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Open Wounds: Sweden Drops the Killing of Olof Palme Case

By Dr. Binoy Kampmark
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It's the sort of thing that ruffled the image of a composed and tranquil existence. In some countries, doing away with political leaders is a periodic affair, deemed necessary to clean the stables. But in Sweden, change is barely discernible, stability nigh guaranteed and institutions revered. "It's in the tradition of Sweden to put itself forth as a moral role model," observes author Elisabeth Åsbrink.

Then came that thorny, troubling issue of **Olof Palme.** Palme minted a reputation berating the bullying actions of great powers and forging an internationalist platform for progressive politics. He took issue with the crushing of the 1968 Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact forces, apartheid in South Africa and US involvement in the Vietnam War. As education minister in the **Tage Erlander** government, he marched alongside Sweden's North Vietnamese ambassador in protest. As Prime Minister, he gave an excoriating speech in 1972 likening the Christmas bombings of Hanoi with the destruction of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War and the Nazi death camp at Treblinka. In an address to parliament on November 7, 1973, he reflected on the overthrow of Chile's socialist president, **Salvador Allende**.

> "The overthrow of a government elected by the people in Chile has raised the question of whether, in general, it is possible to carry out profound changes in a poor and unfair society without having privileged groups resorting to violence."

He mocked the nuclear deterrent and praised striving efforts of the Third World, the latter earning him praise from Cuba's **Fidel Castro**. On the domestic front, he remained a social democrat to an aggressive degree, bringing in universal day care, introducing legislation on workers' rights, abortion and gender equality.

Such measures encouraged the haters, though many preferred operating in the shadows. On February 28, 1986, Palme and his wife Lisbet left a movie theatre located in downtown Stockholm. He had felt no need for a continued security presence. **He was subsequently gunned down in his wife's company at 11.21 pm,** shot in the back by a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum. The scene of death saw witnesses aplenty – 23 in all – who could attest to seeing a man fire the shots and flee the scene via Tunnelgata alleyway. What followed was the interviewing, by police, of 90,000 people. Of that improbably large sample, 134 confessions for the murder were noted.

The list was subsequently trimmed to include, amongst others, Kurdish separatists. At the time, the rattled Stockholm police chief **Hans Holmér** ordered the raid of Stampen, a jazz club that led to the arrest of several Kurds. All were released for lack of evidence. In the

late 1990s, a captured former commander of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) of Turkey, one **Semdin Sakik**, claimed ignorance about "the details of the assassination of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme" but insisted with unconvincing confidence that "this murder was committed by the PKK." PKK leader **Abdullah Öcalan** was supposedly peeved by the expulsion of eight members of the group from Sweden. "The operation to kill Palme was given the codename 'wedding' and the assassination command was given by Abdullah Öcalan [with the words] 'Send him to his wedding'." (The alleged assassins seemed to have had a sense of marital humour about them.) In 1999, Turkish prosecutors took up this angle in the trial of Öcalan, who disabused notions that he was involved. But instead of clearing matters up, another tentative hypothesis was offered: that Palme had been slain by a hastily assembled splinter group, PKK Rejin. Back in Stockholm, sighs were registered.

The smorgasbord of suspects proved heavy and almost ludicrously well spread. Allegations of South African involvement were also, at stages, proffered. (To this can be added claimed Iraqi participation; the role of Chilean neo-fascist Roberto Thieme; the US Central Intelligence Agency and the German Red Army Faction.) The Deep Search papers, prepared by **General Tai Minnaar**, designated Palme "enemy of the state", and contained a list of individuals said to be involved in the decision making, planting and execution of the operation. In January 2003, **Agneta Blidberg**, deputy director of the prosecuting service in Stockholm admitted to receiving the South African documents and instituting "certain steps and interrogations". She refused to put any "value" on them, though a general sense that they were forgeries remained. In South Africa, weighty figures such as **Chris Thirion**, former head of South Africa's Military Intelligence (MI), thought otherwise. The Deep Search papers had a smell that refused to go away. **Former General Tienie Groenewald**, head of South Africa's National Intelligence Interpretation Branch when Palme was killed, was also convinced, going so far as to supply the Swedish aid worker **Göran Björkdahl** with names in Johannesburg during an October 1, 2015 meeting.

The initial field of suspects, filtered of all exoticism and danger, left the police with the petty criminal and derelict **Christer Pettersson**, continuously referred to in press notes as "an alcoholic and drug addict". He was jailed for the killing and sentenced to life imprisonment on July 27, 1989. Crucial to the case was testimony from **Lisbet Palme**, who claimed she saw Pettersson gazing with glacial interest at her dying husband after the shooting. On appeal, he was acquitted. In the 1990s, prosecutors revisited the case that refused to go cold, keen to get back at Pettersson.

Palme's case has continuously radiated with wild discussion and expansive theories, often with bewildering stretch. As Gunnar Pettersson wrote with continuing relevance in 1989,

> "Practically everything that is known is open to interpretation – particularly as regards the motive, since so many individuals and groups can be said to have had one."

The more these ideas persisted, the greater the suspicion about the competence of Sweden's investigative authorities, allied to the troubling idea that right-wing elements in the Norrmalm District of the Stockholm Metropolitan Police and the Swedish Security Police (Säpo) were at work. (The fact that some thirty police were in the vicinity of the murder at the time is striking.) Ministers of Justice, public prosecutors and police investigators duly resigned.

Over the years, one man seemed to linger closer to home, the depressive “Skandia Man”, graphic designer and eventual suicide Stig Engström. He was at the scene at the time, even claiming to have made an effort to “resuscitate” Palme; he worked at Skandia Insurance, in proximity to the crime scene. Interest was revived in 2018 with the investigative prodding of journalist Thomas Pettersson. Engström’s ex-wife, was unswayed. “He was too much of a coward. He wouldn’t harm a fly.”

As seems to be a tendency in high profile cases, the Swedish prosecutors do take their time. And time does get away. Engström had moved up the list of favourite suspects but his death in 2000 made the continuation of proceedings more than just futile. “Since he has died,” concluded chief prosecutor Krister Petersson, “I cannot indict him.” But it was Engström who had “acted how we believe the murderer would have acted.” He had weapons training, been in the army, was a member of a shooting club, hated Palme and his views. Such evidence remained painfully circumstantial. While the prosecutors claimed they could muster enough to move it to trial, it was not necessarily sufficient to obtain a conviction. Obstacles remained: the inability to link, forensically, the murder with any weapon.

The conclusion to this investigation seemed egregiously dismissive, a slander on Palme’s life. Even Palme’s son Marten, in concluding that the prosecutors had drawn the right conclusion in closing the case, could claim some disappointment “that they didn’t have more conclusive evidence, like DNA or a weapon that they could trace to the crime.” If failure to identify Palme’s killer remained Swedish society’s great “open wound”, as current **Prime Minister Stefan Löfven** described it, it is one that has been left tantalisingly unclosed.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark *was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com*
