

The Year of Three Presidents

by Tore Lund

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The Stockholm University (before 1950: *Stockholms högskola*) was founded in the early 1880s as a private venture. The intention was to build a “modern” university, situated at the center of the nation and dedicated to science and usable knowledge, in contrast to the old and allegedly conservative universities at Uppsala and Lund, which were dominated by traditional subjects (theology, philosophy, law). During its early years, it was a small organization with inadequate funding, and with only a few professors, most of them very able and ambitious. The president was elected by the teachers, but the statutes did not say if this included the junior teachers or only the professors. In other words: the stage was set for internal strife. The dominating player on this stage was the professor of mathematics, Gösta Mittag-Leffler. He was a brilliant scientist and raised his department to an international level, starting the journal *Acta Mathematica* and hiring the first female professor in Europe, Sonja Kovalevsky. But he had no flair for cooperation, and his style of leadership made many enemies, including Otto Pettersson (a pioneering oceanographer of international stature) and Viktor Rydberg (professor of history of culture).

In 1894-95, the conflict between Mittag-Leffler and his opponents (led by Pettersson) led to a scandal when two different presidents were elected, first by the limited assembly favored by the Mittag-Leffler group, then by the wider assembly favored by Pettersson and Rydberg. A third assembly then elected a compromise candidate who immediately had to withdraw. Finally the Board intervened, siding with the Pettersson group. The affair figured prominently in the press as “the year of the three presidents”, an allusion to the “year of the four emperors”, the chaotic year 68-69 in Roman history. This is one of the starting points of the cartoon shown above. Another is the role of the German legions in the power struggle of 68-69, and the fact that Rydberg could be associated with Germans because of his recent *Investigations into Germanic Mythology*. The cartoon thus shows the winners of the first election (the Mittag-Leffler group) as Romans-in-Power, and their opponents (Pettersson and Rydberg supported by the younger teachers) as intruding Germans. The cartoon is titled “The Barbarians Enter the Forum”, but this does not mean that the artist thinks of Rydberg (who was by then a national icon) as a barbarian. To emphasize this he added the text “Dichtung und Wahrheit” to his sword, this being (as everyone knew) the title of Goethe’s autobiography. Rydberg had published an acclaimed translation of Goethe’s *Faust Part 1* in 1876.

The conflict of 1894-95 was a tangled mixture of differing opinions, conflicting interests and clashing personalities, with insufficient funding as the major underlying cause. The Stockholm University could not survive without public money, but to get this it had to compromise with some of its original ambitions (e.g. it had to provide exams for its students). The Pettersson group realized this, and that is why they finally won. But the cartoon (which was published in a comic weekly) is hardly concerned with these questions. It is intended as a witty comment on a spectacular power struggle, not as an ideological statement.

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The cartoon was published in the comic magazine *Söndagsnisse*. The artist was Edvard Forsström.