five great officers of state, and would have permanent representation in each of the governing colleges. The old concept of a governing council of landed magnates, serving part time, had been changed to a standing executive of full-time administrators. Although the Form of Government was never fully implemented, it gave Sweden a systematized and professional government machine, which was far in advance of her rivals and was a major factor in her rise to power. There was provision for meetings of the Diet, although it was envisaged that these would be infrequent and it affirmed that the Estates, jointly with the king, had a sovereign authority, 'through its resolutions, which none may question, since king and kingdom are subjected to them with obedience and loyalty'.⁸

There was a final dimension to Oxenstierna's reform programme. The bulk of crown revenue was derived from rents and taxes on its landed estate, a large proportion of them paid in kind. But it was believed that an effective military machine demanded cash revenues. So a policy was instituted of granting away crown land for cash advances or as reward to office holders. It was claimed the whole kingdom would benefit since the properties would be more profitably developed in private hands. The lost income was to be replaced by modern monetary taxes, like excises on trade and commerce, and by intensive development of the mining industries, yielding a royalty to the crown. The disposal of the crown estates by grant or sale was pursued so vigorously that by 1650 about two-thirds of the peasant farms were under the nobility, doubling their holdings since 1600. The compensatory tax revenues that should have been generated were slower to come through. The reality was exposed by the peace of 1648. Sweden's great power status depended on hiring out her services as a mercenary hit man to other powers. With the coming of peace her services were no longer needed and despite the war indemnity and the revenues of the newly acquired territories the revenues of the kingdom could not sustain her international status. This basic truth would drive the policies of Charles XI.

The problem was articulated by a remarkable document, a petition of the three commoner Estates to Queen Christina in the Diet of 1650. What was extraordinary in this 'Supplication' was that the commoners openly challenged the hegemony of the nobility and the policies it had promoted, and advanced their own alternative.⁹ They began by denying any intention to challenge the authority of the queen, stating that they did not allow 'that any shall speak as though we seek to prescribe anything to your royal Majesty, and infringe your royal authority, which God preserve us from, acknowledging that your royal Majesty's full kingly power and authority is the foundation of our liberties, and they hang so together that they

⁸ E. Hildebrand, ed., *Sveriges Regeringsformer 1634-1809* (Stockholm, 1891), Regeringsform 1634, Preamble; Regeringsform 1634, para. 45.

⁹ S. Loenbom, ed., *Handlingar til konung Carl XI: tes historia*, 8 vols. (Stockholm, 1763-7), IV, collection X, p. 70.

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similarly must stand or fall'. They revealed how, in the thinking of commoners, a strong kingship was a protection of their liberties, not a threat. They claimed that the whole community had sacrificed for the wars, yet they had received little return, but a select few had taken all the profit, 'as if we had fought and striven for them, and not for the best interests of the Fatherland'. They set up a strong case, beginning with Scripture, for reversing the policy of dispersing the crown estates and urged that it should be stopped and that the crown must recover its endowment. The queen did not accept the Supplication in 1650, but she did not reject it either, so that it stood on public record. The commoner Estates did not claim any power to enforce their desires, they accepted that only the queen could act, but they had shown that if she, or a successor, decided to reclaim the crown estates through reduction they would give support.¹⁰

The nobility made a vigorous defence of their position. One of the best known of the contemporary tracts, by an anonymous nobleman, took the form of a conversation between a peasant, a priest, a burgher and a nobleman and was written soon after the Diet of 1650. It naturally concluded with the nobleman persuading the other three that the commoners had been mistaken. The nobleman argued that the nobility had earned their rewards and that the whole community benefited because the lands became more productive in private control. But the main thrust was that the behaviour of the commoners had been unacceptable in a well-ordered society. They were reminded that Sweden was not the United Provinces, or Switzerland or republican Rome, but a Christian monarchy. Whatever the commoners might pretend they were violating their duty of obedience, because 'they who will censure a king's actions and judge whether he does right or wrong and issue a correction, are presuming that they have the rights of sovereignty and some higher power over the king's'. The nobleman warned them of the awful consequences if they were to succeed: 'the whole government will fall into confusion and be overturned. All kingly respect and authority will be trampled down and violated, there will be disunity, distrust, desperation between the Estates.'¹¹

The debates of 1650 illustrated basic features of Swedish society. They showed that it was well integrated; all the participants asserted that they were 'patriots' and would sacrifice everything for the 'Fatherland'. On this basis they could agree that the aim of the debate must be consensus, as the nobleman had put it, to maintain 'all good friendship, unity and trust' between the Estates. Because it was a society of Estates, each with its specific functions, there were demarcation disputes between them. The Law sought to avoid these by prescribing the rules of intercourse between the Estates and to give it effect there was the king, endowed by God with sovereign power to judge and resolve. He could best do this impartially if his

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–6.

¹¹ KB, Rålambska Manuskriptsamlingen: Fol. Nr. 5: 1680 års riksdagsärenden, chapter 3, 'Samtaal emellan Junker Pär, Mäster Hans, Nils Andersson Bårgare och Jann i Berga Danneman hällen . . . i Lindköping Ao 1650'.

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authority was unfettered. The 1650s did see a crisis in Sweden's public affairs but the position of the monarchy in society was no part of it, despite the traumas of Christina's abdication in 1654. In the thinking of seventeenth-century Swedes, the monarchy was not the problem but the solution.¹²

The personal crisis of Christina was resolved by her abdicating in favour of her cousin, who succeeded as Charles X Gustav. On his initiative a new consensus on policy was forged. At the Diet of 1655 the commoners were offered a partial reduction, the recovery by the crown of a quarter of all lands donated since 1632, with the assurance to the nobility that the settlement was definitive. The nobility would find compensation in a new round of predatory warfare, first against the Polish Vasas and then against Denmark. In the treaties of Roskilde in 1658 and Copenhagen in 1660, Sweden won further territory and established her modern border in Scandinavia. But when Charles X Gustav died unexpectedly in 1660, the regency for the five-year-old Charles XI was fortunate to be able to disengage from the remaining conflicts without loss – in the settlement with Poland at Oliva, which ended the dynastic dispute and with Russia at Kardis in 1661. However, the problems created by Westphalia remained unresolved. Sweden by herself did not have the resources to sustain her international status, and now there would be no adult king able to implement solutions for a further twelve years.

¹² *Ibid.*