

Sweden, the Elect Nation

by BO ANDERSSON

IN SWEDISH historical writing the period from 1611 to 1718 is usually called the Age of Greatness.¹ In 1611 King Gustavus Adolphus ascended to the throne of a weakened state struggling for its existence. At his death in the battle of Lützen in 1632 Sweden unquestionably was one of the Great Powers of Europe, a position it held until the devastating wars of King Charles XII in the early eighteenth century. After his death in 1718 the Swedish Empire fell apart and Sweden's Age of Greatness definitely belonged to the past.

Sweden's rise to the status of a European Power in the seventeenth century is still puzzling. The country had some important natural resources but was otherwise poor. It was also extremely sparsely populated; Sweden and Finland had about 1.5 million or at most 2 million inhabitants.² As Michael Roberts has argued, the Swedish expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries differs from other cases of the building of empires.³ Sweden's territorial expansion was not so much the result of domestic factors, but rather a response to provocations from outside. This expansion also seems to have been carefully calculated in an overall strategy aimed at gaining control over the area around the Baltic Sea.

What were the factors behind the Swedish expansion? Roberts distinguishes two lines of explanation. According to the first view, by Roberts called the older school, Sweden's main interest was national security. Sweden was constantly aware of being surrounded by hostile enemy powers: Denmark, Russia, and to some extent Germany. This led to the conquest of the Danish provinces in what is now southern Sweden and to the incorporation of Estonia and other areas around the Gulf of Finland and of various other provinces on the Baltic Sea.

The second interpretation of the Swedish expansion, the newer school in Robert's terminology, is not a political but an economic one. Sweden's main interest from the middle of the sixteenth century was, according to this theory, to establish a monopoly over

the trade between Russia and the Western World. Even though Roberts can see some justification for this economic view, he is more inclined to choose a political explanation along the lines of the older school, and I think his inclination is justified. Economic factors seem, for example, to offer only a very weak explanation for the Swedish participation in the Thirty Years' War.

The Age of Greatness always had a special place in the hearts of Swedish historians, and the intimate relationship between the Swedish people and heroes like Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XII was an important part of Swedish national mythology up until the middle of our century. This often led, of course, to a systematic neglect of many important historical issues, for example, the question of war propaganda and of popular resistance to official policies. There are, however, some works on these topics. In the late 1930s the Marxist literary historian Axel Strindberg—a nephew of August Strindberg—wrote a very critical monograph about class conflicts in seventeenth-century Sweden.⁴ At about the same time Johan Nordström published articles about the ideology of Gothicism and about the Swedish political publications in Germany in the early 1630s.⁵ In 1941 Sverker Arnoldsson treated the topic of domestic propaganda before Sweden's entrance into the Thirty Years' War,⁶ and in recent years the Uppsala historian Sven A. Nilsson has led a research project on Sweden and the wars of the seventeenth century.⁷ Recently Nils Erik Villstrand published his dissertation, *Anpassning eller Protest (Adjustment or Protest)*.⁸ There are still other important aspects of Swedish self-understanding in this period yet to be studied, such as the identification of Sweden with Israel as God's chosen people.

Preaching the National Election

The following discussion of Sweden as the Elect Nation will concentrate on the late 1620s and the early 1630s, since these were the years when this topic played its most important role. In order to show why, I will first give a brief sketch of the political and military situation in the late 1620s. After that I will turn to the interpretation of some key sermons by two leading Swedish theo-

logians, Johannes Botvidi and Johannes Rudbeckius, both important court and field preachers with very good connections to King Gustavus Adolphus.

Somewhat surprisingly the 1620s seem to have been the time of the most severe crisis in Swedish society in the seventeenth century. This, however, can easily be explained.⁹ In the Livonian and Polish wars during that decade Sweden had to rely entirely on its own resources. There were no foreign subsidies like the French ones in the 1630s and 1640s, and the war was conducted not with mercenaries but with conscripted Swedish and Finnish soldiers. After some years of war the population must have not only felt the increasing tax burden but also noticed the fact, as modern research has shown, that in the 1620s between thirty-five and forty thousand soldiers never returned alive from the theatre of war. Statistics from the regiment of Österbotten in northern Finland, the only regiment for which exact statistical figures are available, show that the losses could have been as high as about eighty percent. Of these soldiers most were not lost in battle, but died from plague and other diseases in overcrowded camps and garrison towns. It is also possible that some of the soldiers deserted. Although we know of just a few popular disturbances, the facts just mentioned ought to have created severe anti-war sentiments among the common people, who in the process of Sweden's rise to the status of a European power had to bear the main burden.

Before the Polish war was even over in 1629 there were clear indications that Sweden would hardly be able to avoid involvement in the Thirty Years' War.¹⁰ The Protestant cause had suffered a major blow in 1626 with the defeat of the Danish king, Christian IV, at Lutter am Barenberge in northern Germany. In the following year the emperor's troops occupied the Danish peninsula of Jutland. In 1627 General Wallenstein also sent auxiliary troops to aid Poland in the Swedish-Polish war in Prussia and also occupied the province of Mecklenburg along the German coast. Wallenstein and the Catholic side in the Thirty Years' War was now an immediate threat especially to Swedish naval interests in the Baltic Sea.

In view of this political and military development the Swedish Parliament discussed the issues of war and peace in Germany in December 1627. A royal proposition argued for an offensive war,

and the king managed to get the support of the Estates. It is preferable, they said, that you tie your horse to someone else's fence rather than to your own; that is, they supported a war as far away as possible from the borders of the country. The question now arose how to move popular sentiment in favor not just of continuing efforts in Poland but also of a military intervention in Germany. For this purpose the king used the ideological apparatus available for state propaganda, namely, the church.¹¹

The king's view of the main task of church and clergy appears most clearly in a text from 1630, King Gustavus Adolphus' valedictory address to Parliament before his parting for the German war. For the nobility, burghers, and peasants he wished prosperity, the clergy, on the other hand, he addressed in a different way. It was the clergy's duty, he said,

to adjure your congregations, whose hearts are in your power to twist and turn as you will, to be faithful and true to their governors, and to do their duty cheerfully and obediently, conforming them in all unity and concord, so that they be not led astray by evil men. And you shall not only exhort and persuade them thereto, but shall also yourselves show them the way, by your decent and modest bearing; so that they keep themselves quiet and comfortable not only by reason of your learned sermons, but by the example of your behavior.¹²

As we can see, he did not say that the duty of the clergy consists in the guidance of their flock toward salvation and eternal life. Instead, the clergy is assigned the task of maintaining social discipline, of creating obedient subjects.¹³ For this purpose the pastors were supposed to use their rhetorical skills, to twist and turn those hearts which are in their power. It is hardly possible to imagine a more explicit seventeenth-century statement about the church as an instrument of social discipline and royal power.

In this clerical campaign, the Sweden-Israel motif became very important. "For a moment the Swedes felt that they were God's chosen people, small in number and surrounded by powerful enemies, but strong through its faith in the Lord," says a Swedish literary historian in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ The point here is to investigate how these feelings were created through propaganda efforts by specific preachers. A topic I will not be able to

treat, however, is how the idea of the Elect Nation is connected to the concept of the universal monarchy.¹⁵ The notion of a special covenant between God and his people is also nothing peculiar to Sweden in the seventeenth century. There are definite parallels not only in England¹⁶ and the Netherlands,¹⁷ but also in America.¹⁸

The first sermon I would like to treat is by Johannes Botvidi. He was born in Norrköping in 1575.¹⁹ After studies in Stockholm he went to Germany and stayed at a number of Lutheran universities. He also visited the Netherlands, France, England, and Denmark. In 1616 he returned to Sweden to become a court preacher, and in the following year he was made a doctor of theology in Uppsala. In the 1620s he accompanied Gustavus Adolphus on his military campaigns in Livonia and Poland and seems to have been very close to the king. In 1631 he was appointed bishop of Linköping, but he spent most of the following year in Germany organizing the now "liberated" Lutheran churches. Johannes Botvidi died in 1635.

Botvidi's *Tree Predikningar/Håldne Vthi Håarfården Hååt Lijfland Anno 1621* (Three Sermons Held During the Military Campaign in Livonia in the Year 1621) were published in Stockholm in 1627.²⁰ The printing of these war sermons six years after they were delivered is of course a significant fact, and I would suggest that these sermons were supposed to function as part of the mental preparation of the people for the Swedish intervention in the Thirty Years' War. The third sermon in the collection is the most interesting for this topic. It was delivered in Mitau in Livonia on October 10, 1627, before the battle of Annaberg. As is common in war sermons,²¹ the text on which the sermon is based is from the Old Testament, Psalm 81, where it says, among other things:

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, *and* Israel had walked in my ways. I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries.

Botvidi divides his interpretation of this text into two parts: what true devotion is and what can be gained from such true devotion. A number of times he addresses his listeners and readers explicitly: "You Swedish men." Sometimes he also refers to common expe-

riences: "We Swedish men are now in the land of our enemies" (31).

In the part on true devotion Botvidi draws a parallel between God's covenant with Israel and God's covenant with Sweden. "Just as the Children of Israel have a God in Heaven, a great God and a great King above all gods, Ps. 95, he, and not we ourselves, has made us his people and God is our father, Ps. 100" (37). Botvidi further says: "God gives his angels charge over us, to keep us in all our ways, Ps. 91" (37). The reason that the Swedish people are now God's people in the same way as the children of Israel were in earlier times is, according to Botvidi, their faith. The Swedes are "God's Israel, the true Israelites" because they follow in faith him who is the Father of all faithful. The text also, however, implicitly contrasts the Swedes and the Jews by pointing out the Swedes' redemption from the curse of the law by the deeds of Christ. In the context of the 1620s the strong stress on faith also must have had a touch of anti-catholic polemics, pointing out the Swedish Lutheran soldiers' religious superiority to their Polish (and future German) enemies. After using the fate of Israel as a warning example, Botvidi further argues that his listeners and readers should honor and serve God, because God has showed them not fewer but much greater wonders of benevolence and mercy than he showed the Children of Israel (40). God has saved Botvidi's listeners not from slavery in Egypt, but from spiritual slavery, through faith.

After this discussion of true devotion Botvidi turns to the rewards of this devotion. The rewards are that God will turn away all evil from the truly devout and send them all good. God promises his people victory over their enemies. Victory is in the hands of God and he gives it to those who fear him. This promise is further supported by examples from the Old Testament: Abraham's victory over the four kings who had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrhah, Barak and Deborah's victory over Sisera, Gideon's victory over the Midianites, David's victory over Goliath, and so forth. Since these victories are based on faith, the Swedish soldiers should not rely on material factors—lots of equipment, a great number of people, ships, or guns—for victory. "God delighteth not in the strength of the horse, he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man," as it says in

the 147th Psalm. Instead, the victory comes entirely from the Lord (51).

As we can see in the war sermon by Johannes Botvidi, the fundamental structure of thought is the parallel between the children of Israel and the Swedish people. As Israel was before, so Sweden is now God's special nation. Of particular interest in Botvidi's argument is that the relationship between God and Sweden, like that between God and Israel, is not an unconditional one. Only through the fear of God can the rewards of this special relationship be gained. In no other way can a people obtain victory over their enemies. Especially important in Botvidi's rhetorical strategy is his use of pronouns like "we" and "us" and his way of addressing his audience, for instance, "You are now God's people." Through these strategies Botvidi created the impression that what was actually a general theological line of argumentation is something which applied especially and exclusively to the Swedish people. It is very obvious that Botvidi's argumentation about Sweden as the Elect Nation of God could be useful in the ideological preparation for continued military efforts in 1627. This is presumably the reason for the printing at that time of a sermon delivered six years earlier.

Sweden as the Elect Nation is also a common motif in sermons by another theologian, Johannes Rudbeckius. Rudbeckius was one of the most important Swedish bishops of the seventeenth century.²² He was born in 1581. After having been professor of mathematics, he became in 1610 professor of Hebrew in Uppsala and of theology in the following year. In 1613 he was appointed court pastor and he also served as a military chaplain. In 1617 he was made a doctor of theology, and in 1618 he became bishop of Västerås. Rudbeckius died in 1646.

The Sweden-Israel motif occurs in a number of his sermons.²³ On November 6, 1633, on the day of the first anniversary of Gustavus Adolphus' death, Rudbeckius gave a sermon which shows an interesting typological aspect of this motif.²⁴ Even before his death Gustavus Adolphus had been compared not only to a historical hero like Alexander the Great, but also to biblical heroes such as Gideon and Judas Maccabeus.²⁵ As the text for his sermon Rudbeckius had chosen a passage from the Book of Judas Mac-

cabeus, and gave it a typological interpretation. Judas Maccabeus is the type, Gustavus Adolphus the Antitype, which here definitely implies that the Swedish king has played a special role in the history of salvation. As Judas Maccabeus fought against his enemy Antiochum, Gustavus Adolphus has gone into combat against the forces of the pope and Antichrist. As God helped Judas Maccabeus, he has, according to Rudbeckius, "not left us unhelpt" (E2^v). God has helped us and helps us now; between God and Sweden there is a special relationship, a covenant between God and his chosen people, the new Israel.

One of the common characteristics of the funeral or commemoration sermon is the comparison with historical characters. In another sermon on Gustavus Adolphus, Rudbeckius uses examples from the old Israel, some of which seem rather far-fetched.²⁶ For thirty days the children of Israel wept over Moses who had brought them out from slavery in Egypt and led them through the desert. Should not the Swedish nation weep even longer over its dear Moses, that is, Gustavus Adolphus, whose grandfather, Gustav I, saved Sweden from Popish slavery with the aid of God (E1^r)? It seems as if Rudbeckius was aggressively searching for parallels between Israel and Sweden.

Summary

Sweden's rise to the status of a great power in the seventeenth century is still difficult to explain. The country was poor and had a comparatively small population. In spite of these facts, Sweden managed to build up a very strong position of power in the area around the Baltic Sea. One of the crucial and most difficult times in this process of empire building was the 1620s, when Sweden was entirely dependent on its own resources. This led to an increased tax burden and to severe losses of soldiers during the wars in Livonia and Prussia. In the 1620s more and more signs also indicated that Sweden could hardly refrain from intervening in the Thirty Years' War.

In this situation and during the hard years of the first half of the 1630s the Swedish people had to be persuaded that the efforts

demanded of them were necessary and meaningful. Here the church became the main instrument for the king's war propaganda. Pastors were seen almost entirely as servants of the crown, who were supposed to use their rhetorical skills to teach their congregations "to be faithful and true to their governors, and to do their duty cheerfully and obediently," as the king expressed this expectation in his valedictory speech in 1630. One important argument in this politico-theological propaganda was the concept of a special bond between God and his chosen people. Sweden's relationship to God was claimed to be similar, sometimes even to surpass that of God and biblical Israel. This can be seen in the war sermon by Johannes Botvidi and in the sermons by Johannes Rudbeckius, which I have discussed. In the attempts to explain how it was possible for Sweden to become a "Great Power" in the seventeenth century, ideological factors of this kind should not be neglected.

NOTES

1 For an overview in English, see M Roberts (ed.), *Sweden's Age of Greatness 1632–1718* (London Macmillan, 1973) The year 1632 as the beginning of this period, however, is not the usual date in Swedish historical writing

2 See S Dahlgren, "Estates and Classes," in Roberts, *Sweden's Age of Greatness*, 102–131, especially 104

3 For this and the following, see M Roberts, *The Swedish Imperial Experience 1560–1718* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1979), chapt 1

4 A Strindberg, *Bondenod och stormaktsdrom En historia om klasskamp i Sverige 1630–1718* (Stockholm A Bonnier, 1937, 3rd ed., 1986)

5 "Gotisk historieromantik och stormaktstudens anda" and "Lejonet från Norden", in J Nordstrom, *De yverbornes o Sextonhundredalsstudier* (Stockholm A Bonnier, 1934), 55–78, 9–54

6 S Arnoldsson, *Kringspropagandan i Sverige fore trettioånga kriget*, Goteborgs hogskolas årsskrift 47 (Goteborg Elanders boktryckeri aktiebolag, 1941)

7 S A Nilsson, *De stora krigens tid Om Sverige som militarstat och bondesamhalle*, Studia historica Upsalienia 161 (Stockholm Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990)

8 N E Villstrand, *Anpassning eller protest Lokalsamhället inför utskrivningarna av fotfolk till den svenska krigsmakten 1620–1679* (Åbo Åbo Akademi's förlag, 1992)

9 For the following, see esp S A Nilsson, "Hemlandet och de stora krigen under Gustav II Adolfs tid," in Nilsson, *De stora krigens tid*, 160–177 Cf H Holmquist, *Svenska kyrkan under Gustav II Adolf 1611–1632*, Svenska kyrkans historia, 4 1 (Stockholm Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1938), 215

10. For a discussion of the development in the 1620s, see Arnoldsson, *Krigspropagandan*, 13ff.
11. For the role of the church as instrument of propaganda, see Nilsson, *De stora krigens tid*, 14, 68, 238ff.
12. Swedish text in C. G. Styffe, ed., *Konung Gustaf II Adolfs skrifter* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1861), 628ff. The English translation is quoted from M. Roberts, "The Swedish Church," in Roberts, ed., *Sweden's Age of Greatness, 132-173*, 134f.
13. For the church as an instrument of social disciplining in early modern times, see esp. R. Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation: Central Europe 1550-1750* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 53ff.
14. H. Schück, *Sveriges Litteratur till Frihetstidens början*, vol. 1 of *Illustrerad Svensk Litteraturhistoria*, by H. Schück and K. Warburg (Stockholm: H. Geber, 1896), 192f.
15. For a discussion of the concept of the universal monarchy, see F. Bosbach, *Monarchia universalis: Ein politischer Leitbegriff der fruhen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck u. Ruprecht, 1988), and for this concept in connection with Sweden: J. Burkhardt, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 51ff.
16. See, for example, Cromwell's speech from July 4, 1653, in I. Roots, ed., *Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (London: Dent, 1989), 8-28.
17. See S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 93ff.
18. See, for example, the texts in A. Heimert & A. Delbanco, *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985).
19. For biographical information on J. Botvidi, see A. Westén, *Svenska kongliga Hofclericiets Historia*, vol. 1:1 (Stockholm: Kungliga Tryckeriet, 1799), 461ff.
20. Stockholm: Christoffer Reusner, 1627 (Västerås Stadsbibliotek, Ä sv tr 1627).
21. For a discussion of the importance of the Old Testament for Swedish homiletics in the first half of the seventeenth century, see I. Kalm, *Studier i svensk predikan under 1600-talets forra hälft med sarskeild hansyn till Gamla Testamentets stallning* (Uppsala: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1948).
22. For biographical information, see B. R. Hall, *Johannes Rudbeckius (Ner): En historisk-pedagogisk studie* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & söner, 1911).
23. See Kalm, *Studier i svensk predikan*, 77ff., and G. Lindberg, *Johannes Rudbeckius som predikant* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1927), 117ff.
24. J. Rudbeckius, *Sorgh och klaghepredikan offuer Then Stormechtighe/ Hogborne Furstes och Herres/ H. Gustaff Adolphs . . . Dodelighe Affgång . . . the 6. Novembris. Anno 1632. . . . Hällin på samma dagh/ året ther effter/ Anno 1633 vthi Wästeråås* (Wästeråås: Peder Wald, 1636) (Västerås Stadsbibliotek: Äld. sv. tr. 1636).
25. Cf. A. Wang, *Der miles christianus' im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert und seine mittelalterliche Tradition: Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis von sprachlicher und graphischer Bildlichkeit*, Mikrokosmos 1, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1975), 179ff. See also S. Tschopp, *Heilsgeschichtliche Deutungsmuster in der Publizistik des Dreißigjährigen Krieges: Pro- und antischwedische Propaganda in Deutschland 1628 bis 1635*, Mikrokosmos 29, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991).
26. J. Rudbeckius, *Jordeferaz eller Vthforelse Predikan/ Offuer Then Stormechtighe Hogborne Furstes och Herres. H. Gustaff Adolphs/ . . . Kungliche Lijk* (Wästeråås: Peder Wald, 1634) (Västerås Stadsbibliotek: Äld. sv. tr. 1634).



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