

Leon Jespersen, ed.. *A Revolution from Above? The Power State of 16th and 17th Century Scandinavia*. Odense: Odense University Press, 2000. 400 pp. DKK 300.00, cloth, ISBN 978-87-7838-407-2.



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"The Power State in the Nordic Countries and its Social Consequences" was one of the themes discussed during the nineteenth Nordic Congress of Historians at the University of Odense in 1984. Reports of this colloquium were later published in E. Ladewig Petersen, ed., *Magtstaten i Norden i 1600-tallet og de sociale konsekvenser. Rapporter til den XIX nordiske historikerkongres* (Odense 1984, Volume I). Discussions at this panel gave rise to an inter-Nordic collaboration, leading to a flowering of new research and new publications in this field since 1985. According to Jespersen's Foreword, the volume under review should be seen as: "the final project, [which] primarily addresses a non-Nordic audience, and [...] is designed to move from the general to the specific."

Four historians were selected to lead the project: one Danish, one Swedish, one Norwegian and one Finnish. The anthology is supposed to build an inter-Nordic comparative approach. Consequently, the Danish and Swedish scholars selected research themes that crossed national borders, while their Norwegian and Finnish colleagues se-

lected regional or local level studies, focusing on certain parts of present-day Norway and Finland.

Theorizing the "power state" was the point of departure for the authors, who use this term in reference to the rapid military development that took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the "military revolution"), when traditional armies based on cavalry and led by the nobility became obsolete, leading consequently to the questioning of the nobility's social roles. Cavalries were replaced by mass infantry armies, usually made up of mercenaries. Financing the new armies was very costly. In the past, an army was only formed, and military taxes levied, during times of war. During peace-time the king was expected to "live on his own", i.e. from the incomes of the royal demesnes. With the advent of the "power state," a peace-time army also became necessary, and consequently the tax burdens that arose from military spending became permanent. This development translated into a huge expansion of the state, its fields of activity, and its authority over society.

Certainly, the term "power state" is not unproblematic. It could be argued that every state is a power state, and that the term is consequently unnecessary. The authors are aware of this point, which they discuss in the introductory chapter, written by the Norwegian historian, Ystein Rian. Other expressions relating to state power, such as "the military state," "the taxation state," "absolutism," the "administration state," the "emergence" or "birth" of the "modern nation state," have been used by various scholars. Each of these terms, however, cover only parts of the political and economic development that was taking place, whereas the term "power state" (in German: *Machtstaat*) is the most comprehensive. And, as this term has actually gained prescription within historiography, there are good reasons to make use of it.

The aim of this book is to illustrate how the power state developed within Nordic countries, with a focus on questions such as: How did the international economy affect the internal structure of the power state? To what extent did states succeed in their endeavours to centralize and extract human and material resources? What sections of population benefitted, and what sections were disadvantaged?

The book's first chapter, "The Constitutional and Administrative Situation," by Leon Jespersen (senior researcher at the Danish National Archives), takes an inter-Nordic comparative approach that could be characterized as a history of political ideas and administration. In Jespersen's point of departure, sixteenth-century Denmark (which included Norway and the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein) was the stronger and more technologically advanced of the two Nordic states. This changed during the seventeenth century, when Sweden got the upper hand. Both countries had estate economies, but in Sweden, unlike Denmark, all four classes within estate society (including--remarkably enough--the peasants) were represented in the *riksdag*, a congress-

sional unit which met regularly and had a significant say in public affairs. The Swedish army would be to a large extent based on conscripted men from the peasantry. In contrast, the Danish army would consist mainly of mercenaries. Both countries were governed by an aristocratic council, but whereas the Swedish council and *riksdag* cooperated with the monarchy to expand the power of the state at home--involving Sweden in various wars on the continent in the process--the Danish council consistently opposed the endeavours of King Christian IV to make reforms and stage an active foreign policy. The Swedish nobility was open to newcomers, but the Danish nobility was a closed caste.

Not until royal absolutism was introduced in Denmark in 1660, after a disastrous war defeat against Sweden and after the council of the realm had been abolished, did reforms of the Danish state come to match those in Sweden. However, the abolition of the Danish council of the realm did not mean that the power of landlords had disappeared. On the contrary, their grip on the peasantry actually increased with the blessing and support of an absolute power state. Though state absolutism had been introduced in Sweden as early as 1680, it was a milder than this Danish version. The powers of the *riksdag* were curbed in this first instance, but not abolished. In Denmark, the introduction of absolutism meant that royal demesnes were sold to pay off war debts. In Sweden, the introduction of absolutism was accompanied by a so-called "reduktion" policy, i.e. the reversal of former royal demesnes that had been donated to members of the aristocracy. Still, only after the death of the war King, Charles XII, in 1718, did Sweden lose its status as a great power. A comparative contribution from a Swedish historian has for some reason not been included in the present volume. However, Jespersen's Foreword suggests that such an article will probably be published in a later volume.

The next main chapter, entitled "State, Elite and Peasant Power in a Norwegian Region, Bratsberg County, in the 17th Century," is written by Ystein Rian (a professor of history at the University of Oslo). The level of analysis in this chapter is regional, focusing on Bratsberg County in Southern Norway, a region which contains coastal as well as inland areas, market towns and countryside, and shipping, logging, ironworks and mining industries. In short, it is a most heterogeneous region. Rian's aim is to see how the move toward a power state affected the county.

Certainly, taxes and custom duties rose in the seventeenth century, though less than the government would have desired. The collection of local taxes was not always efficient, as local civil servants often had strong relations to the community, and as a consequence they behaved officiously in their tax-collecting duties, least they might suffer discomforts in the local communities of which they were themselves a part. Furthermore, many Crown servants were also involved in trading, and did not sharply distinguish between public finances and their own private financial interests. And authorities often shrank from using force during tax collection. Instead, the Bratsberg County government received a significant amount of its income from selling off public property (houses, works and in the 1720s, even churches). Those farmers which also had timber to sell fared better than those without, and even became market-oriented.

Whereas Rian's contribution focuses on the extraction of resources, as a form of taxes and duties in Bratsberg, Nils Erik Villstrand (professor of history at the Academy, Finland) concentrates on human resources, such as the conscription of soldiers. During the Age of Greatness Sweden's army was based on the draft, and at the time Finland was an integrated part of the Swedish Empire. Villstrand's examination is based on two selected parishes in different parts of Finland. Villstrand describes how the system of drafting young men

from the peasantry was organized, and how it actually worked.

The drafting of soldiers was very unpopular among the peasant population. In examining how they responded, Villstrand distinguishes between a strategy of adaptation and one of protest. The legal way of evading conscription was to pay someone else to serve in one's place. Many people chose this solution, to the extent that many of the soldiers in the Swedish army were in fact mercenaries, as they were in many other armies of the period. Hence, Sweden did not differ much in the respect that, for its soldiers, the question of being paid was a central one. Hiring a substitute was a costly response to the draft, and to raise money many small farmers went into the business of burning tar for sale. Thus, the demands of an expanding power state had forced the peasants into commerce. The second strategy to avoid the draft was to protest. Sometimes this meant simply not appearing before the conscription board or at the induction. Active resistance also appeared in the form of desertion, self-mutilation and conspiracy. In the eastern part of Finland, the control of central powers was very limited, and the draft could not be implemented effectively. In general, authorities in the East seemed reluctant to force military demands upon the peasantry, fearing strong local reactions.

Both Rian's and Villstrand's studies can be characterized as social histories that show how the power state, in a regional and local context, was not in fact as all-powerful and efficient as is usually purported, but rather that its purpose and function tended to be closely linked to the development of the market economy. Both studies take place in peripheral regions of the two Nordic states, and it would be interesting to see whether strategies of the state were more effective in areas closer to the capitals of Stockholm and Copenhagen.

A Revolution from Above? does not purport to be a comprehensive analysis of the Nordic power

state, but focuses rather on central and essential elements of it. In the last chapter, Ystein Rian ably sums up results of the project, answering the three questions posed in the introduction in the process.

The book's bibliography is comprehensive, and is designed to provide a helping hand to those readers unfamiliar with Scandinavian languages or Finnish. Whenever a book or article in one of these languages is cited, a summary of its contents is given in English, French or German. Against this foundation, it seems peculiar that the authors would choose to cite a work by the great French historian Fernand Braudel in its Swedish translation, rather than citing the original work. Furthermore, even though there are several references to the German sociologist Max Weber throughout the book, no publications by him are included in the bibliography.

According to the Foreword, "the greater part of the work [... was] ready for translation about 1991, but certain coincidences have held up publication until now. This means that there are only a limited number of references to works dated after 1991". This delay may well have been due to circumstances beyond the control of the editor and authors. Still, from a user's point of view it is regrettable. A good deal of literature has in fact been published since then, that would have been worthwhile to include in the bibliography. In fact, since 1991 the very idea of the power state has been subject to new interpretations, and has been questioned and criticized for being structurally deterministic, or fiscally reductionist (e.g.: Sebastian Olden-Jorgensen, "Den ldre danske enevlde 1660-1730. Et historiografisk essay," in: *Historie*, vol. 2, pp. 311-15).

One must say, however, that it's better late than never for this publication. The above-mentioned criticisms should not overshadow the important and valuable contribution this book makes to the research on the Nordic power state that has been conducted since the early 1980s.

This area of Nordic social history has now finally been summarized and presented for an English audience, and will be accessible to a European and international audience.

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