
**An Episode in Nazi Diplomacy:
The German-Swedish Transit Agreement of July 8, 1940**

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Though spring came to Sweden with all its wonted splendor in 1940, the sunny skies and receding snows failed to inspire the elation of former years. Serenity and peace reigned over the countryside, but beneath the disciplined and taciturn facade of Swedish life there festered tension and uncertainty. War appeared from every side to threaten the abundant society which the Swedes had fashioned for themselves. The little nation belatedly looked to its defenses with one overriding question in view: What can Sweden do to protect her neutrality and remain at peace?¹

A combination of good fortune, skill, and determination was to preserve Sweden from the horror and destruction of the war which engulfed

her neighbors. The peace had its price, however, and there were many who were unwilling to pay it at the time. Among the most painful sacrifices required of the nation was her forced departure from the path of absolute neutrality. In July, 1940, Sweden granted Germany the right to use her territory and equipment for the transport of the *Wehrmacht*. In so doing, she compromised one of the basic tenets of her neutralist policy. This paper purports to survey the diplomatic negotiations which led to these transit concessions and assess their significance on the course of the war.

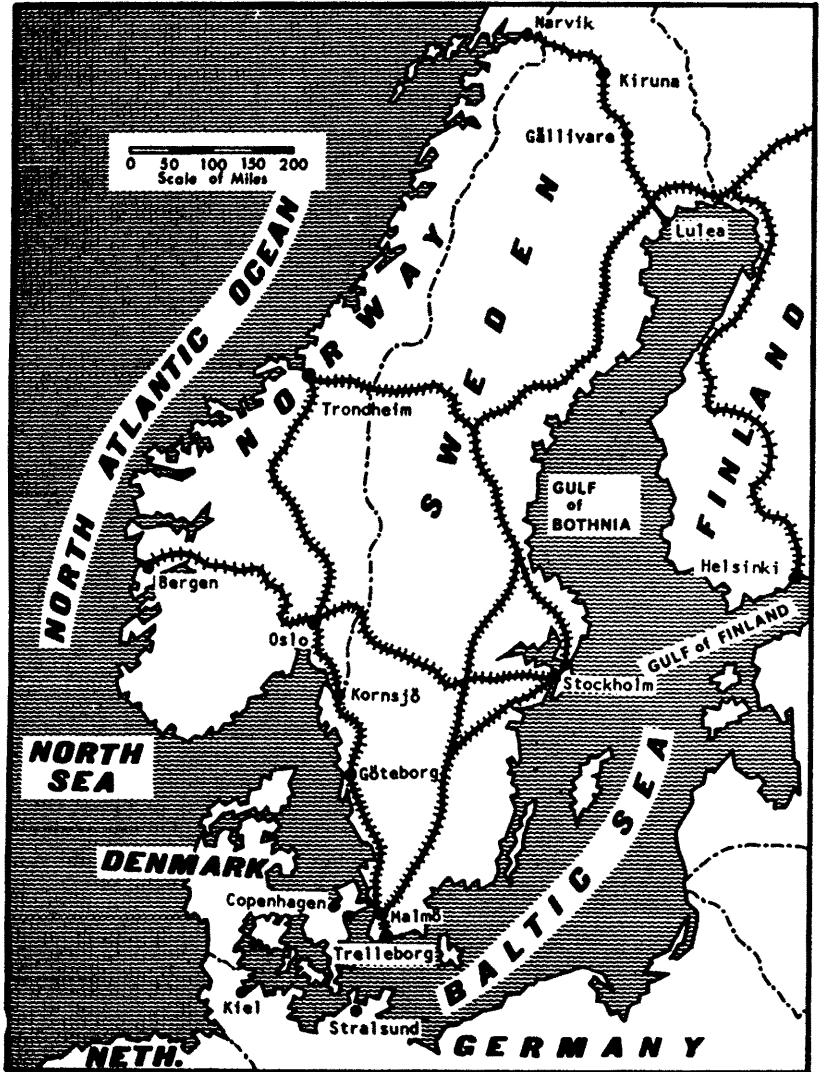
Neutrality as a cornerstone of Swedish policy had its roots deep in the past. The nation had enjoyed uninterrupted peace since 1814. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson had reaffirmed Sweden's commitment to complete neutrality.¹ Within a few months, however, this policy was subjected to serious strain when the Soviet Union attacked Finland in November, 1939. Despite her historic ties with Finland and sympathy for the Finnish cause, Sweden limited her assistance to providing medical supplies and munitions for her beleaguered neighbor. Even in this, the Swedes exceeded the bounds of strict neutrality.²

The next threat to Swedish security came from the west. The British and French were anxious to open a new theater of war in Scandinavia and shut off the supply of Swedish iron ore to Germany. Early in 1940 they began preparations for the occupation of Swedish and Norwegian territory and simultaneous intervention in the Russo-Finnish War. On March 2, 1940, the Allies requested permission to send reinforcements to Finland across Sweden and Norway. Both neutrals quickly denied this request which, in any case, came too late, since the Russo-Finnish Armistice was concluded on March 12.⁴

A far greater danger to Sweden was posed by the German invasion of Norway and Denmark on April 9, 1940. Despite German assurances that Swedish neutrality would be respected, the government at Stockholm expected attack at any moment. Policy considerations of her great neighbors, Germany and the Soviet Union, spared her this fate, however. Russia, the traditional enemy on the east, was anxious to preserve Sweden as a neutral buffer between Soviet and German spheres of interest in the Baltic.⁴ Germany also had nothing to gain from a war with Sweden. Hitler's Norwegian campaign had been launched in an effort to forestall Allied intervention in Scandinavia, secure air and naval bases for attacks on Britain, and gain unlimited access to the rich iron mines of the Gällivare-Kiruna region of northern Sweden (see map). These mines supplied Germany with approximately ten million tons of ore annually, or about 28.5% of the total German supply in 1940. Sweden was, moreover, one of Germany's best customers: 38% of Sweden's total imports came from Germany.⁴ A neutral Sweden could serve German interests better than a conquered one.

Britain was fully cognizant of this fact. Winston Churchill was convinced that Swedish ore supplies were a decisive factor in the German war effort. "What we want," he declared on April 11, "is that Sweden should not remain neutral, but declare war on Germany. . . . It would be disastrous if they remained neutral and bought Germany off with ore from Gällivare [*sic*] down the Gulf of Bothnia."⁷

Aware of these British designs against their neutrality, the Swedish Government adopted a more cooperative and conciliatory attitude toward Germany than did the Swedish public in general. The majority of the population was sympathetic to Britain and suspicious of Nazi intentions. The Swedish Foreign Minister, Christian Günther, found difficulty in moderating the tone of the anti-German press sufficiently to avoid giving the impression of unneutral behavior.⁸ At the same time, Prime Minister Hans-



Main Swedish Rail Connections with Norway and Finland in 1940

son reiterated his government's policy of nonalignment, emphasizing that

it is not consistent with strict neutrality to permit any belligerent to make use of Swedish territory for its operation. Fortunately no demands in such a direction have been made of us. Should any such demands be made, they must be refused.⁸

Hansson did not have long to wait for this resolution to be tested.

The test came as a result of the critical position of German forces at remote and frigid Narvik, the chief iron ore port and grand prize of the Norwegian campaign. Though the Germans had occupied this strategic port on April 9, an Allied expeditionary force established a beachhead in the area several days later. In order to supply their isolated and beleaguered troops at Narvik, the Germans required the use of Swedish railroads. Hermann Goering, who considered himself an expert in Swedish affairs, immediately began discussions with representatives of the Swedish Government to this end.⁹

Under considerable pressure, Stockholm permitted the passage of a trainload of medical supplies, food, clothing, and medical personnel through Swedish territory to Narvik. The returning supply train brought more than five hundred stranded sailors back to their German homeland at the end of April. This was a clear violation of Swedish neutrality. Günther, stung by criticism in the Swedish press, issued an official denial that any "war material" had passed through Sweden and took a firmer tone toward German demands. Though the Swedes permitted additional shipments of rations and allowed the evacuation of wounded to be carried out over their rails, their attitude began to stiffen.¹⁰

These minor concessions of April, though heartening to the German forces at Narvik, would never suffice to meet German requirements for men and materiel in the battle zone. Joachim von Ribbentrop, Nazi Foreign Minister, cast about for a convenient instrument to apply pressure on the Swedes. He found it in an undelivered order for forty-eight million Reichsmarks worth of arms which Sweden had purchased from Germany. At the beginning of May, Ribbentrop made arms deliveries to Sweden contingent on Swedish compliance with the German demands for unrestricted transit of men and weapons on Swedish rails.¹¹

The Swedes remained adamant. They had refused to aid Britain and Norway before, they argued; they could hardly aid Germany now. How could Sweden ever justify such an act to Norway? To grant Germany transit rights, declared Arvid Richert, Swedish Minister to Germany, would "burden the Government with a scandal which, in view of Nordic common feeling, they would not be able either to shake off or to bear."¹² Throughout the month of May, 1940, Stockholm resisted Nazi demands on the question.

In the meantime, however, German arms had astounded the world. Belgium and Holland had fallen in quick succession, and by the middle of June the onrushing *Wehrmacht* had forced the evacuation of Paris. The Allies abandoned their tenuous hold on Narvik, and by June 10 the war in Norway was over. These overwhelming military triumphs cleared the way for Nazi diplomacy. The Germans were no longer in a mood to haggle over interpretations of international law. Threats would now suffice. On June 15, Ribbentrop summoned the Swedish Minister to a conference in Belgium. Troops and arms were needed in Norway, the Nazi Foreign Minister declared; Sweden must permit the passage of German forces by rail. If Stockholm caused any difficulty about the matter, Ribbentrop warned, the Fuehrer "would regard it as a directly hostile act."¹³

What was Sweden to do? Stockholm was full of rumors that not only France, but Britain too was ready to sue for peace. The Swedish Foreign Office was in reception of insistent reports that Germany planned "com-

pulsive measures" against Sweden. Minister Richert warned his superiors in the Swedish capital that a negative reply to the German demands would have "catastrophic consequences for our land."¹⁴ On June 19, the Swedes gave in.

After several weeks of negotiations, a transit agreement was signed on July 8 which permitted shipment of men and materiel between the Reich and Norway on a regular schedule. In order to render the unpleasant concession as tolerable as possible, the Germans agreed that their troops would remain unarmed and in closed cars en route. Shipment of weapons and supplies could be carried out virtually without limit, however.¹⁵

The Swedish government was hard put to reconcile these concessions with its policy of neutrality, but manfully, if somewhat speciously, argued that since hostilities in Norway had ceased, Sweden was under no obligation to restrict German traffic. Britain reacted with restrained annoyance to the transit agreement, while the Norwegian Government in exile condemned the move as a flagrant breach of the Fifth Hague Convention of 1907. Some newspaper comment in Sweden reflected this indignation, but it was apparent that a majority of the Swedish people reluctantly supported their government's action as the lesser of evils.¹⁶ They realized, as Prime Minister Hansson put it, that

The general European situation has undergone a fundamental change in recent weeks. . . . We in our land cannot ignore the unfolding of events which reveal that wholly or in part seven countries of Europe are occupied and that France has accepted an armistice.¹⁷

While clinging to the ideal of neutrality, Sweden yielded before the overwhelming fact that Germany was now master of the continent.

The agreement of July 8 established a principle which was to be followed for three years, but the scope and nature of German troop movements were gradually enlarged. Within a year and a half, some 670,000 members of the *Wehrmacht* had crossed Swedish territory. Following the Nazi invasion of Russia in June, 1941, a fully equipped German division was shipped across Sweden to join battle on the Eastern Front.¹⁸ Only in August, 1943, after the decline in Axis fortunes had become quite obvious, did Sweden find herself in a position to repudiate the transit agreement and cooperate openly with the Allies.¹⁹

While in force, the agreement had made possible the transfer of from 200,000 to 300,000 German soldiers over Swedish routes each year. Such mobility kept the northern bastion of *Festung Europa* strong and secure and Norwegian-based aircraft and submarines coursing the North Atlantic at peak efficiency. Transit through Sweden bolstered the morale of the troops in Norway and freed vital German shipping for duty elsewhere. By maintaining a firm grip on Scandinavia, Hitler assured himself of a continued supply of Swedish products vital to his war effort.²⁰ The transit agreement was an Axis victory in itself.

But, in a deeper sense, it was a Swedish victory too. The transit concessions averted German aggression in 1940 when it might well have succeeded. By 1943, when the *Wehrmacht* began planning a blow against Sweden, it was too late.²¹ Thus, the Swedes bought time, and the price they paid seems not unreasonable when one considers the benefits it brought. Few European states can claim that they simultaneously remained at peace, pursued a profitable foreign trade, maintained national sovereignty, and kept their people free during World War II. Sweden can.

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