

## DEATH OF A TROUBLESOME SOCIALIST

*After 25 years, the investigation into Olof Palme's assassination has not made much progress — possibly because it has been conducted by loyal colleagues of the assassins.*

*Al Burke  
28 February 2011*

Swedes have not had much practice at investigating the murder of their national leaders. The last such victim prior to Olof Palme was King Gustav III, who in 1792 was shot from behind after exchanging a few words with his assassin — under circumstances sufficiently operatic to have provided the inspiration for Verdi's "A Masked Ball". That case was cleared up within a matter of days, and turned out to be a conspiracy of aristocrats embittered over royal infringements on their power and privileges.

Prime Minister Olof Palme was murdered on the night of 28 February 1986, while strolling with his wife unguarded (at his own request) through the centre of Stockholm, after seeing a film revolving around Mozart's doomed opera hero, Don Giovanni. Palme had never been comfortable with security guards and the other trappings of power; and, until that night, it was a source of quiet national pride that anyone — even a controversial prime minister — could freely go to the cinema and move about in the city without fear of molestation by admirers or detractors.

As the couple passed a store display window, a man waiting there stepped forward and shot Palme in the back.<sup>1</sup> The killer paused a few seconds to make sure that the deed was properly done, than ran down an adjacent alley and disappeared.

The shooting was reported immediately by nearby witnesses, but the police response was delayed for several crucial minutes while the killer made his getaway — and that was just the beginning. A commission of inquiry concluded in 1999 that the initial police response had failed in eight crucial respects:

- The hunt for the assassin was very disorganized.
- All available police resources were not activated.
- All possible escape routes were not blocked.
- All police districts were not notified.
- The crime scene was not properly cordoned off. By the time the first technical investigation was conducted the morning after, the site had been trampled by members of the general public.
- The chain of command was unclear.
- Documentation by the police command headquarters was extremely deficient.
- The national alarm was not co-ordinated with police command and was not issued until two hours after the murder was reported



Photo: Al Burke

*Summer 2010. Looking toward the assassin's escape route, visitors place flowers on the spot where Olof Palme fell.*

In short, it was the start of a remarkably inept, unorganized and passive police investigation which after 25 years has failed to produce any significant results.

### *Dog's breakfast*

The first two years of the official investigation focused on a dog's breakfast of conspiracy theories — involving apartheid South Africa, Iran, Chile, the Croatian *Ustasha*, etc. — which rested on slender premises and were eventually dismissed as wild goose chases.

The investigation was led initially by Chief of Police Hans Holmér who, apparently on the basis of information provided by the Swedish Security Service ("SÄPO"), focused on Kurdish nationalists said to be furious at what they regarded as Palme's insufficient support for their cause. But the Kurdish theory led nowhere, while other intriguing possibilities were neglected or ignored. Holmér resigned from the investigation in February of 1987 and died in 2002. Subsequent evidence concerning his own movements in the city before and after the fatal shot have raised suspicions that Holmér may himself have been involved in a conspiracy of right-wing police to commit the murder (see below).

The investigators who succeeded Holmér eventually zeroed in on Christer Pettersson, an alcoholic with a criminal history that included manslaughter. Pettersson had all the earmarks of a classic "fall guy", and was found guilty of the murder in June of 1989. But that conviction was unanimously thrown out by an appeals court, due to the serious weakness of the evidence.

The centrepiece of the case against Christer Pettersson was Lisbet Palme's identification of him as the man who had shot her husband. This she did on the basis of a *videotaped* line-up consisting of one paunchy and somewhat forlorn alcoholic, i.e. Pettersson, and eleven healthy policemen in good trim. Two of them had accompanied Mrs. Palme to the viewing, and she was told in advance that the main suspect was an alcoholic. Immediately upon seeing the line-up, Mrs. Palme exclaimed, "Yes, it's clear which one is the alcoholic!"

It was, indeed, quite clear. In subsequent tests with subjects who were unfamiliar with the case, but given the same information that had been supplied to Lisbet Palme, up to 80 per cent were able to pick out Christer Pettersson as the suspected gunman.

Despite the fiasco with Pettersson and the previous interest in conspiracy theories, the chief investigators declared that the murder must have been committed by a lone gunman — on the grounds that, "If there had been a conspiracy, it would have come to light by now".

The reasoning capacity reflected in that comment may explain why they continue to nurture the belief that Christer Pettersson, who died in 2004, was the murderer. As recently as 22 February 2011, current chief investigator Sten Edqvist noted that, "There was of course much that pointed to Christer Pettersson. The fact remains that he was convicted once, and Lisbet Palme is 100 per cent certain that it was he."

### *Perish the thought*

Meanwhile, there has been an evident reluctance or unwillingness to energetically follow up a number of other interesting leads, including many which appear to implicate certain individuals among the police and the security agency charged with protecting the prime minister. The possible involvement of the C.I.A. was disposed of by telephoning the F.B.I. in Washington and requesting that virulently anti-communist sister-agency to look into the matter.

Indications that right-wing Swedish police may have been involved are especially numerous and suggestive. But Hans Ölvebro, who led the investigation from 1988 to 1997, expressed what appears to be a well-entrenched attitude when he declared: "That is the one theory which I refuse even to consider."

Ölvebro also said he found it difficult to believe that the C.I.A. would have any motive to get rid of Palme, partly because his successor, Ingvar Carlsson, posed the same sort of threat to U.S. interests — a preposterous conclusion on both counts, whether based on ignorance, stupidity or wilful intent to mislead.

Such statements appear to characterize Ölvebro's approach to his task. After watching a 1995 TV programme in which he attempted to justify his group's lack of results with a staggering display of investigatorial sloppiness, dithering and negligence, a senior detective sighed in dismay, "One is ashamed to be a police officer!"

Despite all this, and after 25 years of meagre results, police are still in charge of the investigation, and still free to prevent others from gaining access to vital information relating to the case.

Inevitably, the investigative vacuum has been filled by a number of engaged citizens — who are routinely dismissed by the police, the mainstream media and other pillars of the establishment as "amateur sleuths".

It is true that, as usual in such contexts, the quality and credibility of the volunteer efforts vary widely. But many of those who have devoted time and effort to studying the Palme case have impressive backgrounds in academia, the media, the military and other fields; and they are, demonstrably, at least as competent as the official investigators who

have devoted their seemingly minimal efforts to chasing phantom Kurdish assassins and reminiscing about Christer Pettersson, while refusing to consider important leads.

### *Daring accusation*

Perhaps the most industrious and persistent of all the volunteer investigators has been Sven Anér, a retired journalist with long experience at Swedish Public Television and *Dagens Nyheter*, the country's two most influential news media.

For most of the past 25 years, Anér has published a newsletter (originally in print, now in blog form) with news and analysis of the Palme murder and related matters. Despite his solid credentials and the evident value of his labours, Anér and others like him have been largely ignored and quite often ridiculed by the mainstream media, which themselves have devoted comparatively few resources to the case.

A similar sort of response has been the result of Sven Anér's decades-long struggle to pry key items of classified information about the case from police investigators, SÄPO and other authorities. Most of his requests have been rejected, or approved but with crucial bits of information blacked out.

In late 2010, however, reporter Olle Minell of the left-wing journal *Proletären* was granted several previously classified documents which lend credence to the theory that a group of right-wing police, perhaps together with some military personnel, carried out the assassination. Several individuals are mentioned and one in particular has been tentatively identified as the likely assassin on the basis of close observations by two young women. His name is Anti Avsan, a police officer at the time of the murder and currently a member of the Swedish parliament for the Conservative Party.<sup>2</sup>

The recently declassified documents provide strong support for the theory of police involvement which Sven Anér and others have developed over the years. But to date, there has not been any discernable reaction from official sources or the mainstream press. That non-response has prompted Sven Anér, now 89 years old, to formally accuse Anti Avsan of the assassination. In a letter to Sweden's Attorney General dated 12 February 2011, challenges the Attorney General to either start proceedings against Anti Avsan or charge Anér for making a false accusation. In either case, it would be necessary to release additional classified documents in order to confirm or disprove the accusation against Avsan.

As of today, 28 February 2011, Sven Anér has not received a reply from the Attorney General. Nor does it appear that Anti Avsan has publicly responded to the accusation. He has, in any event, not replied to an invitation to comment that was submitted in preparation of this article.



*Photo: Sveriges Riksdag*

*Anti Avsan*

It is not inconceivable that official Sweden and the mainstream media will deal with the accusation against Avsan and his alleged accomplices by “killing it with silence”, a common and usually effective Swedish method for disposing of disagreeable questions.

### *Systematic negligence*

The most exhaustive and meticulous study of official negligence to date was published in 1995 by the brothers Kari and Pertti Poutiainen, physicists who applied their scientific method to the available information. Entitled *Inuti labyrinthen* (“*Inside the Labyrinth*”), their study reveals a pattern of astonishing blunders, destruction of vital evidence and violations of routine procedure by both the police and the security service, all of which had the effect of facilitating the assassin’s escape and hindering the subsequent investigation.

Such a pattern of behaviour might possibly be excused, in part, if the Swedish agencies in question were known to be habitually inefficient, or had been seized by a collective panic that lasted several years. But there is scant basis for any such explanation.

The Poutiainen brothers could draw no firm conclusions about the actual murder: The systematic confusion and negligence which they document has rendered a solution of the murder unlikely. But they do have strong suspicions about which interests had the necessary means, opportunity and, above all, motive to assassinate Olof Palme.

They note that Palme was one of four Social Democratic national leaders deemed especially troublesome by the international anti-communist crusade. Three of them were abruptly removed from power during the 1970s through the intercession of the C.I.A. and/or co-operating national intelligence agencies: Harold Wilson in England, Willy Brandt in Germany, and Gough Whitlam in Australia.

In the case of Olof Palme’s assassination, the United States has been the elephant in the living room that prudent souls decline to mention.

*Olof Palme was at the same time one of the most admired and most hated public figures in modern Swedish history. The hatred was especially intense among doctrinaire anti-communists who objected to his support for Vietnam and other victims of U.S. aggression. Here, Palme marches in a 1968 demonstration against the war in Stockholm, alongside the visiting Vietnamese ambassador to Moscow.*



Commenting upon Jan Bondesson's book on the subject, *Blood on the Snow*, veteran Swedish journalist Anders Leopold has observed: "The possibility that George Bush, at that time Vice President of the United States, might have acted through the C.I.A. and sister organizations in Chile and South Africa, is not mentioned in the book. Just as Swedish editors and correspondents in the U.S. do not dare to discuss the United States' possible role in the murder of Palme, Bondesson knows that if he did so in a book, his days as a teacher at Cardiff University would soon be over."<sup>3</sup>

However, despite the U.S. government's well-documented, intense displeasure with Olof Palme ("that Swedish asshole" in Richard Nixon's terminology), there was probably no need for it to become directly involved in any plot to assassinate him. The superpower's ideological soulmates among the Swedish population were more than sufficient in number and in animosity to perform the deed on their own initiative.

That applies not least to various elements of the police, the intelligence agencies and the military — the navy, in particular. Just weeks prior to the assassination, for example, twelve naval officers published a virulent attack on Palme in *Svenska Dagbladet*, accusing him of a treasonous failure to defend the nation against the looming threat of the Soviet Union. Political leaders have been killed for lesser offences to the sensibilities of wrathful creatures that have worked themselves into a state of fear and loathing.

*"Palme's death is an insignificant parenthesis in world history, and in Sweden it is probably only Social Democrats who mourn that conceited character. As for me, I smoked a cigar in a haze of euphoria on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1986 to celebrate Sweden's liberation from its Communist dictator."*

— Marie Lennerljung, Conservative politician<sup>4</sup>

### *Rising star extinguished*

In addition to those noted above, several other theories of the motives involved continue to be pursued by various enthusiasts. Among the chief suspects are: the racist government of South Africa, incensed at Palme's key role in the global campaign against *apartheid*; international arms merchants, anxious that Palme was about to disclose unsavoury aspects of a lucrative deal for the sale of weapons to India by the Swedish manufacturer, Bofors; Chilean fascists, financed by the C.I.A. and angered by the Palme government's warm welcome to thousands of refugees from the Pinochet coup and dictatorship; etc.

Based on selected elements of the available evidence and varying levels of speculation, each of these theories possesses a degree of plausibility, especially when alternatives are dismissed or ignored. What they lack, thus far, is the large and seemingly consistent accumulation of specific details that have been documented by the Poutiainens and others. During the sixteen years that have passed since the publication of their book, which has become a standard reference for other researchers, little has emerged to alter their assessment.

"We feel that the analysis is just as accurate and relevant today," says Pertti Poutiainen. "Of course, one could always adjust a few details here and there. But nothing has come to light during the intervening years that would necessitate a major revision."

In the book, the Poutiainens observe that, "When Palme was murdered, he had just won his second election of the new decade, and his international reputation and authority had never been greater. His star in world politics had not yet passed its zenith, but was still clearly on the rise.... It cannot have been especially encouraging to the spycatchers —



Photo: Al Burke

*Located in a churchyard just a stone's throw from the murder site, Olof Palme's simple grave reflects the lack of pretension with which he lived his extraordinary life.*

obsessed with the idea of pushing back world socialism, in the spirit of Ronald Reagan — to see the most 'dangerous' socialist of them all, Olof Palme, spreading unimpeded his 'anti-American' socialist message all over the world. Much would be gained in the battle against socialism if he were to disappear from the world political arena. (For example, the 'Marxist-Leninist' Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, with which the Reagan administration was obsessed, would thereby lose one of its most important supporters in the West.)

"There are three other important considerations, as noted previously:

- (1) Within the Swedish branch of the western intelligence complex, there was a well-known hatred of Palme.
- (2) It is impossible to get a clear picture of the secret service's activities during the night of the assassination.
- (3) The police failed to conduct an organized hunt for the killer during the night of the assassination.

"Given these facts, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that, on a dark February night in Stockholm, Olof Palme was gunned down on the front lines of the Cold War."

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## Endnotes

1. While the prevailing view is that the shot came from behind, some witnesses have reported that the Palmes turned to speak briefly with the killer, who then shot the prime minister in the chest. This question would most likely be resolved by a study of the coroners' report; but those in charge of the official investigation have thus far refused to make it public, and no one of higher authority has compelled them to do so.
2. Olle Minell. *Proletären*:
  - a) "Vad döljer sig i de hemliga Palmedokumenten?" 15 September 2010
  - b) "Hittar vi Palmes mördare i Stockholms Försvarsskytteförening?" 1 October 2010
3. Anders Leopold. "Svensk skriver om Palmemordet på engelska..." *Leopold Report*. Internet: [www.leopoldreport.com/LITT4.html](http://www.leopoldreport.com/LITT4.html)
4. Johanna Melén. "Moderat firade efter Palmemordet." *Aftonbladet*, 11 October 2007

## Selected References

Available only in Swedish, the standard reference on the assassination of Olof Palme is the Poutiainen brothers' *Inuti Labyrinten* which is often cited by other writers on the subject. They include Jan Bondesson, whose *Blood on the Snow* is one of the few extensive sources in English; the book begins with a useful summary of the theories and evidence relating to the case, and concludes with a rather speculative attempt to prove the Bofors-India connection (see p. 7). Other sources in English are noted in the Wikipedia entry.

Poutiainen, Kari and Pertti. *Inuti Labyrinten*. Grimur Förlag, 1995

Anér, Sven. *Palmemordet*. <http://svenanerpalmemordet.blogspot.com>

Bondesson, Jan. *Blood on the Snow*. Cornell University Press, 2005

Borgnäs, Lars. *En iskall vind drog genom Sverige*. Norstedts, 2006

Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination\\_of\\_Olof\\_Palme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Olof_Palme)

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