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Review of Anna Maria Forsberg, *The Story of War: Church and Propaganda in France and Sweden, 1610-1710*

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**Erik Ringmar**

In *The Story of War,* Anna Maria Forsberg contrasts and compares two similar, seventeenth-century, institutions — French *Te Deums* and Swedish *tacksägelsedagar,* “days of thanksgiving.” In both countries these ceremonies were ways in which monarchs relied the institutional structure of the church in order to communicate with their subjects regarding matters of peace and war. This was how victories on the battlefield were celebrated but also how information and propaganda were disseminated to people at large. Forsberg’s is a quasi-experimental method: by keeping one variable — the ceremony — constant, she can investigate how other variables vary. More than just a study of *Te Deums* and *tacksägelsedagar* her book becomes a study of the relations that obtained between sovereigns and their subjects and thereby a study of notions of kingship and of national community.

Forsberg arrives at a number of well-substantiated, if not actually surprising, conclusions. In Sweden, fairly detailed accounts of battles and sieges were read from the church pulpits. Since churches in Sweden were state-run institutions, and since every one of the king’s subjects was forced to attend church, the kings were in a position to speak to the whole country. Moreover, since the kings, until the last decades of the seventeenth-century, were dependent on the consent given by the Diet, which included the peasant estate, they had to involve people at large in their decision-making. The Swedish army also had a high contingent of conscripted soldiers. In addition, Sweden was poor, almost exclusively rural, the geographical distances
were enormous, and the kings were in a good position to make sure that their versions of
events prevailed. In France, by contrast, the Te Deums were more limited in their impact. Many
were celebrated only in a few churches and only to an invited crowd of social elites. The
emphasis was on rituals rather than on information. Moreover, since the church was not run by
the state, and since priests were not civil servants, the institution was never as useful as a tool
of royal propaganda. In addition, in the case of France where far more people lived in cities,
with access to alternative sources of information, the French monarchy could not exercise the
same kind of monopoly on information as was the case in Sweden. Many of the battlefields
were also a lot closer to large centers of population and information about them was likely to
reach people through alternative routes. Above all, however, the royal institution was entirely
different in the two cases. French kings had a divine status, they were anointed by god; their
aim was to show off, to overawe their subjects with the splendor of their displays. The kings of
France did not need the approval of a parliament, instead they themselves were the only
political subjects. People at large were invited to adore them, but they were not consulted and
not asked for their consent. The Te Deums served all of these aims.

Forsberg covers a lot of material. Not every victory on the battlefield was celebrated in
church, but many were, and most left some traces in the primary sources. Yet since the study
covers one hundred years and two countries, this makes for a somewhat unwieldy presentation.
She repeatedly stops to remind us of the historical context of each victory. For readers who
know the story, nothing is new; for readers who do not, it is all a bit confusing. Perhaps the
exposition could have been more condensed; perhaps the material would have lent itself better
to a long research article than to a full-length book. Moreover, by presenting the same material
first as a matter of “information,” then as “celebration,” and finally as a “narration,” she is
forced to tell the story three times over. There may have been a better way of organizing the
material. The “narrative” section, in particular, disappoints. The royal attempts to
communicate with the people do contain some information to be sure but there is not all that
much of a “story” here. In addition, it is not certain that the quasi-experimental set-up works.
As Forsberg herself realizes, the *Te Deums* said in Paris may not have been the same ceremony as the *Te Deums* said in countryside, but the differences are of course even more pronounced if we compare France with Sweden. Whether we are talking about the same social institution in the two cases depends not on formal similarities, but instead on which meanings that were attributed to a certain institution by people at the time. Still, there is no reason to complain too much. Forsberg’s study highlights important differences in the seventeenth-century notions of kingship and national community — differences which set Sweden and France on very different political trajectories. A study of *Te Deums* and *tacksägelse* provides a neat way of telling this story.