

The Holocaust and Memory Culture: The Case of Sweden¹

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The Holocaust was not conceptualized as such in Sweden until the early 1980s. Until then, the main focus in both scholarly and public discussion of the Second World War was on the consequences for Sweden. The research project *Sweden during the period of the Second World War*, in Swedish “Sverige under andra världskriget”, SUAV for short, dealt with the war primarily from political, diplomatic and military perspectives. In this project, which produced twenty PhD dissertations in history and two anthologies between 1971 and 1986, the Holocaust was not regarded as related to Swedish history (Ekman 1979; Ekman 1986). Also, when the project was placed in an international context in a conference in the House of Parliament in Stockholm in 1995, the issue of the Holocaust and Sweden was not approached (Ekman/Edling 1997). Only one of the dissertations in the SUAV project touched upon the issue: Hans Lindberg analyzed Swedish refugee policy in the period immediately before the Holocaust (Lindberg 1973).

Because known facts about Swedish complicity in Nazi German policies during the first war years were usually avoided in the historical studies, it is possible to argue that the Swedish example bears some resemblance to the historiography on the war in the first post-war decades in one of the belligerent states, France (Bosworth 1994). It seems that a vague sense of shame made historians play down the subjects of the Jewish policy of the Vichy regime and Sweden’s refugee policy vis-à-vis Jewish people (Ekman 2003; Heuman 2006).

1 I thank Klas-Göran Karlsson for valuable comments on the first draft of this article.

In Sweden, the specific interest in the history of the Holocaust emerged from the memory turn in historical research, on the one hand, and from the impact of mass culture on historical science, on the other. The best known example of mass culture influencing the historical knowledge of the Holocaust was the American television series *The Holocaust*. It was broadcast in Sweden in 1979 under the title *Förintelsen*, which literally means “the annihilation.” The term “Förintelsen” became the ubiquitous word for the Holocaust in Swedish. It came to be spelled with a capital “F”. This is not according to the ordinary spelling rules in Swedish. In Swedish, the concept of “the Holocaust” acquired an extremely unique quality (Andersson 2002; Andersson 2003; Gerner & Karlsson 2003).

The combination of the memory dimension in historical science and historical fiction in mass culture helped shape a context of morality issues concerning research subjects related to the Holocaust. This tilt towards moral issues becomes evident when one compares the previous Swedish historiography on Sweden during the Second World War with the following Swedish historiography on Sweden and its relation to the Holocaust. Although it is possible to discern both a moralist and a realist paradigm in public debate during the war and immediately after it, “the Holocaust as a matter that concerns Sweden” was briefly approached only once before the 1990s, namely in 1963 in the supplement volume of the new edition of Carl Grimberg’s popular world history (Ekman 2003: 19).

The national memory of the Holocaust

The non-conceptualization of the Holocaust did not mean that the extermination of the Jewish people was a totally neglected issue in Swedish historiography. However, the focus was not on the fate of the Jews but rather on two Swedish personalities who became mythologized as rescuers of Jews, Raoul Wallenberg and Folke Bernadotte. Their actions concerned Jews in Budapest in 1944, and prisoners – some of whom happened to be Jews – in concentration camps in northern Germany in early 1945, respectively. In the summer of 1944, the Swedish government allowed the US War Refugee Board to channel money through the Swedish businessman Raoul Wallenberg to enable the rescue of Jews in Budapest. The latter was given the status as a diplomat at the Swedish legation in Budapest and was able to rescue Jews by distributing Swedish passports to prospective victims and organizing their legal escape (Lajos 2004). In early 1945, the chairman of the Swedish Red Cross,

Count Folke Bernadotte, made an agreement with the Nazi regime allowing him to bring Scandinavian prisoners and some others from Nazi concentration camps to Sweden in special buses, “the White Buses” (Persson 2002).

During the first decades after the war, Swedish society took pride in the reputation of having rescued Jewish people from the Nazis. In addition to Wallenberg’s and Bernadotte’s missions, the most famous action was the admission of more than 7000 Danish Jews who, aided by Danish fishermen and thanks to an early warning about imminent deportation to German concentration camps, managed to escape across the straits of Öresund in October 1943 (Kreth/Morgensen 1995). However, this action was not analyzed in Swedish historical science until it was discussed, in a comparative perspective, in a monograph by an American historian in 1987 and in a PhD dissertation from Stockholm University in 2006 (Byström 2006; Koblik 1988).

Both Wallenberg and Bernadotte became national heroes. Their tragic fates made these figures overshadow those whom they had saved. Wallenberg disappeared after having been arrested by Soviet troops in Debrecen in Hungary on 17 January 1945. Jewish terrorists assassinated Bernadotte in Jerusalem in September 1948 when he was there on a UN mission to solve the conflict between Israel and the Arabs of Palestine.

A dissertation on the Wallenberg mission, which Attila Lajos from Växjö University published in 2004, broke new ground in the sense that it focused on the events themselves on location in Budapest rather than on Wallenberg (Lajos 2004). Lajos was the first to use Hungarian language sources. Swedish colleagues criticized Lajos for unduly de-heroizing Wallenberg (Liljegren 2004; Lundmark 2004; Wahlbäck 2004; Zander 2006). However, Lajos’s most important result was that he was able to demonstrate that all previous Swedish research on Wallenberg had focused on the man and not on the Jewish people who he rescued. In this way, the impression of a rather belated Swedish scholarly interest in the Holocaust as such was reaffirmed.

In a similar way as Wallenberg’s mission, Bernadotte’s mission has also been re-evaluated. A historian from Gothenburg University, Ingrid Lomfors, has broken new ground by highlighting the fact that this mission was selective: Scandinavians were to be rescued first and others, including Jews, only if this was expedient. The facts about the manner in which the mission was carried out had been known already when it occurred. However, Lomfors argued that Bernadotte’s mission primarily and consciously selected non-Jews (Lomfors 2005a; Lomfors 2005b). The political scientist Sune Persson, also from Gothenburg University

contested Lomfors's conclusion. He maintained that Bernadotte did his utmost to rescue anyone within reach (Lomfors 2002; Persson 2003).

It is a fact that Bernadotte's mission rescued between five and six thousand Jewish people among a total of about 21 000 prisoners. Some of these, many of whom were Polish women, were brought to southern Sweden, where Lund University is situated. In 1945, the University had a Polish lecturer, Zygmunt Lakocinski. In 1945, he served as an interpreter for the Polish speaking Jewish women who had been rescued from the Ravensbrück camp. He realized that the memories of the rescued women were worth preserving, not least because they could be used as testimonies in the expected trials of Nazi war criminals once the war had ended. Lakocinski saw to it that five hundred individuals of the rescued were interviewed and that their stories were recorded (Kulturhistoriska föreningen för södra Sverige 2004).

The oral history of survivors

At the time when the prisoners who had been rescued from the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbrück arrived in Sweden, there was at Lund University a professor of history named Sture Bolin. He took a professional interest in the histories of the former concentration camp inmates. In 1944, Bolin had published the book *The One-sided Violence*, an analysis of Nazi propaganda and diplomacy on the eve of the Second World War (Bolin 1944). Bolin designed a research program dealing with the memories of the rescued concentration camp inmates and appointed Zygmunt Lakocinski as director of the research. From the professional point of view this was a pioneering project, because at the time nobody had cared to collect testimonies of Nazi camp survivors using systematic, scholarly methods of investigation: it was oral history *avant le mot*. Also in another respect Bolin's initiative was before its time. Interviews had certainly been used as source material for scholars, but mainly in ethnological studies. Now a highly skilled professional historian took an initiative that can be seen, in retrospect, as an early call for memory research. Sture Bolin apparently felt that something exceptional had occurred and that this called for extraordinary measures in order to document it.

Two Swedish government agencies, *Statens Arbetsmarknadskommision* (The State Labour Market Committee) and *Statens utlänningskommision* (The State Committee on Foreigners) financed the interview work. It was carried out by an enlightenment agency, *The Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs*, which was established in 1938 with the aim

of educating the Swedish public about international politics and which had close connections to the Swedish ministries of defense and of foreign affairs.

As was mentioned above, Lakocinski carried out 500 interviews. However, because the Swedish state ceased to sponsor the project, in November 1946 this work came to an end without the materials being published. In 1974 the archival materials were deposited in the University Library in Lund. In 1995, fifty years after the original documentation project, the archive was opened to research (Universitetsbiblioteket Lunds Universitet 2005). This became possible thanks to donations from a number of private Swedish and foreign foundations.² Later, the Swedish state agency *The Forum of Living History* also gave financial support to the project.

However, only a year and a half after the end of the Second World War, the Swedish authorities lost interest in the memories of the survivors. The remembrances of the war among these new inhabitants in Sweden, many of whom later became Swedish citizens, were relegated to the dusty shelves of the University Library in Lund. Only thanks to the new interest in a new historical period, letters, annotations and artifacts made by the inmates of the Ravensbrück concentration camp during their imprisonment finally came to form a permanent exhibition at the ethnographic museum *Kulturen (Culture)* in Lund. (Nilsson Nylander 2004; Ravensbrück project 2005). The museum *Kulturen* had been founded in 1892. Its aim was to “save artifacts from the old peasant society that was about to disappear.” Its founder, Georg J:son Karlin also included in the collections artifacts from all over the world. The idea was that in order to understand their own culture, Swedes must be given the opportunity to compare it with other cultures (Om Kulturen 2009). It is noteworthy that thanks to the comparative vision of its founder, memorabilia from the nadir of human culture, the Holocaust, became an exhibit in a Swedish museum of culture.

In 2005, the year after the permanent exhibition in *Kulturen* opened, a number of the interviews from 1945 with the survivors from Ravensbrück finally became available for the Swedish public. In his book “Voices that never fall silent”, Artur Szulc presented Lakocinski and his work and published witness reports from Ravensbrück together with reports from Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Majdanek, Plaszow, Treblinka, Sachsenhausen, and Stutthof (Szulc 2005).

2 The sponsors were *Eduard and Sophie Heckscher's Foundation*, *The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture*, *The Nordenstedt Foundation*, *The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany*, *Margit and Lennart Carlsson's Foundation* and *The Forum for Living History*.

It is evident that neither Swedish civil society nor the authorities had recognized a need to highlight the fate of the surviving victims from the Holocaust in spite of the fact that detailed information on their suffering was available already in 1945. The delay of fifty and almost sixty years until the opening of the archives and the exhibition, respectively, is an eloquent example of the Swedish policy and culture of silence concerning the fate of the victims of the Holocaust.

Another memory – the Swedish self-examination

In 1991, the journalist Maria-Pia Boëthius published a book which was highly critical of Swedish concessions to German demands during the war (Boëthius 1991). New research that was inspired by the debate caused by Boëthius's book placed these concessions in focus. Also, the rather authoritarian Swedish social policy came under scrutiny within the wider context of racism. The Swedish eugenics program which was initiated before the war and continued into the 1970s became the subject of both research and public debate (Tydén 2002; Zaremba 1999).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Sweden changed from being culturally rather homogenous into becoming a multicultural country. Successive waves of immigrants, mainly from other European countries, had been assimilated or at least very well integrated into Swedish society from the Middle Ages until the 1960s. The last such wave happened to be those secularized Polish Jews who left Poland in the wake of the antisemitic policies after the 1967 Israel-Arab states war and the student protests against Soviet interference in Polish cultural affairs in 1968. However, beginning in the 1970s, a large number of people arrived who remained less well integrated. They were imported labor and political refugees. Many came from Latin America and the Middle East. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, there were manifestations of xenophobia and racism in Swedish society targeting the new categories of immigrants. This development clashed with official policy and it tainted the image of the morally good Sweden. Towards the end of the 1990s, the interest in the Holocaust became part of Swedish official policy exactly because the authorities felt a need to fight xenophobia and racism by way of educating about the Holocaust. It was presumed that widespread knowledge of the Holocaust would cure Swedish society from xenophobia and racism.

A news report in the Swedish radio became the triggering event for the official Swedish interest in the Holocaust. The news was that in June 1997 a research institute in Stockholm, CEIFO, published a survey which said that Swedish youth did not know much about the Holocaust.

The Swedish premier Göran Persson was alarmed and took up the issue in the Parliament during its last session before the summer recess. The effect of Persson's initiative was a parliamentary resolution on the creation of an information agency. It was called *Living history*. Already in the autumn, the agency published its first book about the Holocaust, aimed at a broad public (Bruchfeldt/Levine 1997). In 2003, *The Forum for Living History* became a state institution (Karlsson 2003: 15-16).³

The campaigns of *Living History* created an increased interest also in research about Sweden's relation to different aspects of the Holocaust. Ten years after the inception of *Living History*, two substantial historical anthologies presented investigations of Sweden's relations with Nazi Germany and Swedish policy vis-à-vis Jewish refugees in the period 1920-1950 (Andersson/Kvist Geverts 2008; Andersson/Tydén 2007). In his dissertation one of the contributors to the first volume, Mikael Byström, showed that there were attitudes and views among Swedish bureaucrats concerning Jewish people that implied that if Sweden had been under direct Nazi control, Jews in Sweden and especially the non-citizens among these people might have been treated in the same manner as the Vichy regime treated Jewish people (Byström 2006).

In another dissertation, Karin Kvist Geverts applied the concept of "antisemitic background noise" as an explanatory factor. The idea is that Swedish bureaucrats who were responsible for implementing refugee policies, although they were not consciously antisemitic, anyhow acted upon premises that said that Jews were a special people that Swedish society should be wary of receiving and therefore restrict immigration of (Kvist Geverts 2008b). Kvist Geverts argued that antisemitic⁴ background noise was normal in Sweden in the 1930s. Clerks could discharge open antisemitism at the same time as they gave expression to antisemitic ideas (Kvist Geverts 2008a). The implication is that Swedish society was imbued with a kind of subtle, seemingly harmless antisemitism, the consequences of which had deadly consequences for the targets, the Jewish refugees who were not accepted by Sweden.

3 The homepage is at www.levandehistoria.se

4 Since there is no such thing as "semitism", the term used in this text for hatred of Jews, *antisemitism*, is not hyphenated. Cf Langmuir (1996: 16)

The Holocaust and communism in Swedish historical culture

Among historians based at Lund University, the belated Swedish interest in Holocaust research took an international turn. In 2001, the research project “The Holocaust in European Historical Culture” was launched, with funding from the Tercentenary Foundation of the Bank of Sweden. By 2008, this project had produced three PhD dissertations, three anthologies and one monograph (Dietsch 2006; Gerner/ Karlsson 2005; Karlsson/Zander 2003; Karlsson/Zander 2006; Karlsson/Zander 2008; Sniegón 2008; Tossavainen 2006). The focus was not on historiography but on the manifestations of historical consciousness related to the Holocaust, in museums, films, novels, places of commemoration and monuments in a number of west European states – the Scandinavian countries, Germany, Great Britain, France and Italy – and Israel. The project also covered former communist countries – Croatia, Czechoslovakia (and the Czech and Slovak Republics), the GDR, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia and Ukraine. The Holocaust was treated together with investigations concerning the place in historical culture of the other experience of terror in these societies, Stalinism. The focus on historical culture and not on history *per se* produced the result that the two horrors of the Holocaust and of Stalinist repression were seen not only as complementary evils but also as competing for space in the historical culture of the ex-communist states.

Members of the research project on the Holocaust in Lund taught about crimes against humanity in the Stalinist Soviet Union in education programs for school teachers and journalists that were arranged by *The Forum for Living History*. The idea was to invite reflections and discussions on the similarities and dissimilarities between the two totalitarian systems with respect to their policy of mass murder. Finally, ten years after its inception, *The Forum for Living History* launched an education program on the crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes. The *Forum* chose to put a special focus on Joseph Stalin’s USSR, Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia.

The influence of international historical studies on the place of the Holocaust and Communism in the historical culture of former Communist states in Europe, on the one hand, and on the other hand views among political groupings in Sweden – mainly but not exclusively connected to the Liberal Party – that Communist regimes had violated human rights to such a degree, resulted in the thesis that it was relevant to teach the Swedish public about these regimes as well.

Very few historians and social scientists in Sweden have taken an interest in the study of Communist regimes. Placing Communism seemingly on an equal footing with Nazism was a new and shocking experience. Those Swedish academics who did not study Communist regimes thus experienced the new addition to the program of the *Forum for Living History* in Sweden as an expression of anti-Communism. More than five hundred Swedish academic historians and social scientists protested against the addition of the communist dimension of genocide by way of a public call for condemnation of the new program and, moreover, for the abolishment of *The Forum for Living History* as such (Historieuppropet 2008). The enlightenment project on Communist crimes thus released a roll call among Swedish intellectuals that would not accept any enlightenment project that included teaching about the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Communist regimes.

It is not a matter of people belonging to the Communist Party of Sweden in its nonagenarian guise as The Left Party, but rather of identification with the utopian gleaming goals of the communist ideology and cause. Although individuals had condemned the organization of *Living History* in 1997, no one had bothered to organize a public appeal against it. The abolishment appeal in 2008 ostentatiously aimed at the very idea of state-sponsored enlightenment projects. It is relevant to note that the chosen protest strategy invoked the idea of the night-watch state, an idea which is usually linked to liberal rather than socialist political ideology. It goes without saying that if this logic became the rule, rather many institutions in Swedish society would have to be dismantled, including different authorities that enlighten the public.

In this context, it is relevant to mention that a book on crimes against humanity under communist regimes, which was published at the time of the new project by *The Forum for Living History*, met high academic quality standards. The book, an overview of academic research in English, German, Russian, Chinese (Mandarin) and Swedish on the regimes of Stalinist Russia, Mao's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia, actually happened to throw a certain light on the protest. The appeal appeared to be directed not against a simplifying popularization but against an informative text that reflected the state of the art in communist studies. The authors of the book defined crimes against humanity as "murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against civilian populations, before or during the war; or persecution on political, racial or religious grounds" (Karlsson/Schoenhals 2008: 5). They applied this standard of judgment to their history of Stalin's, Mao's and Pol Pot's regimes.

Genocidal background noise

The Holocaust has always been regarded with abhorrence by an overwhelming majority of Swedish intellectuals and as has been noted above, there was no organized protest movement against the activities of *The Forum for Living History* concerning teaching the history of the Holocaust. Whereas, in spite of the label “Living History”, the Holocaust had been firmly anchored in the past, Communism really is living history. One of the parties in the Swedish parliament, although it calls itself simply “The Left Party”, traces its ancestry back to the Swedish Communist Party. The Left Party celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2007, i.e., on the anniversary of the party that had been founded in 1917 and which had been a member of the Communist International and thereafter had nurtured intimate contacts with and received financial support from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Björlin 2001).

The first relevant point is that the Swedish Left Party is a continuation party of and not a successor party to the Swedish Communist Party. The Swedish Left Party thus has inherited the historical legacy of the so-called “real existing socialism”, including Stalinism. The objection that many individual members of the Left Party are decent people is another matter. It might well be that members of Fascist parties also are decent people. What is relevant here is the historical legacy of communism when it comes to the societal role of direct successor parties today, such as the Communist party in the contemporary Czech Republic and, what is relevant in the present context of Sweden, the Swedish Left Party which claims heritage from the Swedish Communist Party (from 1917), which was a member of the Comintern.

The second relevant point is exactly that, in contrast to Nazism, Communism is a living ideology in contemporary Sweden. The issue is whether it should be treated by Swedish state agencies – the education system, museums and the Forum on Living History – as equally menacing to society as Holocaust denial, antisemitism and racism.

“Crimes against humanity committed by Communist regimes” is a complex concept. In the Swedish context, the concept was coined as an antidote to the Holocaust rather than to “the crimes of Nazism”. The argument was that the picture of the genocides of the twentieth century would be incomplete if Communist crimes were not treated in historiography and enlightenment work alongside the Holocaust. The framework of interpretation for the new project on Communist regimes was according to the basic tenet of *Living history*, i.e. that ideology is a necessary precondition for genocide. In a similar way as the Holocaust was, as it were, programmed in Nazi ideology, the Communist mass murders

– conceptualized as genocide – were programmed in communist ideology under Stalin’s, Mao’s and Pol Pot’s regimes, i.e. the three Communist regimes that the Forum selected as the focal points of the new project. This was the idea behind the new project.

Undoubtedly, the “crimes against humanity committed by Communist regimes” were placed upon the agenda of *Living History* because the Holocaust was there. One notes that the theory of totalitarianism is tacitly accepted as a framework. However, whereas there probably is a rather broad consensus among non-specialists (concerning Nazism) in the historical profession, as well as among the public in general, that there is a causal link between Nazi ideology and the Holocaust, people with no specialist knowledge about Communism in the USSR, China and Cambodia, such as the more than 500 signatories of the appeal against the enlightenment project about Communist regimes, deny that there is a corresponding link between Stalinist, Maoist and Cambodian Communism and the mass murders committed by these regimes.

It is a reasonable hypothesis that most of the signatories of the appeal referred to above did not regard themselves as defending crimes in the name of Communism. Rather, one is confronted with the counterpart to what Karin Kvist Geverts has labeled the “antisemitic background noise”. The “communist background noise” comes from the idea that communism is to be thought of as immanently and essentially “good” and that consequently, all real existing historical communist regimes must be exempted from moral judgment.

Living history in Sweden – beyond the Holocaust

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Swedish historical research on the topic of Sweden and crimes of Communist regimes was in the same stage as Swedish Holocaust research had been some thirty years earlier. The authors of *Living History’s* report on the historiography on Communist crimes, Klas-Göran Karlsson and Michel Schoenhals from Lund University, ended their presentation with the following observation:

“How did Swedes, Swedish institutions and Sweden react to the crimes against humanity that were committed by communist regimes, both in the time when they were executed and after? In spite of remarkable recent research initiatives this is a field of research that is only budding.” (Karlsson/Schoenhals 2008: 5)

Half a century after the end of the Second World War, the shadow of Nazism returned in Swedish historical consciousness, but in a new way. The Swedish People's Home came in for critical scrutiny by both historians and journalists. Sweden's complicity in Hitler's policy was highlighted and what could be interpreted as totalitarian traits of the welfare state, i.e., compulsory sterilization of citizens, came into focus. In 1997, the Prime Minister Göran Persson rang the alarm bell concerning lack of historical knowledge about the Holocaust among Swedish youth. As a result, the Swedish Parliament decided to launch the educational project "Living history". Information on Nazism and the Holocaust was used as an instrument to combat xenophobia among the Swedish youth.

Ten years after the original initiative, in 2007, the Swedish government decided to let *The Forum of Living history* launch a second educational project. This time it was about crimes against humanity under Communist regimes. The appeal by more than five hundred Swedish historians and social scientists against this project can be interpreted as having been motivated by the fear that it would make possible "the identification of thought patterns and rhetorical figures in contemporary debates and politics" and compromise the Communist ideology. It is highly relevant to refer to the concept of "background noise" in this context. Kvist-Geverts demonstrated that it was not a matter of Swedish officials being antisemitic, but that the cases they handled involving Jews implied a discrimination against Jews in general. Similarly, those Swedish historical scholars and social scientists who do not want special enlightenment campaigns on Communist regimes in the contemporary world, especially those in China, Cuba and North Korea, must be suspected of harboring the view that Communist regimes should not be criticized to such an extent that Communist ideology as such becomes unattractive.

The quote in the preceding paragraph is taken from another context: the editors of the volume with articles on the Swedish Jewish refugee policy in 1920-1950 explicitly argued that their research was instrumental for making contemporary Swedish refugee policy humanitarian, because the historical knowledge concerning the earlier – inhuman – treatment of refugees made possible "the identification of thought patterns and rhetorical figures in contemporary debates and politics". Andersson and Kvist-Geverts refer to racism, but the observation is also valid in respect to other ideologies, for example Communism. Whether some people hold that a communist background noise is good and beneficial does not detract from the general relevance of the observation (Andersson/Kvist Geverts 2008: 8). As a consequence of the creation of *The Forum for Living History*, Swedish historical science has been en-

couraged to leave the academic ivory tower and engage in the education of Swedish youth and ordinary citizens about crimes against humanity.

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