

A Swedish Watergate

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Swedish Prime Minister Palme

In May 1973 the leftist magazine *Folket i Bild/Kulturfront* published an article concerning a hitherto unknown Swedish counterintelligence agency, the Bureau of Information (IB). The magazine had acquired the information concerning IB in the classical manner -- through tapping and through an informant, the ex-agent Hakan Isacsson. The magazine accused IB of using murder, thefts, burglaries, and illegal tapping of phone calls for collecting information. On May 8, 1973 two men connected with the magazine appeared on television and presented documents which they said proved cooperation between IB and Shin Beth, the Israeli Intelligence.

Later that month, the magazine claimed that IB was spying on Swedish leftist organizations and named one of the agents. Meanwhile, the Swedish Minister of Defense admitted that SAPO, the Swedish Secret Police, kept an eye on young Swedes "that play with fire," members of organizations such as the Swedish Palestine Association.

On May 22, Captain Gilbert Ericsson of the merchant navy admitted giving information to IB concerning ports and warships in the Mediterranean Sea area. The chief prosecutor Carl-Axel Robert started an investigation on the accusations made by FiB/K concerning murder, etc.

Before the national election in mid-September very few things happened. In the election, which ended in a tie, the Social Democrats suffered a set-back, but could still stay in power with their 156 seats plus 19 Communist seats (175 total) against the combined non-socialists' 175 seats.

One week after the election, FiB/K said that IB helped the American CIA to spy on North Vietnam. The government acted quickly: Prime Minister Palme commissioned the chief prosecutor to investigate whether FiB/K had violated the law concerning the freedom of the press.

Later, on October 22, 1973, the Swedish police raided the office of FiB/K and confiscated electronic wiretapping instruments and some intimidating documents. At the same time five persons were arrested, four of them in Stockholm and the fifth in Lund in southern Sweden. Two were soon to be released, but the remaining three: Jan Gillou, a French citizen long a Swedish resident; Peter Branau, a conscripted ex-officer; and Hakan Isacsson, an ex-agent of the IB, were charged with espionage and illegal investigation.

These events of course created much ado, and the Communists were not slow to use it for presenting themselves as the defender of democracy and to scandalize the government: it was immediately labeled "a Swedish Watergate."

On October 23, about 6,000 people in Stockholm and 4,000 in other cities demonstrated against the arrests. An impressive campaign started. Radio and television and many newspapers, heavily infiltrated by Communists, did their utmost to create a mass opinion for the benefit of the three accused of espionage, the magazine FiB/K (also threatened by legal actions), and the government. The slogan was, "Release the political prisoners. Quite an impressive movement was created. For example, in theatres after the performances pro-Communist actors made an appeal for the political prisoners and made the whole audience join in the shouts: "release the political prisoners!"

The Communists have infiltrated other political parties, and not just the political youth organizations but the parties themselves, especially the Social Democratic Party. This became clear when local SOP organizations took a stand against their own party leaders and for the three men arrested -- a rather shocking experience for the SOP leader's used to a strict party discipline. Typical also was a rumor that IB had kept an eye not only on Communist and pro-Communist organizations but also on the non-socialist parties.

No doubt these rumors had the purpose of creating trouble for the government in the Parliament, with its present uncertain situation. The non-socialists, however, backed the government since it was a question of national security, even if the Conservative Party criticized the government for some minor mistakes in dealing with the matter.

The trial of the three arrested men ended in January 1974, and all three were convicted. But the sentences were mild, one year of prison for Jan Guillou and six months for Peter Bratt and Hakan Isacson.

The most interesting aspect of the affair is what it reveals of the relationship between the government and the Communists and the Communist influence in Sweden today.

Concerning the latter, it clearly revealed how deeply many organizations and even political parties were infiltrated. Many SOP members went against their own party, trusting the Communists more than what their party leaders said. The affair also indicated the Communist infiltration of the mass media.

Concerning the relationship between the Communists and the government, this affair casts a strange light on Prime Minister Palme. Previously, he posed as anti-American and pro-North Vietnam, and also in general rather leftist. At the same time, he obviously was aware of and supporting IB's spying on North Vietnam for the U.S. Those who suspected that Palme's anti-American attitude was just for domestic policy reasons and that he tried to convert people's discomfort over problems in Sweden to indignation that a big nation would fight a war with a small one, may be right.

What was the effect of the whole affair? At first it looked like a Communist success, but now it looks like the contrary. Even if the Communists were able to mobilize an impressive number of people, they did not win many new sympathizers.

It never became a popular movement. People in general -- after their first reaction of astonishment and indignation that Sweden also dealt with espionage-sided with the government and thought that the 18 was justified.

The attitude of the government toward the left changed, as earlier it had been passive or even benevolent; now it is rather suspicious and hostile. In June 1974 the government and the employees of the Swedish Radio and Television Company (SR) clashed, and the government cut down on the expenses of the SR.

Asked about his opinion of the SR, Palme answered, "Does anyone love SR?" Mr. Palme's anti-American views are now less outspoken, and in April he met President Nixon in Paris, where they had a hearty talk.

It looks like the Communist influence on the Swedish people and their hopes of becoming a popular movement reached a peak in the winter of 1973-74. Last year, for instance the National Liberation Front of Vietnam had 100,000 members and sympathizers; now it has only 10,000. The Communists have not found a substitute for Vietnam in Chile or any other country, and even though they have cried hard, they have no longer found people so interested.

The Communists are now forced to put more emphasis on other methods in order to conquer Sweden. It looks as if the tide has changed.