

Fact Sheets on Sweden

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The History of Sweden

Fourteen thousand years ago the whole of the present country of Sweden was covered by a thick ice cap. As the ice slowly retreated, man came to Sweden and the first known human dwelling place, which has been found in southern Sweden, dates from around 10,000 BC. It is clear that from the period 8000 to 6000 BC the country as a whole began to be populated by peoples who lived by hunting and fishing and who used simple stone tools. Dwelling places and graves dating from the Stone Age, which is generally regarded as lasting until about 1800 BC, are being found in increasing numbers. Stone tools became more sophisticated during that period, which was succeeded in the Nordic region by the Bronze Age from 1800 to 500 BC. This period gets its name from the bronze weapons and religious objects which characterize the archaeological discoveries dating from these centuries, even though stone tools continued to dominate everyday life. The Bronze Age is marked in the Nordic region, especially in Denmark but also in Sweden, by a high level of culture, as is shown, for example, by the artefacts found in graves. After about 500 BC such artefacts become more rare as iron began to be more generally used. During the Early Iron Age (500 BC–400 AD), the period of the great migrations (400–550) and the so-called Vendel period (550–800)—so named because of the magnificent boat graves found at Vendel in Uppland—the population of Sweden became a settled one and agriculture came to form the basis for the economy and for society.

The Viking Age and Early Christianity

The Viking Age, 800–1050, was characterized by a marked expansion, which in the case of Sweden was mainly directed eastwards. Many Viking expeditions set off from Sweden with the mixed purpose of plunder and trade along the coasts of the Baltic Sea and the rivers which stretched deep into present-day Russia, where Swedish Vikings established trading stations and short-lived principalities, like that of Rurik at Novgorod. The Vikings active in the east travelled as far as the Black and Caspian Seas, where they developed trading links with the Byzantine Empire and the Arab dominions. At the same time, Christianity first reached Sweden with the mission of Ansgar, who visited the country from the Carolingian Empire in the ninth century. However, it was not until the eleventh century that Sweden was Christianized. Even then the old pagan Nordic religion survived until far into the twelfth century, and Sweden did not obtain an archbishop of its own until 1164. Sweden's expansion in the east continued during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through the incorporation of Finland into the Swedish kingdom after several crusades.

The Founding of the Kingdom

The various provinces of Sweden, which had previously been independent entities, were absorbed around 1000 into a single unit whose centre of gravity lay partly in Västergötland and Östergötland and partly in the provinces around Lake Mälaren, especially Uppland.

From the middle of the twelfth century onward there was a hard struggle for temporal power in this kingdom between the Sverker and Erik families, which held the crown alternately between 1160 and 1250. However, during this period the main administrative units were still the provinces, each of which had its own assembly (*ting*), lawmen and laws. It was first during the latter part of the thirteenth century that the crown gained a greater measure of influence and was able, with the introduction of royal castles and provincial administration, to assert the authority of the central government and to impose laws and ordinances valid for the whole kingdom. In 1280 King Magnus Ladulås (1275–90) issued a statute which involved the establishment of a temporal nobility and the organization of society on the feudal model. A council containing representatives of the aristocracy and the church was set up to advise the king. In 1350, during the reign of Magnus Eriksson (1319–64), the various provincial law codes were superseded by a law code that was valid for the whole country.

The Hansa Period

Trade increased during the fourteenth century, especially with the German towns which were grouped under the leadership of Lübeck in the Hansa League. For the following 200 years, until the middle of the sixteenth century, the Hansa dominated Sweden's trade, and a large number of towns were founded in Sweden as a consequence of the lively commercial activity connected with the Hansa. Agriculture was and remained the basis for economic life and it too developed during these years through the introduction of the three-field system and improved tools. However, the Black Death, which reached Sweden in 1350, led to a long period of economic decline marked by a smaller population and many abandoned farms. The crisis cannot really be said to have been surmounted until the latter part of the fifteenth century, at the same time as the production of iron in central Sweden began to play an increasingly important role in the country's economy.

The Kalmar Union

In 1389, through inheritance and family ties, the crowns of Denmark, Norway and Sweden were united under the rule of the Danish Queen Margareta. In 1397, the so-called Union of Kalmar was concluded under her leadership. It involved an undertaking that the three Scandinavian countries should have one and the same king. In fact, however, the whole union period, 1397–1521, was marked by conflict between the central government, represented by the king, on the one hand and the high nobility along with intermittently rebellious burghers and peasants on the other. These conflicts, which became interwoven with efforts to maintain Sweden's national unity and the economic interests it shared with the Hansa, culminated in the so-called bloodbath of Stockholm in 1520, when eighty of the leading men in Sweden were executed at the instigation of the Danish union king,

Kristian II. This event provoked a rebellion, which in 1521 led to the deposition of Kristian II and the seizure of power by a Swedish nobleman, Gustav Vasa, who was elected king of Sweden in 1523.

The Vasa Period

The foundations of the Swedish national state were laid during the reign of Gustav Vasa (1523–60). The church was turned into a national institution, its estates were confiscated by the state and the Protestant Reformation was introduced in several stages. At the same time the administration was reorganized along German lines and power was concentrated in the hands of the king. The position of the crown was strengthened further in 1544 when a hereditary monarchy was introduced. Before that time the country had been an elective monarchy, and the aristocracy had been able to assert itself every time the throne fell vacant. The efforts of the higher nobility to re-establish the power of the council during the reigns of Erik XIV (1560–68), Johan III (1568–92) and Sigismund (1592–99) failed in the long run. During the reigns of Karl IX (1599–1611) and Gustav II Adolf—Gustavus Adolphus—(1611–32), the crown was able to maintain and strengthen its position. After the death of Gustav II Adolf at the Battle of Lützen in 1632, the higher nobility succeeded in introducing a new constitution, the Form of Government of 1634, which created a number of central administrative bodies and placed effective power in their hands. However, this constitution only applied during periods when the monarch was a minor—first in the case of Queen Kristina and then in that of Karl XI—and lost all actuality in 1680 when Karl XI repossessed crown land which had previously been transferred to the nobility. This move definitively turned the nobility into a bureaucratic class obedient to the king's will in everything.

From Great Power Policy to Neutrality

Since the dissolution of the union with Denmark and Norway, Swedish foreign policy had aimed at gaining domination of the Baltic Sea, and this led from the 1560s onwards to repeated wars with Denmark. After Sweden intervened in 1630 with great success in the Thirty Years' War on the side of the German Protestants and Gustav II Adolf had become one of Europe's leading monarchs, Sweden defeated Denmark in the two wars of 1643–45 and 1657–58. These victories led to the incorporation into Sweden of the previously Danish provinces of Skåne, Halland, Blekinge and Gotland and of the previously Norwegian provinces of Bohuslän, Jämtland and Härjedalen. Finland, as well as a number of provinces in northern Germany and the present-day Baltic republics, also belonged to Sweden, and after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 and the Peace of Roskilde with Denmark in 1658 Sweden was a great power in northern Europe. The country even founded a short-lived colony in what is now Delaware in North America. However, Sweden was, except for some small iron works and the copper mine at

The Nordic area around 1450



In the middle of the 15th century Sweden included the southwestern parts of Finland. Lappmarken had not yet been colonized and in fact lay outside the country's borders. The eastern border with Russia had been settled in 1323.

Falun, a purely agrarian country based on a natural economy, and lacked the resources to maintain its position as a great power in the long run. After its defeat in the Great Northern War (1700–21) against the combined forces of Denmark, Poland and Russia, Sweden lost most of its provinces on the other side of the Baltic Sea and was reduced to largely the same frontiers as present-day Sweden and Finland. During the Napoleonic Wars, Finland was finally surrendered to Russia and Sweden's last possessions in northern Germany were also lost. As compensation for these losses, the French marshal Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, who had been elected heir to the Swedish throne in 1810, succeeded in obtaining Norway, which was forced into a union with Sweden in 1814. This union was peacefully dissolved in 1905 after many internal dis-

putes. Since the short war fought against Norway in 1814 in connection with the creation of the union, Sweden has not been involved in any war and has also since the First World War pursued a foreign policy of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime, basing its security on a strong national defence. Nonetheless, Sweden joined the League of Nations in 1920 and the United Nations in 1946, and within the framework of these has taken part in several international peacekeeping missions.

The end of the Cold War and of the political division of Europe has in the 1990s created new perspectives for Sweden's foreign and security policy, and new opportunities for Sweden to participate in the process of West European integration. Sweden therefore applied for full membership of the European

Community (EC) in 1991, and became a member of the European Union (EU) in 1995 after a referendum in 1994. When the European Monetary Union (EMU) came into operation in January 1999, Sweden chose to stand aside. It may possibly join later, after a further referendum or a parliamentary election in which EMU will be one of the main issues. Also at the beginning of 1999, on the subject of defence, the government reaffirmed Sweden's policy of non-participation in military alliances.

Constitutional, Economic and Political Development

After the death of the warrior king Karl XII in 1718 and Sweden's defeat in the Great Northern War, the Swedish Parliament (the *Riksdag*) and council were strong enough to introduce a new constitution which abolished royal absolutism and placed power in the hands of Parliament. During the so-called Era of Liberty (1719–72) Sweden developed a form of parliamentary government which meant that the party dominant in Parliament appointed the government (the council), which in turn was responsible before Parliament. However, Gustav III (1771–92) reduced the power of Parliament through a bloodless *coup* in 1772 and later, in 1789, he reintroduced absolutism.

In other respects, eighteenth-century Sweden was characterized by rapid cultural development, which partly occurred in close contact with France. Overseas trade, which also developed at a rapid pace during the eighteenth century, was hard hit by the Napoleonic Wars, which led to general stagnation and economic crisis in Sweden during the first part of the nineteenth century. Even during the latter part of the century, despite the construction of railways and the emergence of the sawmill industry, Sweden was still a poor country, in which 90% of the population earned its livelihood within agriculture. One consequence of this situation was emigration, mainly to North America, which in relative terms was very substantial: from the middle of the 19th century to 1930 about 1.5 million Swedes emigrated out of a population which totalled only 3.5 million in 1850 and slightly more than 6 million in 1930. Industry did not begin to grow until the 1890s, though it then developed very rapidly between 1900 and 1930 and transformed Sweden into one of Europe's leading industrial nations after the Second World War.

Domestic politics were marked by calm and peaceful development after Gustav IV Adolf (1792–1809) was deposed by a *coup d'état* in 1809. A new constitution characterized by the separation of powers on Montesquieu's model was introduced. Shortly afterwards the French marshal Jean Baptiste Bernadotte was elected heir to the Swedish throne and he became king in 1818 as Karl XIV Johan (1818–44). His conservative policies put their mark on his reign, but nevertheless a liberal opposition began to make its presence felt. In 1842, compulsory education and elementary schools were introduced, and the reigns of his son and grandson, Oskar I (1844–59) and Karl XV (1859–72), witnessed a liberal breakthrough which involved the abolition of the guild system in 1846; the adoption of free trade in the 1850s and 1860s; and finally the introduction of local self-government in 1862 and the reform of Parliament in 1866. This last reform involved the abolition of the old Parliament of four estates, which had existed since the fifteenth century, and its replacement by a bicameral Parliament which survived until the introduction of a unicameral system in 1971.

Nineteenth-century Sweden was also marked by the emergence of strong popular movements like the free churches, the temperance and women's movements and above all the labour movement. The latter, which grew in pace with industrialization in the latter part of the nineteenth century, was reformist in outlook after the turn of the century and the first representatives of social democracy entered the government as early as 1917. Universal suffrage was introduced for men in 1909 and for women in 1921, and this latter date also marked the breakthrough for the principle of parliamentary government. Plans for a welfare society were laid during the 1930s after the Social Democrats had become the governing party, and it proved possible to put these plans into effect in all essentials after the Second World War.

During the Second World War, a coalition government of the four democratic parties was formed. After the war ended, a purely Social Democratic government resumed office under Per Albin Hansson. On Hansson's death in 1946, Tage Erlander became prime minister and held this post without interruption until 1969, when Olof Palme succeeded him as PM until 1976. Under Social Democratic leadership but in close co-operation with the other democratic parties, a number of reforms were carried out in the 1940s and '50s that together laid the foundations of the Swedish welfare state.

Simultaneously, demands for a modernization of the 1809 constitution were also made. After lengthy discussions and investigations, a new form of government was adopted in 1974. This enshrines the principle that all public power is derived from the people, who are to appoint the members of Parliament in free elections. Parliament alone is to pass laws and is entitled to levy taxes. The government is appointed by and responsible to Parliament. The king is still the head of state, but his functions are reduced to purely ceremonial ones. Gustaf VI Adolf, who came to the throne in 1950, was succeeded on his death in 1973 by Carl XVI Gustaf, who was the first Swedish king to "reign" in accordance with the new constitution. In 1980, an amendment in the order of succession introduced an equal right of inheritance to the crown for men and women, which meant that Princess Victoria became the heir apparent instead of her younger brother Carl Philip.

The international economic crisis precipitated by the dramatic hikes in oil prices in 1973 boosted unemployment in Sweden, as elsewhere. The expansion of industry that had taken place at a very rapid rate during the 1950s and '60s and also the swift growth in production had, by the beginning of the 1970s, brought about a steady and steep rise in living standards in Sweden. From the mid-1970s this improvement in standards took place at a slower rate, and towards the end of the 1980s it ceased entirely.

The economic crisis resulted in the departure of the Social Democratic government after the 1976 parliamentary elections and the formation of a non-socialist coalition government under the leadership of Centre Party chairman Thorbjörn Fälldin. However, conflicts concerning the continued expansion of nuclear power prompted several government reshuffles. In the 1982 parliamentary elections, employment and the budget deficit were among the focal issues of debate. The elections resulted in a victory for the Social Democratic Party, which thereafter formed a government with Olof Palme as prime minister. By a devaluation and various other vigorous measures, the new government

The Swedish Baltic Empire 1658–1721



During the period 1658–1721 Sweden was a great power in northern Europe. After its defeat in the Great Northern War 1700–21, Sweden lost its provinces to the south and east of the Gulf of Finland, as well as all its possessions in Germany, except for a small part of Pomerania.

succeeded in improving Sweden's economic situation. The sharp upturns in the international trade cycle in 1983 and subsequent years enabled Sweden to balance the national budget once more, and the government utilized this for a massive expansion of the public sector.

The murder of Olof Palme, the prime minister, on 28 February 1986 came as a shock to the Swedish people, who had been spared this kind of political violence for nearly 200 years. Palme's successor as prime minister was Ingvar Carlsson, who in all essentials retained Palme's policy.

The accelerated growth in production that had formerly characterized economic development in Sweden ended in the 1980s. At the end of the decade and in the early 1990s, it gave way to a fall in industrial production and a negative balance of payments vis-à-vis the rest

of the world. At the same time, the big expansion of the public sector imposed heavy demands on the economy. A swift rise in unemployment contributed further to heavy deficits in the budget and a rapidly swelling national debt. Discontent with the Social Democratic government grew ever stronger, and the 1991 parliamentary elections resulted in its resignation and replacement by a non-socialist coalition government with Moderate Party leader Carl Bildt as prime minister. Despite all its efforts to encourage enterprise and also major savings in the public sector, this new government did not succeed in getting to grips with unemployment, nor with the rapidly growing budget deficit and consequently increasing national debt.

The parliamentary elections of 1994 meant that the Social Democrats took the lead once

more, forming a Social Democratic minority government with Ingvar Carlsson as prime minister. In March 1996 Ingvar Carlsson stepped down as prime minister for personal reasons and was replaced by former finance minister Göran Persson.

The first task of the Social Democratic government was to redress the balance of public finances. This was achieved through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts which had repercussions on several of Sweden's wel-

fare systems. The government was at the same time intent on curbing inflation and creating scope for reducing Sweden's heavy national debt. Several of these aims had been achieved by the end of the 1990s, but the remaining problems included what by Swedish standards was an exceptionally high rate of unemployment.

The new policy had been fiercely opposed, and the Social Democratic Party lost heavily in the 1998 parliamentary elections, but it was able to stay in office after securing the support

of the Left Party, to which many traditionally Social Democratic voters had defected, and the Green Party.

The 1990s turned out to be a problem-ridden decade for Sweden, with growing political divisions. One of the main issues of debate concerns methods for creating a climate of steady economic growth, so as to raise the level of employment while at the same time preserving intact the main essentials of the welfare state.

Sweden's Monarchs since 1523

House of Vasa

Gustav Vasa	(regent 1521)	1523–1560
Erik XIV		1560–1568
Johan III		1568–1592
Sigismund		1592–1599
Karl IX	(regent 1599)	1604–1611
Gustav II Adolf		1611–1632
Kristina	(regency 1632–44)	1644–1654

House of the Palatinate

Karl X Gustav		1654–1660
Karl XI	(regency 1660–72)	1672–1697
Karl XII		1697–1718
Ulrika Eleonora		1719–1720

House of Hesse

Fredrik I		1720–1751
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House of Holstein-Gottorp

Adolf Fredrik		1751–1771
Gustav III		1771–1792
Gustav IV Adolf	(regency 1792–96)	1796–1809
Karl XIII		1809–1818

House of Bernadotte

Karl XIV Johan		1818–1844
Oskar I		1844–1859
Karl XV		1859–1872
Oskar II		1872–1907
Gustaf V		1907–1950
Gustaf VI Adolf		1950–1973
Carl XVI Gustaf		1973–

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