

Intelligence and Espionage (Sweden)

By [Wilhelm Agrell](#)

Summary

Intelligence activities in Sweden during the war were largely influenced by the same set of factors as in other neutral countries. Due to relative accessibility and limited surveillance, Sweden was a useful base for intelligence activities by foreign intelligence services, although the Swedish attitude varied over time towards the warring parties. Even before the war, Swedish authorities were suspicious of Russia, and of Russian intentions toward Sweden and Scandinavia. Contrary to these expectations, Sweden seems to have played only a marginal role for Russian intelligence during the war. The attitude towards Germany was the opposite, with a secret cooperation between the Swedish and German intelligence services, based on the perception of a common opponent in Russia. For Germany, Sweden was also an important target for war propaganda aiming to strengthen the pro-German sentiments in the Swedish press and public opinion.

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Swedish Military Intelligence: Organization and Tasks

Prior to the war, [Sweden](#) already possessed the basic components of a national [intelligence](#) system. There were several reasons for this early development. The prime factor was the perceived threat from [Russia](#) in the [Baltic](#) area and to Scandinavia, and the suspected intelligence activities of travelling Russian saw-grinders (see heading below, *Spy-scare, Surveillance of Aliens and Counter-espionage*). An additional factor was the crisis in 1905, culminating in the break-up of the union with [Norway](#). Although finally solved peacefully, the

use of force had initially not been ruled out, and Swedish intelligence operations were carried out, especially against the main Norwegian naval base.¹

In 1914, the main components of the Swedish intelligence structure were the foreign department of the general staff, and a corresponding unit at the naval staff. The foreign department was set up in 1908, with an instruction to collect and disseminate intelligence from open sources and the reports from military attachés in major capitals. Apart from this, officers travelling abroad were instructed to report their observations to the department. Loosely attached to the foreign department was an entity called *I:a byrån* (1st Bureau) or *underrättelsebyrån* (The Intelligence Bureau). As the name indicated, this bureau had a different role, being tasked not only with the covert collection of information on foreign countries, but also with counter-espionage and the monitoring of so-called anti-militaristic [propaganda](#). The intelligence bureau thus had a more closed character, and used what later would be labelled as "*särskilda metoder*" (special methods): primarily the employment of agents and informers. The bureau was located in the same building as the foreign department, but on a separate floor.²

A main source was, however, the intelligence collected by military and naval attachés, especially those in St. Petersburg and Berlin. In the years preceding the war, the naval attaché in St. Petersburg reported on Russian military dispositions in Finland, based on his own observations, newspaper articles, and Russian contacts. The reporting from St. Petersburg was supplemented by agents recruited by the intelligence bureau in Finland and a network operating along Swedish coasts and borders. Shortly before the outbreak of the war, five Swedish officers from the intelligence bureau travelled to Finland to organize an intelligence network. In all, fourteen agents were employed there by the bureau before the war.³

In 1915, Finnish nationalists set up a committee based in Stockholm. The overarching purpose was Finnish independence from Russia, but the more immediate aim was the collection of intelligence from Finland and support of clandestine operations. Some of the key activists had earlier cooperated with the Swedish intelligence bureau, and their existing agent network in Finland was transferred to the committee and continued to operate as a joint venture, which also included German intelligence.⁴

Spy-scare, Surveillance of Aliens and Counter-espionage

The publicity about the Russian saw-grinders from the turn of the century gradually affected

the military authorities, politicians and eventually the lawmakers. Foreigners were by definition under suspicion in a largely rural and confined society. These travelling artisans, claiming to come from the Novgorod area, tended to appear during the summer in considerable numbers, in specific regions. Rumours spread, fuelled by press reports, that this was an army of spies mapping the Swedish countryside in areas where Russia planned to invade. No evidence of this was ever found and no saw-grinder was ever convicted.⁵ The saw-grinder scare appeared in two waves, the first around the turn of the century and the second from 1910. Both these periods coincided with intensified public debate about an assumed Russian military threat and the increased political polarization of the defence issue in Sweden.⁶

The intelligence bureau made a comprehensive investigation of the saw-grinder phenomenon over a five-year period, concentrating on the county of Västernorrland in northern Sweden. The bureau concluded in its final report in 1913 that the travelling Russians had behaved suspiciously, but also noted that their numbers had declined sharply after 1911. According to the assessment this could have been an effect of new legislation, but could also indicate that the mapping of this particular region now was complete.⁷

The perception of a Russian espionage threat was further strengthened by an espionage case against a Swedish citizen, a Colonel Assanovich, allegedly recruited by the Russian military attaché in Stockholm in 1913. The foreign department had been able to confirm that the St. Petersburg military district was in fact collecting intelligence on Sweden and had issued a manual on the Swedish Army.⁸

In 1913, the Swedish criminal code on espionage was modified and expanded. Previously, only civil servants or military personnel entrusted with secret information could be sentenced for passing this information on to a foreign power. With the new legislation, anyone who disclosed information that could damage the country's defence became liable.⁹

There was initially no specific organization tasked with counter-espionage. The detective department of the Stockholm police district was responsible for the surveillance of political activities. From 1906, this also included the surveillance of foreigners. The department was small, but grew rapidly after the outbreak of the war to over 100 constables. Parallel to the detective department, the general staff organized a police bureau, also staffed by police constables, but specifically tasked with surveillance for the armed forces. The police bureau was a secret organization and remained so until 1918, when it was transferred to the Stockholm police, now as an official entity for the control of foreigners.¹⁰

The legal framework for this control was initially fluid, with no central regulations for cross-border travel or the registration of the presence of foreign citizens. They could be expelled on a case-by-case basis. With the outbreak of the war, new, stricter regulations were introduced, forcing Russian and German citizens to apply for permission to enter the country and report to the local police authority while staying in Sweden. The control of foreigners continued to be far from uniform. On the strategically located island of Gotland, all arriving foreigners were registered and under suspicion of being foreign spies. Not until 1917, in a situation of growing social and political unrest, in both Sweden and Russia, was comprehensive passport control introduced.¹¹

German Intelligence and Propaganda in Sweden

German intelligence in Sweden was mainly conducted by *Nachrichten-Abteilung N* of the Admiralty Staff and *Abteilung IIIb* of the General Staff. Before the outbreak of the war, German intelligence activity had been limited, reflecting the remoteness of Scandinavia, and the limited size and importance of the Scandinavian countries armed forces.¹² Once war broke out, German intelligence took pre-planned steps to enhance intelligence collection, and set up a number of intelligence posts. *Abteilung IIIb* was focused on Russia, and, since Sweden was not a main staging base, operations were coordinated directly from Berlin. Naval intelligence, on the other hand, could substantially facilitate shipping between the Scandinavian countries and [Britain](#), and the large Norwegian merchant fleet. German naval intelligence was concentrated on Norway, but was directed from a clandestine naval intelligence station in Gothenburg, under the cover of Handelsbolaget Emptio AB, led by a Lieutenant Captain Edwin Nordmann, a former officer in the German merchant navy. In Sweden, the Gothenburg intelligence station had sub-stations in Malmö and Stockholm and individual ship-watchers in several other harbours. Most of the personnel in this considerable network were local citizens, with Germans in only the key positions.¹³

German intelligence activities in Sweden were not limited to intelligence collection, but also included preparations for sabotage against British and Russian targets. In 1917, *Nachrichten-Abteilung N* set up a sub-office in Stockholm called Organisation S, under the cover of a medical supplies company. Most of the personnel engaged in this activity were Finnish exiles. Organisation S was involved in a smuggling of explosives to Kristiania, an operation that was subsequently discovered after a tip-off from British intelligence to the Norwegian and Swedish police. The public disclosure of the activities led to the subsequent withdrawal of Organisation S from Stockholm.¹⁴

Another aspect of German secret operations in Sweden concerned propaganda. For [Germany](#)

it was a vital to secure a continued pro-German policy and therefore to strengthen a pro-German angle in newspaper reporting from the war. The German legation was very active in this respect and had for long time gathered information about the Swedish press. The legation set up five departments with the task of supplying the Swedish press with – from a German perspective – suitable material. One of these, the Fifth department, was engaged in a more advanced form of psychological [warfare](#) in order to influence the Swedish press and public opinion. This department employed [Sten Granlund \(1871-1917\)](#), a well-known Swedish journalist, with the task of editing and adjusting circular articles emanating from the [German press](#) for a Swedish audience. Based on the intelligence gathered before the war, the German legation had a good grip not only of the standpoint of various papers, but also their weaknesses in terms of inadequate financial and editorial resources and subsequent susceptibility to print-ready material free of charge. The legation also had staff members cutting and translating Swedish articles to be published in German press. In this way, the propaganda machinery could follow a cyclical pattern, where pro-German Swedish press clippings published in German newspapers could be recycled by the Fifth department and result in the production of additional pro-German articles in the Swedish press.¹⁵

British Intelligence in Sweden

From a British perspective, Sweden was an even more peripheral arena without major significance for the military operations. The activity of the Secret Service Bureau (SSB) in Scandinavia was concentrated on [Denmark](#) and Norway, where a network of watchers was organized, in much in the same way as German naval intelligence was. British operations in Scandinavia were directed from an intelligence station in Copenhagen, with a sub-station in Kristiania. It was not until 1916 that a station was set up in Stockholm.¹⁶ Apart from the collection of naval intelligence, the SSB was monitoring Swedish exports to Germany in order to detect the flow of contraband.

Naval intelligence took on a special significance since, after the Battle of Heligoland, the German navy was more or less confined to the Baltic for training and exercises. This activity was monitored from southern Scandinavia and a network of coastal watchers in Denmark and Sweden kept track of naval traffic through the Sound. Both the German and the British network of coastal watchers along the Sound played an important role in connection with the incursion of British [submarines](#) in the Baltic in October 1914.¹⁷

British intelligence activities in Sweden were on a limited scale, compared with the far more extensive German operations. These were facilitated by the overall pro-German Swedish policy until the major policy changes during 1917, and the cordial relations between Swedish

and German intelligence.

German-Swedish Intelligence Cooperation

German–Swedish military contacts were intensified prior to the war, driven by overlapping German and Swedish strategic interests. In 1910, the heads of the German and Swedish general staffs met in Berlin, where they discussed German security guarantees in case of war, as well as German interest in a Swedish invasion of Finland in the event of war, with the aim of occupying the Åland islands.¹⁸ Against the background of these close relations and the German interest in Sweden as a prospective ally in a war against Russia, the establishment of close intelligence cooperation between the two countries is not surprising. German information gathering concerning the Swedish defence was handled through the cordial bilateral relations, while intelligence cooperation concerned targets and activities of mutual interest.

In some areas, this cooperation went beyond the exchange of intelligence and took the form of joint operations.

One of these operations was intelligence collection and subversion against Russia in Finland. The Finnish nationalists operating from Stockholm had not only “inherited” the agent network of the Swedish intelligence bureau, but had also established links to Germany, both for the dissemination of intelligence and the transfer of volunteers for military training in Germany. In Stockholm, cables sent by agents in Finland were passed on to the German legation by the Swedish intelligence bureau.¹⁹

Another joint operation concerned signal intelligence. The Swedish navy was in the process of acquiring wireless [communications](#), but had not reached a level where the radio communications of foreign powers were monitored. The Swedish general staff, however, had another kind of signals intelligence asset in the form of Russian diplomatic cables sent from St. Petersburg to allied and [neutral](#) capitals, and relayed through the Swedish Telegraph Administration. The general staff was provided with copies of these and other diplomatic cables, but the foreign department had no cryptological expertise that could cope with the Russian cypher-system. The cordial relations between the general staff and Germany, however, provided an opportunity. Shortly after the outbreak of the war, German representatives in Stockholm approached the general staff and suggested a joint venture. The Swedish intelligence should acquire copies of the cables and deliver them to the German legation, to be sent to Berlin. There, the German Foreign Office had the means to read them, obviously after having gained access to codebooks and other relevant cryptological documentation. One of the few Russian-speaking officers in the so-called [censorship](#) section of the general staff was transferred to Berlin under a false name and with strict orders not to

divulge anything about his actual mission, even to members of the Swedish legation. The intercepted telegrams were then sent on a regular basis from Stockholm to Berlin with the diplomatic mail, and the de-cyphered telegrams of relevance to Swedish intelligence were disseminated in the opposite direction.²⁰

The Russian cables were presumably of far greater value for the Germans than for the Swedes, but the reports from the Russian legation in Stockholm to the foreign ministry contained Russian assessments of the political development in Sweden, and of German pressure on Sweden to abandon [neutrality](#).²¹ This cooperation between the Swedish general staff and the German Foreign Office continued, with a short interruption in 1916, due to fears that British submarines operating in the Baltic would be able to seize the German diplomatic mail.

The Swedish Roundabout

The Swedish telegram network was not only a source for cables to and from Russia, and possibly cables from other countries in the Entente. With the outbreak of hostilities, the German foreign service was unable to use the international cables passing through London. In another concession, the Swedish foreign ministry allowed the Germans to use the Swedish traffic to and from Washington as a cover. German diplomatic telegrams were simply embedded in the coded Swedish messages. The entire German communication between Berlin and Washington was in this way relayed through Stockholm, an arrangement later known as “the Swedish roundabout”. This continued until 1915, when the British Foreign Office found out what was going on and protested against what they saw as un-neutral actions. The Swedish Foreign Ministry promised to discontinue the arrangement and to ensure that no German cable was sent between Sweden and Washington. Having promised this, the Swedish Foreign Office switched to another roundabout, this time letting the German cables go embedded in traffic to the embassies in Mexico City and Buenos Aires. This new arrangement was finally revealed in public following the publication in March 1917, of the famous [Zimmerman telegram](#) of 19 January 1917.²²

The role of “the Swedish roundabout” in the British interception of the Zimmerman telegram has been a point of controversy among historians and cryptologists. Based on the remaining archival material from the British Naval Intelligence Room 40, the most likely conclusion is that the Zimmerman telegram did not pass through the Swedish roundabout, but another and even more sensitive clandestine channel. The Germans had received permission to use U.S. State department telegrams in order to facilitate the mediation efforts of President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#). The version that the telegram emanated from “the Swedish

roundabout” was most likely a deception to hide the actual source, and the embarrassing fact that the British intelligence intercepted not only Swedish but also U.S. diplomatic cables.²³

Swedish Spy Fiction: Noble Germans, Belgian Villains and Naive Swedes

In Sweden, the fictionalization of intelligence had started long before the war in the form of the saw-grinder drama. Espionage was therefore probably to some extent an exhausted subject in Swedish popular fiction once the war broke out, but re-surfaced as a sub-theme in the fictionalization of the war. The most productive writer in this genre was the Swedish officer [Ivan Aminoff \(1868-1928\)](#), writing under the pseudonym Radsha. Of his fifteen war novels, published between September 1914 and 1915, two had an explicit espionage theme and are regarded as the first Swedish spy novels. The pro-German political bias is evident in Aminoff’s production, and is also reflected in his spy novels, as in *Spionen från Vogeserna* (The Spy from the Vosges) from October 1914, where the Germans are portrayed as noble heroes and in *Spionernas mästare* (The Master of Spies) from July 1915, where French and Belgian spies plot an Entente assault against Germany prior to the outbreak of the war. In *Mannen från Liège* (The Man from Liège), the Swedish adventure-novel writer [Gunnar Serner \(1886-1947\)](#), better known by his pseudonym Frank Heller, wrote from the opposite perspective, with the Germans as plotting aggressors. In this way, the spy novel became an arena for a literary proxy-war.²⁴

Aminoff’s pro-German narrative became increasingly unattractive as the war progressed, and in 1915 the publisher terminated the series, although the main reason was probably the impact of an overall war-weariness among Swedish readers.²⁵ Aminoff did however return with a final spy novel in 1917, *Den ljusskygge. En spionroman från huvudstaden* (The Shady Figure. A Spy Novel from the Capital). The story represented a new approach, portraying neutral Stockholm as an international spy hub, where the naive Swedes were challenged by decadent foreign influence and moral corruption, a theme more in line with later spy novels during the Second World War and the Cold War.

Conclusion

Like several other neutrals, Sweden became an arena for the intelligence activities of the belligerents. As such, the country played a more prominent role for Germany than for the Entente. The reasons were both geographical and political. German intelligence could use Sweden for intelligence collection and covert operations against both Britain and Russia. In the latter case, the Germans could facilitate secret cooperation with Swedish intelligence. For

Swedish intelligence and counter-intelligence, Russia remained the perceived dominating threat throughout the war, although from the October [Revolution](#) onwards, mainly in terms of ideological subversion.

Wilhelm Agrell, Lund University

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