

**To what extent did Carolus Rex's Russian Campaign 1707-09 contribute to the downfall
of the Swedish Empire?**

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Section A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will explore the question “**To what extent did Carolus Rex’s Russian Campaign 1707-09 contribute to the downfall of the Swedish Empire?**” The years 1611 to 1721 will be the focus of this investigation to allow for an analysis of the various causes for the fall of the Swedish Empire.

The first source which will be evaluated in depth is Neil Kent’s *A Concise History of Sweden - Cambridge Concise Histories*, written in 2008. The origin of this source is valuable because Kent is based at Cambridge University and the St Petersburg State Academy of Art, Architecture and Culture and has written numerous books on Swedish and Scandinavian history. Additionally, the date of publication of his source in 2008 further strengthens its credibility and value as Kent was able to use his advantage of hindsight to analyse a wide array of sources, including first hand sources, such as letters, government documents, newspapers and many more. However, the origin of the source is also limited as Kent was obviously not present at the time the events he discusses occurred, therefore bringing into question the reliability of his sources. The purpose of this source is to analyse multiple aspects of Swedish history from the early viking era all the way to the year 2000. The value of this is that a large time of Swedish history can be analysed and used to make connections. However, the fact that the book covers such a vast amount of time limits historians who just want a very detailed account of a small time period.

The second source evaluated in depth is François-Marie Arouet’s (more commonly known by his ‘nom de plume’; Voltaire) *Histoire de Charles XII, Roi de Suede* (or *History of Charles XII, King of Sweden*) which was first published in 1731 in Rouen. The origin of this source is valuable because Voltaire is a well renowned French writer, not only in history. Many professors, such as Yale professor Peter Gay, have hailed his writing, saying his

"scrupulous concern for truths", "careful sifting of evidence", and "intelligent selection of what is important" are indispensable attributed in his writing¹. Additionally, the date of publication of this work in 1731 is of value as it is a first hand account of Charles XII at the time and there was no need for other sources. This date, however, is also a limitation as the author did not benefit from hindsight. In terms of origin, this source is also limited as Voltaire lived in France and England his entire life, therefore, having never met King Charles XII, he may not be the most reliable person to speak about the Swedish king. The purpose of this source is to provide the reader with useful information on King Charles XII's life. The source, again, is limited in this sense, however, as Voltaire and King Charles XII were not closely acquainted, therefore Voltaire may not be the best person to speak about Carolus Rex's life.

¹ Gay, p. 182–99

Section B: Investigation

The Swedish Empire, also known as the Era of Great Power, was a European absolute monarchy that took over much of Scandinavia and the Baltic Nations during early modern Europe. Although at one point it controlled much of northern Europe, this empire, which has been said to start after Gustavus Adolphus ascended to the throne in 1611, ended after scarcely one century of reign in 1721 following The Great North War². This paper will look at the causes for the end of this century-long superpower and evaluate the research question, “*To what extent did Carolus Rex’s Russian Campaign 1707-09 contribute to the downfall of the Swedish Empire?*” At first, the political and economic situation in Sweden at the end of the 1600’s will be discussed, then political, economic, and military reasons will be considered before a conclusion is drawn on what caused the Swedish Empire to collapse.

In the year 1680, King Karl XI of Sweden had established an autocracy³ which paved the road for Carolus Rex’s (Karl XII) military campaigns in the years to follow. Karl XI had also made a military reconstruction which improved the military force of Sweden. Within a few years after his death several countries declared war against Sweden. This was the start of the “Great Nordic War” between Sweden, on the one hand, and Denmark, Poland-Saxony and Russia, on the other. At the end of the 1600s, Sweden was in a difficult situation economically as in 1695 Sweden got hit with a serious famine caused by crop failure. The effects on the economy were drastic as the crops from Sweden’s heartlands were an important source of nutrition for a large part of Scandinavia.

One of the reasons for the downfall of the Swedish Empire was the disastrous Russian Campaign and its aftermath. The Great Northern War (1700–1721) was a struggle in which a Russian-led invasion force successfully challenged the Swedish Empire's dominant position

² [Frost 2000](#), pp. 133–134

³ Kent, p. 456

in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe. Sensing an opportunity when Sweden was controlled by the young Charles XII, a coalition of Denmark–Norway, Saxony, and Russia declared war on the Swedish Empire and launched an invasion against Swedish Holstein-Gottorp, Swedish Livonia, and Swedish Ingria. This trifold invasion was devastating for the Swedish Empire as its relatively small military was soon overrun by the much larger invasion force. The country was severely underdeveloped economically in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, and therefore suffered a rapid decline as a global military superpower⁴.

After Sweden's military campaigns failed, the Swedish budget deficit kept growing and the country's resources became less and less, making the economy take a big hit. Due to the country's dire economic situation, the number of states that were exempted from government taxation had to be reduced to allow for the government to collect as much money as possible to recover from the financial mistake that was the Russian Campaign. As stated by Neil Kent in *A Concise History of Sweden - Cambridge Concise Histories*, "The economic import of reduction⁵ was, thus, dramatic and swift. As a result of its implementation, by the end of the seventeenth century, some 80 per cent of the estates transferred to the nobility had been returned to the crown, either in the form of the land itself or taxes. These included all specifically baronial and county estates."⁶ This quotation enforces the monumental importance of reduction to the Swedish government. This procedure was so effective that the crown received an annual revenue of at least 2 million *dalers*⁷ in silver, the vast bulk of which came from the foreign Baltic provinces (1.3 million). The process also took away half of the nobles' landed holdings, diminishing their political influence.

⁴ Kent , p. 156

⁵ Reduction - the reduction of states exempt from taxation by the government

⁶ Kent, pp. 158-159

⁷ Currency of Sweden from 1777 to 1873

Additionally, there were also political reasons that contributed to the downfall of the Swedish Empire, in particular, the problems the Swedish autocracy brought along, especially when the king was not present in Sweden. Upon Karl XII's coronation in November 1697, his main focus was on strengthening the military to be able to fend off any attacks from the surrounding nations and in particular Russia. In February 1700, Poland-Saxony invaded Swedish territory followed by Denmark invading Holstein-Gottorp in March. For the next 17 years, Sweden was at war all over Europe and King Karl XII was travelling with the military to fight. As Sweden at the time was an autocracy and King Carolus Rex was the sole bearer of command of the country, while he was travelling fighting in the wars, Sweden had no leader in the country. As Kent stated, "Russia also took advantage of the Swedish king's absence by attacking Finland and rapidly occupied this province after the Battle of Storkyro, forcing the Finnish General Armfelt to flee to Sweden. In reaction, Karl, from his camp at Bender, increasingly involved himself in the high politics of the Sultan's Porte, encouraging the Ottomans to attack Russia by all means at his disposal."⁸ This quote supports the claim that the absence of King Karl XII, and with him the entire power of the government, created more problems for the empire, which ended up leading to its fall, as Sweden got involved in more attacks and wars which they had to fend off with their diminishing army.

In conclusion, there were multiple reasons for the fall of the Swedish Empire, which can all be connected with either military, economic, or political reasons. Carolus Rex's Russian Campaign of 1707-09 contributed to the downfall of the Swedish Empire to a very high extent as without it, the country would not have been forced to spend a great deal of money and resources on the war effort, which ended in the weakening military to be overrun. Additionally, the country was in a weak position economically in the early 1700s as after Sweden's military campaigns failed, the Swedish budget deficit kept growing and the

⁸ Kent, p. 176

country's resources lessened drastically, causing the economy to take a big dive. Furthermore, the absence of the king who was in charge of the entire nation due to the country's autocracy in times of war made the country vulnerable to attacks from other nations. These factors were mostly as a result of the failed Russian Campaign of Carolus Rex, as without the wars, the country would have likely stayed financially and politically stable. The failed Russian Campaign in turn led to other failed military campaigns, no more success which meant loss of income, famine and starvation in Sweden and lack of human resources for a continuation of the wars, not to mention political problems with a king that was stuck down in the Ottoman Empire. Overall, the military, economic, and political reasons for the downfall of the Swedish Empire may have been prevented if not for Carolus Rex's failed military campaigns in Russia.

Section C: Reflection

When only looking at one source, it can be hard to know if the source is accurate. Therefore, while doing my investigation for my History IA, I used a plethora of various sources to make sure that the sources and information are coherent and that the information matches across different sources. In my investigation, I first scoured the internet for different sources. Then, after having a good amount, I started reading them one by one and analysing the opinions and points of view present in each source. Next, I attempted to figure out how much of this information I could actually use for my investigation. Finally, I used the sources I deemed useful in my investigation. Historians in real life use the same method. It is crucial to analyse one's sources as no sources are the same and all historians have a certain bias which is important to identify.

Furthermore, throughout this investigation, I was made aware of a number of challenges that historians face and a few methods used to uncover sources, and most importantly reliable sources. When considering which of the many sources available to include, I realised that it is often very difficult to know if a source is reliable or not. Some sources are written many years after the fact which can have many advantages and disadvantages, for example hindsight. Hindsight allows historians to know exactly how a situation ended and the impacts that it had, whereas if a source was written right when it happened, it will not show the effects and outcomes. On the other hand, this could also be a good thing as if there is no hindsight involved, the information is raw and shows exactly what happened without any possibility for bias or personal interpretation in terms of how the situation ended. Additionally, some historical sources focused on not just the topic I was studying. In my exploration, this would be Neil Kent's "A Concise History of Sweden - Cambridge Concise Histories." This source focused on a wide range of Swedish history, not

just what I was investigating. This could be a disadvantage as the area I was investigating may have been less focused and specific. For this reason, it is often hard for historians to find very specific yet accurate information. The way to get around this is to ask yourself, “To what extent can I use this source?” This is the question I asked myself after analysing each source to make sure that it would add value to my arguments and not jeopardise them by pouring into question the reliability.

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