

## **The Northern Wars. War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721 Modern Wars in Perspective**

**Review Number:** 191

**Publish date:** Tuesday, 1 May, 2001

**Author:** Robert Frost

**Date of Publication:** 2000

**Pages:** 414pp.

**Publisher:** Longman

**Place of Publication:** Harlow

**Reviewer:** Gunner Lind

Sweden, Prussia, and Russia. Three great powers were forged in the fire of the Northern Wars. The military monarchies fed on weaker neighbours where such existed. In the sixteenth century, Poland-Lithuania, Brandenburg and Sweden carved up the small Baltic empire left by the crusading knights of the Teutonic Order. In the eighteenth century, the neighbours devoured the mighty commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania, the largest state ever to disappear from the map of Europe. The partitions of Poland lie beyond the scope of this book, but represent the logical conclusions to a development which started in the second half of the seventeenth century.

These wars transformed the Nordic-Baltic region into the most heavily militarised part of early modern Europe. Louis XIV amazed his age by waging war with an army of 400,000, supported by twenty million French. But his contemporaries, Charles XII of Sweden and Frederic IV of Denmark, fielded more than 100,000 soldiers each from populations of about 2.5 million. Their navies were also relatively larger than those of most other states. It is no wonder that the Nordic-Baltic region pioneered bureaucratisation, centralisation, and state regulation of civil society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Therefore, the Northern wars are of great importance for anybody interested in the processes of European state formation, the development of the European state system, or those changes in the ways of war which are often labelled 'The Military Revolution'.

There exists a large amount of historical research in the languages of the region. So little is available in English, however, that the book under review wisely does not contain any guide to further reading, only a 20-page select bibliography. So this is a welcome addition to the minimal literature in English on the history of northeastern Europe. It is also rewarding for those of us who read some, but not all, of the relevant languages. There is indeed, as it is stated in the introduction, a shortage of synthetic treatments in any language. There is also, it may be added, a shortage of modern treatment of military history in most of the national languages. Most of the extensive literature is quite old, and much of the rest is old-fashioned.

What were the Northern Wars according to Robert Frost? The term is not used in a consistent manner in previous research. It is, indeed, not a very well established term at all. Here it is used as a label for the conflicts between Sweden, Russia and Poland between the Livonian War 1558-1583 and the Great Northern War 1700-1721, with their extensive ramifications. This is almost identical with the division championed by Klaus Zernack back in 1974. This means that this is the story of the rise and fall of Sweden as a great power,

of the culmination and beginning decline of Poland-Lithuania, and the first steps of Russia and Prussia towards great power status. As military history the focus is on the battles over Estonia and Livonia, but the contemporary wars between the Scandinavian kingdoms are not neglected.

The chronological delimitation functions well, especially at the end. The Swedish-Russian and Swedish-Prussian wars during the eighteenth century were indeed very different from the wars of the previous centuries. At the beginning, however, it is less clear why the Russian-Swedish war of 1554-57 does not belong together with the Russian-Swedish-Polish war starting 1558. The geographical boundaries are more problematic. It works fine to treat the Danish-Swedish wars as a kind of side-show - even if this side-show had its own roots in the breakdown of the medieval Nordic union, and the fighting was on a scale equal to that on the main theatre. It functions surprisingly well too, to deal with the Swedish participation in the Thirty Years' War in a summary fashion. What you miss in the book is a fuller treatment of that state which began as the electorate of Brandenburg and ended as the kingdom of Prussia. It is not completely neglected, of course; Brandenburg-Prussia was after all a full participant in most of the Northern Wars. But it is not dealt with so extensively as the other major participants. This is a pity. The comparative analysis of the interlocking changes of society and war-making would have gained from a fuller discussion of the Prussian case, especially as Prussia became more important as a paradigm for the states of Europe than any other of the military monarchies which were shaped by the Northern Wars.

A central thesis of the book is concerned with the "backwardness" of Eastern Europe. It is asserted that there was no ignorance of western European military developments. Most traits which western historians have interpreted as evidence of incompetence or military conservatism - notably the extensive use of cavalry - were instead adaptations to the local strategic and logistic requirements. The famous Polish hussars, for example, were not medieval knights with a new label, but were a new type developed during the sixteenth century to deal with the new infantry, which they did with great effect. The military failure of the Polish commonwealth from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards was caused by the insufficient size of its armies. Not by their quality, and even less by their tactical composition. The roots of the problem were political and connected with the structure and mental world of Polish noble society. They were not military in a strict sense. Generally, the will and the ability to modernise were essential in the Northern Wars, but appropriate modernisation was not identical with westernization - or following any other set pattern - and westernization was not always followed by success in the field. At a few occasions this line of argument is pressed a little too hard, tending towards an apology for (especially) Polish arrangements. On the whole, however, I find that the arguments in favour of the thesis are strong. The book presents a step towards a much more sophisticated - rather than an alternative - view of the developments labelled 'the military revolution'.

It is impressive how well the author uses a remarkable amount of historical literature written in an even more remarkable number of languages. Where I am able to judge (Scandinavian languages, German) the account we get here is very accurate, very up to date, and makes use of essentially every important work, old and new, and judging from the notes and the bibliography, relevant research written in Polish, Russian, Lithuanian etc. is also included. It is possible to find errors. Sweden was not exempted from the Sound Dues in 1645 (but exemption was extended to the new Swedish provinces), and Landskrone may be spelled Landskrona, but never with an Umlaut. Errors are very few, however, compared with almost any work in English on Scandinavian history which I have read. I do sometimes disagree with this account within my field of expertise, but in most cases because I do not agree with other Scandinavian scholars, whose works have been used as a basis. It is difficult to blame a foreign author for that. So I recommend this book, which treats an unusual subject in a highly qualified manner.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/191#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/1182>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>