

Chapter 64 : World War I (VI) (1914-1918).

*It is the business of future to be dangerous....
The major advances in civilization are processes
that all but wreck the societies in which they
occur.*

Alfred North Whitehead

World War I is easiest to explain in the *longue durée*. 1914-18 is the collapse of the world of the Vienna Congress, the continuation of the Napoleonic Wars and the creation of a rich flora of republics and parliamentary democracies in the spirit of the French Revolution. From this point of view, 1914-18 is not a “European catastrophe” but the birth pangs of democracy.

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Swedish-Norwegian diplomacy lay dormant at the outbreak of the First World War, but was resumed by necessity. The kings of Sweden, Norway and Denmark met in Malmö December 18-19, 1914, and in Kristiania September 28-30, 1917. Five more meetings were held between the Ministers of State and Foreign Affairs. At the meeting in Norway 1917, Gustaf gave a conciliatory speech:

Your Majesty and the Norwegian people should be able to understand the feelings with which I today enter the country, with which five of my predecessors as well as myself as regent have ruled for a total of over ninety years. I would not be honest either with myself or with history if I said that what happened in 1905 could still be forgotten. [But...] Let us create a new union, not of the old kind, but a union of understanding and of heart, whose vitality I hope will be of a more lasting nature. The main condition for this is that, especially in the current difficult foreign policy conditions, we remain faithful to each other in order to safeguard and maintain the strict and impartial neutrality proclaimed by the three Nordic kingdoms during the current world war. ... Separately we are three small nations, but together we form a factor to be reckoned with in the protection and maintenance of our freedom and right to self-determination.¹

The meetings resulted in the so-called Nordic Neutrality Entente, which was largely regarded due to Gustaf. He had prepared two speeches from which the government could choose. On the one hand, the conciliatory above, where he spoke “from the heart”, and on the other hand a more conventional version.² However, as one says, the time was not yet ripe. After the end of the war, the initiative collapsed, but was revived a few years later by Prince Carl being invited when Kristiania was renamed Oslo and when his daughter Märtha became Norwegian Crown Princess.³

During the war, Gustaf took several diplomatic initiatives of his own. On February 16, 1915, he sent a letter to Tsar Nicholas II saying that Sweden was willing to assist in the exchange of Russian and German-Austrian wounded prisoners of war. The correspondence with Nikolai continued during 1916 - among other things about the Åland question. Gustaf also had the

¹ Jacobson 1943: ss. 173-173. [Konungens tal på Kristiania slott den 28 november 1917.]

² Värner Rydén. Konungen och hans rådgivare. Dagens Nyheter, 1928-06-10, sida 2,35.

³ Hoelseth 2005.

Swedish minister in Rome express his concern about how Italy's entry into the war would affect Swedish neutrality. Italy had initially declared itself neutral, but on May 23, 1915, Austria declared war. A similar contact was also made when Romania abandoned its neutrality. Gustaf was afraid it would undermine confidence in Sweden's position.

In July 1915, Marshal of the Realm count Ludvig Douglas returned from a stay in Germany - his wife was German - and informed Gustaf of the mood there. Queen Victoria was also in Germany. At the end of 1915, her cousin Prince Max of Baden was on a visit and stayed as Gustaf's guest at Drottningholm. All three argued that Sweden if joined the Central Powers it would be offered Åland in exchange. Gustaf informed the government, but nothing came out of it. Gustaf had an idea to instead negotiate with the Russians with the Danish king as an intermediary. When Finland broke away from Russia in 1918, Gustaf believed it was possible to exploit the power vacuum. The Ålanders had a few days earlier sent a deputation about a merger with Sweden. The Finnish Civil War broke out and Sweden sent troops to pacify Åland. Even after the end of the war, the Ålanders were in favour of merging with Sweden - according to a referendum, 95 per cent were in favour. However, in 1921, an arbitration tribunal favoured the Finnish government. The reason for this being that Sweden (i.e. Gustaf) did not deserve the acquisition:

One must not forget the services that Finland did to others at the same time as itself, when, after a bloody struggle, it rejected the attack by Bolshevist Communism. If it had succumbed, the door would have been open to the expansion of the revolution and certainly Scandinavia would have been the first to be threatened.

It would be a strange gesture of gratitude to the Republic of Finland if it were to be deprived of an area, which it values highly. Such humiliation would be cruelly felt by every country, but perhaps even more so by a state that has the pride and sensitivity of youth. This would remove it from Scandinavia, which needs it as well as Finland needs them.⁴

Gustaf's friendship with Germany has often been interpreted as meaning that he wanted to enter the war on the German side, but there is no support for this. On May 3, 1915, at the banquet after the launch of the first F - boat "Sweden" he summarized his position: "Up to now it has been possible to keep our country out of the struggle, and I sincerely hope that with the help of the Most High it will still be possible. But no one knows what the future holds. The danger for us to be involved in the ongoing battle is no less now than at the beginning of the war. Difficulties have increased and are still increasing, as the struggle between the combatants is getting tougher. Let us therefore not dwell on safety, but be prepared, that even for us war may come."⁵

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After the abdication of Nicholas II on March 15, 1917, the October Revolution of the same year, and the abdication of William II on November 9, 1918, there were revolutionary moods in Sweden. On November 11, the left-wing socialists published a manifesto calling for a socialist government, in accordance with the Russian pattern supported by workers', peasants' and soldiers' councils, a republican constitution and the abolition of the first chamber. The atmosphere was nervous & Gustaf allegedly had the necessities packed to be

⁴ Ehrensvärd 1965: s. 96-97.

⁵ Essén 1933a: s. 266.

able to leave quickly.⁶ The atmosphere was calmed by extensive concessions - first equal voting rights (for men) in the municipal elections, then equal voting rights (for men & women) in the parliamentary elections. There is an interior from a Council on October 14, 1917: "The king experienced one of his nervous paroxysms, during which he with tears in his eyes and a half-suffocated voice reproached me, the ministry and the whole world for 'deserting' him."⁷

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Else, it was "business as usual" even during World War I. Gustaf inaugurated channels, train lines, power plants, museums, colleges, industries etc. He considered it unfortunate that so many had emigrated, but society's technification replaced the losses. Depending on what you measure, BNP 1907-1917 increased by 50-100 percent.

⁶ Nothin 1966: s. 82.

⁷ Hamilton, 1955: del 2, s. 164.