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0521563143 - Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War - Erik Ringmar

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Introduction: the beginning of the story

Why are there wars? Why have human beings in practically all times and places seen it fit to kill each other, not just on an individual and one-on-one basis, but as a matter of official policy, backed up by the full resources of a community, a city or a state? And why has war participation often been regarded, not as a moral wrong, not even as a necessary evil, but as a heroic, glorious, enterprise? The answer to questions such as these may seem easy enough to find once we remember that wars in a certain respect are similar to games, namely occasions on which things can be won and lost. Statesmen, just like prospective game players, conclude that on balance they may stand to benefit from participation, and once this conclusion has been reached they simply act upon it. States go to war since going to war is *in their interest* to do; states act *rationally*, in order to maximise their gains or in order to minimise their losses.

On second thought, however, this rationalistic answer may not be entirely convincing. As any historian is able to tell us, the forces unleashed in a war are inherently difficult to assess beforehand: alliances shift, morale falters, rapid technological changes cause rapid transformations in the balance of power. Similarly the risks involved in a war are invariably high: a regime may be overthrown if defeated, the country may be invaded and occupied. As a result gains and losses from a potential war participation are often next to impossible to calculate in advance, and under such conditions it is simply very difficult to settle on a rational course of action.

This conclusion is further reinforced if the participation in war is viewed not from the perspective of the state, but from the perspective of the individuals, the soldiers, who are to do the actual fighting. If war participation for the state is difficult to calculate in a rational manner, war participation for each individual is often nothing short of senseless. Wars are matters of life and death, after all, and not the kinds of things in which we normally

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engage freely. As a consequence of a war we may not just win or lose utility, but also our lives, and it is difficult to see how any potential benefits can convince us to run this risk.

So why, then, do people go? How can statesmen rely on the loyalty of their citizens, and how can individual soldiers motivate themselves to leave for the front? And most importantly for our purposes: how are scholars to explain the outbreak of war? How can historians and social scientists make sense of actions which might not have made any sense to the people who performed them? In reply to this last question two ready-made replies have traditionally been invoked: that people go to war because they are coerced into doing so, or because they stand to gain monetary or other rewards from it. There may of course be something to both of these answers. Soldiers do no doubt sometimes fight because they have to and sometimes also because of the economic benefits they may reap. Yet carrots and sticks are hardly sufficient in and of themselves. Pure coercion cannot sustain a prolonged war effort, and whenever there is a real possibility of losing one's life it is difficult to justify war participation by the spoils it may bring. There must surely be better ways of securing one's life and one's property than warfare, and if this is the case, there must also be better ways for historians and social scientists to explain its occurrence.¹

Once we have reached these conclusions we may perhaps be tempted to regard wars as inherently irrational enterprises. Perhaps statesmen engage in them only because they have miscalculated their interests, overestimated the benefits of war and underestimated the risks. Perhaps the individuals who go off happily to the fronts are dupes, indoctrinated by official propaganda, or perhaps driven by a death-wish or by a subconscious desire to kill. To call war participation irrational, however, is not to explain it, but rather to decide *not to* explain it. If we take rationality as the norm by which actions are to be measured, then irrational actions become, by definition, abnormal and incomprehensible. As long as rationality is allowed to provide the rule, irrationality will provide the exception: irrationality becomes a residual factor which we invoke only when our explanations fail.

Yet, and as I will argue at length below, there is another possibility. The fact that wars appear as irrational may in fact tell us very little about the stupidity or unreasonableness of human beings and very much about the limits of our contemporary explanatory accounts. The deficiency, in other words, may rest not with the soldiers or with those who order them into battle, but rather with the scholars who attempt to explain these actions. More concretely: the problem may rest with the very model – the rational choice model – through which actions like wars have traditionally been explained. The best way to show that this is indeed the case is to come up

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with a different – a non-rationalistic – model and to demonstrate that actions which rationalism was unable to account for can be explained in terms of it. The most general aim of this book is to do precisely this. I will introduce an alternative theory of action and go on to use it in order to explain puzzling actions such as wars. As I hope to show, my explanation succeeds where the traditional, rationalistic, model fails.

At the core of this alternative theory stands the suggestion that people act not only in order to win things, but also in order to defend a certain conception of who they are. We act, that is, not only because there are things we want to have, but also because there are persons we want to *be*. In fact, this latter kind of actions must be the more fundamental since it only is *as someone* that we can have an interest *in something*. Without this 'someone' there would simply not be anyone around for whom something could, or could not, be an interest. Actions undertaken in order to establish this someone are thus the more basic and they cannot be redescribed in rationalistic terms – calculations of utility gains and utility losses can make no sense until they can be attached to a certain person.

It is very common, we noted above, to compare actions with moves in a game. Just as the participants in a game, human beings allegedly do what they do because of the payoffs the prospective action may bring. What this rationalistic interpretation overlooks, however, is the simple fact that people generally do not play games in order to win things. While most games certainly may offer a prize of some kind to the winner – a trophy, a medal or a king's daughter – these prizes are more often than not mere pretexts for engaging in the game in the first place. Given the high costs involved in the practising of many sports, the slim chances of winning at a lottery, or the risks involved in the slaying of dragons, pursuits like these are not likely to yield much profit. In utilitarian terms the game is very rarely worth the candle.

Why, then, if not for rationalistic reasons, do we play? Although there are no doubt many answers to this question, it is worth underlining the obvious, yet easily neglected, fact that we participate in games because we want to excel over others.² Winning *as such* is what is important, not whatever additional rewards winning might bring. And why, then, do people want to win? Simply put: because winning is desired by others; we want to win because others want to win. By winning we can manifest our superiority; we become 'winners', and everyone else is forced to recognise us as such. Even if we cannot all win, however, just participating in a game is often important enough. By participating we can assume a certain role and abide by a certain set of rules, and in this way present ourselves as persons of a

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certain kind.³ To wit: games do not generally concern utility payoffs, but instead questions of *identities*, and people do not generally engage in them because of what they can win, but instead because of who or what the game allows them to be.⁴

Looked at as a problem concerning identities rather than utilities, the puzzle concerning war participation becomes easier to solve. For war to make sense from each individual's point of view, those individuals must see themselves as living in the kind of societies where they can make sense of their lives; there must be a life worth living and a life for which they are prepared to die. If this is the case – or if the official war propaganda is able to convince them that this is the case – it may indeed be necessary to resist a military threat. If the enemy is sufficiently alien and sufficiently powerful, it is possible that a defeat and an invasion may alter us, turn us into someone we are not. As some future, potential, selves, we may perhaps enjoy life under Communism, Nazism or Shiite Islam, but for us today those future selves may just as well be different persons. There is no point outside of our present identity from which a future, radically alien, identity can be judged. The present self is the only standard by which life can be measured and if we do not fight for who we are nothing else will ever make sense.⁵ Hence, as long as we are loyal to our communities and identify ourselves in relation to them, we may have no other choice and very little bargaining power *vis-à-vis* our political and military authorities. We act, not in defence of our interests, but in defence of our identity.

Sweden goes to war

Theoretical arguments, when presented alone, often fail to persuade. Although we may perhaps be convinced in the abstract, we cannot really tell what difference a certain theoretical perspective makes until we have come to incorporate it as a part of the intellectual framework through which we normally interpret our lives. For this more radical – more practical – conversion to take place we typically need to illustrate the abstract argument with the help of some concrete example or case study. The aim of the second part of this book is to do precisely this: I will explain why Sweden went to war against the armies of the Habsburg emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the year 1630. As I will argue, all previous scholars who have explained the Swedish intervention have done so in rationalistic terms, but as I will show, such explanations overlook the most important aspects of the war. A focus on interests alone cannot explain the Swedish decision to intervene; for that we need an explanation which is able to focus also on questions of identities.

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But why should we study this long-forgotten war rather than some other, more recent, conflict? Why should a potential reader accept an invitation to explore why Sweden went to war in 1630? This is an important question, of course, but before I address it, let me briefly introduce the Swedish case study.

On 26 June 1630 a first contingent of Swedish troops under the command of king Gustav II Adolf landed on the island of Usedom on the northern coast of Germany. A month later they were joined by the rest of the army, bringing its total to 12,000 men. The Swedish intervention into the German War – what historians later were to refer to as the ‘Thirty Years War’ – was a fact. Sweden had joined the Protestant side in the great conflagration which had set the new religion against the old and which already for twelve years had wreaked enormous damage on the European continent. The Swedish king had pitted his country against the military might of the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna.⁶

The most immediate problem facing the Swedish army in the summer of 1630 was how to gain a foothold on German territory. Luckily there were not many Imperial forces in the province of Pomerania where they had landed, but the Swedes were very short of supplies and their king was greeted with suspicion and hostility in all quarters. Yet the Swedish army was too large to be fed in the small coastal area it had occupied; they had to move forward even at the risk of antagonising one or another of the multitude of princes, bishops, archbishops, palsgraves, margraves, landgraves, counts, viscounts, dukes and archdukes who constituted the political mosaic which was the Holy Roman Empire. The Swedish army occupied the town of Stettin and established itself on both sides of the river Oder.

Later the same summer, Sweden acquired its first allies. On 1 August, Gustav Adolf concluded a treaty with Magdeburg, a Protestant city which only a year before had survived a protracted siege by the Imperial general Albrecht von Wallenstein. Later in August the count of Pomerania also joined the Swedish side. Yet this was not, properly speaking, a diplomatic break-through for the Swedes. The Pomeranians had been won over only at gun point and relations between the Swedish king and the rest of the Protestant princes in Germany were to remain troubled throughout the course of the war. While the German Protestants no doubt regarded the invasion of their Swedish co-religionists as a unique opportunity to extort privileges from the Catholic emperor, they also mistrusted the Swedes: they were suspicious of Gustav Adolf's intentions, feared the reaction of their Catholic neighbours, and balked at the prospective presence of a Swedish

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army which in large part would have to be clothed, fed and housed with the help of the resources of Protestant German lands. When the German Protestants met in Leipzig in February 1631, Johann Georg of Saxony – the leading Protestant prince in Germany at the time – declared that he was not prepared to join any arrangement which could be regarded as hostile to the empire.

When the military campaign began in the spring of 1631 the Swedes encountered their first serious adversary: Jean Tilly, the Imperial general who had fought, and thoroughly defeated, the rebellious Protestants in Bohemia in the early 1620s. General Tilly's first major military action was to lay a siege on the city of Magdeburg, the Swedish ally. On 10 May, the citizens of Magdeburg were forced to surrender and in the confusion which followed the city was swept by a conflagration in which 20,000 persons were killed. The disaster was a military setback and a great humiliation to the Swedes. During the months which followed, however, Gustav Adolf discovered – much to his own surprise – that the situation had improved. Tilly moved out of Magdeburg and turned to the east, and as a consequence the Swedes suddenly found themselves in something of a military vacuum. Gustav Adolf was not slow in seizing the opportunity: at the end of June he moved out of the Brandenburg region, took Tangermünde, moved across the river Elbe and proceeded to construct a huge fortified camp at Werben. This rapid campaign was a turning-point in the war. It was a turning-point for the Swedes since they now, for the first time, had moved out of the Baltic coastal lands and into a new supply area in central Germany, but also for the German Protestants – and the recalcitrant Elector of Saxony – who now began taking a more positive view of Gustav Adolf's project. Also the prestige of Saxony had suffered as a result of the fall of Magdeburg, and in the wake of the disaster it had become increasingly obvious that Johann Georg's previous policy of neutrality and moderation was impossible to sustain. On 2 September, Sweden and Saxony concluded an alliance 'for as long as the danger from the enemy shall continue'.⁷

The Swedish army, reinforced by Saxon troops, marched on to meet Tilly's forces, and on 9 September 1631 the two armies met at Breitenfeld. It was a spectacular battle and a spectacular victory for Gustav Adolf, for Sweden and for the Protestant cause. When night fell, the Imperial army was completely defeated and the invincible general Tilly was on the run. Church bells celebrated the event, we are told, all over Protestant lands and even as far away as in Moscow. As a result of the victory, Gustav Adolf's position improved dramatically. For a while he considered pursuing Tilly's fleeing troops by marching directly on Vienna, but he eventually settled on

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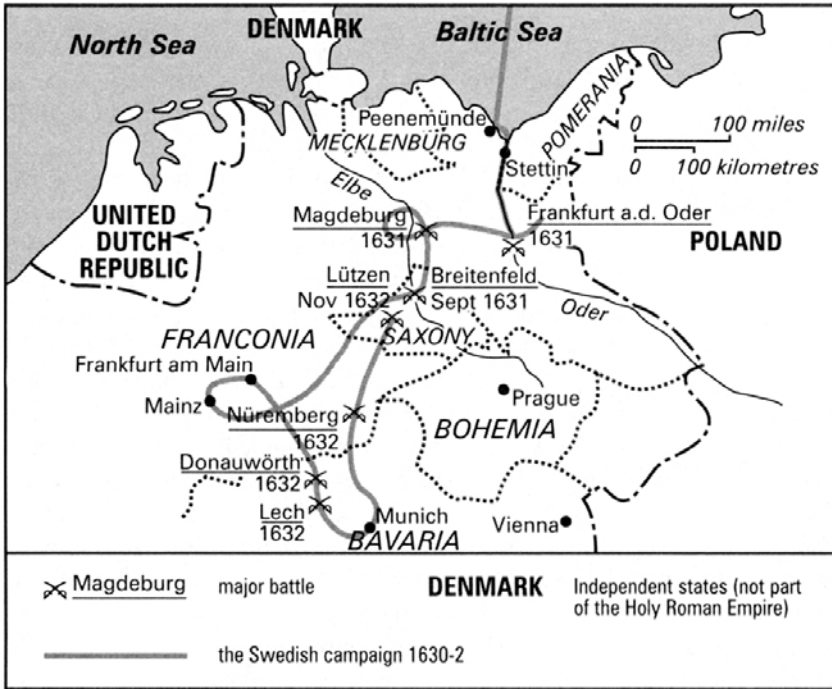


Figure 1 The Swedish intervention, 1630–2

a more cautious course and turned his troops to Franconia, a rich area in western Germany previously untouched by the war. The Swedes entered Würzburg on 4 October, Frankfurt on 17 November, Worms on 7 December and Mainz on 12 December, where they settled for the winter.

At the winter headquarters Gustav Adolf kept court like a new emperor. He received delegations from all over German territory and began to draw up plans for a Protestant union – a *corpus evangelicum* – which could guarantee himself and Sweden a permanent influence in German affairs. Yet his plans also took on a wider, all-European, scope: Swedish agents drafted alliances with potential anti-Habsburg powers wherever they could be found – Gustav Adolf received missions from the ruler of Transylvania, the Khan of the Crimean Tartars, and he even dispatched an embassy to the Sultan. King Gustav Adolf was suddenly the most powerful man in Europe. There was something extraordinary – even miraculous – about this unexpected shift of fortunes, and not surprisingly a number of legends came to be associated with the Swedish king. Gustav Adolf was the ‘lion from the north’ who had appeared in the prophecies of Paracelsus, the

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sixteenth-century physician and necromancer; Gustav Adolf was the 'storm from the north' which Ezekiel had foreseen two thousand years earlier. His latinised name (Gustavus), somebody discovered, was an anagram of Augustus, the first Roman emperor who had ruled the world.⁸

The Swedish objective for the military campaign of 1632 was nothing but total victory. Gustav Adolf would, as he put it, 'clip the wings of the Imperialists so that they shall not fly again'; the only acceptable peace, according to Axel Oxenstierna, the Swedish chancellor, was a peace 'with our foot on their neck and a knife at their throat'.⁹ The plan was to move rapidly through Bavaria, to crush the Habsburg armies in the emperor's hereditary lands and then to capture Vienna itself. Yet, as it would turn out, the campaign of 1632 was much more difficult than the previous year's. Forced to strengthen his defences, the Habsburg emperor had turned to the legendary – but also notoriously independent-minded – general Albrecht von Wallenstein for help. Wallenstein was reinstated as head of the second Austrian army and he soon began recruiting and training troops in Bohemia. Although this posed no direct challenge to Gustav Adolf's army in the south, it did threaten the heart of the Swedish position in the province of Thuringia, as well as Saxony, Sweden's new ally. In an attempt to relieve pressure on these positions and incite Wallenstein to move south, the Swedes occupied Nuremberg, Augsburg and Munich and laid waste to much of the Bavarian countryside. Yet Wallenstein refused to leave his position. At the end of the summer Gustav Adolf suddenly received news that the Protestant position in the north was under attack and he decided to march to their rescue.

The first major engagement between the Swedish and the Imperial armies took place at the small Saxon village of Lützen on 6 November 1632. Gustav Adolf had surprised Wallenstein with his sudden appearance on the Saxon theatre and, as the king was aware, some of the Imperial forces had temporarily been scattered. Yet a direct attack on Wallenstein's position proved to be impossible: the morning of 6 November was very foggy and only by noon were military operations practicable. As soon as Gustav Adolf gave the order, however, the centre of the Swedish army went on the offensive while the Swedish left wing launched an attack on the Habsburgs' right. Soon a panic flight developed among the Imperial troops which threatened a large section of their forces with disintegration. The battle seemed as good as over. At this point, however, the mist came down again, and this concealed the extent of the Swedish advantage. In the confusion the Swedish left wing suddenly ran into tough resistance, and in an effort to relieve them king Gustav Adolf took personal command of a cavalry regiment which he launched upon the enemy. Almost immediately,

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however, the king was hit. An Austrian horseman fired a pistol in his back, he fell from the saddle, and as he lay face downward in the mud a final shot through the head ended his life. After a long day of intense fighting the Swedes had won the battle, but no victory could make up for the fact that the king was dead. 'May God console us poor Swedish men', as Gabriel Oxenstierna put it in a letter to his brother Axel, the chancellor, 'who have lost this dear and precious pearl of our fatherland'.¹⁰

Despite the death of the king, however, the Swedish engagement in Germany did continue. Chancellor Oxenstierna, who was a highly skilled administrator, looked after the Pomeranian province in the north and reinforced the Swedish diplomatic network, and a number of very resourceful Swedish generals continued the military campaigns, often with considerable success. Yet the momentum was gone. After the death of the king, the German Protestants were less than enthusiastic about supporting a Swedish-dominated security system, and the Swedish war-machine was difficult to maintain in a Germany increasingly ravaged by war. The Swedes were no longer powerful enough to impose their will through military means – a conclusion only reinforced by the battle of Nördlingen, August 1634, at which the Swedish army suffered a humiliating defeat. By 1638 it was clear that Sweden could hope to fight its way to acceptable peace terms only with the aid of foreign mercenaries paid for by subsidies provided by Cardinal Richelieu's government in France.

If we turn away from the chronology of the 'German War' – the 'Thirty Years War' – and look instead at the consequences it brought, these can be summarised in a number of different ways. For Sweden, first of all, the war meant that the country secured its sovereignty and an officially recognised place as a legitimate member of the community of European states. In fact, it achieved much more than this: when the peace treaty was finally signed in Westphalia in 1648, Sweden was generally regarded as a major political power and as one of the principal players in European politics. As far as Germany was concerned, the war brought an unprecedented destruction of crops, a complete devastation of large parts of the country, and untold suffering to millions of people. The Thirty Years War, we could say, was the first modern – the first 'total' – war. In political terms, the Westphalian settlement reaffirmed German disunity: by strengthening the Protestant princes and their relative independence at the expense of the hegemonic position of the empire, a unification of the country from Vienna, and under Catholicism, was precluded. This failure would continue to be an important theme of European politics during the following centuries and a source of embarrassment to later generations of German nationalists.

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In somewhat more abstract and general terms we could perhaps say that the military, political and ideological bankruptcy of the empire contributed to a radical reformulation of the very categories through which politics was analysed and understood. Throughout the Middle Ages the post-Roman myth of the empire still played an important role. Just as there was only one religious community governed by one church, there was, according to this mythology, only one political community governed by one ruler. As a consequence of the Thirty Years War, however, this mythology was shattered. From Westphalia and onwards, the *state* was instead the only legitimate political entity; states were governed by rulers who declared themselves 'sovereign', acknowledging no rival authorities above them and none below. Around the state a new kind of political life began to develop, and also a new kind of world – *inter-national* – politics. This is the 'modern age' and the 'modern world' of which we ourselves are still a part. No, the Swedish intervention of 1630 did not by itself bring about this transformation – it was *not* its sole cause – but with 350 years of hindsight we can conclude that it did contribute to this outcome and that, at any rate, it is a very good symbol of it.

Why did Sweden go to war in 1630?

Although the Swedish intervention into the Thirty Years War can thus be shown to have had a number of important, far-reaching, consequences, no discussion regarding consequences alone will ever answer the question of why Sweden went to war *in the first place*. On the contrary, any attempt at a posterior rationalisation will inevitably risk hiding the possible anterior irrationality of the whole enterprise. In fact, and as even the most superficial study will reveal, there were several strong reasons for early-seventeenth-century Sweden *not* to engage in a continental war of this magnitude. The country was too poor and too economically backward, first of all; its population was not large enough and the country lacked the man-power and the potential soldiers. There was, furthermore, no socio-economic base for imperialism: Sweden had no large cities except for Stockholm, no middle class, few skilled administrators and an aristocratic class which by European standards was exceptionally small. Indeed geography itself seemed to condemn Sweden to a peripheral role on the world stage: the country was pent up in a remote corner of Europe; it had no stakes in European affairs; no glorious history to defend and no important dynastic ties to any of the combatants on the continent. And perhaps most importantly of all: at the time of the intervention the country had no allies and no financial support from any quarter. The other Protestant states –