

Chapter 1 : Jean-Baptiste Jules Bernadotte | Charles XIV John – The Sources.

When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.
John Ford (1962)

August 21, 1810, under chaotic and odd circumstances, the French parvenu Jean-Baptiste Jules Bernadotte was elected heir apparent to the Swedish throne. In Sweden he is (according to the traditional order of regents) known as *Karl XIV Johan*. In Norway he is known as *Karl III Johan*. In English speaking countries he is known as *Charles XIV John*. His biography is here detailed in 12 chapters: Sources (this chapter), the French period (1763-1810; four chapters), “The Bernadotte Campaign“ (1810; one chapter), the Swedish period (1810-1844; two chapters) & his legacy (six chapters).

The uneven distribution of sources makes for uneven quality of the biographies. All of them have their shortcomings and there are still question marks concerning Jean Bernadotte's life and works. On the plus side, the archives have become accessible and it has become possible to collate facts & assess the accuracy of contemporary judgments. On the negative side, the “zeitgeist“ has been lost, so later biographies tend to make him more modern in his thinking than is warranted. No one has ever doubted his energy & intelligence, but he was a wartime phenomena, a non-commissioned officer from the provinces promoted to general, autodidact, born & raised in the 18th century under l'Ancien Régime, and this whole world has since been destroyed by the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Vienna Congress, the parliamentary democracies & two world wars. He is hard to understand.

Jean's Swedish biographer Torvald T:son Höjer (1906-1962) summarized it as the French period until Jean's officer appointment in 1792 was largely undocumented and that Jean had a large information advantage for the period 1792-1810 by bringing his personal archives when he moved to Sweden. He took advantage of this by employing ghost writers and by providing biased information to his biographers. Meanwhile, a number of French memoirs were written in which the authors tried to bring him down to earth. The death of Jean in 1844 is considered the end of this witness literature. Anyone with any personal knowledge of him was then dead. It then took until the 20th century until the French, German, English, Swedish and so on archives were in order.¹ Then the work began to put it all together.

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Personally, I find the Bernadotte literature - a mixture of anecdotes, partisan contributions, long winded eulogies, four-colour prints & statistics - frustrating. One might think that after 200 years it would be possible to “grasp“ him, but no. The detailing of his person, career & deeds do not make sense. The more one reads, the more one becomes convinced that some essential part is missing or misinterpreted. Carl-Fredrik Palmstierna put it this way:

The problem with describing Karl XIV Johan's long career is to organically link the revolutionary general of France with the future ruler of the Kingdom Sweden-Norway, who inaugurated the north's longest known period of peace. One sort of assumes that Karl XIV Johan existed from birth: “in the beginning“ was King Karl XIV Johan, who started life as a private and during the revolution inevitably

¹ Höjer 1939a.

advanced to lieutenant, colonel, general, minister of war and marshal to eventually fulfil the destiny for which he was intended.²

The problem would thus be so-called “information bias“: (1) Jean's biographers tend to extrapolate his later persona backwards in time. (2) Well documented periods are assumed typical. (3) Occasional events & statements are given an excessive weight. (4) Jean was a controversial person. His enemies attacks and his own rebuttals are often reported, without the issue being clear. I have therefore followed the advice of Palmstierna to, at every stage of Jean's life, describe him as a product of his experiences & situation. In practice, this means describing Jean from Napoleon's perspective - a self-taught military, at the mercy of himself, fate & the Swedes exaggerated expectations.

In order to describe Jean's life as close as possible, “wie es wirklich war“, I have read both old and new literature. The hope was that the combination of details, perspectives & 200 years of debate would contribute to understanding. Taking everything at face value proved impossible however. The amount of biased information made it difficult to draw any conclusions at all. Whatever you write, someone with excellent but difficult-to-check arguments, claims the opposite. At some stage all biographers, including Torvald Höjer, seem to have abandoned making sense of Jeans career. In the name of objectivity, everything is given the same weight and what the English describe as “muddling through“ is interpreted as statecraft. I have therefore cleansed his biography so that the relevant data does not drown in the amount of irrelevant information, repetitions & interpretations but his own contributions or lack of such become clear. My impression of Jean is that he does not lie but is highly selective in what he passes on.

Jean's posthumous reputation is somewhat surprisingly in line with his inaugural address in the state hall November 5, 1810, when he still hadn't accomplished anything. It is as if his time as crown prince, regent & king 1810-1844 was of no consequence. His main role was as harbinger of new times: “Yes gentlemen, peace is the only honourable goal of a wise and enlightened government. It is not the extent of a state, which constitutes its strength and independence; It is its laws, its trade, its industry and above all its national sentiment. Sweden has certainly suffered great losses, but Sweden's honour has not suffered the slightest. Gentlemen, let us accept our fate. It has left us land sufficient for our needs and the iron to defend us!“³ Esaias Tegnér's poem Svea from the following year has consecrated this attitude “to conquer Finland within the borders of Sweden“.

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In a first step, the Bernadotte literature was localized through searches in Libris, WorldCat, article lists & newspaper databases with the search words “Bernadotte“ & “Karl XIV Johan“. In a second step, I have used source lists. In both searches, the inclusion criterion was that the source would be about Jean Bernadotte as a person, not about the Napoleonic or Karl Johan era in general. The search resulted in some 400 references spread over 200 years (see the bibliographical appendix):

- 50 longer biographies (about Jean's life as a whole, about the Crown Prince's time or about the French or Swedish time only).

² Palmstierna 1982: s. 159.

³ Bernadottes tal inför ständerna. Stockholm 1810-11-05. I: Ahnfeldt 1887: s. 191.

- 100 short biographies (brochures, single chapters, longer articles, tributaries & essays).
- 150 special studies [excluding the choice of successor] (whole books & longer articles on limited periods of time or subjects).
- 50 studies of the succession & related subjects.
- 50 difficult to classify (document collections, newspaper articles, memories, memoirs, romanticized biographies & debate literature).

In the account I start with Jean's own version (as presented by himself, his surroundings & his ghost writers), add later research and confront it with the critique. As the reading progressed, elements of the “Bernadotte Myth“ began to crack: Those concerning his irreproachable character, superior knowledge & fidelity to the 1809 Constitution.

Sources are documented to the extent that they are used. The undocumented background on Karl Johan's life comes from the longer biographies, mainly from Barton (1914, 1921 & 1925), Höjer (1939b, 1943 & 1960), Girod de l'Ain (1968a & 1968b) and Sven Åstrand's short biography (1973) in the Swedish biographical dictionary. The focus of the special studies reflects the sprawling debate about Karl Johan's person & politics: His youth and non-commissioned service from 1763 to 1792. His military advance 1792-1798. His time as ambassador in Vienna in 1798 and as minister of war in 1799. His role in the coups d'état on the 18th Fructidor in Year V (1797) & 18th Brumaire in Year VIII (1799). His political wilderness years of 1800-1804. His service as French Marshal 1804-1810. His conflicts with Napoleon. The heir apparent election 1810 & the Swedish Public Opinion. His position as Crown Prince of Sweden in 1810-1818. His role during the War of the Coalition against Napoleon 1813-1814. The foundation of the Swedish-Norwegian Union in 1814. His French and Argentine “throne plans“. His internal & external policies: government, parliament, freedom of the press, economy, Göta Canal, banking, defence, the union with Norway, “the neutrality“, his dynastic policies and a number of internal and foreign policy crises. Cultural studies of his court, life style, social life, private economy, propaganda & legacy.

It is impossible to cover all this in the context of a short biography. Most of it is of dubious relevance to his reign. I concentrate on Karl Johan's upbringing, early career, education, personality & ideology. Like a variety of other French – Talleyrand & Fouché are the most famous - he had his whole career to manoeuvre in highly changing political circumstances: L'Ancien Régime (1763-1789), the constitutional monarchy (1789-1792), the convention (1792-1793), the terror (1793-1795), the directorate (1795-1799), the consulate (1799-1804), the empire (1804-1815) & the Restoration (1815-1848). Realpolitik and acting was in the blood. Or as a French encyclopedia formulated it in 1815: Glory hunting, expediency and betrayal was his nature: “He is said, until his appointment as successor to the Swedish throne, to have taken nine or ten oaths of allegiance, which he all broke.“⁴ And he continued doing so. Most biographies end with the fall of Napoleon in 1815 or with the coronation of Karl Johan in 1818. The alternative is to end it with 30 years of political mud wrestling in the spirit of the Bismarck quote: “Laws are like sausages. It is best not to see them being made.”

Jean is often said to be unique because of his simple background, but it is possible to find at least a hundred similar careers, although they did not lead as far. As to his ideology he was an amalgam of his contemporaries: Frederick II of Prussia (1712-1786), Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) & Louis XVIII of France (1755-1824). All three of them enlightened monarchs

⁴ N.N. 1815: s. 23.

or close. Jean Bernadotte's career is described in this spirit. He was of his time, because how else would he be?