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The Famine of 1695–1697 and its Impact on Eighteenth Century Interest in Demography and Public Health in Sweden

In 1695–1697, mostly due to unusually cold winters and rainy summers, the Swedish realm suffered a catastrophic famine. Finland was hit particularly hard, and it is estimated that one third of the population of the region perished during the famine. The diminishing resources forced large groups of people to roam around in search of anything edible, which in turn led to the spread of contagious diseases in the severely weakened population.

Only around thirteen years later, the last plague epidemic of the Baltic Sea region arrived, again causing very high mortality. The spread of the epidemic was linked to the Great Northern War, and the war itself was also a heavy burden to the Finnish population in particular. The war ended in 1721.

The severe population catastrophes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century cast a long shadow on the Swedish realm, and the fear of new, similar demographic crises was a key factor behind the rise of interest in population statistics and public health. These topics became questions of enthusiastic scientific, societal and public discourse in the middle of the century. At the same time, the so-called Age of Liberty (1719–1772) saw a general rise of interest and investments in science, which was mirrored for example in the founding of the Royal Academy of Sciences in 1739. A decade later, 1749, the national population statistics office Tabellverket was founded. The Health Commission, dedicated to the prevention and control of disease epidemics, had already been established in 1737.

In my presentation I will shed light on the many ways the population catastrophes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, especially the famine of 1695–1697, affected the great interest in demography and public health in Sweden during the latter half of the eighteenth century. By giving examples of contemporary texts that highlight these effects, I will trace the fears behind the many measures taken to prevent new crises.

The famine of 1695–1697 and the plague outbreak were often mentioned, more or less directly, in speeches and texts that discussed demographic conditions. They were also clearly present in the planning of administrative efforts and measures taken to improve public health, which included, for instance, inoculations to prevent smallpox epidemics and the establishment of government-regulated grain storages to alleviate the negative effects of poor crop years. The role

of weather in disease epidemics and other demographic patterns was also an area of great interest, and district physicians kept meticulous records of weather conditions, which they then compared to the characteristics of diseases and ailments present in local populations. These observations were reported to administrative officials and bodies such as the Health Commission and Tabellverket. The efforts to prevent new famines also included the introduction of improved agricultural methods and new plants such as the potato. Physicians, as well as the clergy and other educated groups, strived to educate and enlighten the public on health-related topics via speeches, pamphlets and books, and several societies dedicated to such educational purposes were established.

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