

Chapter 63 : Pre-war (1907-1914).

At the time of accession Gustaf was known in appearance but not as a person. Most talked about was that he refrained from being crowned. Gustaf's reasons were unclear but there is an interview with Marshal von Essen: "The king, to my knowledge, has not expressed any particular motif for his decision ... but there is no need to wonder; the king is a man of action, who does not like unnecessary formalities ... he has also mentioned the immense costs."¹

The left wing expectations of Gustaf were cautiously positive, but not fulfilled. Gustaf's politics 1907-1914 was a continuation of his father's - the same "prosecution mania", the same fixation on the 1809 constitution (increasingly out of step with parliamentary practice) & the same expensive defence policy (necessary for the outside world to respect Sweden's neutrality). The natural thing had been that Gustaf as partly responsible for the Norway debacle had been deposed - but no such debate took place. All the blame for 1905 was placed on the Norwegians, in the same manner as later all the blame for the defence crisis was placed on Staaff.

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The "prosecution mania" of 1907-1914 included 30 or 300 prison sentences depending on what legislation is included. I shall confine myself to "crimes of opinion". The prosecutions were about all sorts of things: Pamphlets, blasphemy, demonstrations, conscription, lese majesty, assassination, etc. Half of the sentences referred to the general strike of 1909.² There is a widely published photograph from that year of Gustaf (casually leaning on his walking stick) & Hjalmar Branting (with hat in hand) that has been used to demonstrate the despite everything there was a trusting relationship between King & Social Democracy. Nothing could be further from the truth. All leading Social Democrats had been in prison for their views and the party had from 1911 the requirement for a republic enshrined in the statutes. It was not until 1917 that Branting was made a minister, in 1920 prime minister & then Gustaf wanted guarantees that he would not put his republican plans into effect. Afterwards it can be said that the Swedish repression - prison 3-6 months & fines - was not that dissuasive, but it delayed the political process & poisoned the social climate. The social-democratic republican demands is probably Gustaf's longest lasting legacy & has caused the monarchy great harm.

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"Politics is the art of the possible."
Otto von Bismarck

Gustaf's largest political challenge was the defence battle of 1911-1914. The second largest challenge was the strikes of 1909.³ The strikes ended with a social democratic defeat & a split. The defence battle ended with a liberal defeat, but was a Pyrrhic victory. The most famous elements were the "F-boat collection" of 1912⁴, "the peasant armament support march" of 1913/14 & "the courtyard crisis" of 1914. I describe the support march:

¹ Dagens Nyheter, 1907-12-24, s. 2.

² Haste 1988: ss. 108-145; Bosdotter m.fl. red. 2012.

³ Se även kapitel 71 om drottning Victoria.

⁴ Se även kapitel 71 om drottning Victoria.

- November 19, 1913, farmer Uno Nyberg suggested wholesaler J E Frykberg to organize a support campaign for Gustaf or the country as a whole. After a tentative start, a meeting on December 15 decided to publish an appeal to Swedish farmers for an unpolitical support campaign for the country because "over each party stands the country". To address Gustaf was considered less appropriate, but since he was the highest custodian of the country, they would do so anyway. The most burning patriotic issue was defence. The petition was signed by the 27 people present. At this stage, the defence debater etc. Sven Hedin was approached as a suitable adviser.
- On December 21, a petition was published. The idea was to gather 3000 people, but it ended in about 31 thousand. According to Frykberg & Gustaf's joint MD Ernst Lidin, Gustaf was willing to receive them, but there were limits to what he could say. He also did not want to give the speech at Lejonbacken but in the courtyard where there was better acoustics & where also Victoria could attend. The two chambers of the Parliament were also to be approached, but they were advised against it by the house Speakers, because this would politicize the issue. On January 16 Frykberg, Nyberg & another person approached Gustaf and received his official confirmation. Gustaf reiterated that: "I am a constitutional king and cannot say everything I want to, but I will try to say as much as I can." Frykberg insisted that as many royalties as possible participate. Preferably also the youngest generation Prince Gustaf Adolf.
- In addition to the 31 thousand participants, the peasant march was supported by over 80 thousand signatures from all strata of society. The logistics of the train itself were so professional that it must have been handled by military personnel. On February 6, royals and peasants, as many as could be accommodated, gathered in the courtyard, the remaining milling about outside. Uno Nyberg spoke for the 31 thousand, J E Frykberg for the 80 thousand. The messages were identical - that the defence issue was not a party matter and that given the world situation it required a rapid solution. The speeches were quite prosaic. Gustaf's speech, on the other hand, delved into national romantic notions of the indissoluble bond between king and people. The king not only stood over the parties - he had a special relationship with the people - "From times so far back, that they are shrouded in the mystery of fairy tales, this kingdom has rested on the firm and unshakable trust between king and people."
- Gustaf's speech differed to such an extent from his usual way of expressing himself that speculation immediately started about who had authored it - Sven Hedin or Verner von Heidenstam were considered the most likely. However, the author being Sven Hedin was not confirmed until his book in 1951, that he wanted Gustaf to give a speech "worthy of the solemn seriousness of the moment". Frykberg had left him a copy of his & Nyberg speech. Hedin and his collaborator Carl Bennedich wrote a suitable response that was handed to Gustaf in late January. Some of the wording were changed by Gustaf & his advisers.

And what was Gustaf's intention? None of Gustaf's advisors wanted Staaff to resign before the defence issue was resolved, which could take another 2-3 months. Not even Gustaf himself wanted that. "He only wanted to state his position, as he wanted the peasants to leave the king satisfied and that out there in the land they would know that they could trust him."⁵ Staaf, however, chose to resign. The motivation was that Gustaf's speech was political:

⁵ Frykberg 1959: s. 110. [Referat av Hugo Hamiltons dagbok.]

The last words, which were exchanged between the king and Staaff, were, according to a note, which Hellner was allowed to copy:

”Is it not the case that the main difference of opinion between us lies therein, that I believe that on February 6, I followed the constitution, whereas you consider my speech to be an unconstitutional act?”

The Prime Minister replied:

”Yes, that's it.”⁶

Afterwards, this has been interpreted as each king's statement being political, so he should not pronounce an opinion on anything at all. That was not Gustaf's interpretation. Speaking to the student protesters on February 11, he said: ”It is my constitutional right and my duty as King of Sweden, in troubled days, to express openly and unreservedly my opinion of what I consider useful and necessary for my people.” And when the government of Staaff resigned on February 17, he put on record that ”I would like to declare at this time that any desire or aspiration in the direction of personal powers has been, is and always will be alien to me. I have until now exercised my royal duties, according to the statutes of the Constitution and its spirit. From this I will never waver.”

That Gustaf received his supporters was well taken up by his sympathizers: ”[They were met] by a living personality and not by the death mask of the constitutional kingdom from the Age of Liberty.”⁷

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Over the years, the courtyard crisis has been portrayed from every possible angle. In the beginning, reports dominated & chronicles, then how it fitted into the contemporary debate (defence, parliamentarianism, ”people power”), finally from the perspective of the actors (J E Frykberg, Sven Hedin, Karl Staaf, Hjalmar Branting, Queen Victoria⁸, etc). The literature is extensive & difficult to delimit - The ”courtyard crisis” of 1914 becomes part of the ”constitutional crisis” of 1905-1925. I provide a selection of references:

Gustaf's perspective: Laurin 1917; Åsbrink 1918: ss. 216-231; Hildebrand 1928: ss. 34-40; Swahn 1930: ss. 42-44; Jansen 1931: s. 114; Böök 1933; Essén 1933a: ss. 227-237; Essén 1933b: ss. 241-250; de Chessin 1938: ss. 32-33; Swahn 1938: ss. 216-218; Rudbeck & Lindfors red. 1943: s. 55-56; Hildebrand 1945: del 2, ss. 101-136; Söderström red. 1947: ss. 117-158; Anonymous 1950; Söderberg 1951: ss. 83-88; Nerman m.fl. 1952: ss. 365-367; Hagberg 1953: s. 205; Ohlmarks m.fl. 1956: s. 536-538; Holm 1967; Elgklou 1978: s. 164; Ohlmarks 1983: ss. 121-132; Weibull 1991: ss. 74-82; Elgklou 1995: ss. 195-204; Skott 1996: ss. 106-111; Lagerqvist 1997: ss. 402-407; von Platen 2002; Lagerqvist & Åberg 2004: s. 43; Liljegren 2004: s. 109; Hadenius 2007: ss. 123-146; Lindqvist 2010: ss. 90-93; Norlin 2015: ss. 125-127.

Biographies, diaries & memories: De Geer 1926: ss. 73-85; Laurin 1929: del 4, ss. 451-461; Zweigbergk 1942; Hedin 1951; Palmstierna 1952; Hamilton 1955; Nothin 1955: ss. 302-311; Andersson 1956; Hellner 1960; Kihlberg 1962; von Steyern 1962:

⁶ Frykberg 1959: s. 118. I:Hellner 1960: s. 214, dagbok 1914-02-10.

⁷ Lagerroth 1951: s. 328. [Lagerroth citerar en kommentar ur minnet.]

⁸ Se kapitel 77 om drottning Victoria.

del 2; Edén 1969; Körner 1970; Stenson 1977; Widén 1984; Odelberg 2014; Svenning 2014.

Research & debates: Wählstrand 1941; Gerdner 1946; Håstad 1947; Brusewitz 1951: ss. 65-79; Lagerroth 1951; Gerdner 1954; Nyman 1957; Frykberg 1959; Carlgren 1967; Wichman 1967; De Geer & Torbacke 1976: ss. 7-87; von Sydow 1980: ss. 101-125; Torbacke 1983; Zetterberg 1987 & 1989; Johanson 1993; Brennecke 1997; Johanson 1997.

Since the sources are so fragmentary, mostly letters & diaries where references are mixed with speculation & rumours, it has been possible to put together arguments for the desired version of the crisis. De Geer & Torbacke (1976) present six interpretations or main lines of research & summarize: "The above shows that the literature about the crisis in the courtyard is rich and extensive. Stimulating for the researchers has been that the source situation has been unusually favourable. Practically all the leading figures of the epoch have left unpublished material in the form of correspondence, diaries, memos etc." But, as I pointed out, this does not apply to Gustaf & Victoria, who had all their papers burned.

The most credible version of the courtyard crisis is in my opinion that the peasant march came at an unfortunate time for the Liberals & that Gustaf underestimated the explosive force of his words - it had happened before, and it would happen again.⁹ The outbreak of the First World War, however, proved Gustaf right on all points. For example, the Norwegians portrayal of the events is very positive:

Shortly before this [world war], G. [Gustaf V] 6/2 1914 received the great peasant march with a strongly patriotic and defence friendly speech, which led to the resignation of Staaff's liberal government and a dissolution of parliament with new elections, from which the conservatives returned strengthened. But the king's defence policy was not "activist", and throughout the war Sweden maintained its neutrality. This attitude facilitated the later reconciliation with Norway, which pursued the same foreign policy.¹⁰

During the crisis Gustaf was noticeably tired. He felt sick, lost weight, had headaches, severe stomach pains, vomiting & had blood in the stools. The explanation came on April 9 when he had surgery for stomach ulcers. He also appears to have been depressed and mentally out of balance due to his mother's death on December 30, 1913. Many years later he commented on the courtyard crisis as it being a terrible experience & that he never wanted to be part of anything like it again. Staaff was also ill during the crisis - he had serious heart problems. It has since been claimed that the conflict was due to their incompatible personalities and/or Staaf's boorish behaviour. This seems to be an afterthought. Gustaf also complained about Staaf's employees, who he claimed behaved the same way. Gustaf's adjutant colonel C.A.A. Murray expressed the view that "Staaff and his comrades tried [by not informing him & denying him the right to protest] to make the king a complete zero and control his actions and remarks even in the private."¹¹ As it usually happens at such times, a conflict of principles (in this case concerning the role of the king) turned into a personal conflict. Gustaf had no experience of such, did not know how to behave and could not escape. Staaff being the abrasive person he was did not help up the situation & afterwards a lot of stories have been

⁹ Hellner 1960: ss. 200-203.

¹⁰ Jansen 1931: s. 114.

¹¹ Hamilton 1955: s. 287. [Något redigerat.]

told, that of one were to believe them, it was a personal rather than a political conflict. Before his death in 1915 Staaff developed his parliamentary ideas, and during the Edén government Gustaf actually started to follow (parts of) the advice:

The King should limit his statements so that they do not form the basis for party battles. But he need not be a name-stamp. In connection with the English handbooks, Staaff emphasized the possibilities of exercising influence that a parliamentary monarch has. He can form a policy, develop it for his advisers in whatever matter he wants. He can also use his personal influence to loyally exert a certain amount of pressure on people, for example when the government wishes to acquire a distinguished power to a significant government office. Furthermore, the monarch can appeal to the people even without the support of his advisers, whom he must then let go and replace with new ones, who are prepared to assume responsibility for the action. But it is a very serious matter. The normal thing is that dissolution of the parliament, like other acts of state, takes place under the sole responsibility of the government. Staaff adds that the king can also act as mediator between the parties, perform valuable social duties, smooth ruffled feathers and help out. It is unfortunate, however, if a monarch nowadays claims to take the initiative and come forward and lead. Such things should very rarely happen without discussions with one or another political movement and its men. The advisers are in such case representatives of one side or other, not the kings men. Otherwise they can be trusted individual friends of the monarch, former legal advisers, courtiers, etc.¹²

Regarding Gustaf's ability to engage in such a political science discussion, all sources agree about his incompetence. But he well understood the consequences. I quote Count Frederick Wachtmeister:

March 30 [1916]. Dad says, that the King is not untalented, but has a better head than his brothers Oscar and Carl; but that Carl has made more of his because he works. The King only works with cards [=plays bridge]. He doesn't read. And he lacks the ability to discuss. When he encounters an objection, he cannot answer it. Instead of learning how, he has trained himself to cut off the opponent. He snubs him, becomes angry. Because of this he avoids dissidents. He likes to command, not to discuss. "Many times," says Dad, "he has become angry on me, because I answer back."¹³

In short: Gustaf had a good head but a closed mind. Like his foreign colleagues he was not fit for democracy, but for the trenches.

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Gustaf's additional efforts were of a routine nature: In- & outgoing state visits, "national tours", military exercises, inaugurations, attendance & audiences. He protected the academies because it was his duty and further organizations because their activities interested him: the Academy of War Sciences, the Musical Academy, the Volunteer Rifle Association, the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography, the Society for Political Economics, the Swedish General Export Association.

¹² Kilhlberg 1962: del 2, s. 336.

¹³ von Steyern 1962: del 2, s. 234. [1916-03-30]