



KING GUSTAV III MONUMENT

Stockholm, Sweden

59.32687, 18.07499



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Executive Summary

In June 2020 the chairman of *Afrosvenskarnas riksförbund* (the Afro-Swedish National Federation) called for the removal of a statue of Gustav III, the king who brought Sweden into the transatlantic slave trade and made Sweden a colonising power through his purchase of the Caribbean island of Saint-Barthelémy in 1784. However, politicians and journalists in Sweden were largely against the removal of statues, citing either the supposedly iconoclastic nature of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement or the importance of resisting 'historical revisionism'. Some suggested the importance of preserving and presenting all sides of history, including aspects which were more difficult to address. This case study highlights the unique nature of Swedish debates on its colonial past and concepts of Swedish 'white innocence', as well as the resistance to the removal of contested statues in Sweden's capital.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement and its emergence in Sweden, Kitimba Sabuni, the chairman of *Afrosvenskarnas riksförbund*, called for the removal of the statue of King Gustav III, who ruled Sweden from 1771 until his assassination in 1792. This formed a part of his larger call for Stockholm to ‘revise’ its cityscape, in order to fit in with the current “‘anti-racist’ zeitgeist.’ Appeals such as these form a contrast to Sweden’s current relationship to colonialism and self-perception. Sweden largely views itself as a country untainted by colonial history, positing itself as a modern and progressive defender of universal human rights on the world stage.

Background

King Gustav III and Saint Barthélemy

King Gustav III (1746-1792) acquired Saint Barthélemy in 1784, and thus ‘symbolically restored’ Sweden’s colonial presence in the Western Hemisphere.¹ Sweden was a slave holding nation from 1785 to 1847.² During Gustav III’s reign, ‘the harbor town of Gustavia was erected and established as a free port with very low duty and tax rates’ and benefited heavily from Sweden’s ‘neutral position among belligerents in the Caribbean.’³ In 1804-5 Gustavia was ‘among the most prominent “slave ports” in the Caribbean’, with approximately 20 ships (out of 1800) entering each year with a cargo of enslaved Africans.⁴ As a ‘free trade zone under a militarily neutral Swedish flag’, the island became a ‘haven for white entrepreneurs’ from Europe, North Africa, and elsewhere in the Caribbean. While ruling Saint Barthélemy, Swedish officials had ‘put in place a draconian justice system that governed the island’s black population, both enslaved and free.’⁵ Even as it presented lucrative opportunities for white residents, the island was ruled by *Le Code de lois de la Martinique* (Code of Laws of Martinique, based on the French *Code Noir*), under which ‘race determined rights’ - “free colored” people enjoyed few rights, and enslaved people none.⁶ Even as Sweden immediately ‘began adapting to the surrounding archipelago’s traditions of controlling the black population’, the majority of opinions voiced in newspapers and literature were against slavery - even as they remained largely silent on Sweden’s own slave-holding

¹ Sputnik International, “Afro-Swedish National Federation Wants to Tear Down Statue of ‘Colonial’ King.” *Sputnik International*, June 24, 2020.

² Fredrik Thomasson, “Knowledge, Silence, and Denial: The Late-eighteenth-century Debate on Slavery and Colonialism in Sweden,” in *The Moment is Now: Carl Bernhard Wadström’s Revolutionary Voice on Human Trafficking and the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, ed. Anders Hallengren (Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 2019), 31.

³ Lill-Ann Körber, “Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History”, *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 77.

⁴ Michael McEachrane, “Universal Human Rights and the Coloniality of Race in Sweden”, *Human Rights Review*, 19 (2018): 476.

⁵ Fredrik Thomasson, “Knowledge, Silence, and Denial: The Late-eighteenth-century Debate on Slavery and Colonialism in Sweden,” in *The Moment is Now: Carl Bernhard Wadström’s Revolutionary Voice on Human Trafficking and the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, ed. Anders Hallengren (Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 2019), 31.

⁶ Michael McEachrane, “Universal Human Rights and the Coloniality of Race in Sweden”, *Human Rights Review*, 19 (2018): 476-477; Mémoire St Barth, “Le « Code Noir » suédois de Saint-Barthélemy”, Mémoire St Barth, 2010.

practices, although it is unclear whether this was self-censorship or ignorance.⁷ The island itself later declined in importance and once slavery was abolished in 1847, 'most inhabitants of African descent subsequently left the island in search of opportunities elsewhere.'⁸ Saint Barthelémy was transferred back to France in 1878, nearly a century after it was acquired, as it began to be perceived as an economic burden.

The official history website of the Swedish Institute mentions Gustav III only in this context: "Gustav III (1771–92), Called the Theatre King, Gustav III founded Stockholm's first opera, the Swedish Academy and the Royal Academy of Music. Assassinated at a masquerade ball."⁹ It does not mention colonialism, or his connection to Saint Barthelémy."



Figure 1: "Image of King Gustav III Statue" Image by Oleg Yunakov via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

Statue of Gustav III

The statue itself was erected in 1808, designed by the royal sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel. The large bronze statue sits on a porphyry base in the city's Old Town, on the waterfront outside the Royal Palace, with a view across the harbour. The inscription on the base reads: 'For King Gustav III: legislator, conqueror, restorer of peace.' (Figure 1)

Race and Colonial History in Sweden

Sweden has had a tumultuous history with concepts of race and theories of eugenics and racial purity. Before the Second World War, 'racial hygiene' featured prominently in Swedish politics and science, but links between Swedish eugenics and Nazi race theory were later dismissed.¹⁰

Today, Sweden has 'one of the highest proportion of Black people in Europe', with approximately 350,000 *afrosvenskar/afrikansvenskar* (Afro-Swedes) in 2020 - two African slaves, both children, were brought to Sweden in the 1640s, although today's Black Swedes are largely immigrants and refugees.¹¹ Tobias Hübinette et. al write:

Afro-Swedes are one of the most vocal minorities in today's Sweden in terms of antiracist activism while also being among the most marginalized and impoverished in terms of socioeconomic outcomes. . . Further, the Afro-Swedish minority is proportionally the most affected by racialized hate crimes and likely also by instances of racial discrimination within the various spheres of Swedish society as well as by racial profiling by the police.¹²

⁷ Fredrik Thomasson, "Knowledge, Silence, and Denial: The Late-eighteenth-century Debate on Slavery and Colonialism in Sweden," in *The Moment is Now: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Revolutionary Voice on Human Trafficking and the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, ed. Anders Hallengren (Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 2019), 43-44.

⁸ Lill-Ann Körber, "Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History", *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 87.

⁹ Swedish Institute, "History of Sweden", Swedish Institute, 2021.

¹⁰ Michael McEachrane, "Universal Human Rights and the Coloniality of Race in Sweden", *Human Rights Review*, 19 (2018): 478-479.

¹¹ Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 27-28.

¹² Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 30.

Furthermore, due to the nature of colonialism in Sweden, 'few public debates have been about interpretations of Sweden's colonial past overseas, [instead mostly] centred on colonization of Sapmi or Sámiland.'¹³ Indeed, while the Swedish Institute website does not mention Gustav III's colonial history, it does refer to the struggle the Sami have faced in Sweden over their rights and land.¹⁴

Although there was some history of protests over racism in Sweden beginning in 2016, the first major protest occurred on June 2 2020 in the wake of the killing of George Floyd with a protest meeting outside the US embassy in Stockholm . It took on a powerful digital form, which reached around 1.3 million people online, and was followed by several protests in Swedish cities.¹⁵

Like many other Scandinavian countries, Sweden likes to portray itself as an exception to other instances of colonial rule, in historiography emphasising its supposed ineptitude as a colonial power, concepts of untaintedness and innocence,, and its role as a champion of rights and liberal democracy in the world today. It is notable that Sweden was never a major colonial power and traded enslaved persons on a small scale - 'but this was not for lack of ambition.'¹⁶ Gunlög Fur wrote in 2014:

Engagement with colonialism proper appears limited and distant in time, and this "indirect" form of Scandinavian involvement in colonial expansion allows room for claims of innocence in confrontations with colonial histories. Seemingly untainted by colonialism's heritage, the Scandinavian countries throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first successfully maintained positions as champions of minority rights and mediators in global politics.¹⁷

In fact, Sweden largely glosses over its colonial history as it seeks to portray a certain global image, especially after the Second World War:

Sweden has made itself known as a prominent defender of universal human rights. It has actively supported struggles against colonialism and apartheid, the self-determination and development of Third World countries, been an outspoken critic of racism and imperialism, and among the most generous developed countries toward refugees. Until recently, it has positioned itself as without any colonial history.¹⁸

Saint Barthélemy and Sweden today

Today, there are close links between Saint Barthélemy and Sweden. Residents of Saint Barthélemy participate in 'Piteådagen', a festival held every year in memory of Swedish rule of the island and to celebrate current relations, this despite the fact that Saint Barthélemy 'is often

¹³ Ibid: 27-28.

¹⁴ Swedish Institute, "History of Sweden", Swedish Institute, 2021.

¹⁵ Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 27-28.

¹⁶ Fredrik Thomasson, "Knowledge, Silence, and Denial: The Late-eighteenth-century Debate on Slavery and Colonialism in Sweden," in *The Moment is Now: Carl Bernhard Wadström's Revolutionary Voice on Human Trafficking and the Abolition of the African Slave Trade*, ed. Anders Hallgren (Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 2019), 32.

¹⁷ Quoted in Lill-Ann Körber, "Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History", *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 79.

¹⁸ Michael McEachrane, "Universal Human Rights and the Coloniality of Race in Sweden", *Human Rights Review*, 19 (2018): 471.

described as being absent, invisible, or forgotten in Swedish collective consciousness.¹⁹

There are currently links between the town of Piteå (in the north of Sweden) and Saint Barthélemy. The Stockholm based *St Barthélemysällskapet* (Saint Barthélemy Society) organises publications, events, and regular trips to and from the island, and is also involved in the organisation of Piteådagen and the annual race *Gustavialoppet*.²⁰

The friendly relations resumed from the 1960s, highlighting the historiographic gap, in which Sweden ‘skipped a phase of scrutinising its own involvement in colonialism and transatlantic enslavement.’²¹ In fact, Scandinavian literature and culture scholar Lill-Ann Körber suggests that the former colony plays a part in the achievement and maintenance of ‘an impression of the innocence, irrelevance, and ineffectiveness of Swedish colonialism’. This is further exacerbated by the presence of earlier Spanish conquerors or French colonisers, ‘who could be held responsible for the island’s initial colonisation’ and the fact that the island was under Swedish rule during the abolition of slavery (and shifted its Day of Remembrance of Abolition of Slavery from the French to the Swedish date in 2007).²²

Today, Körber describes the island as unusual in its status as a global capitalist “paradise” and its... “Europeanness” and “whiteness”, not unusual in the marginalisation of indigenous history.²³ Saint Barthélemy is not a member of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and so is also not a member of the CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC, founded in 2013), which calls on a number of European countries, including Sweden, to acknowledge their complicity in colonisation and the enslavement of Africans, and to participate in a programme which includes a formal apology and reparations.²⁴

History of the Contestation

Following BLM protests and controversies surrounding the historical legacies of statues and monuments across Europe, *Afrosvenskarnas riksförbund* has asked the country to revise certain statues, notably those of King Gustav III. *Afrosvenskarans riksförbund* is a society dedicated to raising awareness of Sweden’s colonial history, often through public education programs, guided city tours, and events. Its chairman, Kitimbwa Sabuni, referenced the description on the statue’s pedestal, arguing that ‘this person was also something else, he was the person who pulled Sweden back into the transatlantic slave trade. We should also have a discussion about the appropriateness of immortalising him in the cityscape in this way.’²⁵ He went on to argue: ‘statues are not living history books in the room, but they also convey various ideological projects. It’s never

¹⁹ Lill-Ann Körber, “Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History”, *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 74.

²⁰ Ibid: 77-78; St Barthélemysällskapet, “Välkommen!” St Barthélemysällskapet, Accessed December 9, 2022.

²¹ Lill-Ann Körber, “Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History”, *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 80.

²² Ibid, 80.

²³ Ibid, 78.

²⁴ CARICOM, “CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice”, CARICOM, 2022.

²⁵ Translation by author, SVT Nyheder, “Afrosvenskarnas riksförbund kritiska mot Gustav III-statyn.” SVT Nyheder, June 18, 2020 (updated 24 July, 2020.)

pure history. These projects change over time and if we have an anti-racist project going on today, shouldn't we change the cityscape to reflect that?'²⁶ Sabuni stated 'these crimes have morally relevant traces in our time. It's not ancient history.'²⁷

However, Catharina Nolin, a professor of art history argued:

It is clear that Gustav III was involved in the oppression of blacks when he bought the colony of Sankt-Barthélemy in the Caribbean. But he also contributed much else, among others to Swedish language. I'm not that much in favour of removing, rather adding. To try and create more knowledge about the statues, even the difficult kind of knowledge.²⁸

Debates about the King Gustav III statue took place at the same time as debates emerged about the legacy of Carl Linnaeus, a famous Swedish natural scientist, who developed a theory of human varieties, creating a hierarchy in which black people were the lowest category and leading to the development of scientific racism. Hübinette, Wikström, Samuelsson argue that such debates are part of a case of 'Swedish racialised memory war' in which defences of controversial colonial statues constitute part of 'an ongoing effort to absolve Swedes of any substantial complicity in European and Western racism and colonialism. In effect, what is defended is a white-washed use and understanding of history – a status quo that largely remains unchallenged in Sweden.'²⁹

Decision-Making Processes

Calls for the removal of the statues in general have divided the Swedish press, with journalists such as Ivar Arni arguing against the so-called *historierevisionism* (historical revisionism) of the BLM movement while author and journalist Maria Ripenberg argued for the inclusion of postcolonial perspectives: 'Old statues show who wrote our history – and also what history is not told [...] It is not a day too early for historical monuments to be put into a perspective other than the white man's. But it's going very slowly.'³⁰

The debate similarly divided politicians in Sweden, with the Left accused of allying itself with the BLM movement, leading to a 'so-called "postmodern", "extremist" and "identity political" Left.'³¹ There were strong reactions on social media to Sabuni's statement against the statue, and a political councillor, Jan Hedberg, was found to be one of a number of racist commentators in a

²⁶ Translation by author, Ibid.

²⁷ Translation by author, Ibid.

²⁸ Sputnik International, "Afro-Swedish National Federation Wants to Tear Down Statue of 'Colonial' King." Sputnik International, June 24, 2020.

²⁹ Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 27.

³⁰ Ivar Arni, "Acceptera inte deras historierevisionism", *Svenska Dagbladet*, June 14, 2020.; Maria Ripenberg, 2020, quoted in Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 36.

³¹ Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 45-46.

Facebook group entitled 'Political debate from right to left', calling for Sabuni to 'Go home to Africa!'³²

After calls to remove the statue, the Prime Minister at the time, Stefan Löfven, said he was against removing statues in Sweden and was subsequently criticised by Sabuni: 'Our prime minister should be open to at least having a conversation.'³³ Löfven argued in an interview to the Swedish paper *Expressen* that it was no solution to tear down statues in light of new historical perspectives: 'We have a history. Should we start thinking every hundred years about which statues or other monuments should be demolished because we now see this in a different light?'³⁴

Sveriges television (Sweden's Television) profiled politicians from different parties following calls for the removal of both the Gustav III statue and statues of Carl Linnaeus, showing a range of opinions, which were however overall encapsulated in its headline 'Don't remove statues', generally citing that it is better to learn from than to erase history. Per Lodenius of the Centre Party argued:

There may be parts of our cultural heritage that show a part of our history that we are now anything but proud of. This does not mean that we should politically advocate that art should be removed. Instead, we should encourage discussion and the dissemination of knowledge.

Aron Emilsson of the Social Democrats argued:

Completely removing or relocating a statue, especially if the statue is a national symbol, should be subject to extensive scrutiny and very difficult. On the contrary, we should consider whether the legal protection of historical monuments and memorials can be strengthened.

The Green Party believed it should be assessed on a case by case basis and came the closest to hinting at a basis for removing certain statues, with Anna Sibinska arguing:

This is a discussion that must be conducted on a case-by-case basis. After all, the vast majority of statues are part of our history. We must take into account what they symbolise, and what relevance they have for society today. But it is not a law of nature that the particular public design we have today must live on forever.³⁵

Some also suggested alternative solutions. Whilst against the tearing down of statues, citing fears of losing memories and lessons, the former director of TV4, Sweden's largest television network, Jan Scherman, called for the making of an educational TV series about Sweden's statues.³⁶

Summary and Conclusions

Writing on the Carl Linnaeus statue, Hübinette et. al state:

³² Translation by author, Kim Frederiksson, "KD-nämndeman deltog i rasistiskt hatdrev: "Stick hem til Afrika!" Aktuelt Fokus, June 20, 2020.

³³ Sputnik International, "Afro-Swedish National Federation Wants to Tear Down Statue of 'Colonial' King." Sputnik International, June 24, 2020.

³⁴ Lydia Farran-Lee, "Stefan Löfven vill inte riva statyer i Sverige." SVT Nyheter, June 17, 2020.

³⁵ Translation by author, SVT Nyheter, "Svenska politiker: Ta inte bort statyer", SVT Nyheter, July 24, 2020.

³⁶ Lisa Andersson, "Scherman: Gör folkbildande tv om sveriges statyer." Omni, July 3, 2020.

Contrary to most other Western countries, and not the least the US and the UK, the Swedish debate on the question of monuments to Linnaeus never led to the removal of any major statue or monument anywhere in the country during 2020 . . . Further, after the month of June the debate quickly fizzled out.³⁷

This is also true of the Gustav III statue, which still stands on the harbourfront today, and there are few newspaper articles to be found on the subject following summer 2020.

The controversy surrounding the statue speaks to a very different understanding of colonialism and slavery in Sweden as compared to countries such as the US and the UK:

There seems to be a general agreement that most Swedes have very poor knowledge of the era of Swedish empire and the country's involvement in colonialism [...] It is indeed fitting that Fur (2013:17) characterizes the relationship between colonialism and Swedish history as "unthinkable connections"; a major obstacle to an increase in the level of knowledge and understanding of Sweden's colonialism is the very self-image of Swedes as a humanitarian superpower.³⁸

Similarly, analysing a sense of exceptionalism and a past 'untainted by a legacy of slavery' in both Sweden and Saint-Barthélemy, Körber writes that 'Sweden has claimed an exceptional position in the larger picture of European expansion and race ideology, a claim that cannot be maintained after scrutinizing the history of and narratives about Swedish colonialism in the Caribbean.'³⁹

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Last updated January 2023

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³⁷ Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström, Johan Samuelsson, "Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020", *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2022): 27-28.

³⁸ David Jansson, "Deadly exceptionalisms, or would you rather be crushed by a moral superpower or a military superpower?" *Political Geography* 64 (2018): 88.

³⁹ Lill-Ann Körber, "Sweden and St. Barthélemy: Exceptionalisms, Whiteness, and the Disappearance of Slavery from Colonial History", *Scandinavia Studies*, 91, no. 1/2 (2019): 95.

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monument_to_King_Gustav_III_of_Sweden_%28Stockholm%29.jpg. (Figure 1)

About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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Published by IHJR-EuroClio in

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To cite this publication:

The Contested Histories Initiative, "[Monument to King Gustav III in Sweden]", *Contested Histories Case Study #150* ([January 2023]), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which only reflect the authors' views. The Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union 