

I

The Making of the Empire

THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES saw the foundation of those great modern empires in whose liquidation it has been our dubious destiny to acquiesce: the empires of Portugal, of Spain, of the Dutch, of England, and of France. Two of them, at all events – those of the Dutch and of Portugal – were based on small countries, neither of which had hitherto shown any likelihood of emerging as a great power, and they must always appear astonishing outbursts of energy: in the long view, perhaps, historical aberrations which Time must sooner or later rectify. But whether aberrations or no, they were, for good or ill, such remarkable records of human achievement, and set so deep an impress on vast areas of the world, that they must remain of perennial interest to the historian, troubling the ocean of history like those unpredictable freak waves which make the seas breasted by their caravels so formidable to mariners.

But the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provided another example of imperial expansion, which at first sight must appear equally improbable; and which did indeed astonish contemporaries: the empire which Sweden made for herself in the Baltic, and in Germany, in the century between 1560 and 1660. And it is that empire which I hope to analyse in these lectures. For the most part it was acquired at break-neck speed: less than forty years separates the capture of Riga (1621) and the peace of Oliva. Its disintegration was equally swift: it may be said to have begun in 1702, when Peter the Great took Nöteborg (the future Schlüsselburg); and it was virtually complete when, sixteen years later, the bullet of an enemy (or possibly of a patriot) put an end to Charles XII's existence. Upon the history of mankind it left no permanent mark; and even upon the territories which were included in it exercised an influence which was for the most part transient. But in its day it was a tremendous fact; and to later

2 THE SWEDISH IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

historians it is a fascinating challenge. Hitherto, there has been no single study, apart from one necessarily brief essay by Sven Lundkvist, which attempts an assessment of the whole experience. So, though in the long perspectives of history it may appear as no more than a ripple in a back-water, yet I make no apology for considering it.

How are we to account for this eccentric political phenomenon? Why did this highly unlikely development occur? What forces lay behind it, what peculiar circumstances, at home and abroad, permitted, facilitated, or perhaps compelled it? What was the nature of the empire which resulted, what the effects of the imperial experience on the conqueror and on the conquered? And why did the phenomenon prove so transient, the structure so fragile, the collapse so rapid and so total? These are some of the questions which I have put to myself, and to some of which, though not quite to all, I hope to provide at least some sort of an answer.

It seems clear, in the first place, that the Swedish empire was of a very different nature and provenance from those other empires which were contemporary with it. Those empires can all, perhaps, be described as empires of enterprise, of exploitation, of opportunity: perhaps even to some extent as empires of accident. Lying as they did at immense distances, sundered from the motherland by months of ocean voyaging, not one of them had direct strategic relevance to the metropole; though the rivalry of Dutch and Portuguese in Brazil or Indonesia might indeed centre on control of locally important strategic positions, and though such control might certainly have great economic significance for the colonial power. The Swedish empire, on the contrary, was an essential element in Sweden's defences. It is clear, too, that the Swedish expansion differed radically from the others in that it was not a more or less spontaneous outburst of the national energies, endogenously generated by forces which remain obscure: it was essentially a response to challenges from the outside. It may have been an empire of necessity; but by no stretch of imagination could it be described as an empire acquired by accident. It was the creation of deliberate policy, in that each addition to it was seen as necessary, and was the result of state action: private enterprise had no part in it. There was no place here for great proconsuls or wealthy corporations.

THE MAKING OF THE EMPIRE

3

What, then, was the dynamic behind the Swedish expansion? It is a question to which more than one answer is available: as so often in Swedish historiography, there is an old school of thought and a new, and they come to widely differing conclusions. It fortunately happens that the available literature in English on the whole clearly reflects the views of the Old School; and this, perhaps, may serve to relieve me of the need to do more than remind you of the general run of their arguments.

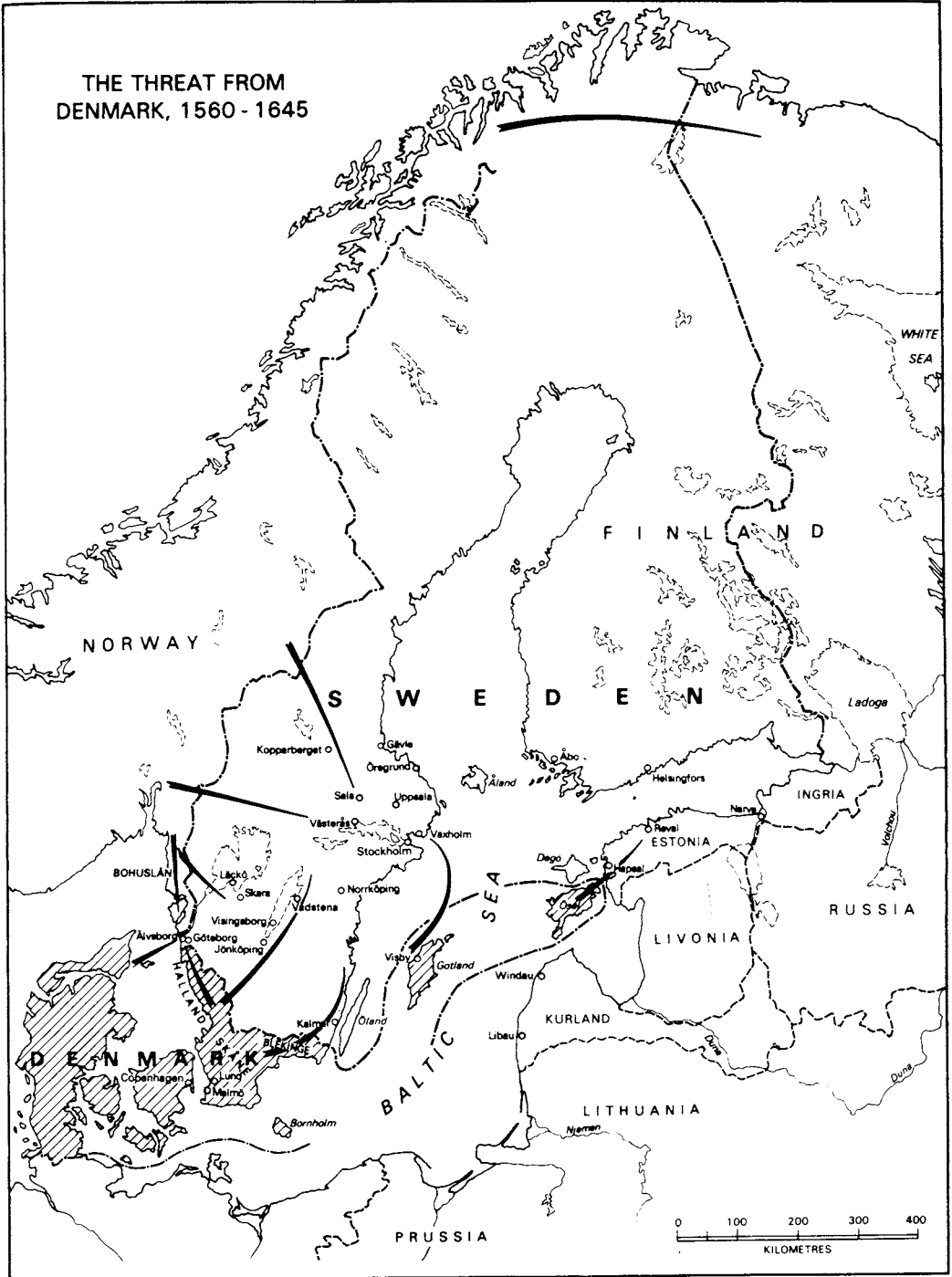
The Old School, then, contended that the Swedish empire was essentially a reaction to, and the product of, past history: first to the struggle for national independence from Denmark; secondly, and more potently, to great international upheavals which were not of Swedish origin at all, and which were beyond Swedish control: the consolidation and outward thrust of the Muscovite state; the disintegration of the Baltic *status quo* in the mid-sixteenth century as a result of the decline of the Hanse and the collapse of the old Crusading Order of the Livonian Knights – itself in part a side-effect of the Reformation; and lastly, the international repercussions of the Counter-Reformation. All these developments, it is argued, directly affected Sweden's safety. Thus the real dynamic behind the creation of the empire was simply fear; and its initial objective, security. In this it contrasted absolutely with other contemporary empires, for whom the question of security – and by this I mean security of the metropole – had no part in the process of empire-building. It may be granted that absolute security is a chimaera; and the pursuit of it is apt to exercise an addictive effect upon those statesmen who devote themselves to it. And it cannot be denied that the search for security at times led Swedish statesmen to seek it in very strange places: in Alsace, at Olmütz, on the Brenner, in Kraków. It led them, too, to a far-flung diplomacy which at times embraced the Tatars of the Crimea, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the princes of Transylvania and Moldavia, and a motley collection of rebels against their lawful sovereigns. These diplomatic extravagances were invariably disappointing, occasionally disastrous, and not seldom farcical. But the excesses and exaggerations of the search for security must not blind us to the possibility that the search was justified. The historians of the Old School insisted that throughout the whole century and a half of her imperial career, Sweden found herself hemmed in between

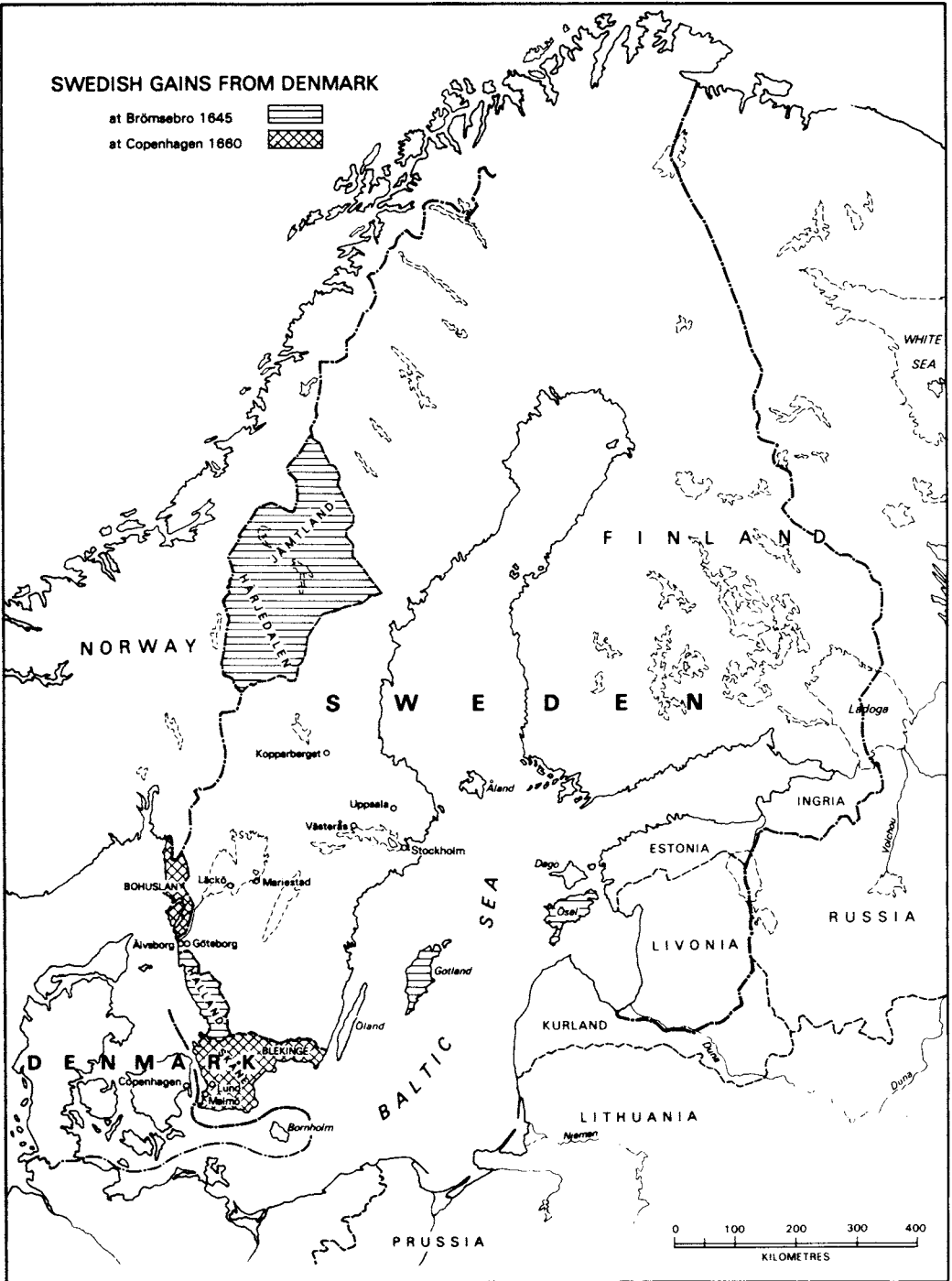
4 THE SWEDISH IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

two hostile powers: on the one hand Denmark, anxious to reverse the verdict of 1523 and once more unite Scandinavia under a single sovereign – or, if that proved impossible, to keep Sweden in a permanent condition of military and economic weakness; on the other hand the emergent Muscovite state, with its ambitions to expand towards the Gulf of Bothnia, into the Scandinavian Arctic, and above all towards the Gulf of Finland and the Estonian coast. Successive kings of Sweden reacted to the situation by pre-emptive strikes, anxious aggressions, swift exploitation of opportunities which might well prove transient, in the hope thereby of buttressing their defences or deepening the protective zones which surrounded them.

Their apprehensions were the consequence of the hard facts of geography and the unforgotten lessons of recent history. A glance at the map will make clear the lines of force directed against the Swedish state. Denmark was in a position to close the Sound to Swedish trade: she could cut Sweden off from western markets and Atlantic salt; she threatened Sweden's solitary window to the open sea, at Älvsborg. From the Great Belt to the Gulf of Riga her islands stretched like a great boom across the Baltic, and were the warrant for her pretension to lordship of the sea; from her provinces north of the Sound, from the associated kingdom of Norway, her kings were able to launch attacks which might threaten Sweden's very existence. Twice between 1560 and 1613 such an attempt was made; and though each time it was beaten off, the cost of survival was high. For on each occasion the Danes captured Älvsborg; and on each occasion Älvsborg had to be bought back by war-indemnities of crushing severity. The memory of these experiences did not fade: when in 1643 Torstensson marched his army into Jutland, men said in Sweden that he was going to find out what had become of Älvsborg's ransom. Swedish propaganda did not fail to point out, as a warning example to patriots,¹ that Norway had lost her ancient independence and become a vassal-kingdom of the Danish crown. And Swedish statesmen were always prone to persuade themselves (on very slender evidence) that the Norwegians would embrace any suitable opportunity to throw off the Danish yoke: Charles X in

¹ E.g. in Gustav Adolf's speech at the opening of the *riksdag* of 1625: C. G. Styffe, *Konung Gustaf II Adolfs skrifter* (Stockholm 1861), pp. 214–17.





THE MAKING OF THE EMPIRE

7

1659, Charles XI in 1678, Charles XII in the last two years of his life (to say nothing of Gustav III), all dreamed of a quick conquest and painless incorporation of Norway.

No doubt it is true that after 1624¹ it must have been increasingly clear that the danger of subjection by Denmark had ceased to be a reality. No doubt there came a moment in 1628 when circumstances forced the two countries into alliance for common defence against Habsburg. But by this time it had become an axiom of Swedish policy that Denmark was the unsleeping enemy. Axel Oxenstierna and Gustav Adolf each considered a preventive war against Denmark as a preliminary, or alternative, to the war in Germany;² in 1639 Oxenstierna told the Council that Denmark had 'repeatedly chucked us under the chin to see whether our teeth sat firm in our head';³ and four years later the pre-emptive strike was duly carried out. The resulting peace of Brömsebro (1645), by handing over Jämtland, Härjedalen and Halland to Sweden, began the process of giving Sweden her natural geographical limits. But the fear of Denmark remained; reinforced now by the possibility of a Danish *revanche*. That fear played its part in the choice of territorial gains which Sweden made at the peace of Westphalia: the acquisition of Bremen and Verden was welcomed as being (in Per Brahe's words) 'a stopper for the Jute'.⁴ The idea of a preventive war against Denmark, while that country was still weak, was much in the minds of members of the Council when they debated the need for arming in December 1654.⁵ Similar ideas, as it happened, were prevalent in Copenhagen: even in the early forties Denmark had felt herself encircled; and the Danish attack on Sweden in 1657 was dictated by anxiety not to let slip a possibly fleeting opportunity to obtain the security which they sought: as one Danish statesman put it, 'peace was more dangerous than war'.⁶ And already the marriage

¹ When Gustav Adolf won a decisive diplomatic victory over Christian IV at the frontier conference at Sjöaryd.

² See, e.g. *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brevväxling (AOSB)* (1888–) i.vi.39–40; *Svenska riksrådets protokoll (RRP)* 1.234–7.

³ *RRP* vii.385 (17 January 1639).

⁴ Yngve Lorents, *Efter Brömsebrofreden. Svenska och danska förbindelser med Frankrike och Holland 1645–1649* (Uppsala 1916), p. 100.

⁵ *RRP* xvi.12.

⁶ Finn Askgaard, *Kampen om Östersjön på Carl X Gustafs tid (Carl X Gustaf-Studier)* (Haderslev 1974), pp. 15, 99.

8 THE SWEDISH IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

of Charles X had already inaugurated the fatal dynastic connexion with Holstein–Gottorp which turned that duchy into a Swedish puppet-state whose function was to threaten Denmark from the rear – much as France had tried to use Scotland in Tudor times – and so made normal relations with Denmark almost impossible. The logical conclusion of this anti-Danish policy was reached by Charles X, who launched his onslaught in 1658 with the avowed programme of annihilating Denmark as an independent state: the Danish royal family was to be imprisoned; the Danish aristocracy dispersed and deported; the city of Copenhagen was to be razed to the ground.¹ This programme, fortunately, proved beyond his powers; but when peace came in 1660 it brought to Sweden the rich province of Skåne, and so completed the process of attainment of natural boundaries which had been begun at Brömsebro.

This unsleeping fear of Denmark was not a political fantasy or an insubstantial nightmare. Until 1613 a Danish conquest was conceivable; until 1643 Danish encirclement was as much a reality as Swedish encirclement seemed to be to Christian IV; until 1721 a resounding Danish revenge, and the recovery of the provinces lost in 1645 and 1660, was at least a possibility. It was the fear of being imprisoned in the Baltic that led to Charles IX's provocative forward policy in Lappmark; it was the same fear which led Charles X to extort the cession of Trondheim at the peace of Roskilde in 1658. When in 1700 Denmark and Russia made their joint attack upon Sweden, Frederick IV was reaping the late harvest of more than sixty years of patient Danish diplomacy. And it is not to be forgotten that it had been fear of a Danish presence in Estonia, no less than of a Russian, which had led Eric XIV to take Reval under his protection, and so initiate the process which was to result in the creation of Sweden's transmarine empire. With Denmark established on Bornholm, Gotland, Ösel, no Swedish king (not even Gustav Vasa) could contemplate the re-establishment of the old Danish sphere of influence on the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland.

The prospect of war on two fronts – of being caught in a

¹ Lauritz Weibull, 'Från Kiel till Köbenhavn i augusti 1658', *Scandia* 1929, pp. 292–3, 311; *RRP* xviii.87–8. Charles X feared that on grounds of convenience and accessibility Copenhagen might become the capital of any united Scandinavian state, and Sweden become no more than an appendage of Denmark: see Charles X to Biörenklou, 2 March 1658, in C. Adlersparre, *Historiska samlingar*, v (Stockholm 1822), p. 179.

THE MAKING OF THE EMPIRE

9

pincer-movement between Denmark and Muscovy – had emerged long before the seventeenth century. Between the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth the consolidated Muscovite realm for the first time flexed its youthful muscles and lunged outwards towards the sea. The collapse of the Livonian Knights in the 1550s gave Ivan IV the chance for which Russia had been waiting: in the vacuum of power thus left behind in Livonia, Russia, Poland and Denmark sought, with dubious titles but indubitable violence, to impose their dominion upon a ravaged and lordless land. A decisive moment came in 1558, when Ivan captured Narva, and thus for the first time gave Moscow free access to the sea.

The consequences of this event were far-reaching. The town of Reval, fearing the ruin of her trade and the loss of her middleman's profits, in 1560 offered to put herself under Swedish protection. Eric XIV accepted that offer; and by doing so laid the first stone of his country's Baltic empire. But the motive that prompted him (it is argued), was essentially precautionary: the necessity to make sure that no hostile or potentially hostile power should establish itself along the southern shore of the Gulf of Finland: not Denmark; and above all, not Russia. The fear of a Russian break-through to the Baltic was widespread in Europe,¹ and not least in Sweden. Already in Eric's time Swedish statesmen foresaw that the vastness of Russia, its limitless human resources, inherent strength and expansive force, would be the great danger they had to face in the future; and soon afterwards a spine-chilling prophecy became current, which predicted that in the year 1591 a Russian invasion of Finland would lead to the total destruction of the Swedish realm.² Already they had seen that they must either fight the Russians or be friends with them: successive generations would swing between these political alternatives.

In this view, then Sweden's lodgment in Estonia had as one of its objects the prevention of any irruption of the Muscovite to the Baltic shore; and thereafter the construction of an ever-deeper buffer-zone to insulate that lodgment from a Russian resurgence. For the foothold in Estonia could hardly be maintained if it were

¹ Georg von Rauch, 'Moskau und die europäischen Mächte des 17. Jahrhunderts', *Historische Zeitschrift (HZ)* 1954, p. 27.

² Kari Tarkiainen, 'Faran från öst i svensk säkerhetspolitisk diskussion inför Stolbovafreden', *Scandia* 1974, pp. 36–7.

10 THE SWEDISH IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE

bounded by the mediaeval walls of Reval. If Reval itself were to be safe it must be provided with some sort of hinterland, if only to deny to possible enemies the bases from which an attack could be mounted against it. But once the capture of neighbouring strongholds was begun, who could define the limits of strategic necessity, or set bounds to the process of expansion? The need for some sort of defence in depth appeared clearly in the time of John III, when the Swedes fought desperately, and for the most part alone, to stem the advance of the Muscovite to the sea. Not until the 1580s did the tide begin to turn in their favour. In 1581 Pontus de la Gardie took Narva. Its transference to Swedish control did indeed mark the end of its hectic prosperity; but it also marked the end of one of Ivan's most cherished commercial ambitions. When peace was made at Teusina in 1595, the whole of Estonia passed into Swedish hands. After a quarter of a century of war, Sweden found herself, not with an outpost, but with an overseas dominion.

Ten years later the threat from the east assumed a new character. Between 1605 and 1613 Russia was submerged in the anarchy of the Time of Troubles; and for a time it seemed possible that one solution to the confusion might lie in the election of a Polish Tsar. The consequences of such a union, at a time when Swedish and Polish forces were already fighting each other in Livonia, might be expected to be disastrous. In an effort to avert the danger Charles IX himself intervened in the Russian imbroglio; and Gustav Adolf after him put forward his brother as a candidate for the Muscovite throne. The attempt to give Russia a Swedish Tsar did indeed fail, though by a narrow margin; but the difficulties of Michael Romanov, struggling simultaneously against Polish and Swedish invasions, presented Sweden with a unique and fleeting opportunity to add a new defensive buttress in the east. Gustav Adolf did not fail to seize it. He was not, indeed, able to annex the vast areas of north-west Russia which had been included in his original peace-terms;¹ but the peace of Stolbova in 1617 for the first time gave to Sweden a deliberately-chosen strategic frontier.² By adding Ingria to the Swedish dominions it shut Russia off from the sea; it blocked Moscow's

¹ AOSB 1.ii.246; M. Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus. A History of Sweden 1611-1632*, 1 (London 1953), pp. 86-8. ² Tarkiainen, 'Faran från öst', pp. 44, 47.