

Abstract

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Peasants, Nobility and the Struggle for Crown Farms in Finland and Sweden during the Eighteenth Century.

Early modern states were important landowners throughout the Nordic countries after the Reformation. In Sweden and Finland, the share of crown farms was at its highest level at the turn of the eighteenth century. As much as 70% of all farms in Finland were crown farms after the Great Northern War (1700–1721). In Sweden, the corresponding percentage was 36% in 1700.

This book discusses the selling of vast amounts of state-owned farms during the eighteenth century in Finland and Sweden. The operation was called *skatteköp* by contemporaries, meaning literally ‘tax purchase’. The term refers to the fact that every crown farm that was bought from the state during the operation was converted into a ‘tax farm’ (*skattehemman*), i.e. into a freeholding farm in which the owner was entitled to bequeath the estate to his or her offspring.

The entire phenomenon was closely related to the war economy. The Swedish crown began to sell its farms in 1701 to finance its war efforts, and after the year 1719 to amortise the public debt generated by extensive military spending during the Great Northern War. Several other European states also resorted to the same method for raising finances during the early modern period. Some members of the noble estate resisted the sales because the prices were relatively low especially after the 1750s. For the peasant estate, continuing the sales remained one of the most important political issues throughout the eighteenth century.

The crown sold over 14,000 farms in Finland during the period 1701–1808. Most of these farms were sold to peasants, thereby increasing the number of owner-occupying farmers. However, there were also hundreds of officers, civil servants, industrialists and other persons of

standing among the buyers. Every fourth farm was sold to members of the rural elite in the province of Uusimaa and Häme (Southern Finland). The statutes dictated that owners of metal works and manufacturers had a pre-emptive right to crown farms situated in areas surrounding their industrial works. Likewise, cavalry farms that owed the crown a cavalryman, horse and equipment also had a pre-emptive right to their auxiliary farms. Both these prerogatives advanced the development of large domains in Finland. The process ignited social conflicts between peasants and nobility, because corvée-load had increased, and some of the peasants even lost their farms after the sales.

Overall, the sales were instrumental in the emergence of an independent farming class both in Finland and in Sweden. At the same time, the sales widened the social and economic gap within the pre-industrial rural society.