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Defining Sweden's Neutrality in World War I

Up until the turn of the 20th century, the once-warring nation of Sweden had enjoyed 100 years of peace. However, as the agriculturally based economy industrialized and millions of Swedes fled to the Americas to escape poverty and religious persecution during the Great Emigration, Sweden's political system began to face civil unrest rising from its 5.7 million inhabitants. Though the peaceful political separation of Sweden and Norway in 1905 maintained Sweden's image of tranquility, within the country, disagreements regarding trade unions and defense further separated the conservatives from the liberals, ultimately leading to the liberal government's resignation. While the various strikes and marches that led to the liberal government's resignation revealed a rising democracy, such an increase was ill-timed with World War I as it lengthened the inexperienced, conservative caretaker government's rule. Since Sweden's political instability prompted the nation to be in no position to formally engage in World War I, on August 3rd, 1914, Sweden proclaimed its neutrality. Sweden's neutrality during World War I contributes to the argument that perhaps even in countries proclaiming to take no part in the war, there remain significant ramifications.

Though there was a slight rise in democracy around the time of the war, politically Sweden was out of touch with the needs of its people when it proclaimed neutrality. Roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of Sweden's population lived in rural areas as Sweden relied heavily on an agrarian economy as

a primary source of income. As the rest of Europe transitioned to an industrial economy, Sweden's waterfront location allowed its economy to thrive as a major exporter of raw materials such as iron and timber. "Britain and Germany were its two most important trading partners: Germany first and foremost as an exporter to Sweden, Britain as an importer of Swedish products." (Qvarnström, "Sweden") As Germany and Britain became more involved in the war, raw materials were in high demand thus increasing their dependence on Sweden's exports and boosting Sweden's economy. In fact, while other countries struggled economically immediately following the war, Sweden had enough resources to support a building boom from all of its wartime exports. Nonetheless, in 1916, Sweden began suffering from starvation and a decline in living standards as their harvest failed and Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare prevented them from receiving crucial imports of potatoes, bread, sugar, grain, and butter. With the lack of food and other supplies, the price of goods increased causing inflation which, with the exception of those who used the black market to their advantage, left the rest of the Swedish population in crisis during the war. Though Sweden's government claimed neutrality, the country's economic success and crisis proved neutrality did not dissolve its connections with the rest of the world.

By and large, Sweden's trade relations and cultural ties during World War I affected the country's position throughout the war. Prior to 1914, Sweden was connected to Germany through both dynastic ties and their admiration for the German culture, but they were not prepared to side with Germany when the war began. Nevertheless, Sweden's prime minister made a secret agreement in which Sweden swore to be sympathetic towards Germany. "This benevolent attitude means that Sweden agreed - sometimes after an initial refusal - to German demands and requirements: Swedish lighthouses were blacked out, the Sound between Denmark

and Sweden was mined, and a transit ban on military equipment across Sweden was adopted to hinder British and French exports to Russia.” (Qvarnström, “Sweden”) Furthermore, the Luxburg Affair revealed another Swedish violation of neutrality as they assisted Germany by transmitting messages about sinking Argentine ships. While much of the Swedish public was aware of Sweden’s pro-German actions, Germany made a conscious effort to translate certain German articles into Swedish and then circulate their news with the intention of swaying the Swedish public opinion. Furthermore, both Britain and Germany eventually grew frustrated with Sweden’s ongoing trade partnership during the war, but in time, the two countries agreed to disregard the matter out of raw material necessity. Meanwhile, internally, as Sweden’s living standards declined with the lack of food imports, Sweden’s government had increasing fears that the public would be influenced by the Russian Revolution and consequently attempt to overthrow the government.

Leading up to World War I, the United States was not in a dissimilar position to Sweden economically, socially, and politically. Economically, the United States had recently emerged from the Gilded Age which brought about technological advancements, industrialization, business tycoons, and a new living standard for Americans. However, as the era’s name “the Gilded Age” suggests, below this glittering surface of economic prosperity was political corruption. To draw attention to the nation’s issues, there was a significant rise in labor unions; one of which went on strike in 1877 shutting down the railroad system for 6 weeks. “The common perception was that money and business had replaced democracy and justice as core American values.” (Thompson, “The US Before WWI”) Thus the Gilded Age welcomed the Progressive Era which swept the nation with political activism and social reforms leading right

up to the beginning of World War I. The president during this time, Woodrow Wilson, feared joining the war would divide the nation and stated, “We [Americans] must be impartial in thought, as well as action,” still fixed on George Washington’s Farewell Address’ point of not getting involved with other countries’ entanglements. Though much of the United States’ population were immigrants of the nations at war, they felt being an ocean away separated them from the war’s issues. However, in the years that followed this declaration of neutrality, the United States began getting pulled into the war by unrestricted submarine warfare, the Zimmerman Telegram, and foreign trade restrictions ultimately joining the war in 1917.

Both Sweden and the United States declared neutrality primarily based off of the fear of unrest within their own nations. History views neutrality in different lights: the negative being a national weakness and the positive being moral superiority. However, whether or not these two countries’ positions of neutrality were declared with positive intentions, they still involved themselves enough in the war to be affected -- and to have an effect upon -- the war’s progression. For Sweden, declaring neutrality meant isolating itself and its people politically from warfare, but its location and economic reliance made it damaging for the country to isolate itself completely. Currently, America is proposing travel bans to regulate immigration as part of an isolationist “America First” policy, when in fact, World War I reminds us to put isolation in context because isolating a nation for political reasons does not eliminate the economic and social ties that bind the world together.

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