

when she was one of the Great Powers of Europe. At the death of Charles XI in 1697 Sweden possessed all Finland and most of the East Sea provinces, besides Pomerania and some territories of the old German Empire, almost turning the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Bothnia into a Swedish lake. In Finland, which had been Swedish since the thirteenth century, the Swedish language and culture had taken deep root amongst the population; and though there is now a specifically Finnish literature, the best known writers of Finland, Runeberg and Topelius, are still Swedish classics. There had been centuries of warfare over the Baltic provinces between Poles, Danes, Germans, Russians and Swedes, but it seemed to have ended in the definite establishment of Sweden as the Great Power of the North. Her soldiers were amongst the best trained of Europe and had the inspiring traditions of Gustavus Adolphus and the famous campaigns of the Thirty Years War behind them. Her navy was equal to the best of that time.

Then came the tragedy of Swedish history with that heroic madman Charles XII, who after nine years of wasting warfare lost the empire of the north for Sweden at Pultawa. Yet his early campaigns in this war are counted amongst the most glorious pages in their history by the Swedes. Turning on the treacherous combination which had been formed against him the young king, he was only 18 years old, forced Frederick of Denmark into an ignominious peace, beat Peter the Great soundly at the battle of Narva, and then turned into Saxony and Poland to punish Augustus the Strong; and there he stayed till he had uncrowned him, refusing all other terms however advantageous; six years of victorious but wasting warfare during which the sagacious Peter was collecting and training his Russians, overrunning the Baltic provinces of Sweden and founding the new capital of St. Petersburg on their borders (1703) as a sign that he meant to stay there. Charles had said he would drive Augustus from the throne of Poland if he should have to stay there thirty years to do it; and he had that half fantastic heroism of the old Vikings in him which would never go back on a boast however rashly uttered. When at last he turned his attention to the really dangerous enemy, it was almost too late and in trying to make up for lost time by the heroic strategy of a march on Moscow, he found himself