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# To What Extent Did Sweden Remain Neutral in World War Two?

By Theo, Y8

## To What Extent did Sweden Remain Neutral during WW2?

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Sweden is considered to have been neutral in WW2, but there is much debate about whether they stayed neutral throughout the war. There are now an increasing number of opinions on the topic, and many are becoming critical of Sweden. Since I am Swedish and it is both a controversial and interesting subject, I decided to discover the details of the past and unravel Sweden's WW2 policies to ascertain the truth. This essay provides evidence for and against Sweden's enduring neutrality. The aim of this essay is to work out how loyal Sweden stayed to their neutral policy. Personally, since Sweden's trade with Germany continued in colossal quantities long after the Nazis posed any threat of invasion, despite the Allies having applied much pressure on Sweden to cease their export of iron ore and ball-bearings to Germany, I do not think that Sweden remained neutral and non-belligerent in WW2.

There are lots of arguments for Sweden remaining neutral throughout WW2. Firstly, they remained out of conflict and kept the nation at peace, which had been PM Per Albin Hansson's main aim from the war's start. Even when their borders were seriously threatened by Germany's invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1940, Sweden didn't attempt to help their neighbours in battling the Nazis. Also, on many occasions, Sweden rejected requests from other nations which would have meant violating neutrality. For example, during the Winter War between Finland and the USSR, when Finland requested that Sweden send two full ranks of soldiers to fight for them, Sweden rejected the request, as it would have violated their neutrality. This would have triggered the risk of invasion. Sweden could well have chosen not to be perceived as neutral and support their Nordic neighbours but decided against it.

Additionally, Sweden didn't accept all of Germany's demands immediately, and when they did, they put certain restrictions on the concessions. Sweden's acceptance of German concessions was largely due to the threat posed by Germany's army, which was far superior to Sweden's; a consequence of Hansson and the Social Democrats spending their money on social reforms, leading to military austerity. For example, when on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1940, the Germans demanded the transit of 100 carriages of equipment through Sweden to Nazi-occupied Norway, Sweden rejected the offer. Then, Germany negotiated with Sweden from 19<sup>th</sup> June to 8<sup>th</sup> July. This German pressure meant that Sweden accepted the transit of men, but with strict conditions. On only 3 different railway routes, with weekly trains from Narvik and daily ones from southern Norway, a maximum of 500 unarmed soldiers per train were allowed, and the numbers of German soldiers entering and exiting Norway had to match, so that Germany couldn't build up too great a military presence. Sweden's acceptance of this concession wasn't a neutral act, but the extent of violation was lessened by Germany's repetitive demands forcing pressure onto Sweden's coalition government and the strict conditions Sweden made Germany comply with.

Another example of this was when, after the WTA treaty, which stated that Sweden was to limit their exports to Germany to pre-war levels, had been agreed upon with Britain, Sweden offered Germany 7 million tonnes of iron ore per year, which had been their 1933-7 export levels. The Germans rejected this and after applying pressure by placing mines in southern Sweden, demanded 10 million tonnes of iron ore per year. This was identical to 1938 export levels and Sweden accepted the offer, but only because Germany had mined southern Sweden, and would no doubt have activated the bombs to cause devastation, if Sweden had not agreed. Sweden was dependant on the deal for coal, coke, chemicals and machinery to keep the nation at peace, and had only given away 10 million tonnes of iron ore per year because of the threat that the German's mines had posed.

However, there is the opposing opinion that Sweden didn't remain loyal to their neutral policy declared at the beginning of the war, which has several arguments for it too. Many historians today consider Sweden to have been pro-German during WW2. They mainly base this opinion on Sweden's excessive trade with Germany. By the time Sweden had finally ceased their trade of high-grade iron ore in November 1944, they had exported 50 million tonnes of iron ore to Germany since the war's start. This was a year after Germany began losing territory, so at that time posed little threat to Sweden. Germany were in a position from which they were unlikely to win the war. Additionally, Sweden shipped high-quality ball bearings to Germany. The shipping of ball bearings climaxed in 1943, when it, as Paul Levine wrote, it 'constituted 70 per cent of those imported by Germany, which was in turn 10 per cent of Germany's total usage'. These ball bearings were vital for Germany's production of aircraft, tanks, submarines and weapons. Sweden's main manufacturer of these was SKF, which the Allies threatened to bomb. The Allies applied lots of pressure on Sweden to cease their trade with Germany, but the trade continued with limited Allied knowledge, until October 1944. Sweden's trade with Germany massively aided Germany's production of crucial war equipment. Since even after Germany posed little threat of invading and the Allies applied much pressure on the Swedes, the trade continued, aiding Germany massively. This was not a neutral act and supported a genocidal regime, which the Swedes had known about for several years.

Between the summer of 1940 and the autumn of 1941, Sweden allowed the German transit of 670,000 troops across Sweden to Norway, let 60 German planes travel weekly over Swedish air-space to Finland, guarded 70 German supply ships through Swedish territorial waters to Finland and permitted 5,000 wagons full of supplies to cross Sweden to Finland. These were arguably some of the least neutral actions that Sweden did during WW2, since they helped Germany both retain their territory in Norway, but also to fight the USSR in operation Barbarossa.

Even if they had aided the regime with generous supplies, Sweden helped many Jews survive the Holocaust, largely due to the endeavours of Raoul Wallenberg. After autumn 1942,

Sweden provided safety for 30,000 of Jews. Firstly, all Jews in Norway were let across the border, a total of 900. Also, 7,000 Jewish Danes were taken to Sweden by boat, during the autumn of 1943. Raoul issued Swedish protection passports to 20,000 Hungarian Jews to protect them from being taken to concentration camps. Sweden reached an agreement with Germany which led to 100 white Swedish buses leaving for Germany in spring 1945 and liberating 21,000 prisoners, including 2,000 imprisoned Danish police and 3,500 Jews. All this was aided by very close Swedish-German relations, which is why the Germans allowed the Swedes to do this. It was acting against Germany's belligerent regime and, although morally correct, was therefore a violation of neutrality.

During the war, more than 50,000 Norwegians and Danes sought refuge in Sweden. Military training was given to them in camps. They were then sent back to Norway to lead effective resistance movements against the Germans. Upon German inquiry, the Swedes claimed that they were training them as police, and not soldiers. This helped the Allies in an aim to fight off the Germans, so was not a neutral action either.

The Germans utilised Swedish telephone wires to communicate with their soldiers in Norway, and these encrypted messages were listened to and decoded by the Swedes. They were able to find out about the German battleship, the Bismark, which planned to attack the Atlantic convoys, and notified the Allies, who sank the Bismark in May 1941. Also, Swedish diplomats spied for the Allies in Nazi-occupied Europe, and, although never required, American planes were situated in Sweden for the Allied invasion of Norway from spring 1944 until 1945. In Malmö, a beacon was erected to guide British planes when bombing Germany. On Öland, Allied spies were allowed to decipher German radio signals. These actions are not considered to have been neutral, because they aided Allied invasions and worked alongside Allied intelligence.

Another example of Sweden's lack of neutrality was during the Winter War, when they aided the Finnish by placing mines on Åland, sending 8,000 volunteers to Finland and giving them supplies including food, medication and weapons. This provided Finland with military support during the conflict, so is therefore considered a violation of neutrality.

To conclude, it can be argued that Sweden either did or did not remain neutral during WW2, as they had announced they would be at the start of the war. Despite rejecting many requests and remaining out of conflict, Per Albin himself admitted that Sweden had violated neutrality, writing in his diary that Sweden had 'broken our precious and strict neutrality', but felt that Sweden had been forced into it by the Germans. Sweden did export 50 million tonnes of iron ore and lots of ball bearings to Germany, which helped their production of military equipment. Many German transits across Swedish territory helped them to keep territory in Norway and fight the USSR. On the other hand, their lack of neutrality was also evidenced by

their support for the Allies. They protected 30,000 Jews and trained 50,000 men to become soldiers, which effectively resisted the Germans. Sweden aided the Finnish in the Winter War and helped Allies on numerous occasions. These are the main reasons that many Swedes today, including myself, and countless historians believe that Sweden, although starting the war as neutrals, having not been involved in conflict for nearly 125 years, violated their neutrality during WW2. They made concessions and gave support to save their own country from being invaded, as well as contributing to the largest racist genocidal regime of all time.

Word Count: 1,600

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