

**Stephen L. Kling, ed.** *Great Northern War Compendium*. Volumes 1 and 2. St. Louis: THGC Publishing, 2015. Illustrations. 625 pp. \$125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-9964557-0-1.

**Reviewed by** Caleb Karges (Concordia University Irvine)

**Published on** H-War (January, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

For such an influential conflict in European history, the Great Northern War is a largely under-represented subject in English-language scholarship. This is due primarily to two reasons: the difficulties posed by an inherently limited pool of scholars who could work in some of the languages involved and the Cold War, which severely restricted Anglophone scholarship on half of the war's belligerents. Along with the war's broad linguistic and geographical dimensions, its sheer length in conjunction with its whirling complexities manifested in multiple entries, exits, interventions, and reentries by various belligerents is enough to intimidate even the most ambitious of scholars. Consequently, the most authoritative work on the subject in English is probably Ragnhild Hatton's fifty-year-old biography *Charles XII of Sweden* (1968). Academic and amateur scholarship on the war has tended to focus on biographies of the main players in the war, especially Charles XII and Peter the Great, or on the sensational event that was the Battle of Poltava.

It is in light of this reality that the editor of the work under review, Steve L. Kling, took it upon himself to put together a massive two-volume work in English on the subject. Kling's work does not set out to be the authoritative piece on the Great Northern War, but as Kling himself admits in his introduction, the purpose is to help generate

further discussion and research on the topic. His second purpose, which helps serve the first, is to make non-English-language research accessible to the Anglophone world. To accomplish his task, Kling collected seventy-three essays written by an assortment of academic and amateur researchers from several countries on various aspects of the conflict. Kling himself wrote a number of entries in the book to help tie parts together and to fill gaps in places where he lacked a contributor to cover an important topic. He also commissioned translations of some of the contributions not originally written in English.

The strengths and weaknesses of *The Great Northern War Compendium* lie in this band of international contributors. One of the work's great achievements is to make accessible research conducted in languages other than English, especially the work of researchers in Poland, Russia, and the Baltic states. The book almost serves as a who's who of current researchers on the Great Northern War. Many of the chapters are written by authors intimately familiar with the material, adding depth and authority to the volumes. However, as with all edited volumes, not all chapters are created equal (and Kling is aware of these drawbacks). The prose of the chapters are as varied as the levels of English-language ability of each author. While

*The Great Northern War Compendium* has academic contributors, it is not necessarily an academic work. The book is a blend of amateur and academic research, and consequently, some chapters are indeed more amateurish than others. Some works are driven by primary sources, while others are overly reliant on one or two secondary texts. Nevertheless, the book's intended audience is not necessarily an academic one but a popular one. The book particularly targets the veritable army of military history enthusiasts in the Anglophone world: hobbyists, game developers, wargamers, armchair generals, miniature collectors, etc. However, the book will still be of interest to academic researchers due to the depth and breadth of the two volumes. Of particular interest for the reader are the lists of further reading that accompany each chapter.

While the format of an edited volume possesses certain inherent drawbacks in creating a coherent, overarching narrative, the general chronological order of the chapters, along with certain introductory chapters, helps to compensate for this. The strength of an edited volume is that it allows its authors to explore their topics in greater depth and nuance than they would have been able to if enslaved to a strict narrative. Upon reading the two volumes of *The Great Northern War Compendium*, one gets the impression of how complex a conflict the Great Northern War was. Aside from the normal foreign relations considerations of each belligerent, many of the chapters bring out the complications posed by domestic considerations, especially in Poland-Lithuania, which was wrecked by civil war, and Russia with its occasional peasant and Cossack rebellions. Furthermore, perhaps the book's greatest success is to draw out a picture of the war that goes beyond Charles XII, Peter the Great, and Poltava, although all three hold considerable prominence throughout the two volumes.

The chapters in *The Great Northern War Compendium* can be divided into several thematic

groupings. There are detailed chapters on the armies of each of the belligerents, including the Cossacks, various German princes, and even the Ottoman Empire, which briefly intervened in the conflict. These chapters often include an administrative and technical history of the forces, and always end with a detailed description of the flags and uniforms of each regiment (accompanied with colorful depictions). The latter part may not be of interest to academics but is of definite interest to military history enthusiasts and game developers. Most chapters are concerned with the battles, campaigns, and sieges conducted during the war, and these form the backbone of the work. The depth and detail devoted to battles is particularly strong. However, some may be critical of the overemphasis on battles in an age that siege warfare was still dominant, but the book does show an awareness of the importance of sieges throughout the war and many of the battles covered were fought within the context of a siege. Furthermore, the emphasis on battles firmly focuses the work on the land war; naval dimensions of the conflict do not receive much treatment until midway through the second volume. Some chapters serve as biographies of some of the major personalities in the war, which help round out the picture of the war in a number of dimensions, while giving the narrative a bit of a personal flair. Dan Andersen's biography of Peter Wessel Tordenskiold is particularly successful in this regard and helps give the reader a greater understanding of the naval war. These biographical chapters also give a window into European society in the early eighteenth century. Lastly, a few chapters deal with the cultural effects of the Great Northern War, including the memory of Charles XII in Sweden, the growth of orientalism in Europe, and the effect of Swedish prisoners of war in Russia. Their inclusion helps the work speak to the war's broader significance in European and even Asian history.

Finally, it would be negligent on my part to ignore the artwork of *The Great Northern War Compendium*, which is as much a part of the work as

the text. When one opens the books, one will be struck by the large number of vivid color photographs and paintings on every page. The book includes numerous photographs of contemporary artwork and maps acquired from museums, archives, or the Internet. Pictures taken in museums or on location by the contributors supplement the essays. The most striking aspect of the work is the number of paintings and illustrations by current artists commissioned for the books. With all of this artwork, it seems that Kling is trying to capture the reader's imagination, in the hopes that it may inspire the reader to conduct further research.

I would be hesitant to recommend *The Great Northern War Compendium* as a textbook for an undergraduate course as it would be unfitting for this purpose. On the other hand, I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in further exploring the Great Northern War, especially anyone who is a military history enthusiast or hobbyist. I hope that it can accomplish Kling's stated purpose to generate more interest and scholarship on the war.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Caleb Karges. Review of Kling, Stephen L., ed. *Great Northern War Compendium*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49893>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.