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THE UNCROWNED KING: AXEL OXENSTIERNA AND SWEDEN'S RISE TO POWER DURING THE
THIRTY YEARS WAR

by

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During the Thirty Years War

Forest R Johnson III

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The Death of a King and Rise of a Chancellor

For the first time in his adult life, Axel Oxenstierna, Chancellor of Sweden, suffered through a sleepless night. On November 6, 1632, Gustav II Adolf (also known as Gustavus Adolphus, the Latinized version of his name), the king of Sweden, fell during the Battle of Lutzen, part of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) being fought by Sweden, France, and their allies against the Catholic states of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Holy Roman Emperor's allies. While Gustav had an heir in his daughter Christina, she was only 6 years old at the time of her father's death, and until her eighteenth birthday could not hold the powers of the monarch, per Sweden's laws of succession at the time. She *was*, however, officially crowned while yet a girl of 6, due to Sweden's rule of law requiring a vote of the estates for any new king, as even Christina was called.

A humorous episode occurred with this vote, as a representative of the Lower Estate (i.e., the lower classes of society, non-nobles), known as Lars Larsson, demanded to see the young princess before a vote could be taken, as he and others were anxious about the notion of voting for a female to be "king". When Christina was found and brought before the Riksdag, the vote to crown her was unanimous, as all in attendance were awed at her unmistakable resemblance to her father Gustav.¹ This serves to illustrate the precarious situation in which all parties of the Swedish government found themselves after Lutzen, as none had given much credence to the idea that their beloved king would die so suddenly. Nevertheless, Sweden's generals swore their allegiance and willingness to continue the fight in letters to Oxenstierna and the Queen herself,

¹ Buckley, Veronica, *Christina: Queen of Sweden* (Fourth Estate: London, 2004), 46-47.

as did the members of the Privy Council, giving the new status quo legitimacy, and ensuring that Gustav's will would live on, at least for the short term.

As a direct result of Gustav's death and Christina's minority, the onus of power (as well as responsibility for Christina's schooling and training in statecraft) fell to Axel Oxenstierna, the Chancellor of the Swedish state (more formally known as the Lord High Chancellor). To this man, above all others, the king had entrusted the governance and administration of the state during his long absences due to wars with Denmark, Russia, Poland, and the Holy Roman Empire, and it was largely due to his expertise that Gustav had been able to institute the majority of his reforms. Thus, it followed that the Chancellor was the man most capable of leading the Swedish state to greatness with the king's passing. With the regency of the young queen under the control of the Privy Council from 1632 until she took the throne in 1644, Oxenstierna held sway over nearly all important functions of the state. During this twelve-year period, the Lord High Chancellor served as the *de facto* head of state, and was either directly or indirectly responsible for the vast majority of Sweden's advancements, both at home and abroad. Though some have considered him a mere regent, Axel Oxenstierna's "reign" can be considered significant due to several differences from previous regencies within Sweden, or Europe as a whole. For the first time in early modern European history, a noble with no connection to the royal family, and no influence from the church, took control of the state in the absence of a *reigning* monarch, held power for a significant period of time and gave over power peacefully when the heir was ready/able to take power.

Throughout his tenure as Lord High Chancellor, Axel Oxenstierna was responsible for, or played a vital role in, a number of peace treaties and truces which not only increased Sweden's power and influence in the Baltic region, but also in the HRE (Holy Roman Empire) and France.

These ranged from the Treaty of Knared in 1613 which ended the Kalmar War (1611-1613) between Sweden and Denmark, to the incredibly important Truce of Altmark (1629) which not only ended the war between Sweden and Poland, but also cemented an alliance between France and Sweden, which would last (albeit in slightly altered forms, with new treaties marking each) until the end of the war in 1648.² Oxenstierna was personally opposed to the alliance with France, believing (rightly, it must be said) that Cardinal Richelieu was simply using the then-powerful Swedes to further his own goal of destroying Habsburg hegemony over much of Europe.

The Thirty Years War, which lasted from 1618-1648, was largely fought on the battlefields of the Holy Roman Empire, at the time an incorporation of numerous Germanic states under individual rulers, themselves subject to the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor, which was largely Catholic by tradition as much as by belief. As the famous Frenchman Voltaire once stated, the title for these lands, the Holy Roman Empire, was a misnomer, as “this agglomeration which was called and which still calls itself the Holy Roman Empire was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.”³ The Thirty Years War and its aftermath were largely an offshoot of the ongoing religious struggles between European states with interests in and outside of the German states over the notion of religious tolerance in the Empire for Protestants (at that time, only Lutherans were recognized by the Emperor as such).

In 1618, the heir to the Imperial throne, Ferdinand II (who became Emperor the next year), began to mistreat his Protestant citizens, removing rights and privileges, which had been enjoyed for decades, from Protestant nobles and the lower class alike, and overtly giving

² Frost, Robert I., *The Northern Wars: War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe, 1558-1721*, (Pearson Education Limited: Edinburgh Gate, Harlow, Essex, 2000) 114.

³ Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, trans. by Johnson, Forest R, (1756).

financial benefits to Catholics and the Catholic church. A number of these citizens in Catholic lands appealed to the Protestant Germanic states of the Northeast, such as Brandenburg, Bremen, and Saxony, which quickly rallied troops to counter the Catholic forces of the Emperor. However, after twelve years of brutal fighting and numerous defeats left these states on the verge of complete failure, the great powers of Europe (France, Sweden, Spain, and Denmark) were finally motivated to intervene directly in the war, each for its own purposes.

In 1630, the German Protestants finally received the outside support they had prayed for, as into the fray marched the “Lion of the North,” King Gustav II Adolf of the Swedes, determined to free the German princes from what he, and they, saw as the tyranny of the Catholic Emperor.⁴ This, as much as any factor, led directly to the prominence, indeed pre-eminence, of the Swedish Chancellor in the war following the untimely death of Gustav a mere two years following his landing in the Empire. The war was able to continue without the king, as the Chancellor assumed supreme command of the Swedish armies, and the king’s generals pledged themselves to the continuation of Gustav’s aims in the Empire.

While a great number of generals and statesmen played pivotal roles for their respective nations during the period of the Thirty Years War, perhaps none were quite as prominent as Axel Oxenstierna. He was in possession of a keen intellect, which at times led him to look down upon his contemporaries, particularly his allies Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin and many of the German princes. This trait was inadvertently passed to his children, as his son Johan displayed this very tendency at the peace conferences in Westphalia, despite not having achieved what his father had. Nevertheless, the Chancellor’s skill at negotiation, at seeing all options before him and choosing one which would he believed would best benefit his nation was undeniable, and

⁴ Wilson, Peter H., *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, Basingstroke, Hampshire, 2010), 120-121.

lauded throughout Europe. In a manner generally foreign to the continually bickering states of which the Holy Roman Empire was comprised, as well as other monarchies within Europe, Oxenstierna led Sweden through the death of her beloved King, through disastrous military defeats, and a failed alliance.⁵ Through it all he reacted with a signature poise, and a manner which suggested strength even when he was unsure of himself or of the correctness of his actions. In a number of ways, his life is symbolic of Sweden's success during this period, having both tragedy and heartbreak, balanced by good fortune and great power, enough to make Sweden's Chancellor, for all practical purposes, its king without name or crown.

Early Life and Career Under Gustav (1583-1632)

Though he later achieved power and prestige on his own merits, Axel Oxenstierna was born into the historically influential Oxenstierna family. Indeed, one of his ancestors, Jöns Oxenstierna Bengtsson, the Archbishop of Uppsala, who became regent, was the only other person in Swedish history to hold what in modern terminology would be called dictator-like powers over the state.⁶ However, unlike his famed ancestor, Axel had the full support of the nobility in so doing, and was fully independent of not only the royal line but the church, as well. Despite the greatness which his family name seemed to portend for the young man, he began his career in the court of King Charles IX as a mere valet, having studied alongside his brothers at several universities within the Holy Roman Empire. His family connections and education

⁵ Parker, Geoffrey, *Europe in Crisis: 1598-1648* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1979), 94.

⁶ Wang, Eric A., "Jöns Oxenstierna Bengtsson", *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, 1913, accessed Nov. 6, 2016, <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=1731>.

granted Axel the chance, at the age of 19, to serve in his first official position in the Swedish court, though he was initially a mere valet to the reigning monarch, King Charles IX of Sweden.⁷

Yet, through this position, the talented Oxenstierna gained status, and was sent to gain his first taste of European diplomacy in missions to the Imperial courts, particularly the Duchy of Mecklenburg, during which he served as a Counselor. At around the same time, the young diplomat was granted a prestigious seat on the Privy Council, signifying his status as a trusted servant of the King. As a result, he was sent as a member of the delegation to Charles' adversary Christian IV of Denmark in 1610, in an attempt to dissuade the latter from war with Sweden, an action which illustrates not only the king's trust in the young man, but his rapid rise through the ranks of the court as well. Unfortunately for both the Swedish king and the young diplomat, however, the negotiations failed, and the Kalmar War swiftly broke out, with Danish forces crossing into Swedish territories. Charles died the next year, before a true defense could be roused. This inadvertently served as the beginning of what would become a meteoric rise in power and influence for Oxenstierna, as the issue of succession quickly arose, given that Charles' eldest son Gustav Adolf was only 17, and thus was unfit to assume command and the throne.

This succession was due almost entirely to the influence and political power of the Privy Council's eldest members, guided by the hand of Oxenstierna. Together the two managed to effect the necessary change to the laws of succession, in order to ensure a smooth transition. The limited experience which the young Councilor had gained under Charles IX gave him a drive to succeed where others had failed. With the other Council members, Oxenstierna was able to practically force Gustav into accepting the Charter of 1612 which placed the prince on his

⁷ Hofburg, Herman, et al, "Oxenstierna, Axel Gustaffson," In *Svenskt biografiskt handlexikon*, ed. by Hofburg, Herman et al, 2nd ed, 1906, accessed December 13, 2016. <http://runeberg.org/sbh/b0252.html>.

father's throne in return for a grant of greater authority and autonomy to the nobility. The Charter effectively ensured that the Councilors' offices were no longer mere puppets of the king's will as they'd been under Charles, but were capable of making independent decisions if necessary, a significant factor in the Chancellor's later "reign."⁸

In an effort to please/thank the Council and the nobility, the young king granted great prestige and financial gifts to the Council, as well as acquiesced to their demands to grant the nobility more authority within the government.⁹ In gratitude for his key role in these developments, the other prominent members of the Privy Council elected Oxenstierna to the vaunted position of Lord High Chancellor. Largely due to the prestige this position granted him, as well as his own recognized skills as a statesman, Oxenstierna was able to effect a number of changes to the Swedish government both under Gustav's purview and alone, which drained power from the monarch to a nobility-controlled bureaucracy. These reforms, as well as his effective management of the Swedish state during the wars, enabled him to remain in this powerful position for the rest of his life.¹⁰

Having been a key asset in his successful rise to the throne, Gustav Adolf quickly came to trust his Chancellor for guidance, the two becoming fast friends, though their relationship was initially rocky due to their differing outlooks on the world around them and manner of dealing with stress. As the historian Michael Roberts notes in one of his multiple studies of Gustav, "It was a partnership of equals . . . their temperaments were very different: Gustavus dynamic, impetuous . . . Oxenstierna imperturbable, tireless, unhurrying; the one supplying inspiration, the

⁸ Roberts, Michael, *Gustavus Adolphus: A History of Sweden 1611-1632*, Vol. 1: 1611-1626 (Longmans: London, 1953), 22.

⁹ Parker, *Europe*, 103.

¹⁰ Hofburg, Herman, et al, "Oxenstierna, Axel Gustaffson," In *Svenskt biografiskt handlexikon*, ed. by Hofburg, Herman et al, 2nd ed, 1906, accessed December 13, 2016. <http://runeberg.org/sbh/b0253.html>.

other ripe wisdom and many-sided administrative ability.”¹¹ Yet in 1612, the young king demonstrated his supreme trust and faith in his Chancellor, saying, “It is not more particularly specified what he shall do, or how he shall act, in virtue of his office, but it is left to his modesty and his understanding as he may think best, and as he may answer it to God, to Us, and to all our loyal subjects.”¹² This statement proved prophetic, given both Oxenstierna’s numerous accomplishments, and influence, both at the king’s side and behest, and those which were the product of his own pseudo-reign over Sweden during Christina’s minority. Indeed, the Chancellor was trusted enough that he was specifically selected to attend the king during his journey into the Holy Roman Empire in search of a bride. After a long journey and several meetings with princesses across the German states, Gustav found an agreeable and attractive bride in Maria Eleonora of Brandenburg; Oxenstierna had the honor of escorting the young bride and Queen-to-be from her home to Sweden, where Gustav awaited.¹³

A number of difficulties faced the young king, however, detracting from his marital bliss and the initially stormy relationship he had with the High Chancellor. A problem of succession, dating to the accession of Gustav’s father King Charles IX over Sigismund III, King of Poland and head of the Polish House of Vasa, would eventually lead to war, which would eventually go so far as to inform Gustav’s beliefs about intervening in the religious crises in the Empire.¹⁴ Though the young king had little military experience, he insisted upon leading his armies from the front, and won multiple victories, though he was nearly killed during the final battle of the war, the Battle of Trzciana. In addition, a struggle for supremacy of the Baltic coast with the

¹¹ Roberts, Michael. *Gustavus Adolphus*, (Longman: London, 1973), 36.

¹² Roberts, Michael, *Gustavus Adolphus and the Rise of Sweden*, (The English Universities Press: London, 1973), 85.

¹³ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . Sweden*, 52-53.

¹⁴ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . Sweden*, 35

long-powerful Denmark and its king, Christian IV, led to another war away from Sweden's shores, which was only settled by the eventual Treaty of Knared of 1613.

This treaty, which the Chancellor assisted in negotiating, was considered a disgrace to the Swedes, as it forced Sweden to pay an indemnity to Denmark in return for both the end of the war which the Danes had initiated, and the return of the fortress at Alvsborg on the western coast.¹⁵ The indemnity would not be fully paid until 1619. The future chancellor gained from this experience, as from that point he refused to cease negotiations until he had reached compromise which would be favorable to Sweden, though it left him with a deeply held distrust of Denmark and King Christian IV. Indeed, it seems evident that the Chancellor took the loss at Knared personally, as the later "Torstenson War" from 1643-1645 came as much from Christian IV's decision to support the Emperor in the late 1630's as from his belief and assertion that Denmark had always been the primary enemy of Sweden. Whatever the specific reason, Oxenstierna came to believe that Christian IV should be defeated as swiftly as possible, if for no other purpose than putting down an enemy far closer to Sweden's borders than the Emperor in far-off Vienna.

In addition to the Swedish troubles with the Danes, the Ingrian War (officially begun in 1610) carried on, a war against Russia for dominion over the Baltic, as well as (the same being true of the later war with Poland) over dynastic concerns from a generation prior. Whereas with Denmark the young king had been all too happy to accept an unflattering peace proposal, the concerns over succession, particularly due to Sigismund III of Poland's continued interest in the Swedish crown, made Gustav particularly interested in ensuring a positive outcome of this war. Utilizing a series of quick strategic strikes against the Russians, already weakened by the forces of Sigismund by the time he entered the war personally, the young Swede was able to largely

¹⁵ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . Sweden*, 42.

dismantle his foes' counteroffensives. With the assistance of his faithful Chancellor, Gustav pressured the Russians to agree to the Treaty of Stolbova in 1617, which stripped the Russians of their access to the Baltic Sea, thus of trade, which could henceforth only be facilitated by the Swedish fleet.¹⁶ This granted Sweden not only a base from which to launch further strikes against Russia if need be, but some degree of financial stability as well, at least for the time being.

With Gustav firmly in control of the state, the Chancellor and his monarch set to work restructuring and seeing to a number of reforms which likely would not have been possible without the direct intervention of Oxenstierna, given the training and experience he had gained previously in statecraft, as evidenced by the Charter of 1612.¹⁷ While it is undeniable that Gustav was similarly trained, as befitting a monarch of early modern Europe, the style of government which he had agreed to as condition of his enthronement gave him significantly less absolute authority than had been available to his father and grandfather before him.¹⁸ More importantly, Gustav had appointed a chancellor with experience (albeit limited at that point in time) within the very system which both men wished to reform, as well as training at both the professional (i.e. university training) level and familial one, given his family's ties to Sweden's government in prior decades.¹⁹

First, the two set about founding universities in Sweden to train diplomats and statesmen of the realm, as it came to light that many from the Lower Estates could not afford the fees necessary to send aspiring politicians to secular universities in The Empire, and the majority did not desire their sons to be taught in Catholic schools with a doctrine-heavy curriculum. To this

¹⁶ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . A History*, 53-55.

¹⁷ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . Sweden*, 33.

¹⁸ Parker, *Europe*, 103.

¹⁹ Frost, *Northern Wars*, 116.

end, Oxenstierna personally wrote to many prominent lecturers on the continent and requested their services. In addition to educational reforms, the Chancellor wished to reform the justice system, which heretofore had been, in the view of much of the nobility, too heavily focused upon the king's judgment, which left little to no room for smaller claims or the claims of the Lower Estates, if listened to at all. Thus, as a result of the two's efforts, the first Swedish Supreme Court was founded in 1614. To remedy the judicial problems which had previously plagued Sweden's monarchs, Gustav explicitly authorized the court to hand out judgments in his name. This was a significant innovation, as an appeals process was also instituted, which guaranteed that anyone unsatisfied with their judgment could yet appeal directly to the king for restitution. This department was run through the office of the Justice Department in the Privy Council which itself answered, albeit informally, to Oxenstierna. With regard to the Council, the Chancellor reorganized and reshaped its specific purposes, expanding its offices to five, with the Marshall, High Steward, Admiral, High Chancellor, and Treasurer. Just as importantly, a new stipulation (ratified by the later Instrument of Government of 1634) required that the king (or queen) have a council, but also gave the king the freedom to choose the members thereof.²⁰

Gustav chose a council comprised of his own brother (the illegitimate son of Charles IX), his Chancellor, and two of Oxenstierna's close family members, his cousin Gabriel Bengtsson Oxenstierna and brother Gabriel Gustaffson Oxenstierna. This decision proved incredibly beneficial to the Chancellor's twelve year "reign" over the country, primarily due to the ease with which his policies and advice were accepted without debate. Yet this also held true with regards to his more controversial decisions, such as his continuous delaying actions during the peace talks at Westphalia in the late 1640s, in hopes of receiving what he saw as the best

²⁰ Roberts, Michael "Oxenstierna in Germany", In *From Oxenstierna to Charles XII: Four Studies*, ed. Michael Roberts (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991) 11-12.

possible terms. It also serves to explain a curious phenomenon which took place during Oxenstierna's time in the Empire after Gustav's death, when, as Michael Roberts notes, even the most minor issues of the state such as acquisition of cloth for Gustav's funeral were referred to him.²¹ While this speaks to the Chancellor's savvy and dominance of the government, it also provides a picture of a government which seemingly would have not functioned anywhere near as well as history shows that it did without its careful and calculating architect overseeing it.

In 1626, Gustav declared war on Poland, influenced by a number of factors, nearly all of them personal. From Sigismund's standpoint, Gustav stood as a usurper, as both were direct descendants of the first King of Sweden from the House of Vasa, Gustav I. In addition, both men were the son of a king of Sweden, King John III and his younger brother, King Charles IX. From the standpoint of the Polish king, Gustav II stood as a symbol of his father, the man responsible for deposing Sigismund and thus minimizing his claim to the Swedish throne.²² Beyond even the important goal of securing his hold on his throne, however, Gustav held what might be called imperialist dreams. He desired to gain territory around the Baltic Sea to better secure his nation's borders, but also to gain economically by gaining control of the lucrative tolls imposed on sea and river trade in the region and pressure the Catholic Habsburgs by removing a potentially valuable ally.²³

With these ends in mind, the Swedish king invaded, and soon began to ravage the Polish garrisons, winning several major victories. Incidentally, this also gave Gustav motivation to

²¹ Ibid, 17-18.

²² Roberts, *Gustavus . . . A History*, 14-49.

Please note: This section contains a bevy of information about the succession of both Sigismund and Charles, which has been deemed too lengthy and unnecessary to the narrative to have added. Suffice it to say that Gustav II inherited a succession crisis which threatened to destroy Sweden, as both men had legitimate claims to the throne, and armies to defend them, though Sweden had been weakened by wars.

²³ Roberts, *Gustavus . . . Sweden*, 62-63.

implement military reforms and gave his soldiers the experience of bloody, prolonged battles which they would rely upon heavily due to similar terrain and weather conditions in the Empire.²⁴ The war finally came to its end only with the intervention of the French, particularly Cardinal Richelieu, King Louis XIII's chief minister, who brokered the Truce of Altmark of 1629. By this time, Gustav was eager to assist in the Germans' war and was more than willing to remove his troops from the beleaguered state. In return, Sweden gained control of Poland's invaluable Baltic ports, which came to be an incredibly useful source of wealth for the Swedes, desperate to pay off mounting war costs from before Gustav landed in the Empire.

Having been freed of his worries along the Baltic Sea, Gustav set his sights upon invading the Holy Roman Empire to assist the German Protestants, though he was influenced in this regard by the French.²⁵ Supporting him, as always, was Oxenstierna, to whom the administration of the state during the King's numerous absences had been relegated. In addition, he had been granted a governor-generalship over Prussia in the 1620s and had thus learned how to manage supply lines, troop payments, and recruitment both from Sweden and from conquered territories, skills which would very soon make themselves necessary. In 1630, Gustav and his army landed in the duchy of Pomerania. Less than a year later, in 1631, the Protestants saw the effectiveness and benefits of the impetuous Swedish king's military reforms. At the Battle of Breitenfeld, his lighter units and cannon were able to rain death upon the slower, more static, infantry squares of the Imperial general, Johann Tserclaes, the Count of Tilly. By the end of the year, Oxenstierna had been recalled to his king's side, having had a noticeable effect on the

²⁴ Frost, *Northern Wars*, 112.

²⁵ Pages, Georges, *The Thirty Years War: 1618-1648*, trans. David Maland and John Hooper, (Harper and Row: New York, 1939), 117.

ability of Gustav to resupply his armies with all of the base necessities, as well as much-needed reinforcements from abroad.²⁶

In 1631, the Protestants received a welcome boon with the signing of the Treaty of Barwalde between France and Sweden. Much like the Treaty of Wismar, which succeeded it in 1636 (around the same time as the turning point for the Swedes, with their victory over an Imperial army at the Battle of Wittstock), it fully cemented the alliance between France and Sweden, the basis of which was established with the signing of the Truce of Altmark in 1629.²⁷²⁸ While it must be reiterated that Oxenstierna was incredibly distrustful of his French ally, he dared not turn against King Gustav, who desired Protestant hegemony equaling that enjoyed by the Catholic Habsburgs of Austria and Spain. Gustav envisioned himself as the leader of an Evangelical Protestant alliance akin to the Catholic League, which would stand firmly against the kind of oppression which had antagonized the German princes into beginning the war.²⁹ The Chancellor later recorded that, “had his late Majesty not betaken himself to Germany with his army, the emperor would today have a fleet upon these seas . . . the whole coast would have fallen to him and here in Sweden we should never have enjoyed a minute’s security.”³⁰ This statement is also illustrative of his own reasons for continuing the war following Gustav’s death.

Early in his service to Gustav, Oxenstierna was placed in a position which prepared him well for his future role as the de facto ruler of Sweden. It swiftly became his responsibility to manage the government’s affairs during the king’s multiple long absences, effectively governing

²⁶ *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brevföreläsning. Avd. 2. Bd 13, Brev från Jacob Spens och Jan Rutgers*, trans. By Johnson, Forest R

²⁷ Maland, David, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, (Macmillan: London, 1966), 385.

²⁸ “The Treaty of Barwalde, 23 January 1631, and the Guarantee for Bavaria, 15 January 1631” In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. by Peter H Wilson, (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2010), 131-140-142.

²⁹ Gustav II Adolf Vasa, “The ‘norms for future action’, 1631”, In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. By Peter H Wilson, (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2010), 131-132.

³⁰ Pages, *The Thirty Years War*, 131.

the whole of the Swedish state during these periods. His responsibilities were quite similar to those he would face following the king's death. These included notable influences in or outright control over the Swedish economy, diplomacy with both allies and enemies, the administration of taxation, and the hiring of troops for Sweden's armies. In addition, the wars granted him a great amount of experience with military matters, particularly when he was granted a Governor-Generalship over occupied Prussia during the latter war. He also gained experience in diplomacy, as the role of negotiator and chief diplomat in peace negotiations fell to his office, known as the Chancery. He excelled in both positions, most particularly the latter, ensuring settlements beneficial to Sweden in the Treaty of Stolbova (1617) and the later Truce of Altmark, and various treaties with France.

The War and the Home Front Post-Gustav (1632-1644)

In mid-July, 1634, the body of Gustav II Adolf arrived in Stockholm and was laid to rest (due to delays caused by the distraught and depressed queen), accompanied by his faithful Chancellor and the other members of his Privy Council, the young Queen Christina, the Queen Mother, Maria Eleonora, and the hide of his beloved warhorse Streiff (the horse had died en route to Sweden).³¹ After the king's burial at Ridderholm church in Stockholm, the Chancellor set to the monumental task of assuming the mantles of Regent (due to Christina's minority), Supreme Commander of the Protestant war effort, as well as the Chancellor and de facto ruler of Sweden through his domination of the Privy Council and Riksdag. Given his years of experience with reform and administration under Gustav, and the deep trust which the latter held in his

³¹ Grönhammar, Ann; Nestor, Sofia. *The Royal Armoury in the Cellar Vaults of the Royal Palace* (Livrustkammaren: Stockholm, 2011).

Chancellor, it is likely that no other man in the government at that time would have been able, much less willing, to assume such a role.

Rather than back away, as some would have done, Oxenstierna comforted the Queen, visited his estates, and promptly returned to the Empire, coming to reside in the city of Mainz.³² Mainz swiftly became the informal capital of the Swedish state and all of its holdings, which it remained until Oxenstierna's return to Sweden in 1636, following the disaster at Nordlingen and collapse of the Heilbronn League. It must be stated, however, that the Chancellor maintained a healthy correspondence with his contemporaries in the Riksdag and Privy Council, advising and indirectly controlling the direction various government departments proceeded in despite his concerns with the ever-changing political and military environment of the German states.³³

Desiring to act in a manner which reflected Gustav's will, yet cognizant of his own shortcomings, Oxenstierna swiftly adopted a laissez-faire military policy, leaving strategy and order of battle to his generals while he himself oversaw recruitment, supply trains, and diplomacy with Sweden's allies.³⁴ In addition, Oxenstierna almost immediately began seeing to the creation of a League of Protestant German states, as envisioned by Gustav, to defend against "Catholic tyranny", with himself as director and France as guarantor, with the personal assurance of Cardinal Richelieu.³⁵ The resulting Heilbronn League, founded in early 1633, served as a godsend to the Swedes, who being far from home, were heavily dependent on their continental allies for food supplies, safe passage, and the recruitment of mercenaries.³⁶ This is not to mention

³² See Appendix II for location in the Empire.

³³ *Gabriel Gustafsson Oxenstiernas Bref till rikskansleren Axel Oxenstierna, 1611-1640*, trans. In part by Johnson Forest R (1890).

³⁴ Roberts, "Oxenstierna in Germany", 2-6.

³⁵ Maland, *Europe*, 175.

³⁶ "The League of Heilbronn, 13 April 1633" In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. Peter H. Wilson, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 179-181.

the troops that states such as Brandenburg supplied from their own independent forces to the command of the Swedes and their allies. Despite the great responsibilities which had been forced upon him by his king's assassin, the Chancellor did not waver in his commitment to walk the path Gustav had and avenge the wrongs perpetrated against his Protestant allies. Indeed, he was seen as much by himself as by others as the new champion and leading face/force for Protestants throughout the Empire.

In the creation of this alliance the Chancellor was particularly successful. Being a politician and statesman, the Chancellor had attempted to secure peace with the Empire and her allies, an action which would have rendered the League unnecessary. However, to Oxenstierna's disappointment, the involved parties could not agree on a settlement which benefited them all, and he thus moved forward with the plans laid out by Gustav for a Protestant league to challenge the Catholics.³⁷ As Gustav had wished, an evangelical alliance to combat the Catholic League was created in the form of the Heilbronn League in 1633, which consisted of a number of German Protestant states (albeit fewer than originally envisioned) and Sweden, with France as a guarantor.³⁸ Through the League, which included, through lengthy negotiation with Oxenstierna's contemporary (and chief political rival in Europe, Cardinal Richelieu, the nation of France, Sweden was able to maintain her war gains to that point, as well as gain much-needed funding for her armies, which Sweden's economy could not easily supply.³⁹

Realizing that Sweden would need a new source of funds with the loss of tolls from Polish lands due to the expiration of the Truce of Altmärk (the Poles became more concerned with Russia and the Ottoman Empire than with the Swedes shortly after their losses) the

³⁷ *Gabriel Gustafsson Oxenstiernas Bref till rikskansleren Axel Oxenstierna, 1611-1640*, trans. In part by Johnson Forest R (1890).

³⁸ Roberts, "Oxenstierna in Germany", 31.

³⁹ Pages, *The Thirty Years War*, 117.

Chancellor instituted a quickly-infamous project known as “reduction”. By this, lands belonging to the crown could be “bought” by nobles in exchange for good service in the armies, to include service of sons or other relatives, or more literally for a payment to the state’s treasuries.⁴⁰ However, this also meant that said lands could only be taxed indirectly (i.e. by their production, though the nobles could not be taxed for them as a land tax) which, in the end, hurt the Swedish economy. Oxenstierna, without the backing of his fiery king to keep the nobility in line, was taken advantage of in this instance, as nobles sought to make themselves more powerful at the expense of the state and, indeed, the crown. Though he attempted to stem the flow of lands to his colleagues, in this he was unable to make headway.⁴¹ As Sven-Erik Astrom reports in his research, the Swedish economy still felt the effects of this program decades later.⁴²

Despite the crowning achievement which the founding of the League of Heilbronn can be said to have been for Oxenstierna, problems arose almost immediately. Though the death of the Swedish king at Lutzen was instrumental in uniting the Protestant German states in a manner close to that which the late king had envisioned, many of the signatory states desired peace due to their far lengthier commitment to the wars by that point. This swiftly reached the ears of the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand III, who offered (albeit begrudgingly) a solution to the battered German Protestant states. Though the League collapsed with the signing of the Peace of Prague in 1635, the result of a successful ploy by Emperor Ferdinand III to wrest the all-important support of the Germanic princes from his opponents, several of the signatories remained in allegiance to France and Sweden, even if they were no longer willing to offer troops and endanger themselves through direct intervention.

⁴⁰ Maland, *Europe*, 391.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Astrom, Sven-Erik, “Swedish Economy and Role as a Great Power” in *Sweden’s Age of Greatness: 1632-1718*, ed. By Michael Roberts, (Macmillan: London, 1973), 97.

Due to the terms of the Peace, which granted to each state the right to choose its own religious affiliation, a prominent reason many had been willing to go to war against the Catholic sovereign to begin with was taken away. However, the creation of the League in itself must be considered a mark of the political skill and savvy which the Swedish Chancellor possessed. In the face of mounting Catholic opposition to the allies' cause, the creation of the Heilbronn League stood as a political weapon, a symbol of the resistance of France and Sweden, and their respective allies, to the power and influence of the Holy Roman Emperor. In addition, it served as a powerful reminder to the Privy Council and Riksdag that the chancellor, for his faults, was adhering to the will of the fallen king and had achieved an important goal as the war was concerned. Through the League's creation, Oxenstierna firmly established himself as champion of the Protestant cause in Gustav's place, and given the German Protestants cause to assist their "savior." Perhaps most importantly, the Chancellor had ensured that due to their assistance against the Habsburgs, the Swedes would be rewarded in any peace settlement and have security against outside threats.⁴³

In 1634, Oxenstierna wrote the Instrument of Government of 1634, which, among other things formally ratified many of the reforms made under Gustav, to include the separation of the government into five colleges, the enhancement of the Chancery, official changes to the military's supply, weapon, and formation standards, and the creation of the Supreme Court. Just as important, this document served as Sweden's first true constitution (though it went unratified by any monarch until it fell out of use during the reign of Charles XI). This was incredibly significant, as the government had previously (i.e., pre-Gustav II) been centered almost directly upon the monarch himself, with government offices being little more than titles for the favored

⁴³ Roberts, "Oxenstierna in Germany", 33-35.

members of the nobility. Yet perhaps most importantly to the legacy of Oxenstierna as the ruler of the state was his claim regarding the legitimacy of the document. Interestingly, while the loyalty of the Privy Council, as well as the Riksdag, to the Chancellor was rarely if ever truly questioned, he ensured that his would not be a worry, legitimizing his work by stating that it was written only by the will and consent of Gustav, with whom he had discussed such a document in the event of the king's passing.

Even beyond the writing of necessary treatises on the Swedish government's reorganization and reforms, the Chancellor had a direct effect on his colleagues and underlings in Sweden following Gustav's untimely death. Though he often complained about the amount of work which seemed heaped upon him by others, it is imperative to note the sheer amount of detail with which he concerned himself. For example, it was to him that the other regents came for such things as "determination of wage-scales for civil servants . . . At the Regents' request he drew up for them a schedule of rates for tolls and duties in Sweden and Finland".⁴⁴ Indeed, the sheer amount of correspondence between Mainz and Stockholm during this period is noted by Michael Roberts as having been primarily due to advice the Chancellor issued to various colleges and departments, in addition to that which he kept up with the Queen, Cardinal Richelieu, and his generals in the field.⁴⁵

The Swedish generals Baner, Horn, and Torstenson were all assisted in their efforts to hold together the Swedish forces by the efforts of German allies such as Bernhard de Saxe-Weimar. Saxe-Weimar, a staunch ally of Gustav and later France, turned what could easily have been an even larger disaster at Lutzen into a hard-fought victory by furiously counterattacking the Imperial center, seizing the high ground and the Imperial artillery batteries, snatching victory

⁴⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 13.

just as Imperial reinforcements arrived to the battlefield. The generals as a body seemed only too happy to allow Chancellor Oxenstierna to remain the Supreme Commander of the allied forces.⁴⁶ Any political conflicts, indeed concerns, these men may have had were with one another, over the subjects of lands awarded to victors, and who among them ought to be given sole commands based upon his merits and experiences under Gustav. For his part, the Chancellor seemed to have little to no issue with allowing his generals a high degree of free will, so long as they followed his general directives of the war, such as withdrawal to the north per his strategy, or advancing south with French support forces following the signing of the Treaty of Hamburg in 1638.⁴⁷

In 1634, a disaster struck for the then victorious Swedes and their allies. A Spanish army moving north from Italy to assist against the threatening French and Swedish forces combined with an Imperial army and, in the swiftly following Battle of Nordlingen, shattered the Swedish front. Most devastating to the Protestant cause was the loss of a great number of Swedish veterans with whom Gustav II had entered The Empire, whose numbers had already been drastically reduced by the victory at Lutzen and the numerous smaller battles fought against the Catholic League troops in the interim. Yet this battle was far more than a mere military defeat, as it signaled a near collapse for Oxenstierna as well. Things went decidedly downhill for the embattled Chancellor following the loss at Nordlingen, to the point that it led him to abandon his temporary base in The Empire and return to Stockholm. From there, he continued to direct the war effort as best he could, and took a more direct control over the government at home.

Two years later, however, an undesired and unexpected godsend (not fully appreciated until the beginning of peace talks gave credence to it) came for the Chancellor at Hamburg in

⁴⁶ "Från Axel Oxenstierna till Gustav Horn/Fältmarskalk", trans by Johnson Forest R, In *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brevvexling. v.16 pt.1-2 Brev 1636-1654 (i urval)*

⁴⁷ Ibid.

1638, with the signing of an eponymous treaty with France. Its stipulations included a guarantee that in return for a yearly indemnity from the French of one million thalers, the Swedes would continue to lead the war effort in The Empire and supply their own soldiers for this effort. The Chancellor was incredibly unhappy with this arrangement, never truly trusting the motivations of the wily Richelieu, and believing that he had been shackled to the whims of the mercurial French monarchy. It is incredible, indeed, that such was his opinion, given his previous unyielding support for Gustav's nigh-imperialist visions. Whatever his personal views, however, he was able to recognize the potential benefit for Sweden, as the nobility scrabbled for land and power and funds for the war became increasingly difficult to come by.

By 1638, the Chancellor had come to see that he had two options available to him pertaining to the war in The Empire; he could continue to push back against the Imperials, which would have the positive effect of potentially winning peace terms which would directly favor him and thus further his ends of a more protected Swedish homeland. He could also order his generals to withdraw in order to defend the homeland and the territory which had been taken to that point.⁴⁸ The second option would grant his enemies avenues through which Sweden could be easily attacked or made weaker from the continent, and would deprive Sweden of most of her allies, both real and potential. Though he did so only begrudgingly, he chose to unite with France as it, if nothing else, it guaranteed that Sweden would not fight alone even if the rest of the Germans should abandon them. Realizing the benefit, he chose the first option, which with French assistance allowed the war to continue, and for Sweden to eventually gain from the peace proceedings at Westphalia.

⁴⁸ Roberts, "Oxenstierna in Germany", 18.

This policy was affirmed legally by the signing of yet another treaty between the Swedes and French, the Treaty of Hamburg of 1638, this time guaranteeing a payment of one million French *livres* to the Swedish war effort per year to pay the soldiery. It also served a second purpose, formally ratifying the terms of the earlier Treaty of Wismar of 1636. By the terms of this agreement, however unhappy with its potential implications he may have been, Oxenstierna threw in his lot, and that of the burgeoning Swedish empire, on the successes of his generals.⁴⁹ He was rewarded by a reversal of Swedish fortunes following the Battle of Wittstock in 1636 which laid the groundwork for a combined assault on the Imperial holdings. A major victory over the Imperial forces at the Battle of Second Breitenfeld in the northern Empire in 1642 helped to quell any fears the Chancellor may yet have had, while follow-up victories in the battles of Jankau (1645), Second Nordlingen (1645), Zusmarshausen and the capture of Prague in 1648 buttressed French victories against both the Spanish and Imperial troops. Had it not been for Oxenstierna's decision to move forward with the French at Hamburg, however, the war may well have turned once more against the Protestants.

As aforementioned, Oxenstierna had always seen the true threat to Swedish hegemony as coming not from the Catholic Habsburgs, but from Denmark, particularly as Christian IV came to support the Catholic cause in the mid-1630s. Realizing not only the danger to the Swedish homeland but to the war effort in the German states should Christian invade either, the Chancellor sent letters to his celebrated generals and field marshals, specifically Lennart Torstenson and Carl Wrangel, directing a multi-pronged attack. A massive tactical victory at the Battle of Fehmarn which destroyed most of the Danish fleet, the arrival of Dutch, German and

⁴⁹ *Rikskansleren Axel Oxenstiernas skrifter och brevvevling. 11,1: förra afdelningen: Brev 1634, januari-mars*, trans in part by Johnson, Forest R

French reinforcements, and Swedish defense forces fending off a well-prepared strike against Sweden itself, forced Christian to the negotiating table in 1645. The Danes had been caught completely unawares, but credit is also due to Torstenson, for whom the short-lived war was named, acting swiftly to the Chancellor's command, having brought his army across the German states from Moravia.⁵⁰ His forces having been devastated, Christian was forced to accept unflattering terms, a final revenge for the insult of the Treaty of Knared just over thirty years prior. By the resulting Treaty of Bromsebro (1645), Sweden received freedom from the dues pushed on all Swedish shipping, as well as the territories of Jemtland and Herjedalen in Norway and the islands of Osel and Gotland.⁵¹

The Reign of Christina, Oxenstierna's Loss of Power, and the Peace of Westphalia (1644-1654)

In September 1644, Christina of House Vasa finally turned eighteen, and formally assumed control of the Swedish government she had been "King" over for twelve years. With the conclusion of her minority, and assumption of her full powers for the first time, Christina almost immediately began to strike out against the policies which her Chancellor, and his associates on the Privy Council, had put into place during her minority.⁵² Most particularly, Christina resented what she saw as a power grab by Oxenstierna and the nobility, and pursued a policy with a far greater emphasis on royal power than had been in place even under her father's control. For the rest of her 10-year reign, the young Queen continued this fight, while the financial issues that

⁵⁰ See Appendix II for Map

⁵¹ Scott, F., *Sweden: The Nation's History*, (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale, 1988), 200.

⁵² Scott, *Sweden*, 203.

faced her father and Oxenstierna (and his government) continued unabated, despite her attempts to assuage these issues by seizing previously royal lands which had been sold (making them taxable properties once more) and attempting to draw down her military forces. Even had she wished to do so, however, Christina could not easily remove Oxenstierna from office, as he remained the most prominent noble in government, and had personal or working relationships with many of Sweden's allies, particularly the French, whose funds were necessary to continue the war.

When formal peace negotiations began in the German towns of Munster and Osnabruck in 1642 (the former prepared for Catholic, the latter for Protestant, plenipotentiaries), Sweden sent two notable personages in the forms of Johan Adler Salvius and Johan Oxenstierna. The former was a favorite of the Queen, and a former secretary, a man in whose abilities the Chancellor trusted, though he disliked the man himself for ascending to power as a favorite.⁵³ The latter was the trusted eldest son of the Lord High Chancellor himself. Like his father, the younger Oxenstierna possessed a rough demeanor, a feature which reportedly made it difficult for other plenipotentiaries to speak with him on the same level. This was, to the disappointment of much of the rest of the delegation, made worse by his insistence on pomp and pageantry as befitting a noble and the position of his father. In spite of this, Oxenstierna trusted his son to achieve the ends which both men believed would lead to a greater outcome for the Swedish state at the close of the negotiations. These negotiations took place despite the continuation of the war, which officials and leaders from nearly all involved parties hoped would facilitate better terms for them in an eventual peace treaty should they gain victory.

⁵³ Ibid.

Through the differing personages of Salvius and Johan Oxenstierna, the two leaders' vastly different strategies for the negotiations swiftly became evident. The elder Oxenstierna, as most sides in the war had done to that point, desired to push the advantage which the military alliance with France, and recent military victories such as at the Battles of Second Breitenfeld (1642), Jankau (1645), Second Nordlingen (1645), and Zusmarshausen (1648) granted his nation, and to push for as many territorial and monetary gains as possible.⁵⁴ While it is unknown if he was aware of it, this strategy seems to have been one which could potentially have yielded much higher gains than Sweden came to receive, as Ferdinand III, realizing he was at a disadvantage, gave permission to, as Helfferich states "his plenipotentiary and close advisor, Count Maximilian von Trauttmansdorff to concede almost anything to bring about peace."⁵⁵ It was no mere coincidence that this willingness to concede came even as Protestant forces smashed their way through the city of Prague in 1648, a mere three days journey from the Imperial capital at Vienna.

The Queen, however, desired a swift peace, and was willing to accept nearly any concessions which would end the war more quickly, whereas the Chancellor was far more willing to delay proceedings until such time as the Swedish and French armies were able to deliver a decisive victory, and indeed directed to his son to do as much as he was able to achieve this end. Christina conveyed her sentiments to Salvius, and the younger Oxenstierna, in a letter dated 10 April 1647:

"You will obtain the best terms that are to be had without risk of a rupture; and you will refrain from protracting the negotiations, as you have done in the past . . .

⁵⁴ *The Essential Thirty Years War – A Documentary History* ed. and trans. by Tryntje Helfferich, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2015, 68.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

You will take care not to allow yourselves to be deflected from your object by the imaginings of ambitious men. For you may be perfectly assured that neither personal eminence, nor aristocratic backing, will deter me from manifesting to the whole world the displeasure with which I view unreasonable proceedings.”⁵⁶

Despite these sentiments, however, Christina conveyed her personal opinions of both the influence of her Chancellor on the proceedings in a separate letter written only for Salvius’ eyes on the same day: “I also deduce from all this that there are those who are doing their best to spin out the discussions, if not indeed to wreck the treaty altogether . . . I shall let them see that not even the R.C. [sic] can move the world with his little finger.”⁵⁷ By such actions, Oxenstierna was consistently stymied in his attempts to ensure a maximum payout for Sweden, desired due to its massive financial losses and the fear potential (later real) loss of conquered German territories. As Christina well knew, the Chancellor attempted on a number of occasions to indirectly sway the negotiations through his son, who shared his father’s desire for a maximum payout. Unfortunately for both Oxenstiernas, however, the actions and suggestions of Salvius derailed these attempts. Despite serving both his Chancellor and his Queen, Salvius obeyed only the latter in this instance.

When the treaty of Osnabruck was signed on October 24, 1648, with the concurrent treaty of Munster, the Thirty Years War finally came to a halt, leaving many of the German states largely crippled and a new balance of power within Europe, as Habsburg power declined while Swedish and French power rose. Most importantly for the German Protestants (at least those who

⁵⁶ Vasa, Christina, “Negotiations in Westphalia: Queen Christina to Johan Oxenstierna and Johan Adler Salvius, 10 April 1647” In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. Peter H. Wilson, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵⁷ Vasa, Christina, “Christina to Salvius, 10 April 1647” In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. Peter H. Wilson, (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

remained staunchly opposed to the Emperor), and for Sweden, the concept of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) was reinstated, which guaranteed religious freedom to Protestants and (for the first time ever) to Calvinists in the Empire. Sweden received only 1/4 of the 20 million thaler indemnity which the Chancellor had fought so strenuously for, nearly all of which was spent in paying off the Swedish soldiery, as well as the thousands of German and Scottish mercenaries populating the Swedish armies.⁵⁸

Sweden was additionally granted control of the territories of Western (henceforth Swedish) Pomerania and Wismar, as well as the Prince-Bishoprics of Bremen and Verden, which gave Sweden a seat in the Imperial diet. In essence, this gave the northern country a say in the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire. Yet here, too, the Chancellor was ill-satisfied, as he had hoped to gain sole control of Pomerania, as well as the river tolls of Bremen. In later years, Oxenstierna blamed Sweden's eventual gains (which he saw as inferior when compared with the sacrifices made by the Swedish state and its population) in the Peace of Westphalia on Christina's influence, a factor made worse in his mind by the events which followed, a short six years later.⁵⁹

In 1654, to the shock of the nation, Queen Christina chose, after much deliberation, to abdicate her throne in favor of her beloved cousin, Charles Gustav, who ascended the throne the very next day as Charles X Gustav. As she was the only legitimate heir to the Swedish House of Vasa (her older brother Gustav being illegitimate and Charles belonging to the house his father belonged to), this was seen by much of the nobility not only as treason against the state (particularly given the continuing issues with state finance) but against her family and her name.

⁵⁸ "The Peace of Westphalia (October 24, 1648)" In *The Essential Thirty Years War – A Documentary History* ed. and trans. by Tryntje Helfferich, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2015.

⁵⁹ "The Peace of Westphalia, 24 October 1648" In *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook* ed. By Peter Wilson (Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2010), 313-314.

This proved significant due to the great respect many important figures in Europe had had for her father, and his legacy, which she seemed to be disrespecting by her refusal to continue her role as ruler. In addition, financial troubles remained rampant in the new Swedish empire. The sale of royal lands to the nobility, as feared by Oxenstierna many years prior, had had incredibly negative effects. As Lockhart notes, by 1654, “the nobility was, by far the largest collective landowner in the kingdom, with nearly 63 percent of all cultivated land in Sweden and Finland in noble hands . . . nearly two-thirds of the tax-rights to the farms of *skattebonder* (literally tax farmers, those who paid a yearly fee to farm land owned by others) were nobly owned as well.”⁶⁰

Yet, as with most things in her life, Christina stood fast, despite the protestations of the Riksdag, the Privy Council, and the repeated arguments put forth by Oxenstierna himself. The Chancellor was brought to silence on the date of her abdication, refusing even to speak to the assembly of nobles and dignitaries to tell them the purpose for the meeting, “by reason of an oath I had taken to my king, to endeavor to keep the crown on his daughter’s head,” which is also indicative of his refusal to remove her from power in earlier years.⁶¹ Even more scandalously, the queen converted to Catholicism and moved to Rome shortly after her abdication, where she continued to live, aside from trips to France and the Holy Roman Empire, for the rest of her days, under the protection of several popes. For his part, Axel Oxenstierna did not live long enough to have a significant role to play in the administration of his new monarch, dying at his estate a mere two months after the crowning of King Charles X Gustav.

Scholarship Regarding Oxenstierna

⁶⁰ Lockhart, Paul D, *Sweden in the Seventeenth Century*, European History in Perspective, ed. Jeremy Black, (Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, Basingstroke, Hampshire, 2004), 80.

⁶¹ Buckley, *Christina*, 117.

Throughout the twentieth century, a great body of research was completed on the subject of the Thirty Years War and those who had great effects upon the events of that tumultuous era. Of major note to a number of these historians have been men and women who shaped the world around them by their actions, or were larger than life characters. Gustav II Adolf is certainly one such man, and has been studied extensively by Michael Roberts, a prominent historian of Swedish history during this period. Yet even with his extensive research, the Swedish chancellor in this period, on whom much of the government of Sweden relied, has been largely overlooked in favor of the monarchs he served.

It is not particularly difficult to come to an understanding of how such an influential man could have been overlooked. For a great period of his life, c. 1636-1644, as Michael Roberts himself notes, there is a great dearth of documentation relevant to him or which directly involves him.⁶² However, it must be stated outright that a number of letters of Oxenstierna have been preserved within Swedish archives, but have not been translated or transcribed as yet, which can further studies into this arguably important man's life and work. These letters, some of which have been used here, have begun to illustrate how important he was to Sweden's system of government following the death of one of the greatest kings in Swedish history. The Chancellor's extensive correspondence with both Stockholm and other leaders throughout Europe is impressive, and shows the sheer enormity of the man's responsibilities as well as how tenuous, at any given time, his own position truly was. More than once, in fact, the Chancellor deplored his position and thought of requesting replacement, only to realize none else could manage things as well as he himself.

⁶² Roberts, "Oxenstierna in Germany", 3.

It is certainly undeniable that within Oxenstierna's letters his accomplishments are showcased, but they also serve to reveal his flaws to us, and his failings. From his letters to his generals we see a man unsure of military strategy, and slightly uneven in his assertions about the war's ultimate goal. In a letter Michael Roberts speaks of, he reported to his brother in 1632 that he felt incapable of taking up the mantle he would be required to.⁶³ Yet, in letters to the Privy Council, he takes the role of mentor, and the voice of experience, despite his audience of well-trained statesmen like himself. In short, his letters show us a multi-faceted man, one who used power as he believed it ought to be used, even if modern statesmen would critique him for his methods or his aims.

It is unfortunate that Michael Roberts' observation about the lack of materials about Oxenstierna alone seems to hold true in some respects. Indeed, the letters which have been preserved, though there are a great number, have several important limitations. While researchers have the ability to come to know Oxenstierna as a man, it can be difficult to pinpoint how he reacted to difficult problems, particularly with regard to some of the more complicated issues he faced while in office. Furthermore, a number of reforms for which his experience was instrumental, e.g. those outlined in the Instrument of Government of 1634, have been attributed to Gustav due to him not mentioning them in extant letters, though his influence can be clearly seen. Lastly, and perhaps most important, the Swedish Chancellor is very rarely spoken of in documents referencing Sweden during the period in which he was active, save in relation to Gustav or Christina, if at all. This is likely due in large part to their larger-than-life personalities, in comparison with a shrewd politician: Gustav a fiery, boisterous, man and a natural leader who

⁶³ Ibid.

led his armies from the front, and Christina a charming, witty, intelligent woman who scandalously abdicated and converted to Catholicism.

While several researchers have conjectured about the life and works of Gustav II's enigmatic Chancellor, the scarcity of remaining evidence of his work during the latter years of Christina's regency, among other factors, has often led to misunderstandings and misattributions of his accomplishments. Some, e.g. Georges Pages, assert that his work was dictated by the plotting and intrigues of foreign powers, particularly the wily Cardinal Richelieu of France. Others, such as Michael Roberts, have focused their attention almost entirely upon the monarchs he served. By so doing, few have struck to the very heart of a man who seemed to live quite contentedly in the shadow of those born to be his superiors, and by whom he has been repeatedly eclipsed in history books.

The Legacy of Axel Oxenstierna

Throughout his long and illustrious career, Oxenstierna served four Swedish monarchs (Charles IX, Gustav II, Christina, and Charles X), three of them as Lord High Chancellor, and was instrumental in the rebuilding of Sweden's administrative systems, in some cases from the ground up. He saw to the creation of the first Swedish Supreme Court, an institution never before seen in his country, and oversaw the often extensive reforms of the Privy Council and his own office, the Chancery, as well as educational reforms for budding diplomats and career politicians. In so doing, he built a system which was able to survive the death of its primary executive, and continue to thrive nevertheless. His Instrument of Government of 1634 had far-reaching effects on the Swedish government as a whole from that point forward, and it is likely that this

document helped to inspire the later Swedish “Age of Liberty” of the early 18th century. It is telling that for a man who had gained so much influence, he never expressed a notion or desire to seize control of his country, or to name himself king.

As previously mentioned, Oxenstierna was well-known for being rather cold and calculating in both his personal and professional lives, traits which he passed on to his sons, themselves prominent statesmen of the era (His son, Erik, assumed the office of Lord High Chancellor following his death, and held the office until he died unexpectedly a short two years later). He reacted to unexpected events with a swiftness and a calm which few others in Europe at the time could comprehend. Even Gustav himself once remarked on this trait of his Chancellor, stating “If we were all as cold as you, we should freeze.” With characteristic poise, the then-young Oxenstierna retorted quickly of his king’s temper, “If we were all hot as Your Majesty, we should burn!”⁶⁴

His uncanny ability to react calmly to nearly any scenario which faced him served him well both during and following the reign of Gustav. While the king was alive, the two were well-known to argue heatedly over matters of state and foreign diplomatic overtures, as well as general strategy, but the king never faulted his subordinate for this. Indeed, by the end of his life, most far-reaching decisions the king made were discussed first with Oxenstierna. After the death of his monarch, this ability served the Chancellor well, as it enabled him to continue to act in the best interest of the state even when it appeared all had gone against him, such as during the combined difficulties presented by the Battle of Nordlingen, the expiration of the Truce of Altmark, the decision whether to renew his alliance with France, and the posturing of Denmark.

⁶⁴ Maland, *Europe*, 383.

While his power and influence over the Swedish state waned in the last years of his life, being pushed aside by Christina's favorites, Axel Oxenstierna remained an irremovable, near-legendary, fixture of the Swedish government until the end of his days. Neither Christina nor her successor seem to have seen any way, much less reason, to remove him from his position given his numerous successes and accomplishments in nearly all facets of his work, from diplomacy to the recruitment of soldiers. Indeed, the Swedish Chancellor was held in great esteem and often begrudging respect by many of his contemporaries throughout Europe, both ally and enemy, for his successes in negotiating treaties, his willingness to alter his own plans in order to suit the situations in which he found himself, and his impressive handle on the ever-changing political climate of Europe throughout the war.

Though King Gustav II Adolf remains the only king in Swedish history to have received the cognomen 'den Stor', meaning 'the Great', his Chancellor and his accomplishments have been repeatedly glossed over by historians and chroniclers since his death. Yet, in the eyes of his contemporaries, even those whom he served, Axel Oxenstierna was anything but a mere off-hand accessory to a military-minded king. Despite the animosity between the two over the running of the state, Christina spoke highly of her former tutor and regent, saying that he was "of great capacity, who knew the strengths and weaknesses of every state in Europe, a wise and prudent man, immensely capable, and great-hearted." Indeed, the queen was said to have loved her regent "like a second father".⁶⁵

While there have been other men in Sweden's long history to have achieved similar ends under great stresses, even within his own family (his ancestor Jons Bengtsson, in one notable example), none exercised the restraint that he did, nor ran the state as effectively in the absence

⁶⁵ Buckley, *Christina*, 50.

of a legally reigning monarch. Just as impressive an accomplishment, he was the first statesman with no connection to the church or to the royal house through direct relation to give up power when it was his appointed time to do so. It is certainly true that the Chancellor had his faults, to include a seeming belief in the natural authority of the nobility, centering power upon himself in government, and a refusal to give up his own lands in order to assist in paying the debts of the state. However, Oxenstierna was also a product of his time, and accomplished a great deal despite a number of difficulties throughout his life in power.

Often consulted by the leading men of his day, the Chancellor of Sweden was almost universally liked, or at least respected (in the case of Sweden's royal house, even loved) by all he had relations with. He kept a vast correspondence with leaders throughout Europe, from his allies in France, Scotland, England, the Spanish Netherlands, Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and Silesia, to his enemies in the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, in addition to the aforementioned correspondence with the other members of the Privy Council on a semi-regular basis. Here we find a particular peculiarity, as it has been previously mentioned that little information about him has survived. While a great number of the Chancellor's letters and writings have indeed survived, comparatively little information exists which describes his actions or thoughts about the period in which he held power over his state.

Despite his often callous, calculating nature, he seems he had a great capacity for kindness, as evidenced by his ward Christina's great love for him, even if she did not agree with several of his policies.⁶⁶ As a man who had accomplished more than most statesmen of his generation, he was well-recognized, at times revered, by a number of the greatest statesmen of his age, as well. The famed 17th century statesman Hugo Grotius once referred to Oxenstierna as

⁶⁶ Buckley, *Christina*, 49.

the “greatest man of the century”, while Cardinal Richelieu, his French foil and ally, described him as “an inexhaustible source of advice,” and Cardinal Mazzarin said of him, “If all statesmen of Europe were on a ship together, Oxenstierna would be at the helm.”⁶⁷ Though each of these men had undeniable impacts on the state of affairs in Europe during their respective lifetimes, none were forced to take control of a state at the death of its monarch, giving Oxenstierna a unique legacy which is unmatched among his European contemporaries, and one which has been too often ignored or marginalized by those who have come since. It is past time for Sweden’s uncrowned king to receive the recognition he richly deserves for his numerous accomplishments during one of the most tumultuous and deadly wars in European history.

⁶⁷ Hofburg, Herman, et al, “Oxenstierna, Axel Gustaffson,” In *Svenskt biografiskt handlexikon*, ed. by Hofburg, Herman et al, 2nd ed, 1906, accessed November 4, 2016, <http://runeberg.org/sbh/b0252.html>.

Appendix I – Family Trees⁶⁸
(Boldface indicates mention in text)

HOUSE OF VASA Family Tree

King Gustav I

King Eric XIV

King John III

King Sigismund III of Poland

King Wladslaw IV of Poland

King John II Casimir of Poland

King Charles IX

Princess Catherine with John Casimir (distinct from the King of Poland)

King Charles X Gustav

King Gustav II Adolf with Queen Maria Eleonora

Queen Christina

Jons Bengtsson (Oxenstjerna)

Multiple Generations

Gustaf Gabrielsson Oxenstierna with Barbro Bielke

Axel Gustaffson Oxenstierna

Johan Oxenstierna

Erik Oxenstierna

Gabriel Gustaffson Oxenstierna

⁶⁸ Note: Not all offspring of individuals are presented here, for the purposes of simplicity. Queen Christina, for example, happened to be the only surviving child of Gustav and Maria, while the king had an illegitimate son from his mistress. Axel Oxenstierna, on the other hand, had 5 surviving sons, and a number of others who did not. Lastly, Catherine and Gustav II were only two of Charles IX's children.

Appendix II – Map of Europe

