

# Strindberg's Thirty Year's War

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## Strindberg's Thirty Year's War

The picture in Sweden of the Thirty Year's War is traditionally that of a religious war, where the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus, with his army hurried to the rescue of his German brothers in faith. This picture was first constructed by Swedish propaganda during the war itself, and during the two centuries that followed it had grown to one of the most definite truths in the writing of Swedish history.

There was no serious attempt to confute this generally accepted point of view until 1878, when Julis Mankell wrote an article in *Historiskt bibliotek* under the heading of *Om orsakerna till Gustaf II Adolfs deltagande i trettioåriga kriget*. (*On the reasons for Gustavus Adolphus's intervention in the Thirty Year's War*.) In this article Mankell tries to prove, that the Swedish intervention in 1630 was no more and no less than an act of imperialism. According to Mankell the enormous Swedish armaments during the 1620's must be interpreted as part of a long-term imperialistic aim early directed towards Germany. These armaments were undertaken in times when there were no military threats against Sweden to be seen.

Mankell also points out how Gustavus Adolphus made conquests in northern Germany at the expence of his own brothers in faith. There are even indications that he sought to be a protestantic emperor. Gustavus Adolphus himself used religion as a cover only when adressing the general public, members of the Swedish parliament, German citizens or soldiers. In the diplomatic acts that are preserved and in the correspondence between the king and the council there are, according to Mankell, no references to religious motives. In these documents facts are always of a powerpolitical nature.

Mankell's article was paid great attention and resulted in a debate in the Swedish newspapers. The strongest criticism came from Claes Theodor Odner, a professor and a wellknown writer of schoolbooks of history. In *Historiskt bibliotek* 1879 he made a "critical illumination"

of Mankell's article and disputed his results. Mankell published an entire book on the subject in 1881, and Odner also broadened his criticism in a book published in 1882, the profit of which were given to the celebrations of Gustavus Adolphus the same year. 250 years had elapsed since his death at Lützen.

The official opinion was against Mankell, and he was forced to resign from his post as an officer. He was later to become a radical liberal member of the Swedish parliament.

The radical opinion, however, supported Mankell, and Strindberg wrote a poem, "För tankens frihet" (To the Freedom of Thought), where Mankell appears, yet without mentioning his name. This poem has been analysed by Olof Lagercrantz, who points out how Strindberg not only shows Mankell as an outcast. The poem is mainly built around the aforementioned jubilee and supports the views put forward by Mankell in the public debate.

Strindberg's critical attitude toward the official Swedish history-writing is also apparent in his historical writings at this time, e. g. *Svenska folket* (*The Swedish People*).

The Thirty Year's War came to be actualized in a somewhat strange way to Strindberg during his second marriage, in the 90's. When their daughter Kerstin was born the Strindberg family stayed with Frida's parents at Dornach by the Danube. Strindberg's parents in law were catholics, and particularly Marie Uhl seems to have been zealous for her faith. She obviously immediately started to work for a catholic baptism of the newborn child. We know about the events that followed through a series of contemporary letters from Strindberg to Leopold Littmansson in Paris. Strindberg has later, in 1898, described these events in his autobiographic novel *Klostret* (*The Monastery*), that was not to be published until 1966, long after Strindberg's death. Parts of the novel, however, were published in a reworked state in 1902 as "Karantänmästarens andra berättelse" (The Quarantinemaster's Second Tale) in *Fagervik och Skamsund* (*Fagervik and Skamsund*). We can also learn about the events from Frida's book *Strindberg och hans andra hustru* (*Strindberg and his Second Wife*). It should be observed, however, that these sources make our knowledge somewhat uncertain. Strindberg's versions must be considered biased, and the low reliability of Frida's book has often been observed. But as often is the case Strindberg's picture of the events is more interesting than are the

events themselves, which means that the lack of additional sources is of no great consequence in this context.

Strindberg and his wife, none of them particularly religious at this time, didn't care at first whether the child was baptized or not. Confronted with his mother-in-law's demands for a catholic baptism, she seems to have been supported by the public opinion in the neighbourhood, Strindberg reacted very strongly, as he often did when exposed to pressure of various kinds. It is interesting to note, that he uses the Thirty Year's War as a picture, when he describes the situation. In a letter to Littmansson the 31st of July 1894 he writes:

Svärföräldrar och Gross-dito äro ultra katoliker. De ville döpa barnet katolskt absolut, men vi unga ville inte, Då lockade man först med värdsligt gull; så vräkte man ut oss. Därpå smygdöpte man barnet. Då bröt 30-åriga kriget ut och jag som Alter Schwede slog katolikerna i ett stort slag.

(Parents in law and Grand-ditto are ultra catholics. They absolutely wanted to baptize the child catholic, but we young ones didn't want to. Then they first tried to tempt us with earthly goods; then they threw us out. Thereafter they baptized the child in secret. That caused the outbreak of the Thirty Year's War and I as Alter Schwede beat the catholics in a great battle.)

And in *Klostret* we read:

– Att bli martyr för en tro som man icke äger, är dock något barockt. Och att vi skulle börja leka om trettioåriga kriget härnere väntade jag icke. Men akta er, ni: svensken kommer! och tar sin dotter med sig på trossen, ty hon är svensk undersåte.

(– To become a martyr for a faith that you don't have, is an absurd thing. And I didn't expect that we would start replaying the Thirty Year's War down here. But watch out: the Swede comes! and brings his daughter on the baggage-train, for she is a Swedish citizen.)

We cannot know, what Strindberg means when he says that he beat the catholics in a great battle, but that probably isn't important either. But it is interesting to note, how he now uses the traditional interpretation of the Thirty Year's War, as a religious war, an interpretation that is opposed to the one he supported during the 80's.

When Strindberg eventually moved back to Sweden, he revived his interest in Swedish history and in the historical drama. While working with the historical dramas he finally moved home to Stockholm and the

archipelago. In the archipelago he wrote *Erik XIV*, and the first work he completed after having moved to Stockholm was *Gustaf Adolf*.

Apart from a single early sketch Strindberg immediately seems to have decided to keep the whole play within Gustavus Adolphus's German campaign. It is also obvious, that he early in his work with *Gustaf Adolf* actualized his Dornach-experiences. In a letter on the 17th of September 1899 adressed to his daughter Kerstin Strindberg writes:

Bald will ich Gustaf Adolf dramatisieren und dann heimsuche ich auch Böhmen und Donau. «Der Schwede kommt!»

Apart from a letter to Gustaf af Geijerstam the same day this is the first indication we have of Strindberg's work with *Gustaf Adolf*. We can observe the verbal likeness with the quotation from *Klostret* above.

In Strindberg's play the Swedish king is also shown as a penitent in much the same way as the character in his book *Inferno*. In other words it is obvious that Strindberg used his own experiences and moods, when he created the main character of *Gustaf Adolf*.

It is also likely that Strindberg in Gustavus Adolphus's German campaign could recognize and revive his own last journey to Germany. That is the journey upon which the chapter Beatrice in *Inferno* is based and that went from Stettin to Berlin and through great forests to the Danube. Its geographical extension reminds of the sequence of settings in *Gustaf Adolf*.

The great influence Strindberg allowed his own experiences to have when he created his Gustavus Adolphus-character and the identification he felt with that character also had consequences for the description of the Thirty Year's War in the play. In the first act the Swedish king sees the war only as a religious war. In other words he sees the war and his own part in it in the same light as official Swedish history writing did. Strindberg, too, must have looked upon the war in this way in 1894 when he used the war as a picture of his controversy with his mother in law. In the play, however, only the king has this narrow view. Both the German population and the Swedish generals show a more complex understanding. Great pain is then taken in the play to show the king's road to a broadened understanding, religious tolerance and even interest in the catholic faith. This development is an obvious parallel to Strindberg's own development from the time of his second

marriage through his *Infernocrises* to the religiously coloured belief in the guidance of a supreme power that he reached in the last years of the 90's.

The play also shows, in a dialectic form, the development of an interpretation of history. Antithetic to the king the Swedish generals, mainly Johan Banér, represent the powerpolitically founded interpretation of history that Mankell, and Strindberg himself, had put forward in the public debate in the 80's. During the play the king unveils these two interpretations and eventually understands how a superior power leads the historical events in an emotionally detached and amoral way. This way to interpret history was also to become Strindberg's own, and he gave it a coherent description in a series of articles in the *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1903 under the title of "Världshistoriens mystik" (Mysticism in World history). There he writes:

Men detta hemlighetsfulla i världsprocessen som vi icke kunna förklara, detta människans omedvetna strävande utan kännedom om målet men i den medvetna viljans tjänst, är vad jag kallat mystik.

(But this mysteriousness in the world process that we cannot explain, this Man's unconscious strivings without knowledge of the aim but in the service of the conscious will, is what I call mysticism.)

Strindberg had come to believe, that there was a supreme power that guided everything that took place on earth, and one of the main themes in *Gustaf Adolf* is how the king reaches the same knowledge.

Now, why is this at all interesting? Why is it necessary to set forth more examples of the connection between Strindberg's life and works? This is something that Strindberg scholars have always done. We have, in fact, often been criticized for doing nothing else.

Apart from the fact that the study of the connections between an author's life and his works can be justified as such, the case that has been related here is particularly interesting, because we are dealing with a historical drama. The introduction of personal experiences, that contribute to making the characters of a historical drama more complex, is of immediate consequence for the genre as such.

The history play had not developed in the same way in Sweden as in Germany or France, where it had turned into a drama of ideas or into an intrigue drama. Ever since its breakthrough, which mainly took place on the royal stages in Stockholm during the national romantic revival in the middle of the 19th century, the Swedish history play had

been fixed as a genre. It can generally be described as stage representations of, usually well known, historical facts. In a fairly unrevised shape the material was taken from the history books of the time, and since the leading maxim of Swedish historywriting was, that the history of Sweden was the history of its kings, the history play devoted itself to showing these on the stage. The kings then didn't appear as complex, psychological individuals but were instead emblematic representations of the greatness of Sweden. In some of the reviews that followed the publication of *Gustaf Adolf* in 1900 we can see that the genre rules for the history play were still living realities at the turn of the century. As a result of the severe criticism that had been directed at the plays published the year before, *Folkungasagan*, *Gustaf Vasa*, and *Erik XIV*, Strindberg had really tried his best to get the sequence of historical events in his new drama correct. The newspaper reviewers now all gave him recognition on this point. They were, however, divided in their opinions about the main character. The reviewers in liberal or social-democratic newspapers showed understanding for the fact that Strindberg had created a dramatic figure wearing the name of a Swedish king as a complex individual. These reviewers obviously operated with a set of aesthetic ideals, where psychological analysis of individuals were more important than the pursuit of the fixed genre rules of the old history play.

The reviewers in the conservative newspapers looked at the matter in a different way. They criticized Strindberg precisely for having put the king forth the way he did. To them it was still unacceptable to show a Swedish king as a complex, searching individual.

To be able to understand this division of the reviewers into two camps, a division that actually follows the partypolitical grouping of the newspapers, it will be necessary to take a short look at the development of the Swedish society.

In the time that elapsed from the middle of the 19th century, when the history play was established as a genre, and to the turn of the century Sweden had changed much. From having been an agrarian country with its power apparatus concentrated at the court and the central administration it had slowly been industrialised and had slid into a capitalistically organised economy. This development had been slower in Sweden than in western Europe, but during the trade boom that began in the middle of the 90's the very breakthrough came.

Socially this meant that masses of people moved to the cities and the industries, and that the bourgeoisie and the working class grew. The old civil-servant aristocracy was threatened and replaced as bearer of the culture by this new bourgeoisie that organized the bookmarket for its needs and that began to fill the theatres.

Both as spectators and as owners of most of the theatres the bourgeoisie had a substantial influence on the theatrical world in Stockholm at the turn of the century. This contrasts sharply to the situation in the beginning of the 19th century. There was then a royal theatre monopoly in the city, and the court and the circles around the central administration were the dominating audience on the two royal theatres. The monopoly was broken, when in 1841 Parliament threatened to withdraw the financial support to the royal theatres. This marked a beginning of a decline of the royal theatres linked to a growth of private theatres.

In the early 1880's king Oscar II parted with the royal theatres, and in 1888 the government turned them over to private entrepreneurs, when Parliament finally refused further financial backing. The opera came to be run by its conductor and the dramatic theatre was taken over by an association of distinguished actors. Both theatres, however, were supervised by the court. At the turn of the century there were two big dramatic stages in Stockholm. There was the ex royal Dramatiska teatern, supervised by a royal censor, baron Bonde. There was also the large Svenska teatern, owned by Albert Ranft, who ran his growing theatrical empire just like any other business.

It was on the Svenska teatern that Strindberg's two historical dramas *Gustaf Vasa* and *Erik XIV* were first performed in the autumn 1899. His third historical drama from this year, *Folkungasagan* was accepted by the Dramatiska teatern, but the theatre eventually broke the contract. Stig Torsslow, who has looked into these events in his book *Dramatenaktörernas republik (The Republic of the Dramaten Actors)* suggests that this was the result of baron Bonde's resistance. The baron did not agree with Strindberg's way of dealing with Swedish history in this drama.

The two different attitudes towards this specific dramatic genre were clearly demonstrated in the autumn of 1899 when the privately owned Svenska teatern played Strindberg's *Erik XIV*. At the same time the royally supervised Dramatiska teatern performed a play by Adolf Paul,



*Karin Månsdotter*, based on the same historical events. Paul's piece adopts the old genre rules for history plays. It can be described as a dramatized history-book. The conservative critics, that could not accept Strindberg's licentious way of treating Swedish history instead accepted Paul's play. The liberal critics, on the other hand, who praised the psychological three-dimensionality of Strindberg's historical characters met Paul's dramatized history-lesson with severe criticism.

In the court-circles, on the royally supervised theatre and among reviewers in conservative or semi-official newspapers the genre rules for history plays were still valid. Among the bourgeois spectators, on private theatres and in liberal or social-democratic newspapers the description of historical symbol-figures as psychologically complex private individuals was looked upon with favour.

As the industrial society had begun to dominate Swedish economy and private theatres had got the better of the royal theatres, the liberal reviewers dominated the public debate. Partially of course for the simple reason, that the majority of the Stockholm newspapers were liberal.

In spite of that, Strindberg was impressed by the conservative criticism that *Gustaf Vasa* and *Erik XIV* received for lack of historical exactness; and he tried hard to get the chronology and the basic framework of the historical events correct in *Gustaf Adolf*. His will to adapt himself was, however, broken when it, during the conception, was confronted with the intensity of his German and Austrian experiences. These made it impossible for him to free his dramatic characters from his own personal problems. It is therefore fair to say that Strindberg's German and Austrian experiences were instrumental in the breaking down of the rules of a specifically Swedish dramatic genre and change it, so that it could be accepted by the bourgeoisie.

It is also fair to say that the sense of recognition Strindberg must have felt when, in his drama, he followed Gustavus Adolphus's German campaign, had consequences for the way in which the war was described. It is striking, how much of the war that is seen from a German point of view. Unlike most earlier Swedish writers Strindberg observed, how horrible the Thirty Year's War must have been for the German population.

Through characters such as the miller and his wife, the cooper at Stettin and his family and others Strindberg succeeds to show the terrible effects of the war, and how meaningless the Swedish intervention

must have been to a people who only wanted peace. Like in the other great play about the Thirty Year's War, Brecht's *Mutter Courage*, only one human being dies on stage in *Gustaf Adolf*. Nevertheless both plays admirably succeed to show the devastating effects of the war.

Brecht wrote his play in Sweden during the Second World War, and one should at least be allowed to suspect that he read Strindberg's *Gustaf Adolf* while working with *Mutter Courage*.

*Gustaf Adolf* was accepted but never played by the Svenska teatern. It was instead first performed in December 1903 on the Berliner Theater under the management of Alfred Halm. This German interest in the play may have been the result of the fact, that Strindberg did not look upon the Thirty Year's War from an exclusively Swedish point of view. The Berlin production, however, seems to have been a solid fiasco. While correspondence to Swedish newspapers hinted that this was mainly due to bad settings and poor stage lighting, Strindberg himself guessed otherwise. In an article in the Svenska Dagbladet shortly after the German première, he expresses the belief that it was still impossible for the Germans to accept even a play about someone who had done Germany such wrong. He points at

...Tysklands förhärjande av svenskar och fransmän; och svenska namnet levde sedan förbannat i Tyskland. Tänk er en främling som svensken, vilken inlockar urfienden fransmannen i Tyska riket!

(...the devastation of Germany by Swedes and Frenchmen; and the name of Sweden then lived damned in Germany. Imagine a stranger like the Swede, who brings the eternal enemy the French into the German realm.)

In other words Strindberg himself believed, that he had not, after all, been able to bring enough of a German perspective into *Gustaf Adolf*.

