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Review by Hanna Hodacs, University of Dalarna

Norbert Götz’s article traces the distribution of British aid to war refugees in Sweden-Finland in the early nineteenth century. In 1808 Russia attacked Finland, then part of Sweden, prompting migration westward. The initial objectives of the British aid were to relieve the situation of these refugees as well as of the remaining population. Later on attention shifted towards the situation in Sweden and especially its public health. The committee in London organizing the aid was an extension of the British ‘Committee of Relieving the Distressed Inhabitants of Germany, and Other Parts of the Continent.’ The name of the group directing the campaign focusing on Sweden and Finland was never fixed. The ‘Committee for managing the Subscription for the Relief of the brave and loyal Swedes’ was a name used occasionally. At other times the group was called ‘the Society for relieving the distresses abroad, occasioned by the French and their allies.’ A ‘Swedish Patriotic Fund’ is also mentioned.

Gustaf Brunnmark, Chaplain to the Swedish legation and rector of the Swedish church in London, was one of the main initiators of the activities in London but the fundraising drew on the campaigning power of the evangelical movement. The politician and famous abolitionist William Wilberforce made an official contribution to the Swedish cause of ten guineas. An important point of contact was the recently established British and Foreign Bible Society. The growing muscle of the evangelical movement is visible in the amounts of funds raised to aid people on the Continent more generally. Between 1805 and 1814 close to £150,000 were collected on behalf of the ‘Distressed Inhabitants’ on the Continent. The British parliament chipped in another £100,000 to be used for the same purpose (519-520). The ongoing Napoleonic European wars form one explanatory backdrop, both in case of the larger European campaign and in relation to the Finish-Swedish aid. Sweden was Britain’s only ally in the Napoleonic wars until 1810 when, as an outcome of the peace with Russia, Sweden was forced to declare war on Britain. No action, however, took place between the two former allies over the next two years. In 1812 Sweden formed an alliance with Russia and Britain against France. In general a strengthening of contacts between Sweden and Britain took place during the first decades of the nineteenth century, not at least due to the Continental blockade.
A large section of Götz’s article is concerned with tracking the movements of aid from London to Sweden. Funds as well as the value of goods and services did not exceed £ 7,000-8,000 (532). Of the capital arriving in the form of bills of exchange (£4000) 20 per cent was lost in transaction costs (526). Losses also arose as materials were shipped. Woollen stockings, jerseys, jackets, sweaters, and blankets to the value of £200 were sent over in in 1809. This goods were soiled by rusty water on board the ship destined to Gothenburg and it ended up taking years to part with, some of it being sold at auctions rather than distributed to the needy. Seed corn to enable farmers in the west of Sweden to saw their fields were also distributed in 1809. The latter two examples also illustrate how the focus shifted from Finnish refugees to poverty-stricken Swedes more generally. Tensions existed between the English benefactors and the Swedish administrators of the aid. The former wanted funds and material to be distributed to the needy immediately while the latter frequently delayed the distribution. The Finnish Church in Stockholm, for example, received funding to relieve the situation of incoming refugees but ended up saving the money and earning interest on it. Eventually the money was spent on church-building work. Götz also shows that the numbers of refugees were inflated in reports to London by those administrating the aid in Stockholm.

Another large section of Götz’s article explores British aid in the form of equipment, drugs, and advice on how to improve the Swedish health care. In 1808, responding to reports on the Swedish navy and the poor health of its crews, the British navy was ordered to supply its allies with medical supply and doctors. Soon after, the Swedish envoy to the United Kingdom, Carl Gustaf von Brinckman, requested further assistance from the British Foreign Minister. He wanted a British physician to visit the naval base at Karlskrona. While the request was denied, the London Committee followed up on the case by forwarding medical equipment and drugs to Sweden. They also ended up employing Wilhelm Friedrich Domeier, a Göttingen-educated physician with experience in evaluating Italian healthcare. The latter travelled to Sweden in 1809 wrote reports on not only the state of hospital care, but also prisons and workhouses across the southern half of the country. Götz traces Domeier’s travels and extracts his mainly negative impressions of Swedish public health through his correspondence with the Commander of Sweden’s Western Army, General Gustaf Mauritz Armfelt. Letters written by the Swedish doctors who received Domeier indicate that his views were not welcomed by those responsible for public health. Christopher Carlander, the chief physician in Gothenburg, found his approach humiliating and called Domeier’s journey a “philanthropic-quixotic expedition” (531).

More source material relating to the aid program has survived in Sweden than in Britain, and, according to Götz, this has to do with how the distribution of aid became embedded in the workings of the Swedish state. More interesting, as Götz points out, this reflects on “the asymmetries in the development of civil society” (520) in Britain and Sweden. This asymmetry is also one of several factors which, Götz argues, explain why the aid was relatively unsuccessful. Götz also points to how the relief efforts were obstructed by “foreign policy interests” producing misunderstandings about the actual need, something which in turn generated “corrupt distribution structures” (520). Other factors were “the divergent interests of donors and distributors” and how the local Swedish elite resisted British advice (520). The case also illustrates how “individual personalities” shaped the design of policies guiding the work (520). Götz concludes that the Anglo-Swedish case, involving “two Protestant European countries with a cultural affinity,” illustrates the fundamental and somewhat universal problems associated with aid more generally (520).

By carefully mapping the work of the London-based organisation and the reception of the British aid in Sweden, Götz has unearthed a hitherto largely unknown history of such aid. Götz’s conclusion makes sense from the point of view of understanding modern forms of aid. The historical specificity of the early-nineteenth century Anglo-Swedish context is, however, somewhat lost. While Götz highlights the influence of
diplomatic relationships and foreign politics in distorting the distribution of aid, he fails to elaborate on the political-religious agenda of the British evangelical movement in its relationship to the Continent of Europe. Maartje Janse's recent writing on the British anti-slavery is a good illustration of how British evangelicals engaged in domestic politics in different European countries.¹ The British and Foreign Bible Society might have had a more general cause than the abolitionist one; their aim was a broad spiritual awakening of their Christian neighbours on the Continent, particularly other Protestants.² Since several of those engaged in bible diffusion in Northern Europe were also heavily engaged in the aid program in London, this raises the question about the extent to which the objectives of aid campaign coincided with that of the British and Foreign Bible Society. Perhaps the London committee cared less about scrutinizing and optimizing the distribution and use of the aid because they also had the forging of evangelical alliances across Protestant Europe as their objective?

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