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From Vietnam to Iraq

Anna Lindh and the Abandoned Legacy of Olof Palme

Feeling the need for some new clothes to wear in a crucial TV debate scheduled for that evening, Sweden's foreign minister decided to go shopping on the afternoon of 10 September 2003.

Walking the few hundred yards from the foreign ministry to Stockholm's retail centre with a friend, Anna Lindh would have likely passed some of the thousands upon thousands of posters papering the country with her image exhorting Swedish voters to vote "Yes" to membership in the European Monetary Union (EMU) in the referendum to be held four days hence — the subject of that evening's debate.

There were sound political reasons for choosing the Social Democratic government's foreign minister — and not its prime minister — as the public face of the "Yes" campaign. Her shopping companion that day, Eva Franchell, would later explain:

"Despite massive support from the business community, the unions and the liberal-conservative parties, the voters were sceptical about the EMU.... Many people thought that [Prime Minister] Göran Persson was arrogant and had no interest in what ordinary people thought. He antagonized voters. The 'Yes' campaign decided to tone down his role, and instead promote Anna Lindh more aggressively. Soon she was on every campaign poster."¹

She was also widely featured in the media and, prior to this campaign, was already well-known due to her prominent role as foreign minister and a political career extending over three decades.



Anna Lindh was the public face of the "Yes to EMU" campaign.

Familiar figure

Thus, there would have been few who did not recognize the relatively short blond woman as she strolled with a companion through the centre of the nation's capital in broad daylight. There were no bodyguards, a normal condition for leading politicians in Sweden at that time.

One who did recognize the unprotected foreign minister was a troubled young man named Mijailo Mijailović who was leaving the NK shopping gallery just as Anna Lindh entered at around 4 p.m. He turned and followed her to the second floor, where he stabbed her with a knife on the arms and in the stomach. It was over in less than a minute and he quickly left the shopping gallery.

The knife had penetrated Anna Lindh's liver and caused profuse internal bleeding requiring 80 litres of blood transfusion. Surgeons believed at first that they had managed to save her life. But after several hours her condition worsened and she died around 5:30 a.m. the next day, September 11th.

Not surprisingly, the violent death of the cheerful youngish woman who was perhaps the most popular politician in the country caused a national trauma — not least because it recalled the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme not 500 metres distant around midnight on 28 February 1986.²

The EMU campaign was suspended for the remaining four days, amidst speculation that the tragedy might result in the favourable outcome that Anna Lindh had urged upon the voters. As predicted, however, membership in the EMU was rejected by a wide margin — roughly 56 - 42 per cent.

“With two national leaders murdered in public during the space of seventeen years, one might get the impression that Sweden is an unusually violent society. Actually, however, it is generally just the opposite....

“Not even the murder of Olof Palme had any significant effect on the open nature of Swedish society.

I recall, for example, visiting the parliament buildings just three years after Palme's death.... Presenting myself to the guard on duty in my heavily accented Swedish, I was waved on without so much as a cursory glance at the contents of my backpack....”³

“No car, no friends, no chance”

Inevitably, there was speculation that the murder of Anna Lindh might somehow be related to the occasionally heated EMU campaign, or to one of the contentious issues she dealt with as foreign minister. The killer had given no indication of any motive, and had quickly escaped.

But he had left behind some physical evidence which, together with tips provided to the police, enabled his arrest two weeks later. The suspect was Mijailo Mijailović, who had been born in Stockholm 24 years earlier to parents who had immigrated from a town south of Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in the 1960s. At the age of six, he was sent to live with his grandparents in the old country for schooling, but returned to Sweden seven years later when civil war broke out.

The following years did not go well. There were frequent visits to psychiatrists, fits of violence which included a knife attack on his father, threats to kill a young woman and her mother, convictions for violations of weapons laws, etc.

Mijailović at first denied having anything to do with the murder. But confronted with strong evidence, he eventually acknowledged guilt in early January 2004. Three months later he was sentenced to life imprisonment and is unlikely ever to be released. Six months after that — one year after the murder — he renounced his Swedish citizenship and is now solely a citizen of Serbia.

Mijailo Mijailović has been reluctant to discuss his reasons for killing Anna Lindh, but in a rare interview in 2011 explained: “I thought: Now I've spotted a politician. They'll, like — now they'll see. I was living on unemployment insurance, sick pay. No car, no friends, no chance.... It's people like me that get recruited to be terrorists, you understand.”⁴

There has never emerged any evidence to suggest that Mijailović was assisted in the murder by anyone else in any way.

From Palme to Persson

It would have been implausible to predict Anna Lindh's enthusiasm for the European Union and its devices at the start of her political career when she headed the Social Democratic Party's youth wing (SSU). Back then she dismissed the EU's predecessor, the European Community, as "a capitalistic club devoid of genuine democracy".⁵

Inspired by Olof Palme, she had joined the SSU at age 12 and was soon elected to lead her local chapter. One of her first initiatives was an exhibition about the Vietnam War, to which Palme was an eloquent and influential opponent.

Another horrific element of U.S. foreign policy that was fervently opposed by Palme's SDP and Lindh's SSU was the military coup against the Allende government in Chile which was launched on 11 September 1973 — thirty years to the day before the death of Anna Lindh.

But the SDP underwent a drastic transformation after the murder of Olof Palme, which may well have been the intent of his elimination.

A fateful step was taken in 1994 when Sweden was manoeuvred into the European Union by means that would not have surprised the young Anna Lindh — a referendum that was devoid of genuine democracy.⁶

By this time, however, she was on her way upward in the party hierarchy — first as a member of parliament, then in the SDP's executive committee, as Environment Minister (1994-98), and finally as Foreign Minister (1998-2003).



Anna Lindh in her room at age 17, flanked by Che Guevara and Karl Marx.

During all this time — especially after Göran Persson succeeded Palme's successor, Ingvar Carlsson, as party leader in 1996 — the Social Democratic Party was becoming decreasingly social democratic and increasingly neo-liberal. There would be no more disparaging references to "capitalistic clubs" and such like.

More crucially for the role of foreign minister, the party's long-standing commitment to peaceful neutrality was abandoned under the domineering guidance of Göran Persson. In a deceitful process that has been called a "tyranny of small steps", Sweden has been incorporated into the USA/NATO military alliance⁷ — thus far unofficially, so as not to further dismay and repel the steadily shrinking grassroots.⁸

Among the many consequences: U.S. troops are now stationed on Swedish soil, most likely for many years to come, and Swedish troops have participated in U.S. wars of aggression in the Balkans, Libya and Afghanistan. All signs point to a steady increase of such collaboration in the years to come.⁹

There is little doubt that membership in the European Union has encouraged and accelerated these developments, just as Olof Palme and many others had warned.

Adaptable perspective

With few exceptions and occasional flashes of her former self, Anna Lindh adapted her public views to the new party doctrine — so much so that as foreign minister she parroted U.S. propaganda to justify the superpower's aggression against Iraq, to cite one example.

That prompted a response from the board of the TFF peace institute: "The speech by Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh for United Nations Day was to a great extent about Iraq.... On UN Day, one would have expected her to follow Sweden's traditional foreign policy orientation and analyse the actual threat to international peace and security... to discuss creative measures to preserve peace in the region and hinder the United States' mobilisation for an attack, which is already at a very advanced stage.

"But instead of giving the inspectors a chance, the Minister chose to support the war option.... Many in the world expect totally different, more independent, genuine conflict management and peace-promoting measures from Sweden."¹⁰

Whatever the extent to which such expectations were justified, they were rarely met during Anna Lindh's time as foreign minister, and even less today. As one of many examples: Swedish troops were once a valued mainstay of U.N. peacekeeping operations. Today there are none serving under the U.N. flag. Instead, they fight alongside USA/NATO troops, while a duplicitous political leadership assures the folks back home that Sweden is still a non-aligned country.

As foreign minister, Anna Lindh often aligned herself with her counterparts in USA/NATO countries. One of them was Madeleine Albright, the U.S. foreign minister who once proclaimed that "it was worth it" to impose sanctions which caused the deaths of over 500,000 Iraqi civilians.

Albright was also a key player in the war against Yugoslavia which included the bombing of Belgrade, the city where she had found refuge from Nazi Germany during World War II. The bombing was heavy enough to break some windows in the home of the Swedish ambassador some ten kilometres distant. Anna Lindh's response? She "said on radio that perhaps such big bombs should not be used in city centres."¹¹

That was the extent of her objection to that USA/NATO war of aggression. It is therefore appropriate that, on the tenth anniversary of her murder, the recipient of the Anna Lindh Award should be Madeleine Albright.

For these and other reasons, Anna Lindh's fate may be especially relevant for understanding the transformation of Sweden during the three decades since Olof Palme was eliminated. One obvious question is: How could such a gifted and evidently decent human being like Anna Lindh start out as a disciple of Palme and end up collaborating with Göran Persson, and consequently with blood-soaked war criminals like Colin Powell and George W. Bush?

It is a particularly cruel irony that, as a young officer, the future General Powell helped to cover up the My Lai massacre — the atrocity which typified the Vietnam War that young Anna had so passionately opposed.

— Al Burke

NOTES

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2. Al Burke, "With Licence to Kill & Cover Up". *Nordic News Network*, 1 January 2017.
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3. "Sweden Rejects EMU: Tragic Prelude". *Nordic News Network*, 5 December 2003
www.nnn.se/n-model/eu/eu.htm
4. Marijana Dragic & Christian Holmén, "Det är dags att sanningen kommer fram".
Expressen, 28 August 2011. www.expressen.se/nyheter/expressen-avslojar/mijailovic-talar-ut-det-ar-dags-att-sanningen-kommer-fram
5. Anders Karlsson, "Tio år sedan mordet på Anna Lindh". *Internationalen*, 11 September 2013
www.internationalen.se/2013/09/tio-ar-sedan-mordet-pa-anna-lindh
6. See "Doubtful Referendum". *Nordic News Network*, 1 January 2001
www.nnn.se/n-model/eu/eu.htm
7. Al Burke, "From Neutrality to NATO". *Nordic News Network*, 22 Sept. 2012
www.nnn.se/nordic/americult/nato/usa-nato.htm
8. The year before Anna Lindh joined the SSU in 1969, the SDP had won a national election with 50% of the vote. Today, opinion polls have found that support among voters is well under 30%, as it has been for the past two years.
9. See "Collateral Damage". *Nordic News Network*, 21 October 2001
www.nnn.se/n-model/foreign/damage.htm
10. TFF's Board, "Anna Lindh's Regrettable Speech on Iraq". Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, 12 November 2002
11. Jan Oberg, "Kosovo 15 years later". Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, 24 March 2014
<http://blog.transnational.org/2014/03/tff-pressinfo-kosovo-15-years-later-a-personal-memory-and-a-word-about-free-research>

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