

Olof Blomqvist, *I Want to Stay. Local Community and Prisoners of War at the Dawn of the Eighteenth Century* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2023). xx + 371 pp.

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A Saxon sergeant held as a prisoner of war in Uppsala in 1707 was walking his dog one April evening when he met and started to quarrel with a local servant. Among the subsequent charges, the servant accused the sergeant of having insulted the Swedish king and the Swedish army. When asked by the local court how he knew that, given that the sergeant spoke German, the servant explained that a German was staying with his master and he had learned some words from him.

The scene is one of many encounters between prisoners of war and the local community narrated in Olof Blomqvist's doctoral thesis, *I Want to Stay*, about prisoners of war during the Great Northern War. The dissertation studies three towns that had to deal with war captives: Torgau in Sachsen, Aarhus in Denmark, and Uppsala in Sweden. The 'had to'-part should be stressed: in all three cases, the central authorities delegated the responsibility and thus the greater part of the financial cost of war captivity to the local communities. Blomqvist's story of the prisoners of war is, therefore, a story about the dynamics between the state and the local community but also, and perhaps foremost, about the relationship between the local community and individual prisoners.

Torgau stands out in the investigation in several respects. To begin with, the town council in Torgau openly opposed the demands of the Saxon states and refused to comply with certain instructions. By contrast, the Danish and Swedish states imposed the responsibility for the prisoner on the local level without much friction. Blomqvist explains the difference with the greater political independence enjoyed by the Saxon town. In this context, the matter of how to deal with the

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prisoners of war became a part of an ongoing power struggle between the local authorities and the Saxon elector.

In Denmark and Sweden, the towns had already lost their autonomy vis-a-vis the king.

While the captives in Aarhus and Uppsala were separated from each other and often acted as individuals, the prisoners in Torgau maintained their internal military organisation and acted as a group represented by their officers. Moreover, due to the negotiation between the Swedish and the Saxon states, the prisoners in Torgau stayed for only a couple of months. In contrast, many in Aarhus and Uppsala remained there for several years. In the latter cases, Blomqvist finds evidence of prisoners of war who were employed by local masters, married local women, and, on a few rare occasions, became burghers in the town where they had been held captive.

As illustrated by the introductory case, migrants and foreigners were not uncommon in early modern towns. Blomqvist finds many similarities between the local perception of prisoners of war and attitudes toward migrants in general: geographical origin, language, and faith could make a person a stranger in many people's eyes, but the fact that they had been declared enemies of the state seems to have mattered less. The local communities under study modelled the organisation of war captivity on well-proven ways of handling mobile elements: billeting regular soldiers and hiring and housing servants.

Prisoners were also kept in larger groups in the cellar vaults of Uppsala Castle and the Torgau town hall, a finding that receives less attention (at least in the conclusion). The sergeant walking his dog outside Uppsala represents only one side of war captivity; the prisoners of war who were employed to take care of dead bodies during the plague epidemic in the same town represent another. The introductory case also points to language as a potential but not necessary problem. The Orthodox faith of the Russian soldiers kept in Uppsala was a greater obstacle to integration. Blomqvist's study clearly demonstrates that the experience of war captivity differed from group to group and between individuals.

The underlying empirical work is the great strength of the book. By combining many types of sources, such as correspondence between different levels of administrative bodies, minutes from the local courts, muster rolls, and parish registers, Blomqvist is able to paint a diverse and detailed picture of the varying experiences of war captivity in the three towns. A database constructed from the scattered evidence allows him to follow individual prisoners of war through time and even out in the Danish countryside. The analysis of the sources is easy to follow, and the empirical support of the conclusions is well described (when conclusions are more speculative, this is also made clear). Especially impressive is the section where

Blomqvist, by scrutinizing the documents and linking different records, makes it credible that the local authorities in Aarhus embezzled money. Source criticism at its finest!

Biases and missing or uncertain links in the database – reconstructions of this kind tend to lean towards more ‘successful’ cases – are insufficiently discussed, however. And while the examples of prisoners of war who married into the local community and became part of established networks among local burghers are very interesting, they are the exceptions, and despite the high-quality archival work, the great mass of prisoners remains anonymous. This, too, would have deserved more discussion.

The international comparison adds several dimensions to the analysis and is another merit. But there is a significant problem. The short time span of the prisoners’ presence in Torgau, together with substantial archival gaps, create an imbalance between the three case studies. For example, Torgau lacks court records from the period, and as the case of the sergeant walking his dog shows, court records are the prime source for studying everyday encounters. Therefore, the fact that Blomqvist finds much more evidence of social interactions between prisoners of war and the locals in Aarhus and Uppsala is not surprising. Blomqvist admits this, and I agree with him that the advantages of the comparison and of going beyond the national framework outweigh the difficulties.

I am less convinced by the study’s theoretical framing. Negotiation is the key theoretical concept. (‘Negotiation’ and ‘negotiations’ and variants of the verb ‘negotiate’ appear 164 times in the text or on every second page; renegotiate/renegotiation is on every tenth page. That is a lot.) I have two problems with that. First, the text conflates (at least) two different concepts of negotiation. A formal negotiation between an officer representing a group of soldiers and the town council about a specific request is very different from the “negotiation” aspect of the everyday interactions between an individual and their social surroundings. This difference is never articulated or commented upon.

Second, I do not see how the language or model of negotiation explains or enhances our understanding of what was going on. It imposes a terminology and a way of thinking that seems detached from how the historical agents experienced and thought about the situation. This is not in itself a problem but it becomes problematic when the analysis speaks of purposes and strategies. In Blomqvist’s words, the prisoners of war ‘renegotiated their belonging on the local level’ (p. 290), ‘the local community struggled with defining what a POW was’ (p. 227), and they faced ‘the task of inventing’ the prisoner of war as a social and legal category (p. 319). To me, it seems that people were much more occupied with trying to solve practical problems than with principles and definitions. The problems they

faced were, for example, how could we possibly know if this foreign man who wants to marry a local woman is not already married to someone else? Or, we must fill the vacancies in our army. Or, Uppsala needs a new tanner.

Based on research on early modern honour and the legal system, Blomqvist describes a tension between state categorization, which wanted readability and predictability, and the local community, which stressed the particular and the complexity of social relationships. The social relationships between prisoners of war and the locals are interpreted as a 'form of resistance against state categorization' (p. 327). I am not convinced. Blomqvist's own investigation shows that the state was more interested in dissolving the enemy status of prisoners of war and transforming them into subjects, soldiers in its own army, or labourers. Rather than having conflicting views, the state and the local community shared a common interest: both wanted cheap labour. Becoming a burgher presupposed both local support and the state's approval, and the state encouraged both marriages between prisoners of war and local women and the employment of prisoners of war as servants. The assumed tension seems more fitting to a theoretical model than the empirical findings.

A more fruitful approach is the application of Simon Karstens' notion of belonging and exclusion as a scale rather than a dichotomy. Whereas many prisoners of war were accepted, employed, and housed by the local community, very few achieved full belonging in the sense of burghership. The analysis would have benefitted from discussing the notions of free and unfree in a similar way (as is the case in much of today's labour history). Ordinary servants were also not 'free'. Just like the prisoners of war, they, too, risked being imprisoned or sent to war if they did not comply with their masters. From this perspective, the somewhat ambiguous status of the prisoners of war appears to have been something quite ordinary to the contemporaries and not something whose boundaries they felt the need to determine. Mapping empirically what the prisoners could and could not do in actual practice and different circumstances would probably have been a more rewarding route than focusing on the theoretically constructed question of what defined a prisoner of war.

But again, the merits trump the shortcomings. Olof Blomqvist's doctoral thesis demonstrates the value of a local perspective for understanding an international phenomenon like war captivity. It shows the relevance of war captivity to the more general questions of state formation and the dynamics of local communities. Based on impressive archival work, it portrays the complexity of the subject, from the power struggles between and within early modern states to a man walking his dog one April evening in 1707.