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After Poltava:  
Peter the Great and the problem of Sweden,  
1709-1724

As the year 1700 began, Russia held no territory on the Baltic coastline and was a remote and secondary power on the periphery of Europe. In 1814 the position was very different: the whole eastern coastline of the Baltic from Tornio in the north to Courland in the south was under Russian rule, and Russia had become one of the great powers of the European states system into the bargain. This territorial revolution along the eastern littoral of the Baltic was achieved through three great Russian annexations – the Peace of Nystad in 1721, the partitions of Poland (1774-1795) and the Peace of Fredrikshamn in 1809. The present survey will focus on a particular aspect during an early phase of that larger process: the ways in which Russia responded to the actual or potential problems Sweden presented for Russian security and for Russian interests under Peter the Great. In the seventeenth century, Sweden had confronted Russia with a quite different problem: after the Peace of Stolbova in 1617 Russia had been excluded from the Baltic by a belt of Swedish territory running from Finland to the borders of Poland-Lithuania; and Tsar Peter of Russia joined Denmark and Saxony in attacking Sweden in 1700 in order to achieve access for Russia to the Baltic. That problem was solved, at least in the short term, by the destruction of the Swedish field army in July 1709 at Poltava and by the military and political consequences which flowed from it. But a new problem took its place. The barrier which Sweden had for so long interposed between Russia and the Baltic had been broken, but peace with Sweden, Swedish acceptance of Russia's new position in north-eastern Europe, had not yet been obtained. And behind this immediate question of peace lurked the long-term problem of how such a

peace was to be made durable, how Russia could neutralize the danger that Sweden – either alone or in alliance with some other anti-Russian power – might launch a war of revenge designed to reverse the verdict of Poltava. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Poltava would change the distribution of power within the Baltic for centuries to come, but this was by no means clear at the time. This survey will look at how Peter the Great grappled with Russia's Swedish problem in its new, eighteenth-century form.

Poltava was a decisive turning point in the Great Northern War (1700-1721)<sup>1</sup>, which began with a joint attack on Sweden by Denmark, Saxony and Russia in 1700. In the early years, the fortunes of war had largely favoured the Swedes. Peter did break through to the Baltic and in 1703 began to construct what would become the great city of St Petersburg, but Denmark was knocked out of the war in 1700 and Augustus II, the ruler of Saxony, who was also the elective king of Poland, was forced to make peace with Sweden and renounce his Polish crown in 1706. In Poland itself, a Swedish army sustained a puppet king on the Polish throne. In 1708, the king of Sweden, Charles XII, led a Swedish invasion army from Poland into Russia – an enterprise which ended in disaster at Poltava the following summer. Poltava changed everything. By the end of 1709 the Swedish forces in Poland had withdrawn to Swedish Pomerania; their place had been taken by Russian forces; and Augustus II was back in Poland.

Poltava also exposed all Sweden's Baltic provinces to Russian conquest. In the summer of 1710 the last Swedish strongholds in Estonia and Livonia, and also Viborg and Kexholm to the north of the Gulf of Finland, fell to the Russians. Most of Finland, including the Åland islands, was overrun in 1713-14. By this time, Sweden's possessions in northern Germany – western Pomerania, the city of Wismar and the duchies of Bremen-Verden – were also under attack. Denmark and Saxony re-entered the conflict in 1709. Prussia and Hanover declared war on Sweden in 1715. Since the previous year, the elector of Hanover had also been King George I of Britain, and this ensured tacit British naval assistance in the pursuit of Hanoverian interests in northern

Europe, even though Britain was not at war with Sweden or a member of the 'northern alliance'. Russian and Saxon troops attacked the Swedish forces in Pomerania as early as 1711, the first occasion on which Russian soldiers set foot on the soil of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Stralsund fell in late 1715 and the last Swedish outpost in northern Germany, Wismar, surrendered in April 1716.

Sweden's overseas provinces had been overrun by its enemies, as had Finland, the eastern section of the Swedish kingdom, and Sweden stood alone against a coalition of Russia, Poland, Saxony, Denmark, Prussia and Hanover. The war could now be carried to those parts of the Swedish kingdom which lay to the west of the Gulf of Bothnia. After the fall of Wismar, a joint Russo-Danish force was assembled on Zealand in the summer of 1716 for an invasion of southern Sweden, and a great armada of warships – British, Danish and Russian – gathered in the Copenhagen roads to support the enterprise.

It was during these years after Poltava, as the fruits of victory were gathered in, that Peter first began to be faced with the problem of Russia's future relations with Sweden in its new, eighteenth-century form. The barrier which Sweden had for so long interposed between Russia and the Baltic had been broken, but peace with Sweden, Swedish acceptance of Russia's new position in north-eastern Europe, had not yet been obtained. And behind the immediate question of peace lurked the long-term problem of how such a peace was to be made durable, how the danger of Swedish revanchism was to be obviated. One conceivable answer was the complete destruction of Sweden as an independent state, but that would have meant placing the greater part of the Swedish kingdom under Danish rule and creating a strong united Scandinavian state in the western Baltic. From a Russian point of view, this would have been a cure that was worse than the disease, and it was also a solution unlikely to gain easy acceptance from those west European powers, like Britain, with an interest in maintaining an equilibrium in the Baltic region. Peter was certainly willing to envisage that the Swedish kingdom might be weakened by the return to Denmark of the provinces

gained in the seventeenth century<sup>3</sup> and – as we shall see – he may also have toyed with the idea that Finland could be detached from Sweden, but there is no evidence that he ever contemplated the complete partition of Sweden. Instead, the logic of his policy towards Sweden in the five or six years after Poltava seems to suggest a vision of the future in which Sweden would be held in check by a strengthened Denmark closely allied to Russia.

The connected tasks of forcing Sweden to make peace in the short term and of forging a new relationship with an enfeebled, but potentially revanchist, Sweden in the longer term therefore remained; and it was in 1716 – just as Swedish fortunes seemed at their lowest ebb – that the prospect of solving even the first, immediate problem through a dictated peace began to recede. In September 1716 Peter called off the projected Russo-Danish invasion of southern Sweden. There were strong military arguments for regarding the undertaking as too risky, but political considerations were also involved: the great 'northern alliance' against Sweden was in fact wracked by internal divisions and was on the verge of collapse. The allies all wished to share in the spoils, but their appetites partially overlapped and this inevitably created tensions. For example, Prussian designs on Swedish Pomerania dated back to the Thirty Years War, Hanover coveted Bremen-Verden, while Denmark had an interest in both these areas as well as wishing to recover the provinces lost to Sweden in 1658. However, the most fundamental source of disharmony was the apprehensions aroused by the growth of Russian power and the ambitions which Peter seemed to entertain in northern Germany. His troops were there to fight the Swedes, but Russia appeared to be taking over Sweden's former position not only in the eastern Baltic but also in northern Germany.<sup>4</sup> Peter's 'influence – backed by his military might – seemed to jump ever further west in Germany'.<sup>5</sup>

The decisive development was the marriage in April 1716 between Peter's niece, Catherine, and Charles-Leopold, duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin. The alliance concluded between Peter and the duke at the same time allowed Peter to use Mecklenburg 'as a naval and military base for operations in

the empire and elsewhere, presumably but not necessarily to be directed against Sweden'.<sup>6</sup> The treaty also gave the Russians certain trading rights in Mecklenburg: behind this stipulation lay Peter's hopes of building a canal across Mecklenburg territory linking the Baltic with the North Sea and by-passing the Sound.<sup>7</sup> Previous developments – the grip Peter had established on the Baltic provinces; the fleet he had constructed; his preponderant influence in Polish affairs – had aroused growing unease, but his treaty with Mecklenburg provoked serious opposition. The prospect of a permanent Russian presence in Mecklenburg seemed to foreshadow Russian domination of the entire Baltic and an enduring influence on the affairs of the Holy Roman Empire. Austria was alarmed, and it was now that Britain developed that aversion to Russia's new position which persisted until the late 1720s.<sup>8</sup>

Peter faced the risk of diplomatic isolation and he ultimately responded to the pressure. When his troops were withdrawn from Zealand after the abandonment of the proposed invasion of Scania, they spent the winter of 1716-17 in Mecklenburg, but he moved the great bulk of them eastwards to Poland in 1717.<sup>9</sup> However, the divisions which had appeared in 1716 were not healed. The members of the northern alliance all remained at war with Sweden, but effective military cooperation was never resumed. George I and Tsar Peter now confronted each other as adversaries in the cross-currents of north European politics. The collapse of the northern alliance created the basis for the peace negotiations between Russia and Sweden which culminated with the Åland congress in 1718. The events of 1716-17 created the risk for Peter that his alienated allies would now seek a separate peace with Sweden if he did not pre-empt them.

Peace negotiations had an equal appeal to Charles XII. Separate and distinct discussions with George I and Peter would serve to confuse and divide his enemies, and above all they would buy time while he rebuilt his army in Sweden. He believed that satisfactory terms could not be obtained until he had restored the prestige of Swedish arms and strengthened his bargaining position by the seizure of enemy land or the

reconquest of lost Swedish territory. At the time of his death in late 1718, this process had been set in motion by military operations designed to bring the whole of Norway south of Trondheim under Swedish control. It is therefore unlikely that the negotiations with Russia between 1716 and 1718 were intended – any more than the parallel discussions with George I – to reach a definite conclusion before Sweden had achieved a stronger bargaining position. Nonetheless, the negotiations did raise important questions which prompted strong and diverging opinions within Sweden. The possibility of a separate peace with one or several of Sweden's numerous enemies potentially had repercussions for the closely connected questions of the Swedish succession and the tortuous affairs of the house of Holstein-Gottorp. Both require some explanation before the Russo-Swedish negotiations of 1716-18 can be examined.

The two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein were divided territorially like a jigsaw puzzle into districts ruled by the king of Denmark, districts ruled by the dukes of Holstein-Gottorp and districts administered jointly. The dukes were long-standing allies of Denmark's arch-enemy, Sweden, and the connection with Holstein-Gottorp had on several occasions provided Sweden with an avenue for attacking Denmark from the Swedish provinces in Germany. The alliance had recently been cemented by the marriage of the duke to King Charles XII of Sweden's elder sister, Hedvig Sofia, and their infant son, Charles-Frederick, had lived in Stockholm since his father's death in 1702. In 1713-14 Denmark occupied the ducal sections of Schleswig-Holstein, but the regency council which acted on behalf of Charles-Frederick established itself abroad and remained diplomatically active. Gottorp claims for restoration were an additional complication in north European affairs. So too was Charles-Frederick's potential claim to the Swedish throne. Charles XII was unmarried and childless. If he should remain so at his death, the two claimants to the throne were Charles-Frederick (whose mother had died in 1708) and Charles XII's younger sister, Ulrika Eleonora, who married Frederick, the son of the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel, in 1715.

The Gottorp government had made an early attempt to involve itself in the question of a Russo-Swedish peace when in late February 1714 one of its representatives, Count Henning Friedrich von Bassewitz, arrived at St Petersburg, and the following month he put a series of proposals to the tsar.<sup>10</sup> Some of Bassewitz's so-called 'points' were of little long-term significance, but many of them contained ideas that would influence events in the Baltic region until the late 1720s. Bassewitz's central proposal from which all else flowed was that his master, Charles-Frederick of Holstein-Gottorp, should marry Peter's eldest daughter, Anna. The dynastic link forged by a marriage alliance of this kind would lay the foundations for mutually beneficial cooperation across the whole board of north European politics. On this basis, Bassewitz suggested that Peter should assist the restoration of Charles-Frederick in the ducal parts of Schleswig-Holstein and also support his claim to the Swedish throne if Charles XII were to die childless. In the meantime, if Russia made peace with Charles XII, Peter would pass on to Charles-Frederick those provinces he had conquered from Sweden 'which' (to employ Bassewitz's delicate formulation) 'Russia cannot retain, and which Sweden cannot receive back'. Moreover, Peter was to refrain from opposing the incorporation of the ducal parts of Schleswig-Holstein into the Swedish crown if Charles-Frederick were to ascend the Swedish throne. For his part, Charles Frederick would, if he gained the Swedish throne, accept considerable territorial losses in northern Germany to Peter's allies; and in the east, he would agree to a peace treaty which allowed Russia access to the Baltic.

Peter rejected Bassewitz's approach in March 1714, above all because he was unwilling to jeopardise his alliance with Denmark, which he regarded as essential to the prosecution of the war against Sweden, especially at sea, but many of Bassewitz's ideas foreshadowed future projects. Three of these ideas were central and recurring. The first was the notion that Charles-Frederick, once married to Anna Petrovna, could provide Peter with a friendly government in Stockholm if he gained the Swedish throne, a government

that accepted Russia's new position as a Baltic power and entered into a durable alliance with Russia. In 1714 Peter professed to find discussion of Charles-Frederick's claims to the Swedish succession premature and distasteful in view of Charles XII's relative youth<sup>11</sup>, but the latter's death without issue in 1718 would in time lend great topicality to this question. The second idea was that the ducal parts of Schleswig-Holstein, once restored to Charles-Frederick and incorporated into the kingdom of Sweden, might serve as compensation for the loss of some or all of Sweden's provinces in northern Germany. The third was the suggestion that some of the territories Peter had conquered from Sweden in the eastern Baltic might be given to Charles-Frederick. In 1714 Bassewitz was unspecific as to which territories these might be and merely hinted that, if other powers refused to allow Russia to keep all its conquests, then Peter might prefer to see certain areas ruled by a loyal son-in-law and only reunited with Sweden if that son-in-law ascended the Swedish throne. When Holstein-Gottorp renewed its approaches to Russia in 1720, Estonia and Livonia were now specifically mentioned, as was the idea that Charles-Frederick's chances of gaining the Swedish throne would be enhanced by the prospect that Sweden would regain Estonia and Livonia if he became king.<sup>12</sup>

The abject failure of Bassewitz's mission had two immediate consequences. One was a falling out between Bassewitz and the leading figure in the Gottorp government, Baron Georg Heinrich von Görtz.<sup>13</sup> The other was temporarily to weaken Charles-Frederick's position in Sweden, where the willingness of the Holsteiners to buy Russian support with Swedish territory was not viewed with a friendly eye.<sup>14</sup>

In the somewhat longer run, however, Gottorp interests gained a stronger place in Swedish policy, because between 1716 and 1718 Görtz came to be Charles XII's closest adviser and the chief executor of his foreign policy.

The new situation created by the effective collapse of the northern alliance in 1716-17 presented Sweden with a potential opportunity for concluding a separate peace with one or some of its enemies. Such a peace would naturally have to involve some Swedish territorial concessions, but if Peter or



George I could be persuaded to pay for these concessions by undertaking to assist Sweden in obtaining compensation elsewhere, then the overall settlement need not lead to any *net* loss of territory by Sweden. The various negotiations in which Sweden became entangled therefore concerned not only a separate peace but also a subsequent alliance designed to gain compensation – or an 'equivalent' as it was called in the jargon of the day – for Sweden. In effect, Sweden faced a choice between east and west, between attempting to restore Sweden's position either in the eastern Baltic or in Germany, and both points of view had strong adherents within Swedish political opinion. These disagreements reflected and were overlaid by the uncertainties surrounding the Swedish succession.

Ulrica Eleonara's husband, Frederick of Hesse, was inclined towards far-reaching concessions in Germany in order to obtain Danish and perhaps even British naval assistance for an attempt to reconquer the Baltic provinces from Russia. Needless to say, he was not averse to sacrifices over Holstein-Gottorp in the interests of an accommodation with Denmark. He also feared that Görtz might build into any agreement with Russia a promise of Russian military support for the Gottorp claim to the Swedish succession. For Görtz, the restoration of Charles-Frederick in Schleswig-Holstein was a central goal, which in its turn made the retention of a strong Swedish position in Germany desirable so as to facilitate Swedish support for Holstein-Gottorp in the future and necessarily implied a predilection for an arrangement with Russia.<sup>15</sup>

The potential for a Russo-Swedish arrangement was comprehensively, if inconclusively, discussed at the peace congress held on the Åland islands which began in May 1718. Görtz was the chief Swedish delegate, and his Russian counterpart was a German in Russian service, Heinrich Johann Friedrich Ostermann. No agreement was reached at the four sessions of the Åland congress held between May and November 1718, but the negotiations throw an interesting light on Peter's attitude to Sweden at this stage of the war. He was not prepared to return much of the territory he had

conquered from Sweden (only Finland minus Viborg), but the possibilities of a Russo-Swedish alliance involving Russian military and naval assistance for the conquest of 'equivalents' from Sweden's other enemies were discussed in some detail.<sup>16</sup> The negotiations never reached a definitive conclusion, so it is unclear how far Peter would have been prepared to go, but the tenor of the discussions suggests that he had moved towards a new way of looking at the problem of Russia's relations with Sweden. In place of the enfeebled Sweden held in check by a Russian alliance with a strengthened Denmark, which he seems to have sought between 1709 and 1716, he was now prepared to discuss the option of a Sweden reconciled to the loss of the Baltic provinces by an alliance with Russia which produced compensatory gains in the west.

In the event, the death of Charles XII and Görtz's fall from power in late 1718 put an end of any immediate prospect of a Russo-Swedish accommodation. The succession passed to Ulrica Eleonora and it was only now that Sweden made a final choice between Peter and George I. The choice fell on the latter, as Frederick of Hesse had long advocated, and the result was a series of peace treaties with Sweden's enemies in the west. In 1719-1720 Sweden made peace separately with Hanover, Prussia and Denmark on terms which involved the loss of Bremen-Verden to Hanover and part of Swedish Pomerania to Prussia and the acceptance of the absorption of ducal Schleswig by Denmark. The ducal portions of Holstein were eventually restored to Charles-Frederick in 1721.<sup>17</sup>

Charles XII's disappearance from the scene also led to far-reaching changes in the way Sweden was governed. There had been widespread and growing opposition to royal absolutism for some years, and the price which Ulrica Eleonora and Frederick of Hesse had to pay – first for her succession and then, in 1720, for agreement that she should step aside and be replaced on the throne by her husband as Frederick I – was the destruction of absolutism. The constitution of 1720 imposed great restrictions on the powers of the crown and placed sovereignty in the hands of the four estates of the Swedish parliament, the *riksdag* – the Nobility, the Clergy, the Burghers and the Peasants.<sup>18</sup> The succession was vested in the

descendants of Ulrica Eleonora, but not in those of Frederick I by a later wife or in any other of his potential heirs<sup>19</sup> – an important stipulation since their marriage remained childless. Real power over Swedish foreign policy lay with the *riksdag*, above all its so-called secret committee, when parliament was in session, and with the council, when it was not. The king had two votes (and also a casting vote) on the 17-man council, but another of its members, the chancery-president (*kanslipresident*) came closer to being the effective director of Swedish foreign policy.<sup>20</sup>

The pay-off for the western orientation which Sweden had adopted in 1719 should have been assistance against Russia. In January 1719 the anti-Russian policy George I had pursued since 1716 reached its culmination in the treaty he concluded (in his capacity as elector of Hanover) with Austria and Saxony at Vienna. In consequence, Peter did in the course of 1719 withdraw his last troops from Mecklenburg and also evacuated Poland, but the alliance never developed into an effective coalition against Russia because of the failure to enlist Poland and above all Prussia among the ranks of its members.<sup>21</sup> In the summer of 1720 British naval protection did deter a repetition of the destructive raids around the Stockholm area carried out by the powerful Russian galley fleet based on the Ålands the previous year,<sup>22</sup> but the level of British commitment to Sweden remained disappointing from a Swedish point of view<sup>23</sup> and Britain's position was in any case undermined by financial crisis at home. In November 1720 George I felt obliged to advise the Swedes to make peace with Russia as quickly as they could.<sup>24</sup>

The upshot was that Sweden contrived to lose the peace as comprehensively as it had lost the war. In May 1721 a new Russo-Swedish peace congress opened at the Finnish town of Nystad. Sweden's negotiating position was already very weak, and Peter's hand was further strengthened by the internal divisions of Swedish politics. After Charles XII's death, Charles Frederick of Holstein-Gottorp had to leave Stockholm, and he established himself at Hamburg with Bassewitz as his leading adviser. In 1720 the Holsteiners renewed the approaches they had made to Peter six years

earlier and this time Peter responded in a more positive vein. He no longer needed to heed Danish sensibilities once the Danes concluded a separate peace with Sweden in July 1720, and in December that year he invited Charles-Frederick to St Petersburg. The two men met for the first time at Riga in May 1721,<sup>25</sup> just as the Nystad congress was getting under way.

The presence of Charles Frederick in Russia was of great utility to Peter, as were the rumours circulated by the Russians that he might give Charles-Frederick his daughter in marriage and confer Livonia on him.<sup>26</sup> With Livonia in his hands, Charles-Frederick would become a much stronger contender for the throne. In Stockholm, Frederick I was alarmed and the council was equally concerned to avoid Russian interference in the new constitutional order established in Sweden.<sup>27</sup> The upshot was the inclusion, at Swedish insistence, in the peace treaty signed at Nystad in September 1721 of two stipulations designed to allay Swedish anxieties. In article four, it was stated that no territory ceded to Russia could ever be passed on to a third party at a later date. In article seven, Russia undertook to refrain from interfering in Swedish internal affairs, especially with regard to the succession and the constitution, and to hinder other parties from doing so.<sup>28</sup>

In view of Swedish eagerness on these two points, Peter did not feel obliged to make any concessions over territorial matters. Under the terms of the peace treaty, he retained all his conquests, including Viborg and Kexholm, except for the bulk of Finland, which was restored to Sweden. He had been prepared to modify his territorial demands marginally in the interests of a speedy peace,<sup>29</sup> but in the end it did not prove necessary. His concessions in articles four and seven of the treaty were not in practice concessions at all. It must be very doubtful that he ever contemplated relinquishing Livonia to Charles-Frederick or indeed to anyone else unless compelled to do so by the force of events.<sup>30</sup> As for article seven, Peter was within a couple of years vigorously interfering in Swedish internal affairs, including the succession question, and for many decades to come the Russians interpreted this article as constituting a Russian guarantee of the 1720 constitution,

which they consequently had a right and a duty to uphold. At the outbreak of the Great Northern War in 1700, Peter is reputed to have remarked that he would prefer to see Sweden a republic (and a republic is precisely what Sweden had now become in the parlance of the time), since republics were supposedly less dangerous to their neighbours than monarchies.<sup>31</sup> During Bassewitz's mission to St Petersburg in 1714, the Russians had asked him about the Gottorp attitude to the maintenance of absolutism in Sweden and Bassewitz had replied, in his eagerness to please, that the house of Holstein-Gottorp was inclined to agree to a change in Sweden's absolutist system of government.<sup>32</sup> It would therefore seem perfectly clear that Peter was as keen to preserve the 1720 constitution of Sweden as the 'golden liberty' of Poland.

The real concession Peter made at Nystad was to return Finland, and in view of the importance of Finland in Russo-Swedish relations at certain times over the following hundred years or so, its place in Peter's thinking requires examination before leaving the peace settlement. In contrast to Sweden's Baltic and German provinces, Finland was an integral part of the Swedish kingdom. Finland possessed a clear geographical identity and was often described as a duchy, because at one stage in the sixteenth century a brother of the Swedish king had borne the title of duke of Finland, but it had no separate political life and was governed in the same way as the other regions of the Swedish kingdom.

Russian forces overran Finland in 1713-1714, but Peter repeatedly made it clear that he was prepared to return the bulk of Finland to Sweden. Even before the attack on Finland began, Peter had in late 1712 described the object of the operation as being to put pressure on the Swedes and to obtain a bargaining counter in future peace negotiations with Sweden.<sup>33</sup> Economically, Finland – to quote an American historian – 'would have meant merely the addition of more evergreen forests and lakes, with which Russia was already amply endowed'.<sup>34</sup> In military terms, Peter evidently did not see the retention of Finland as vital to Russian security. In March 1714 he observed that the Gulf of Finland was so

narrow that if *both* Estonia and Finland were in Swedish hands, the Swedes would be able to control seaborne access to St Petersburg from fortresses at Helsinki and Reval.<sup>35</sup> The natural inference is that the south Finnish coast west of Viborg was not essential in Peter's eyes so long as Estonia was under Russian control.

Viborg itself was another matter. Once St Petersburg was established, it was vulnerable to attack from Viborg, an important fortress and an ancient centre of Swedish power at the head of the Gulf of Finland, and Kexholm on Lake Ladoga was also of some significance in this connection. After he captured Viborg in 1710, Peter described it as 'a strong pillow for St Petersburg',<sup>36</sup> and he never considered returning it thereafter. In other respects, he was flexible about the precise line of the frontier in south-east Finland. As we have seen, in 1721 he was willing to accept somewhat less of Karelia than he finally achieved in order to reach a speedy settlement with Sweden and he was inspecting the terrain west of Viborg with this in view when the news reached him that the peace treaty had been signed.<sup>37</sup> It was also reported that Peter considered returning Kexholm.<sup>38</sup>

The only evidence that Peter contemplated detaching the whole of Finland from Sweden is contained in his response in March 1714 to Bassewitz's proposal that, in the event of peace with Sweden in Charles XII's lifetime, Peter should hand over to Charles-Frederick those provinces 'which Russia cannot retain and which Sweden cannot receive back'. It is probable that the provinces Bassewitz had in mind were Estonia and Livonia, but Peter's written comment on the proposal pointed in a different direction: 'We shall try and secure Finland for [Charles-Frederick], but in that case he should for his part work for this himself'.<sup>39</sup> This is the only reference by Peter to the possibility that Finland as a whole might be detached from the kingdom of Sweden to form an independent political unit of some kind, and it is only possible to speculate about what was in his mind. Perhaps he hoped merely to sow discord and disunity within Sweden: he stressed that Charles-Frederick himself had to 'work' to secure Finland. It was also possible that it would prove necessary to

find compensation for ducal Schleswig-Holstein in the final peace settlement and Peter may have thought that Finland could serve for this purpose. He may also have hoped to use the threat of an independent Finland as a means of applying pressure on the Swedes. However, in the absence of other evidence, the most likely explanation is that, at this moment at least, he saw an independent Finland as a possible option if future developments made it desirable and feasible to weaken Sweden by detaching Finland permanently. If so, it was not an idea to which he ever returned.

With the conclusion of the treaty of Nystad, Peter had finally forced the Swedes to accept peace on his terms, but the problem of Russia's future relations with Sweden had not been solved. He remained unreconciled with George I and, despite ongoing discussions with both France and Austria, he lacked a great power ally. The goal he pursued towards Sweden during the last years of his life was an alliance which neutralized the risk of Swedish adherence to an anti-Russian coalition and gave Russia a preponderant influence in Stockholm. His task was greatly facilitated by the divisions within Swedish political opinion and the continued presence at his own court of Charles-Frederick. The latter's interests had been entirely disregarded at Nystad, but Peter kept him in Russia by holding out the prospect of future support and eventual marriage to Anna Petrovna.<sup>40</sup> His continuing link with Charles-Frederick provided Peter with the basis for a pro-Russian grouping in Sweden. As the British diplomat, Lord Whitworth, aptly put it in April 1722

The Czar invited him [Charles-Frederick] first over, to make the King of Sweden more pliable in the peace, in which he has succeeded; and 'tis probable he will keep him still in hand to entertain a faction in that kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

The faction in question was the Holstein party, one of the three broad groupings active in Sweden in the early 1720s. It was divided over whether Frederick I should be deposed immediately, but it was agreed that Charles-Frederick should at the very least be given the title of 'Royal Highness'

and an assurance of the Swedish succession and support for his demands in Schleswig. The Holstein party hoped Charles-Frederick could be an instrument in reversing some of Sweden's recent territorial losses and favoured cooperation with Russia, not because of any fundamental sympathy towards that state, but because Russian support would be essential for regaining ducal Schleswig. When Charles-Frederick ultimately became king of Sweden, the ducal portions of Schleswig-Holstein would serve as compensation for the provinces Sweden had lost in Germany and might even provide a base for regaining them. Moreover, if Charles-Frederick eventually married Anna Petrovna, it was thought that Peter might give him Estonia and Livonia, which would thus eventually return to Sweden. The other two groupings on the Swedish political stage were the court party, the adherents of Frederick I, which wanted to strengthen the powers of the crown and fix the succession on his Hessian heirs and which looked to Britain for support; and the constitutionalist party led by the chancery-president, Count Arvid Horn, which sought above all to preserve the 1720 constitution and to follow a pacific foreign policy. It was not therefore necessarily averse to good relations with Russia, if not for the same reasons as the Holstein party.<sup>42</sup>

Matters came to a head when the *riksdag* assembled in January 1723.<sup>43</sup> It remained in session until October and during its course Peter pursued three goals: to preserve the 1720 constitution; to advance Charles-Frederick's cause within Sweden; and to secure an alliance with Sweden. In each case, he achieved a fair measure of success. His minister in Stockholm, Mikhail Bestuzhev, used bribery liberally to buy votes; and the naval demonstration which the Russian fleet staged in the Baltic had some intimidatory effect, though it also provoked a revulsion of opinion in Sweden against Russia and Charles-Frederick. However, the main factor working in Peter's favour was that Frederick I's ambitions to strengthen the crown and secure a Hessian succession had created a marriage of convenience between the constitutionalist and Holstein parties. Their combined strength dominated the *riksdag* and was sufficient to brush aside all royalist attempts



at constitutional amendment. As for the Gottorp claim to the Swedish throne, the four estates proved willing to afford Charles-Frederick the title of 'Royal Highness' and to grant him an annual pension (which was subsequently used, incidentally, entirely within Sweden to reward his own supporters<sup>44</sup>), but they stopped short of promising him the succession. All they would do was to hold out the prospect that, if the throne fell vacant, the high regard in which he was held by the estates would be taken into account.<sup>45</sup> Peter's offer of an alliance led to the signature in February 1724, a few months after the estates had dispersed, of a Russo-Swedish treaty. It was a defensive alliance of twelve years' duration, and an additional secret article pledged both sides to pursue the restoration of ducal Schleswig to Charles-Frederick by diplomatic means and to hold confidential consultations on what further steps might be taken to solve the Schleswig problem if these efforts failed.<sup>46</sup>

Peter had good reason to feel satisfied with the course of events in Stockholm over the previous year. He had, it is true, wanted more. At one stage, he hoped to conclude a formal convention with the four estates themselves (not the Swedish government) in which he guaranteed the maintenance of the 1720 constitution.<sup>47</sup> He had also pressed unsuccessfully for the inclusion in the alliance treaty of a further secret article promising the Swedish succession to Charles-Frederick – an attempt at interference in Sweden's internal affairs resented and resisted by the Swedes.<sup>48</sup> He had not been able to realize such ambitions, but the overall achievement was considerable. The 1720 constitution had been reaffirmed; the Holstein party had gained a stronger position and some of its leading figures had joined the council; Charles-Frederick's standing had been enhanced and Sweden had committed itself to supporting his claims in Schleswig. Above all, the treaty of Stockholm seemed to have brought Sweden within the Russian orbit.

*Epilogue: 1724-1727*

The structure, however, remained incomplete. If the Russo-Swedish alliance was to be consolidated and Sweden tied more durably to Russia, it had to be reinforced by tangible Swedish gains and by Charles-Frederick's eventual accession to the Swedish throne. The two were, of course, linked: it was through Charles-Frederick that the Gottorp lands might be incorporated into the kingdom of Sweden. And it was through the exploitation of the Schleswig question that Sweden might be able to regain some of its lost German territories.<sup>49</sup> When he first proposed alliance negotiations to the Swedes in July 1723, Peter hinted obliquely that they might ultimately lead to the reacquisition of Bremen-Verden<sup>50</sup>; and as Ostermann, one of Peter's closest associates in the conduct of foreign affairs, observed in early 1725, it was to be feared that the Swedes would seek other friends if they lost confidence in the prospect of Russian support.<sup>51</sup> It was certainly believed by other powers that the object of the Russo-Swedish alliance was the recovery of Sweden's former possessions in Germany.<sup>52</sup> The treaty of Stockholm, in other words, was only a first step. Another was taken in November 1724 when Peter finally concluded a marriage treaty with Charles-Frederick in which he gave him Anna Petrovna's hand and promised to support his claims to the Swedish throne when it fell vacant and for the restoration of ducal Schleswig.<sup>53</sup>

In the event, neither Russia nor Sweden pursued the implications of the alliance to their logical conclusion. Peter died in January 1725. His widow and successor, Catherine I, was strongly committed to Charles-Frederick and her support for his claims in Schleswig over the next few years produced a serious international crisis in northern Europe, but she died in the spring of 1727 before matters came to a head. Her elimination from the scene placed power within Russia in the hands of factions less wedded to the Gottorp cause and led to a gradual reversal of Russian policy over Schleswig. In July 1727 Charles-Frederick left Russia for Kiel. He never returned.<sup>54</sup>

By this time, Sweden had already slipped from the Russian sphere of influence. Horn had supported the Russian

alliance in 1723-24, but it must be doubted whether he ever contemplated active measures to restore Sweden's position in northern Germany. In April 1724 he assured the British minister in Stockholm 'that the true and sincere intention of the Swedish government is to keep at peace with all the world' and that the secret article about Schleswig in the alliance treaty with Russia was no more than empty words.<sup>55</sup> In his eyes, the treaty of Stockholm was probably no more than a means of establishing tolerable relations with Russia, thus helping to secure for Sweden a period of peace and recuperation after more than two decades of war.

For the moment, however, the Holstein party was riding high in the aftermath of the 1723 *riksdag*. When news of Peter's death reached Stockholm, the council decided (against the views of both Horn and Frederick I) to send Josias Cederhielm, a leading figure in the Holstein party and himself a councillor, on a special mission to St Petersburg. Catherine's claim to the throne was highly dubious, and it was very possible that she would need to defend it by force of arms. In St. Petersburg, her leading adherent, Prince Menshikov, and Bassewitz devised a plan for Charles-Frederick to obtain Swedish military assistance if Catherine's position were threatened by internal rebellion. In return, Catherine would give Estonia and Livonia to her daughter, Anna Petrovna, as her dowry, and these provinces would return to Sweden when Charles-Frederick ascended the Swedish throne. Speculations of this kind doubtless played some role in the decision to send Cederhielm to St Petersburg, but his mission was also intended to reinforce Catherine's commitment to Peter's policies in the Schleswig question. As it happened, nothing came of Cederhielm's mission. By the time he reached Russia, Catherine was firmly in the saddle and she needed neither foreign assistance nor encouragement in her support for Charles-Frederick, who finally married Anna Petrovna in May 1725. Estonia and Livonia, however, remained under the Russian crown. Cederhielm continued to hope that these provinces might eventually come into Charles-Frederick's hands, but this proved the last occasion on which the idea, first raised by Bassewitz in 1714, that

they might be voluntarily if indirectly restored to Sweden through Charles-Frederick's marriage was discussed with even a semblance of seriousness.<sup>56</sup>

By the time Cederhielm returned to Stockholm in May 1726, the tide had begun to turn against the Holstein party. Horn was working closely with the British minister in Stockholm to secure a reorientation of Swedish policy through Sweden's accession to the Alliance of Hanover, an Anglo-French grouping formed in 1725 and antipathetic to Russia and Austria. Horn believed that by joining this defensive alliance Sweden could reduce its dependence on Russia and create a counterweight to its Russian alliance. Swedish political opinion was moving in this direction, and Horn was able to push Sweden's accession first through the council in 1726 (on Frederick I's casting vote) and then through the *riksdag* of 1726-27. Cederhielm and another leading member of the Holstein party had to leave the council and in March 1727 Sweden formally acceded to the Alliance of Hanover, a matter of weeks before the death of Catherine I.<sup>57</sup> The Russo-Swedish alliance of 1724 officially remained in force, but it was an empty shell.

The evolution of Russian policy towards Sweden between 1709 and 1727 seems more complicated than it really was because the tangled affairs of the house of Holstein-Gottorp tend to obscure the underlying factors involved. In reality, Charles-Frederick's claims to the Swedish throne and to ducal Schleswig were only important because they provided Russia with a means of placing a pro-Russian king, dynastically linked to the Romanovs, on the Swedish throne and of securing 'equivalents' in the west for Sweden's territorial losses to Russia in the eastern Baltic. The Swedish succession and ducal Schleswig ceased to be problems in north European politics in the 1740s and 1770s respectively, but the fundamental problem of Russia's relationship with Sweden remained unchanged. Between Poltava and his death, Peter the Great pursued at one time or another all the potential solutions to this problem which would later feature in the policies of his successors over the following hundred years or so. Until 1716 he envisaged a weakened Sweden held in

subjugation by a Russian alliance with a strengthened Denmark. Between 1716 and 1718 he seems to have contemplated a Sweden allied to Russia and reconciled to its losses in the east by compensation in the west. After the death of Charles XII and the destruction of absolutism within Sweden, a third option became conceivable: Sweden was to be rendered incapable of a forceful foreign policy by the maintenance of its new constitution and perhaps even turned into a puppet state through support for a pro-Russian party within Sweden and the accession to the throne of a pro-Russian king. This third option was not incompatible with either of the other two (though the first two were with each other), and indeed Peter and his widow combined it with the second between 1724 and 1727. The same three options would be pursued – sometimes alone, sometimes in combination – by their successors for almost another century.

## Notes

1. The literature on the history of the Great Northern War is immense. A recent brief account in English is David Kirby, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period. The Baltic World 1492-1772* (London, 1990) (cited as Kirby). In German, there is another succinct account in Klaus Zernack (ed.), *Handbuch der Geschichte Russlands*, vol. 2, *Vom Randstaat zur Hegemonialmacht (1613-1856)* (Stuttgart, ongoing) (cited as Zernack). In addition, various biographies provide a lot of information on the war: M. S. Anderson, *Peter the Great* (London, 1978) (cited as Anderson), R. M. Hatton, *Charles XII of Sweden* (cited as Hatton), R. Wittram, *Peter I. Czar und Kaiser*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1964) (cited as Wittram).
2. Zernack, p. 279.
3. Hatton, pp. 324, 325.
4. J. Rosén, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia*, vol. II:1, 1697-1721 (Stockholm, 1952), p. 135 (cited as Rosén).
5. Hatton, p. 424.
6. L. R. Lewitter, 'Poland, Russia and the Treaty of Vienna of

- 5 January 1719', *The Historical Journal*, XIII:1 (1970), p. 3 (cited as Lewitter).
7. Anderson, pp. 69-70; Lewitter, pp. 3-4.
8. Lewitter, pp. 4-5.
9. Anderson, p. 71; Lewitter, p. 6.
10. For Bassewitz's mission to St Petersburg in 1714, see Hans Bagger, *Ruslands alliancepolitik efter freden i Nystad* (Copenhagen, 1974), pp. 93-98 (cited as Bagger); and Helge Almquist, 'Holstein-Gottorp, Sverige och den nordiska ligan i den politiska krisen 1713-1714', *Skrifter utgifna af K. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet i Uppsala*, 21:1 (1918), pp. 147-203 (cited as Almquist).
11. Bagger, p. 95.
12. Bagger, p. 103.
13. Almquist, pp. 188-203.
14. Hatton, p. 371.
15. Hatton, pp. 445-448, 457.
16. Hatton, pp. 456-459; Rosén, pp. 151-155.
17. Bagger, p. 99.
18. Michael Roberts, *The Age of Liberty. Sweden 1719-1772* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 64 (cited as Roberts).
19. Carl Gustaf Malmström, *Sveriges politiska historia från konung Karl XII:s död till statshvälfningen 1772* (2nd edition, 6 vols., Stockholm, 1893-1901), vol. 1, p. 250 (cited as Malmström).
20. Roberts, pp. 76-77, 82-85.
21. Lewitter, pp. 14-30.
22. Anderson, pp. 74-75.
23. David Aldridge, 'The Navy as handmaid for commerce and high policy 1680-1720', in Jeremy Black and Philip Woodfine (eds.), *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester, 1988), p. 65.
24. Anderson, p. 75.
25. Bagger, pp. 99-106.
26. Rosén, pp. 178, 182-183.
27. For the negotiations at Nystad, see, for example, Rosén, pp. 174-185 and G. Wensheim, *Studier kring freden i Nystad* (Lund, 1973).
28. Bagger, pp. 107-111.

29. *Bagger*, p. 110.
30. *Bagger*, p. 105.
31. Romuald J. Misiunas, 'The Baltic Question After Nystad', in A. Ziedonis, W. L. Winter and M. Valgemäe (eds.), *Baltic History* (Columbus, Ohio, 1974), p. 75 (cited as *Misiunas*).
32. *Almquist*, p. 183.
33. *Wittram*, p. 244.
34. *Misiunas*, p. 72.
35. *Bagger*, p. 96.
36. B. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia* (London, 1950), p. 75.
37. *Bagger*, p. 110.
38. H. Arnold Barton, 'Russia and the Problem of Sweden-Finland, 1721-1809', *East European Quarterly*, v:4 (1971), p. 439.
39. *Bagger*, p. 95.
40. *Bagger*, pp. 112-116.
41. J. F. Chance, 'George I and Peter the Great after the Peace of Nystad', *The English Historical Review*, XXVI (1911), p. 278 (cited as *Chance* 1911).
42. Olof Jägerskiöld, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia*, vol. II:2, 1721-1792 (Stockholm, 1957), p. 41-45 (cited as *Jägerskiöld*).
43. For the *riksdag* of 1723, see *Malmström*, vol. 1, pp. 363-431.
44. *Malmström*, vol. 1, p. 440.
45. *Malmström*, vol. 1, p. 417.
46. *Bagger*, pp. 130-131.
47. *Malmström*, vol. 1, p. 383.
48. *Bagger*, pp. 129-130.
49. *Bagger*, p. 161.
50. *Malmström*, vol. 1, p. 391.
51. *Bagger*, p. 78.
52. J. F. Chance, 'Northern Affairs in 1724', *The English Historical Review*, XXVII (1912), pp. 486-490 (cited as *Chance* 1912); *Jägerskiöld*, p. 62.
53. *Bagger*, pp. 134-136.
54. *Bagger*, pp. 238-244

- 55. *Chance* 1912, p. 489.
- 56. *Malmström*, vol. 1, pp. 445-451; *Jägerskiöld*, p. 76; *Bagger*, pp. 166-168.
- 57. *Jägerskiöld*, pp. 66-82; *Malmström*, vol. 1, pp. 454-490 and vol. 2, pp. 1-37.