

HOW DID SWEDEN'S MILITARY EVOLUTION UNDER GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS II CREATE BATTLEFIELD SUCCESS

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The “Lion of the North,” Gustavus Adolphus II, created the true northern lion by systematically reforming Sweden’s military system in the 17th century. The changes that he made to the Swedish military led to their success on the battlefield against larger forces, such as the Holy Roman Empire. These reforms would later contribute to Sweden’s victory during the Thirty Years War.

An army is a group of fighters suited for battle on land; however, the attributes that define a winning army go far beyond persons suited for battle. A successful army needs discipline, tactical flexibility, professional officers, high morale, and esprit de corps. During the 17th century, Swedish monarch Gustavus Adolphus II was inspired to reform the Swedish military after being influenced by Roman tactical manuals and the advancements of the United Provinces’ citizen army. These reforms would later grant the Swedish military victory on the battlefield until his death in 1632. Adolphus II recognised that that his military need to be flexible and powerful; to do this he needed to maximize the offensive capability of his forces and utilize the technology available. Eventually, his reforms improved his military’s discipline and esprit de corps.

Gustavus Adolphus II created a professional soldiery and officer corps that had the discipline and esprit de corps to win battles. Adolphus II was a religious man who envisioned himself as the protector of Protestantism. He went to a war, the “chief object of which [was] to free [his] oppressed brothers in faith from the clutches of the pope.”¹ Moreover, he was the protector of important ports and trading centers

¹Robinson, *Readings in European History Volume II*, 207.

along the Baltic Sea. In order to protect his religious brethren and territory he envisioned a unified Protestant army. This contrasts with the common employment of mercenary forces who were diverse in origin, religion, and loyal only to their pay. To achieve the professional force that Adolphus II envisioned he expanded Sweden's old levy system, turning it from a national draft into a more volunteer orientated recruitment system.² The new system allowed professional soldiers to develop their craft, as well as their identity through regular pay and drills; it was also easier to establish a genuine sense of esprit de corps in a professional army. Furthermore, Adolphus II integrated mercenary companies into the Swedish military. He was able to hire the mercenaries for extended periods of time, as well as holding them to the same standard as his national soldiers; this increased the army standards, which led to an increase in discipline, and personally motivated well-trained soldiers. Adolphus II demanded that the officer corps was properly educated in the art of war; he also required the officers to improve their martial prowess, and study military history and Roman tactical manuals. This change gave officers the independence they needed to be more flexible and resilient.

The effect of the reforms can be seen in Adolphus II's confidence in his country's military ability. In 1630, when addressing the military class, Adolphus II proclaimed that the military spirit of the Goths of antiquity had "shone forth again in your manly behaviour, your unfailing courage" that their descendants would revere their "might at arms, and great conquests."³ Furthermore, he sought decisive battles, suggesting that he had confidence that his army was superior. Adolphus II's reforms were able to showcase his army's true effectiveness when the professional officers were able to win the battle of Lutzen after losing their monarch. The effects of Adolphus II's reforms are further exemplified in the discipline, unity, and desire to fight displayed by the ethnically diverse Swedish army which was a result of his efforts to unify the army into a cohesive fighting force. Improving the officer professionalism, army unity, and cohesion helped win the Swedes battles before and after Adolphus II's death; however, it was his changes to the army's tactical structure that made it a weapon of annihilation.

The changes Gustavus Adolphus II made to his army's tactical structure maximized its mobility and offensive capability. The shift to a more offensive and mobile army was a response to the mostly defensive fighting styles of the time, which were Tercio infantry formations and the cavalry caracole. In 1631, The Tercios at the battle of Breitenfeld were roughly fifteen hundred man, strong muskets, and pike diamonds; it was a massive formation that was incredibly difficult to break, yet it was very slow to maneuver and lacked offensive capability.⁴ In the caracole, cavalry acted as skirmishers, shooting and retreating in ranks to maintain regular

²Weigly, *The Age of Battles*, 6.

³Robinson, 208.

⁴Paul, *Masters of the Battlefield*, 277.

fire. Both these formations were hampered by the primitive quality of firearms they employed as their primary offensive weapons and the over-complexity of their firearm drills. Sweden was able exploit the weakness of their contemporary opponents by reforming the military's tactical structure. Their units were able to increase their mobility by imitating the flexibility and unit size of the Roman cohort which consisted of roughly five hundred men. This proved crucial in the battle of Breitenfield. Military historian Russel Weigly notes that because of the increased flexibility and discipline of Swedish forces they had "a capacity unparalleled since the Romans to react promptly to battlefield emergencies."⁵ Standing in stark contrast to the Imperial Tercios — which were too slow to exploit the opportunity created by the Saxon route — the Swedish forces could fill in the gaps of their line faster than the Imperials because of their unit size. Adolphus II took the Swedish army through several reforms to make it more capable on the offensive. Primarily, the use of mass pike charges and the triple line single salvo of musket fire, the "Swedish Salvee," delivered shock infantry tactics.⁶ The Swedish cavalry increased its effectiveness by combining pistol fire with a direct sword drawn cavalry charge. On both the left and right flanks of the battle of Breitenfield, the effectiveness of Adolphus II's military reform is illustrated. On the left flank, the use of repeated pike charges and mass volleys slowly drove the Imperials back. While the decisive stroke of the battle was a cavalry flank that captured, and turned the Imperial guns on Imperial Tercios and drove into the rear of the Imperial army. Historian Paul K. Davis stated that "the victory was one of the maneuverability of the Swedish units vs the size and weight of the tercio."⁷ He further stated: "Conversely, it was a victory of the weight of Swedish firepower."⁸ Adolphus II was able to effectively increase the Swedish army's mobility and firepower by reforming its tactical structure, giving them a decisive edge on the battlefield. Considering the circumstances that the Swedish military had to face at Breitenfield and Lutzen, it is remarkable that Adolphus II was able to successfully defeat armies commanded by experienced commanders, such as Tilly, the Imperial commander at Breitenfield having started his military career roughly 60 years prior, in 1574. The Imperial armies of Breitenfield and Lutzen were comprised of veteran commanders, yet both were defeated by the significantly more mobile and powerful Swedish forces.

Gustavus Adolphus II's reforms stressed the development of professionalism, mobility, and offensive power, which resulted in victories at Breitenfield and Lutzen. His smaller, more flexible infantry formations could deliver more powerful strikes, eventually leading to the Swedish army's victory at Breitenfield. Gustavus Adolphus II has been described as the "Lion of the North," he was perhaps more

⁵Weigly, 22.

⁶Plant, "The Swedish System."

⁷Paul, 295.

⁸Paul, 295.

telling the creator of a “Northern Lion,” a quick, sharp clawed animal that was the Swedish army.⁹ The foundation that Adolphus II laid out has become the most basic principles that define the victorious from the defeated. Professionalism, mobility, and offensive capability are the hallmarks of an effective army. The blitzkrieg, which specializes in fast and powerful attacks by aircrafts, tanks, and artillery working in combination is a striking example of the changes Adolphus II introduced to the military. This tactic soon became Swedish military’s blueprint for success.

⁹Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe*, 153.

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