

Jezzica Israelsson, *Making themselves heard: Women's and men's voice through the regional petitioning process in Sweden, 1758-1880* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2024). viii + 452 pp.

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“Noble Baron and Governor, Knight of His Majesty’s Order of the North Star. Your Grace.

At Christmas, my husband Anders Garling, a soldier in the Royal Infantry Regiment of Västmanland and Kungörs’ Company No 77... was unfortunately reported to have been shot dead, leaving me and my two poor children to heartfelt grief and loss. What is more, the owners of the soldier’s croft immediately want to force me to leave it ... Therefore, I, poor and defenceless soldier’s woman, am compelled to flee to Your Grace in deepest humility and most humbly supplicate: that ... I be graciously allowed the same right ... to remain on the croft until next Michaelmas. Awaiting a gracious response and affirmative decision to my plea, I remain in most profound veneration until my dying breath,

Your Grace’s Most humble servant Margta Andersdotter, poor widow of the deceased soldier Anders Garling per pro E Garman.”

The example above offers an intimate glimpse into a bygone era, set against the historical backdrop of the Pomeranian War (1757–1762). During the conflict, soldier Anders Garling had lost his life, leaving his widow and two children in a dire situation. The family lived on a croft provided by a group of local farmers, known as a ‘rote’, who were obligated to support the soldier and his family. However, the rote now demanded that the widow vacate the property immediately so it could be assigned to another soldier. Desperately, the widow addressed a petition to the governor of Västmanland, pleading for help. Her petition is only one of thousands that have been unearthed from the archives and studied by Jezzica Israelsson in her doctoral thesis, which she successfully defended on May 31, 2024, at Uppsala University. The petition from the soldier widow can serve as a guiding

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thread for discussing Israelsson's impressive research. The petition in question is dated April 6, 1758, perfectly aligning with the time period covered by this journal and its audience's interests. It conveys both the widow's profound suffering and humble status, and addresses the governor of Västmanland with utmost respect, exemplifying the *Zeitgeist* of early modern Sweden – a corporative society where every individual had a defined place, status, and set of obligations. Margta adopted the subservient role expected of her in such a society, while appealing to the governor, as the monarch's representative, to fulfil his paternal role as protector with benevolence and justice. The fact that this woman was able to address the governor with her problem – and knew how to do so – demonstrates that she had *voice*. This concept – deliberately *italicized* by the author to highlight the concept's complexity – is central to the doctoral thesis under review. *Voice* is described as the ability and need of women and men to make themselves heard by state authorities in order to influence and improve their lives. An intriguing question is how individuals managed to exercise *voice*. In Margta's case, she received assistance from Eric Garman, a bailiff or sheriff from a neighbouring parish. It is likely that he possessed significant practical knowledge of the law, since his petitions reveal a mastery of advanced legal argumentation, providing valuable insights into the level of legal literacy in 18th-century Sweden.

There is already a substantial body of literature on 18th-century petitions in Sweden. Israelsson has not only enriched this scholarship but also pushed its boundaries. To start with, she highlights that petitioning involved not only vertical relationships, between the petitioner and the governor on the one side, and the governor and the respondent on the other, but also horizontal relationships between the petitioner and the respondent. This created a triangular dynamic. While previous studies have predominantly focused on the vertical relationships, often within the frameworks of state formation and the subject's interactions with authorities, Israelsson stresses the equal importance of the horizontal relationship between petitioner and respondent, an aspect that has been largely overlooked in prior research. As she notes: "For example, none of the Swedish studies that quantify petitioners and petitions in regional administrations have a corresponding quantification of respondents".

Israelsson has innovated the existing research in a second significant way: she has expanded her focus beyond the 18th century to establish connections with more modern times. By including petitions from 1803, 1838, and 1880 in her analysis, she offers a dynamic perspective on petitioning practices. This approach may seem straightforward, but it is far from it, given the changing historical contexts and the increasing volume of archival material involved. Through her research, Israelsson has analysed an astonishing 6,402 register entries and 2,834 case files

spanning the four selected years. While the quantitative findings of this study are impressive, the qualitative aspects are equally remarkable. It is impossible to fully capture the incredible richness of this doctoral research within the limited space of this review. However, I can offer my personal perspective as a legal historian with a background in both history and law. As a historian, I have been struck not only by the sheer scale of Israelsson's archival research, but also by the depth of insights she has extracted from these unique sources on topics as wide as credit, land, and labour. She shows how conflicts over resources often prompted individuals to engage with the regional administration. Her study also brings attention to the gender and socioeconomic disparities in petitioning, with women and poorer individuals having less access to this practice, yet still making significant contributions. Finally, her thesis traces the evolution of the petitioning process, reflecting broader societal and administrative changes such as bureaucratization and the rise of civil citizenship. As a lawyer, I admire her legal expertise, which goes beyond the "law in the books" to encompass a nuanced understanding of the "law in action". This reflects not only academic rigor but also a practical appreciation of legal processes. Finally, as a legal historian, I am particularly impressed by her ability to present her findings with exceptional clarity. She effectively situates each case within its legal historical context, drawing connections between legal statutes and customary practices. This skill may seem easy at first glance but requires years of dedicated, specialized study in Swedish legal history.