

Why did Sweden breach its neutrality during the midsummer crisis of 1941?

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Introduction

A policy of neutrality and military non-alignment has been the core of Swedish foreign policy. Sweden has vaunt itself on being a non-belligerent state; not involved in wars or conflicts. In order to preserve independence and further prosperity of Sweden neutrality has been the standard. During the outbreak of the Second World War Sweden declared itself as a neutral country. Swedish neutrality was challenged on multiple occasions throughout the great war however, in June of 1941 the events of the midsummer crisis was its biggest challenge. Sweden was ruled by a war-time coalition government which included all the parties in the Swedish parliament (riksdag) except the communist party. The prime minister of which was Per Albin Hansson; he was from the social democratic party. Blame for the breach in neutrality has been given to many people however, I wanted to dive into who or what should be held accountable for the breached neutrality and more importantly why Sweden breached its neutral stance. Hence why the research question guiding this essay will be **“Why did Sweden breach its neutrality during midsummer 1941?”** The essay itself is based on multiple secondary sources and on the primary source that is Per Albin’s diary, many of these secondary sources are from various established historians on the midsummer crisis and their interpretations and perspectives on the event. This essay will offer how operation Barbarossa triggered the event that became known as the midsummer crisis. Later on, a detailed account of what happened during the midsummer crisis and from there on, a detailed account of the parliamentary process that led to the decision for a positive response to the Germans. Sequential to that, various historians' views on the question at hand will be given and a discussion. Following that, my own thoughts on the matter and a conclusion before a list of the sources is provided.

Background/ Operation Barbarossa

On 22 of June 1941, Operation Barbarossa, also known as the invasion of the Soviet Union. Berlin had submitted a request to allow the Wehrmacht's 163rd Infantry Division to transit through Sweden via railroad from Norway to Finland.¹ The Wehrmacht was deployed in Denmark, Finland and Norway. The Scandinavian region was dominated by the German hegemony and their rule was uncontested.² Following the Nazi invasion of both Denmark and Norway in April of 1940 Sweden was not only surrounded by the Nazi regime in their neighboring countries but, also strategically economically dependent on Germany³ & Appendix

¹Sweden had to play tango with the Nazi German regime in order to maintain its Independence and not succumb to the same fate as its Nordic brothers it had to maintain a functional and cordial relationship with Germany.⁴ Sweden had previously informally participated in trying to defend its neighboring countries before with Finland in the winter war which lasted to march 1939. The Swedish volunteer corps provided 9,640 men and the Swedish volunteer air force also provided 25 aircrafts and weapons which would be used by the Finns during the war.⁵ Sweden tried to help Finland in this peculiar way while still trying to maintain its neutral image. It's worth mentioning that the Swedish king (Gustaf V) which was also a key component in the midsummer crisis which will be discussed later in this essay also, openly stated on the 19th of February 1940 in the "statsrådsdiktamen" that he was against any Swedish intervention in the winter war in favor of the Finnish cause.⁶ However, its biggest threat, the midsummer crisis, was the worst. Sweden adopted a policy that was happy to accommodate German needs, The request led to intense debate within the Four Party coalition

¹ Operation Barbarossa wikipedia

² Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p.371

³ H.R. 3662, U.S. Holocaust Assets Commission Act of 1998: Hearing before the Committee on Banking and Financial Services, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifth Congress, Second Session, June 4, 1998. p.112

⁴ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p.371

⁵ Sweden and the Winter War wikipedia

⁶ Sweden and the Winter War wikipedia

government. After days of debate, the Swedish government responded positively to the German demands and allowed for several military concessions for the Third Reich.⁷ Since the time of the request coincided with the Swedish holiday midsummer the event was eventually dubbed the midsummer crisis. Sweden hoped that these accommodations in the long run would help Sweden remain an independent nation. Sweden had already been making similar accommodations beforehand to unarmed troops coming to and from Norway.⁸ This already raised eyebrows on Sweden's claim of neutrality but the allowing Wehrmacht's 163rd Infantry Division to transit through Sweden is what makes many historians believe that Sweden in fact impaired its claim of neutrality or even broke it. These soldiers were belligerent soldiers in a non- belligerent country. The UN describes neutrality as the following: *“defined as the legal status arising from the abstention of a state from all participation in a war between other states, the maintenance of an attitude of impartiality toward the belligerents, and the recognition by the belligerents of this abstention and impartiality”*.⁹ Various historians feel that the maintenance of an attitude of impartiality toward the belligerents was not met by Sweden as it helped Nazi Germany in the transit of the Wehrmacht's 163rd Infantry Division to transit through Sweden to the Finland knowing they would be aggressors on Soviet Russia which was one part of the allied powers. By aiding transport of armored belligerent troops through neutral land they act in favor of one belligerent side: Nazi Germany and its co-belligerent Finland. Winston Churchill stated that Sweden *“ignored the greater moral issues of the war and played both sides for profit*.¹⁰

⁷Scott, Carl-Gustaf. *"The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was."* p. 388

⁸ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. *"The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was."* p. 375

⁹ UN, neutrality-day

¹⁰<https://amp.en.google-info.org/43111719/1/midsummer-crisis.html>

In the year Immediately following the invasion of Norway and Denmark Germany was quite pleased with Sweden's efforts to accommodate German needs. The most prominent examples of this were with the supplying Iron ore and in Swedish manufactured ball bearings.

¹¹ Their neighboring countries were all Nazi occupied but as for Sweden as long as they complied with German wishes they would continue to enjoy good relations.¹²

In March 1941 the good relations and mutual understanding between the two countries were aggravated. This was because of the rejection to let some 16,000 troops pass from Sweden to Northern-Norway.¹³ They were permitted to use territorial waters but, Germany was aggravated they could not use the typical railroad way. On April 3 Cristian Günther (Swedish Foreign Minister) met German diplomats and discussed the negative attitude Sweden had been taking on Germany during the recent weeks. They also criticized that Swedish newspapers were writing anti-Nazi opinions.¹⁴ In a conversation with Per Albin on the 21 of April Günther stated that he felt particularly bothered by the complaints. But Per Albin Hansson noted the following day that Günther was now in a better mood and stated, "*that the Germans' threatening greetings mostly act as a war of nerves*". Günther had in fact made an attempt to stop the Swedish press' anti-German writings, at a secret April 9. At this time the Swedish geopolitical position was further threatened by signs of a Nazi-Soviet war which Finland was most probably going to be involved in as a German ally; the war was bound to happen. Per Albin was concerned that the war may disturb the unity of the war-time coalition government. If a similar request was asked he supposed that his own party the Social Democrats would have opposition to such a request. The Prime Minister agreed with Günther's opinion that the best course of action was to improve relations with Berlin which had

¹¹ H.R. 3662, U.S. Holocaust Assets Commission Act of 1998: Hearing before the Committee on Banking and Financial Services, House of Representatives, One Hundred Fifth Congress, Second Session, June 4, 1998. p.112

¹² Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p.174

¹³ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p.175

¹⁴ Leif Björkman ocensurerad Sverige inför Operation Barbarossa p.278

deteriorated because of the reluctance and unwillingness to accept the concessions back in March¹⁵. In the next meeting with German envoys in May, Karl Schnurre the diplomat reported back to Berlin that the meetings with the Prime Minister and Günter went very well. In fact, Per Albin had gone as far as to say Sweden would cooperate with Germany “*in a spirit of international collaboration*”.¹⁶ The statements made to Karl Schnurre by both Per Albin and Günter specifically give an invitation to Germany to request passage for troops into Finland; their tone definitely implied they were open to such requests. Karl Schnurre based on such positive meetings would then return the following month with a formal request. Shortly thereafter, Schnurre met with the two and proposed military concessions. The concessions included: The passage of an infantry division from southern Norway through Swedish land to Finland. Schnurre explained that this was a one time occurrence and would not ask Sweden to join forces with the German-Finnish cause. Other concessions included permission to use the Swedish telephone network and short-term permission to Swedish airspace.¹⁷ Once done presenting the material, Günter asked how a Swedish rejection would be seen from a Berlin standpoint. He responded saying it would be seen as an “*unfriendly act*” and that Hitler himself would be disappointed. He then reassured them that Sweden wasn’t called to abandon its neutral policies but to only interpret them in a manner favorable to the Reich. On the 22 of June, Per Albin and Günter meet the king (Gustaf V) to tell him about the German demands. The king strongly stated that he was of the opinion of a positive answer (yes) to the German demands. More intriguingly, he stated that “*he would not be willing to bear the consequences of the actions*”. The wording is very ambiguous and throughout history

¹⁵ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p. 376

¹⁶Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p. 371

¹⁷Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was." p. 378

has been interpreted in various ways. Per Albin interpreted this statement as an abdication threat if a positive answer was not agreed upon.¹⁸

Parliamentary process

On the 23 of June the coalition government met for the first time for a discussion on the request. Günther was the first to speak and spoke about the current situation Sweden was facing geopolitically and also added that Finland had given support to this request. He left his speech with the notion that it was a no-brainer and that a positive response was the only way to better the geopolitical situation Sweden was in.¹⁹ Hansson then went along with his view saying that a positive response to the German demands would violate Swedish foreign policy of neutrality.²⁰ He later spoke on the importance of preserving internal unity and insisted that a rejection could only be made if all parties were in complete agreement. He finally expressed the king's view and his interpretation of his statement as an abdication threat. The following day (24 June) individual party meetings would take place. The Conservative and the Agrarian parties quickly decided on a positive response. This was mainly due to the fact that they felt that Sweden needed to improve their geopolitical situation. Other big reasons for the positive response were the pro-Finnish and anti-Bolshevik attitudes.²¹ The Liberal Party was more divided than the previous parties mentioned. In the liberal's views there was a strong pro-Finnish attitude and equally strong opposition towards Nazi Germany.²² The Liberal Party also took the king's words into great account.²³ Due to the division in the party however, a vote was held to determine their official stance as a party. Only 9 out of 31 were of a negative

¹⁸Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.380

¹⁹ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.381

²⁰Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p. 381

²¹ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.383

²² Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.384

²³Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p. 384

response to the German concessions. Thus, resulting in a positive for the German concessions. Lastly for Per Albin's party the Social Democrats he held a speech reiterating the king's stance and his abdication threat. If they do not respond positively to the Germans he explained that they risk a governmental crisis because of the supposed abdication threat and the lack of unity.²⁴ He also cautioned that Sweden may receive a hostile reaction if there wasn't compliance but also informed them that there wasn't any German threat presently. Once Per Albin opened the floor to debate it was clear that just like the Liberals there was divisiveness in opinions. In the eyes of the Social Democrats, it all came down to the accommodation of Germany; Sweden's relationship with Finland was barely touched upon.²⁵ In Per Albin's diary he mentioned in his opinion that there was a fairly even.²⁶ Members requested to have a vote to settle the differences of opinions. Outcome of the vote was 159 against and only 2 in favor of the German concessions. Hansson called for a second vote on which he stated that the group must accept all possible consequences such as the splitting of the coalition government. The results of the vote were 59 against 72 for and 30 abstained.²⁷ Meaning their official say in the coalition government was a positive response to the German demands. The results were in and Günther issued an official statement that stated Sweden would honor the German request but, intended on maintaining its independence and would not partake in the Nazi-Soviet conflict. Interestingly the word Neutrality was absent from the statement. This Statement or communiqué ended the midsummer crisis. At 11pm the first troops arrived in Sweden.

²⁴ Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.284

²⁵Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p. 385

²⁶ Leif Björkman ocensurerad Sverige inför Operation Barbarossa p.368

²⁷Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p. 186

Discussion

To give my answer to the research question it is important to look at what historians' views are; some that were mentioned before and others that will be mentioned now in this part of the essay. Most Historians give credit to the outcome of the German request to Per Albin however, the nature of his actions are argued. One historian's work that was cited beforehand was Carl Gustaf Scott. His credibility is not in question as he has a PhD in European/Scandinavian history from the University of Wisconsin Madison, a school that ranks top 20 in history and geography by the QS World University Rankings.²⁸ His perspective is that Per Albin made up his mind before the parliamentary process in favor of a positive response to the German request.²⁹ Secondly, he believes that the midsummer crisis didn't need to be a crisis in the first place. Per Albin had already allowed similar requests to go through without going through the parliamentary process in June 1940. In his view it's very peculiar as to why he made it go through the parliamentary process. Scott's view is that he did this to preserve the longstanding continuation of his party's political dominance after the war by tying all other parties of the wartime coalition government to a unified positive response, damaging Swedish neutrality. By tying all other parties to the result, it meant that there was a convenient political alibi that in the future if criticized on the decision Per Albin and the social democratic party would not carry the entire blame as the blame would go to the entire 4 party coalition government. Scott's view is even furtherly blaming Per Albin and the Social democratic party itself for the decision, saying that in his opinion the first vote for the social democratic official decision was a fake, and that the voting that ended up as a landslide win for the no-sayers to the German demands was merely just to make it seem that there was more

²⁸ top university rankings

²⁹Scott, Carl-Gustaf. "*The Swedish Midsummer Crisis of 1941: The Crisis That Never Was.*" p.376

of a tremendously strong opposition than there really was. Eventually we know they voted yes the second time around, but Scott's view is that Per Albin and the social democrats did this on purpose to even get even less blame in the future if criticism did arise because it would mean that they were the most against out of all the other parties and should therefore get the least blame for the decisions to give concessions to Nazi Germany.

In another historian's view, Alf W. Johansson an established historian who is involved with the university of stockholm and MHS (stockholm military school) stated he risked becoming a "prisoner of his own pragmatism" his censorship of anti nazism was not a question of nazim but one of realpolitik. He compares it to a marxist view that he had a burden to do the best he can for his country.³⁰ The best way was to use manipulation and go by any means to get the yes he needed because he believed it was the best way to progress with preserving independence even if it were to breach Swedish neutrality. The Marxist view was because he felt that this was for the common good and as a person with power it was his duty to do this; The concept of realpolitik.³¹

Göran B. Nilsson's interpretation of the events of the midsummer crisis is that the Per albin decision was influenced by two endeavours (1). to keep Sweden out of the war and preserve it independence and (2.) to prevent internal political disintegration.³² Nilsson argues that a refusal would lead to the dissolution of the coalition government and a difficult political conflict, since both King Gustaf V, Cristian Günther and the non-socialist parties, at least the conservatives and the argatarian party, desired that transit should be granted.³³ Nilsons view is often regarded as biased to the Social Democratic party and Per Albin's legacy as it protects him since he argues that given the circumstances he could only do what he did.

³⁰ Jan linde; Krigsfall sverige! Tysklands anfallsplan mot sverige 1943, p.33

³¹Jan linde; Krigsfall sverige! Tysklands anfallsplan mot sverige 1943, p.33

³² Per G.Andreen; Politiska handlingslinjer i midsommarkrisen 1941 p.64

³³ Per G.Andreen; Politiska handlingslinjer i midsommarkrisen 1941 p.64

Krister wahlbäck who like nilsson wrote in "*Historisk Tidskrift*" which is a journal for research in history and economic history, it is a quarterly peer-reviewed journal published by the Swedish historical society, a member of the international committee of historical sciences³⁴. Krister Wahlbäck directly wrote a critique against Nilssons interpretation on the basis that his second point is false. Like previously mentioned Carl-Gustaf Scott, Krister Wahlbäck also argues that he had already made his decision before the parliamentary process which Nilson denies.³⁵ Krister Wahlbäck also denies the fact that he could have potentially twisted the king's wordings to an abdication threat. Wahlbäck also argues that the abdication threat could have had a severe impact on Nilsons second point because if the threat had not been made the non-social parties could have seen things differently than they did at first.³⁶ Wahlbäck does not disagree with the first point Nilson makes.

Conclusion / My Own Thoughts

After consideration of the various historian's views in relation to the research question at hand: "**Why did Sweden breach its neutrality during midsummer 1941?**", I tend to agree with Carl Gustaf Scotts interpretation the most. Those to hold accountable for the Midsummer crisis are Per Albin Hansson and Cristian Günther alone. Since they both in Carl Gustaf Scott's rendition and many other texts are the ones who make the premeditated decision. This was long before the parliamentary process which they had no obligation by law to go through with in the first place. Why Sweden breached its neutrality during the

³⁴ historisktidskrift.se

³⁵ Per Albin och midsommarkrisen 1941; Krister wahlbäck p.26

³⁶ Per Albin och midsommarkrisen 1941; Krister wahlbäck p.26

midsummer crisis of 1941 was to protect Swedish future independence as the request in nature was a semi-ultimatum by the Germans. This was Per Albin's motive but, I believe he saw potential for political gain by taking it through the parliamentary process. He only took it through the parliamentary process and used the king's wordings for an abdication threat in order to protect the social democratic party's dominance and tie the rest of the parties in with the decision so all parties would receive blame. Through his extensive manipulations he even managed to create an image where his party (social democrats) would look better than the rest of the parties since in the first vote there was a large opposition implying that they had a very divided group in the decision making. Per Albin should be held more accountable over Günther as he was the one who manipulated the parliament through his wordings however, Günther should get some blame too since he was there for the supposed abdication threat and made the premeditated decision with Per Albin. Ultimately, why the neutrality was breached was a matter of realpolitik in response to the German request for troop transit through Sweden via rail to Finland since the nature of the request is a semi-ultimatum. To Per Albin and Günther, simply Swedish independence mattered more than Swedish foreign policy of neutrality.

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Appendix

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