The assassination of Olof Palme: Evidence and ideology

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Abstract. In February 1986, the Swedish premier was assassinated in a crime of political violence that remains unsolved at the time of writing. The present paper examines the various explanations that were proposed for this act, both in Sweden and in other Western countries. It will be shown how these explanations changed as the scope of the investigation grew in complexity and how investigators deviated more and more sharply from the 'official' Western view of terrorism. From early suspicion of traditional villains - Middle Eastern separatists or German leftists - attention has focused more recently on very different candidates, in Swedish business and intelligence circles. The aim of the paper is neither to solve the crime nor to produce any new evidence, but to study the changing ideological assumptions of the investigative process, particularly when dealing with sensitive political offenses.

In 1986, the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme was murdered in a Stockholm street. In the words of a much abused cliché, this truly was a crime which shocked a nation, especially as Sweden has very little tradition of political violence. Worse still, the crime remains unsolved at the time of writing, though various groups have been suggested as suspects. The continuing uncertainty has naturally caused intense criticism of Swedish law-enforcement, so that the Palme affair seems likely to be one of the most serious political crises in the modern history of that country.

This paper attempts to interpret the investigation in light of the ideological assumptions which guided (and apparently misguided) its course. It should be said from the outset that the aim of the paper is strictly limited in scope: no new breakthrough is claimed, and the author can present no novel solution of the crime. However, it is hoped that an account like this is justified by the lack of familiarity with the Palme case in the USA. The whole incident deserves to be far better known. In addition, the major focus of the paper is the secondary and journalistic sources which shaped public attitudes to the crime and its context. These accounts may or may not reflect objective reality, or even the true beliefs of the agencies responsible for much of the information presented. However, such a study of journalistic accounts is valuable in illustrating the creation and manipulation of public attitudes towards terrorism and political violence. (Major sources throughout include Johnstone 1987; Reeves 1987; Lohr 1986 a–c; 1988.)

Examining the process of investigation of the Palme killing undoubtedly
were apparently blamed by other terrorist groups for their own crimes – as in the 1988 murder of a German diplomat in Paris (Ibrahim 1988).

After the assassination, the police often let it be known that this Kurdish angle was the ‘main track’ of the investigation, and there is little doubt that this was the lead about which Holmer so often expressed himself ‘95% certain’. In December 1986 and January 1987, twenty Kurds were arrested in connection with the Palme case and three were actually charged (Clines 1986). However, the prosecutor decided almost immediately that insufficient evidence existed to support the charges, and all suspects were freed. By the start of 1987, all leads in this direction had collapsed – and Holmer lost control of the investigation.

As one might expect, there were some who claimed a Palestinian role in this act of terrorism, though this view possessed little credibility. In particular, there had been no claim of responsibility from this quarter. Tales of Palestinian involvement grew out of recent conflicts between Sweden and the PLO: shortly before the crime, Sweden had expelled or arrested several PLO representatives. However, the PLO finds in Sweden one of its best European friends, and involvement in the Palme killing is most unlikely.

The ultra-right

In the American context, the focus on terrorism as a purely foreign phenomenon tends to be a politically conservative creed, and it is used as a weapon to denounce leftist groups like the Palestinians (Herman 1982; Falk 1988). It should be noted that the Swedish search for foreign conspirators also included rightist enemies, natural enough in view of Sweden’s international position. There were several perceived enemies on the far Right, and most of the assassination theories posited a conspiracy between two or more of these candidates.

In the early stages of the investigation, the prime suspect had been Ake Lennart Viktor Gunnarsson, a former member of an ultra-right group, the European Workers’ Party. This group was founded in 1974, and Gunnarsson was a member in early 1985 (Lohr 1986b). The party has connections to the Lyndon Larouche movement in the United States. Gunnarsson was originally held as a ‘perpetrator’, but was subsequently released for lack of evidence. When American police raided Larouche offices in Washington in late 1986, notebooks and materials contained cryptic reference to the Palme killing, though the Larouche followers themselves blamed the Soviets for the crime (‘Notebooks cite Palme slaying’ 1986).

The Larouche angle raised other questions about possible involvement by international rightist groups or terrorist movements. Attention focused partic-
ularly on Chile and its very active secret service, who had long-standing links to international terrorism. Olof Palme had been a bitter opponent of the military junta that came to power in that country in 1973 (Lelyveld 1986c). He had cooperated with Chilean exiles like Orlando Letelier in attacks on Chile; and he had granted refuge and asylum to many fleeing the junta. In the late 1970s, the Chilean government and secret police had allegedly considered putting out a contract on the Swedish leader. Evidence for this came from Michael Townley, an American employed by Chilean intelligence, who had been involved in the 1976 killing of Letelier in Washington, D.C. (Freed and Landis 1980). After his arrest, he had provided authorities with a great deal of information, and one story he told concerned an attack on Palme that he was to have carried out in 1976 at a Madrid meeting of Social Democratic leaders. The story about a plot first surfaced from Chilean exile sources in 1977, and was confirmed in 1979.

The earlier conspiracy certainly does not implicate Chile directly in the assassination, but investigations in this area point to further links between rightist regimes in Latin America and terrorist acts in Europe. In particular, some attention was now directed on the Croats, an ethnic minority from what is now Yugoslavia. Like the Kurds, they seek to achieve their own independent homeland, and their militant groups are closely tied to international terrorist and fascist groups (Anderson and Anderson 1986). Croat terrorists have been active in the Mediterranean immigrant community in Sweden and other north European countries. In the early 1970s, Croat groups killed the Yugoslav ambassador to Sweden, and the assassins fled to Paraguay, where they worked closely with that country's military rulers. Fascist terrorists like Townley have on occasion worked with and through Croat activists, and it is natural to suggest that this is where the Chileans or their like might have found assassins in Sweden.

In the early stages of the investigation, by far the best available lead concerned Gunnarsson and the Swedish ultra-right. Of course, even if his complicity had been proved, it would not have answered questions about the wider forces directing or initiating the act. But the inquiries growing out of his alleged role did in fact indicate a wide range of possible suspects, by no means confined to private groups or movements. Particularly during 1987, the character of the investigation shifted substantially, with the official police inquiry increasingly confined to pursuing sterile leads about nationalist terrorists. Meanwhile, abundant new evidence came to light, which suggested a wholly different context for the assassination. The new information not only offered a new cast of protagonists, it also shifted the inquiry from the back-street activities of terrorist cells to the activities of governments — and important questions were now raised about the role of the Swedish government, either in the act itself, or at least in the ineffective investigation.