

ANNA MARIA FORSSBERG. *The Story of War: Church and Propaganda in France and Sweden, 1610–1710*. Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2016. Pp. 287. \$49.95.

In *The Story of War: Church and Propaganda in France and Sweden, 1610–1710*, Anna Maria Forssberg contrasts and compares two similar seventeenth-century institutions—French *Te Deum* and Swedish *tacksägelsedagar*, “days

of thanksgiving.” In both countries these ceremonies were ways in which monarchs made use of 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. Forssberg’s is a quasi-experimental method: by keeping one variable—the ceremony—constant, she can investigate how other variables differed in the two cases. In this way, more than being just a study of *Te Deum* and *tacksägelsedagar*, the book becomes a study of the relations that obtained between sovereigns and their subjects, and thereby a study of notions of kingship and national community.

Forssberg 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 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 Swedish 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 drawn from peasant ranks, which contributed to making the wars into matters of general concern. On the other hand, Sweden was poor and almost exclusively rural, and the geographical distances were enormous, and as a result the kings were in a good position to make sure that their versions of events prevailed. In France, by contrast, the *Te Deum* 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 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. French kings had a divine status, they were anointed by god, and their aim was 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 Deum* served all of these aims.

Forssberg covers a lot of material. Not every victory on the battlefield was celebrated in church, but many were, and most left 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

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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. 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 Forssberg herself realizes, the *Te Deum* said in Paris may not have been the same ceremony as the *Te Deum* said in the 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 were attributed to a certain institution by people at the time. Still, there is no reason to complain too much. Forssberg’s study highlights important differences in the seventeenth-century notions of kingship and national community—differences that set Sweden and France on very different political trajectories. A study of *Te Deum* and *tacksägelsedagar* provides a neat way of telling this story.

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