

BOOK REVIEW:

Swedish Foreign Policy, 1809–2019

A Comprehensive Modern History



Graeme D. Eddie

Review by Julia Forsberg

Reading Graeme D. Eddie's book – *Swedish Foreign Policy, 1809–2019: A Comprehensive Modern History* – is a remarkable history lesson. And don't get me wrong, it is in no way like the boring, never-ending, tedious history lectures held by a dull teacher who talks way too slowly; it's something else. While being a historical review, the book is a real page turner! It's detailed, it's informative, yet gripping. In the current reality, where Sweden is joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and where the Sweden Democrats, a populist right-wing party, are now the second largest party, it is relevant to look back in order to understand the present. Reading this book is an excellent start.

The book provides a comprehensive overview of Sweden's foreign policy during the period 1809 to 2019, offering nuanced perspectives and analyses of the ever-changing relationship between the country and its surroundings. Naturally, it covers foreign policy, but it also encompasses defence policy and the quaint neutrality policy. In fact, the account of the Swedish defence and its industry during the eventful years from 1990 onwards is unexpectedly elaborate. The same is true about the neutrality policy, which is explored over a span of 50 pages. Even an overview of the years before the ones formally covered in the book is included. The part about Sweden's *Stormaktstiden* (the period of greatest power) was especially detailed. The choice to officially start the book in 1809, 'year zero', makes sense as the author explains that it was a year of great national trauma that created something similar to a restart for Sweden, establishing a new political order – which was followed by a new foreign policy.

The author has gone through an impressive amount of material in the writing of the book: articles, reports, government bills, statements, and election results, to name a few examples. This qualitative case study also offers many descriptions on an individual level, depicting a range of different politicians and their views throughout the years: Anders Björck's opinion as defence minister on the possibility of an all-Nordic security union, Margaretha af Ugglas' excitement as foreign minister for the upcoming chairing of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and Göran Persson as prime

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minister and his arguments in favour of Sweden adopting the Euro.

Throughout the book, the descriptions of Sweden's policy choices are done in an impeccable way. These descriptions range from explaining how the unsuccessful Scandinavian defence union and post-war failure of the UN led to the policy of non-participation, to the decisions that steered the country into closer European collaboration and later into membership of the European Union. Throughout, the author is able to boil down complex decision-making processes to something palpable.

While impressively mastering the art of being informative and engaging at the same time, the book is missing a certain perspective on the present day. Not using the immense knowledge of foreign policy history to make sense of, and possibly explain, current events such as Sweden joining NATO, is a lost opportunity. I would have really loved to read the author's take on today's reality. I guess no historian is keen to predict the future, but what about using what we know about history to understand today? Isn't that the whole USP (Unique Selling Point) of studying history? Maybe I'm missing the point. Each chapter could have ended with a 'current perspective' paragraph. This would be compatible with the layout, as the focus of the book is mostly on

the twentieth century, especially on the years from 1970 onwards.

The author does share his own take on some parts, and has a strong voice throughout the book. His analyses are equally accurate – and I don't know how he does this because the areas covered are at times quite dry – as they are funny. Some examples are when he writes about Sweden's new security policy maxim and calls it 'newish'; when he describes how Sweden was once part of EU28 but then EU27 with a 'goodbye UK'; when he calls the intense first period in office for the foreign minister Ann Linde in 2020 a 'baptism of fire'; when he explains how economists jumped at the chance to criticise the Swedish welfare system and the 'demolition process' of it started in the early 1990s; or when he describes how the Swedish population was nowhere near as positive towards a EU membership as the current prime minister Bildt with the words '*they had quietly and reluctantly taken the ferry crossing to Europe.*'

The book is incredibly detailed, covering a large time period and range of events. I would strongly recommend it, especially to anyone interested in Sweden, history, foreign policy, or the thing we call society in general. And even if the author does not make an analysis of today, he makes sure that readers are capable of doing that by themselves. In a time where many things are uncertain, the focus is commonly placed on possible next steps and future developments. What will happen when Sweden joins NATO? Will Russia invade other countries? When will the war in Ukraine end? Thoughts like these make sense: we want to make sure, or at least create the feeling of making sure, that we will be safe. But simply looking forward, without taking the lessons from the past with us, is foolish. In order to prepare and strategically plan to guarantee a safe future – for all – it is absolutely necessary to understand and analyse the past.