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Patrik Lundell

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THE RATIONALITY OF THE BENEVOLENT ONES

A Swedish case of far right-wing objectivity ideal and media criticism around the Second World War

Patrik Lundell

By examining the National Society Sweden–Germany (Riksföreningen Sverige–Tyskland) 1938–1958, this article highlights a key aspect of far right-wing opinion building, namely its media criticism and objectivity ideal. Far right-wing opinion building is too often depicted as easily comprehensible and appealing to strong emotions. If its objectivity-oriented and neutrality-footed media criticism with scholarly and non-political overtones is taken into consideration a more nuanced understanding can be reached. The article relates this criticism to the Swedish Government's information policy, to notions of the historic role of the press as a propaganda channel, to ideals in contemporary journalism, and to a tradition of conservative media criticism. By uncovering the rationality that supported them, the purpose is ultimately to understand the attraction these standpoints could exercise. Since these ways to argue hardly died with the war a deeper historical understanding appears the more imperative.

KEYWORDS Right-wing propaganda; media criticism; objectivity ideal; Nazism; Sweden; National Society Sweden–Germany

‘Objectively viewed, it is naturally so, that the German National Socialism, like any great popular movement, is a mixture of good and evil, but arguably the good outweighs the bad.’ Herman Nilsson-Ehle speaks as Chairman of the National Society Sweden–Germany (*Riksföreningen Sverige–Tyskland*, RST), formed in December 1937. This objective assessment is however, the internationally esteemed genetics professor continues, made impossible for the general public due to ‘the one-sided and biased news reporting’, which is also incompatible with Swedish neutrality. The purpose of the society is therefore to ‘in a truly objective way try to discover the true and real circumstances and disseminate knowledge thereof in our country. This is also good scholarship’.¹ The main task was set for the issuing of a journal, ‘which objectively and truthfully shall operate in the spirit of the National Society’ (*Sverige–Tyskland*, April 1938). The association gathered mostly professionals, including a fair amount of university people and a few well-known public intellectuals; the three chair men up until 1945 were all full professors at Lund University.

Far right-wing opinion-building work, including Nazi versions, past and present, is too often depicted as easily comprehensible and appealing to strong emotions rather than the intellect.² The literature on the RST is no exception.³ This is not to say that such

elements were absent; there were indeed plenty of flagwaving and emotions involved. However, if the objectivity-oriented and neutrality-footed media criticism with scholarly and non-political overtones, exemplified above by Nilsson-Ehle, is taken into consideration a more nuanced understanding can be reached. This kind of media criticism was central in the association's advocacy, and I will relate it to the Swedish Government's information policy, to notions of the historic role of the press as a propaganda channel, to ideals in contemporary journalism, and to a tradition of conservative media criticism. By uncovering the rationality that supported them, the purpose is ultimately to understand the attraction these standpoints could exercise—no matter how easy it is in retrospect and on moral grounds to reject them.

Since these ways to argue hardly died with the war a deeper historical understanding appears the more imperative. The populist German anti-Islam Pegida movement chants 'Lügenpresse' (lie press). But there are also more sophisticated forms. One of the founders of the wiki-like *Metapedia*—a Swedish so-called metapolitical initiative on the far right which is now in another 15 languages—announces programmatically: 'Of course, objective and factual, but without the politically correct blinders that characterize many other modern encyclopedias'.⁴ Such initiatives need to be understood if they are to be fought.

Daniel Hallin's well-known objectivity model can help clarify the function of this kind of criticism. The model describes journalism as three concentric spheres. The innermost sphere is the sphere of consensus within which otherwise agreed objectivity ideals in practice do not apply because it holds what is perceived of as entirely uncontroversial positions. Journalism's role is here to confirm shared values. Outside is the sphere of objectivity, the realm of legitimate controversy. It is in turn surrounded by the domain of that which deviates completely from the common values and from what is considered legitimate to fight about at all and that journalism therefore not finds it necessary to relate to in an unengaged and impartial way, or pay any attention at all.⁵

The model takes our eyes off whether specific statements should be regarded as objective in themselves and instead directs them towards self-understanding, values and time-bound discursive conditions. No general consensus regarding the 'New Germany' and democracy did initially exist in Sweden, and the RST project consisted in keeping them within the realm of what it was legitimate to argue about. Seen from another perspective, the article focuses a significant group of people whose trust in established journalism's, indeed in the broader public sphere's ability to maintain appropriate boundaries between the spheres was very low.

The RST

'The Swedish press's naive and subjective way of assessing foreign relations has always annoyed me and pose a danger to ourselves.' Later professor of procedural law Per Olof Ekelöf wrote to the RST in the summer of 1938, thus lamenting on 'the Nazi hatred' in Sweden. After taking part of the first two issues of the RST journal, he was however critical. There were certainly several good contributions, but also 'pure propaganda'. An organization that paid tribute to a regime that 'persecutes Jews and throws political opponents in concentration camps', he did not want to be a part of. 'Only by an extreme objectivity would the organization in my opinion be able to overcome the distrust

that Swedes in general presently feel visavi the Third Reich.⁶ According to Ekelöf, the general distrust of Germany should thus be fought, despite the persecution of Jews and the concentration camps. Instead of seeing it as paradoxical, based on a black and white distinction between in favour of or against Nazi Germany, his position suggests a spectrum of opinions which must be taken seriously.

Ekelöf had reacted on a review of a newly published biography on Hitler, Annie Åkerhielm's *Ödets man* ('Destiny's Man'). The review is a good starting point to illustrate some problematic trends in previous research while also sketching a characterization of the association and its journal, focusing on the early years. Several historians have, just like Ekelöf, highlighted this particular review.⁷ They often quote this, or sometimes only the closing remark:

Once the political passions are subsided and our time will be assessed by a cool and objective historical research, it will perhaps seem well-nigh incredible, that of a contemporary Swede it actually took moral courage to unreservedly express the conviction that Adolf Hitler is a statesman of God's grace. (*Sverige–Tyskland*, June 1938)

One difference, however, is that Ekelöf contrasted the review to other texts in the same issue, such as a piece on 'Journalism Research'. This article argued that the German newspaper research, even though the German press was subject to the National Socialist dictatorship, still had something to teach the press in democratic countries like Sweden: after all, 'the journalistic technique' was the same, and the 'objective study' of this, that is, 'a real "newspaper research"', of course, a good thing. In Ekelöf's view, this represented the proper and objective way of improving opinions on Germany.

The fact that many 'pro-Germans' in 1938 thought that Hitler was one of the greatest statesmen ever we can take for granted.⁸ However, the review is not very typical of the journal's rhetoric at this time. In retrospect focusing this kind of unreserved accolades—which certainly were there—and letting this 'selection', as it is called, 'illustrate the Nazi propaganda' of the organization is too reductionistic.⁹ Instead, the RST must by large be seen as in tune with the German so-called cultural propaganda.¹⁰ This mode of opinion building was not primarily about content, about indoctrination in Nazism, but about form, aiming to create, maintain and develop cultural and institutional links between the countries.

Furthermore, this type of society was organized in another fashion than that of a political party, allowing for a wider dissemination of standpoints.¹¹ A spectrum of opinions is therefore to expect, and this must be taken duly into account. This applies in particular when compared with the Swedish proper Nazi parties, which failed to attract any larger crowds partly because of constant internal frictions. A hallmark of the Swedish Nazi parties was precisely their inability to sift out any real Führer.¹² In comparison, it is justified to emphasize the relatively democratic elements in the RST. The Führer principle was absent, and there was a measure of dialogue and diversity.

Around 1990 there was a shift in Swedish historiography on the Second World War from a patriotic to a moral narrative.¹³ Indeed, this research drew much needed attention to neglected and less glorious features of Swedish history. The mapping of 'pro-German' groups and individuals was important and the indignation expressed understandable enough. My point is not to nuance the very strong sympathy for Nazi Germany which

was manifested in the association. Instead it is to try to understand the rationality that could motivate it. This opens for questions otherwise not asked. What can the spectrum of opinions have meant for attractiveness? What did it mean that anti-democratic opinions were expressed in a comparatively democratic context? And, above all and in focus in this article, what role did the constantly invoked objectivity actually play?

The Objectively Good

The establishing of the objectivity ideal in journalism in the interwar years, not least in the US, has been explained by the experiences of the First World War in combination with a professionalization of the journalist role. The epistemological relativism which was a result of the horrors of war and the belligerent countries' propaganda contributed to the ideal. Subjectivity made a simple belief in facts impossible and encouraged a high valuation of professional rules and procedures. One such rule was to give voice to both parties in a conflict. Hence, objectivity was not primarily about *aspects of reality*, but about *statements about* this reality, confirmed by a professional press corps. Objectivity should, in other words, be seen as a reaction against a naive empiricism, against the notion that good journalism would be a kind of transparent mirror of self-evident truths about the world. After the Second World War objectivity had come to represent the given core of the American journalistic self-understanding.¹⁴

News has of course always been crucial in order to sell newspapers, but the interwar period also in Sweden meant that this side of journalism became increasingly more important in relation to more political and opinion-building functions. The Swedish press was highly political in the sense that it often had partisan connections through ownership. News material was however not unabashedly filtered through the political positions expressed in the newspaper's openly opinion-forming material. That objectivity as an ideal began to establish in Sweden during this period is clear.¹⁵ For example, an overview of the Swedish press in 1938 claimed that it belonged to its merits to make room also to the views of political opponents, 'usually in an objective way'.¹⁶ To what extent and under what premises this ideal established is, however, not yet investigated. A look in textbooks in journalism gives a very meagre result. Truthfulness and reliability were admittedly often used words of honour. To hear two sides of a controversy was a basic rule.¹⁷ As an elevated and articulated principle, however, objectivity was not established.

How the RST usage actually relates to a broader journalistic parlance is therefore difficult to say. That it lent credibility from science (and from the academics who occupied key positions in the organization) is obvious. And, as exemplified below, the historic propaganda sins of the press were often referred to. That it was associated to political neutrality is also clear. And as shown below, it was explicitly linked also to journalistic rules and procedures. It is nevertheless interesting that this upcoming journalistic ideal by these 'pro-Germans' was so frequently invoked and that it apparently fitted a conservative based conception of an impartial and independent politics very well.

As mentioned, opinions on the RST were divided. Some found the journal too 'lame'; it would certainly not suffice against the 'hyper-intellectual Jewish lie-writers and their soldiers in the so-called "labour" movement'.¹⁸ Per Olof Ekelöf's opposite view has been quoted, and similar expressions are frequent. In principle, however, many of those

calling for a less servile tone visavi Germany, and who were quite critical towards the RST, could concur in the description of the problem itself, that is, place the question within the sphere of legitimate controversy, to use Hallin's terminology. Swedish mainstream media was biased and anti-German, liberal *Upsala Nya Tidning* (13 May 1938) concluded in an albeit critical leading article on the RST; hence 'the need for objective information work' was imperative. This is an important observation in order to understand the potential attractiveness of the association's arguments.

Managing member Gunnar Berg commented in a letter to chairman Nilsson-Ehle on the objections put forward: '[W]e are expected to be more critical. To be sure, our association was founded to be a counterweight to the exaggerated German criticism, and now we are supposed to begin to criticize conditions! This is of course nonsense'.¹⁹ Berg was confident with the society's 'completely apolitical route', including its plans for a 'newspaper service', that is, to produce and supply provincial newspapers with

fully objective and apolitical articles about the new Germany, for example on the Labour Service, social enterprises such as *Kraft durch Freude* [Strength through Joy, the state-operated leisure organization], the Winter Aid, etc., the *Autobahn*, the rebuilding of the cities etc., etc.²⁰

Since these opinions are found also in letters between sympathizers, there is no reason to assume that they are to be understood as motivated by purely strategic considerations. This is true in spite of German involvement in the association, the scope of which is difficult to accurately determine.²¹ Regardless, these 'pro-Germans' seem to have been convinced that there was much good being achieved in the 'New Germany'. Hence, the Swedish public needed to be informed about this since it was being fed a distorted picture. And that Sweden benefitted from a close and friendly relationship with Germany they saw as a given; the links were many, strong and old. On this basis, they saw no contradiction between the objectivity claims and the character of friendship association with the ambition to convey positive images. Objectivity consisted, in this sense, of balancing and correction.²²

Media Criticism

'Not all devote themselves to what in the current situation should be their real and very important task', Foreign Minister Christian Günther inculcated in the autumn of 1940 apropos of the Swedish newspapers, 'namely, to give the Swedish people as an objectively correct general overview as possible'.²³ At risk, according to Günther, was the credibility of the Swedish neutrality, both in the domestic public opinion and abroad. On the one hand, Günther's statement has been used to illustrate how far the Swedish coalition government would go to meet the German notion of the press as part of Swedish foreign policy—'completely contrary to contemporary liberal press ideology'.²⁴ On the other hand, and more correct, it has also been noted that the very close cooperation between the state and the commercial and industrial life, including the press industry, was rather typical.²⁵

If *liberal press ideology* refers to a position that would lead to an anti-Nazi stance, independent from and polemic against the coalition government's foreign policy during wartime, this position was and remained indeed the exception.²⁶ The editor most strongly

associated with such an autonomous posture, Torgny Segerstedt at liberal *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning*, was certainly an exception. When he died in the spring of 1945 he was—as a case in point—criticized in the obituary (!) in conservative *Svenska Dagbladet* (1 April 1945) precisely for his shortcomings in terms of ‘objectivity and scrupulous balance’ and for his ‘eminently subjective desire for opposition’.

‘I do not claim that the newspapers shall take party for Germany’, thus echoing the Foreign Minister, a letter to the editor in *Sweden–Germany’s* January issue of 1942 continued: ‘only to be objective and truly neutral’. No doubt did an organization like the RST operate under the protection of the government’s desire that the Swedes would not choose sides in the war.²⁷ The purpose of the association was to construct countermeasures against what it saw as the anti-German opinion formation, particularly in the daily press, to be a balancing and corrective counterweight. This aim has indeed been observed by historians.²⁸ The role the media criticism played, its nature and extent, has not, however, been properly noted.²⁹ The RST’s way to counteract the so called German-baiting consisted as much in media criticism as in positive counter images. If it occasionally even is possible to trace cautious criticism of the Third Reich and if a fairly large number of articles is about German culture in a general sense, a standard feature in virtually every text in *Sweden–Germany* is criticism of media conditions in Sweden, sometimes casually, sometimes substantially. No issue of the journal lacks terms like *German-persecution, emotional thinking, agitation, journalistic savagery, one-sided and biased news reporting*. They all allude to deficiencies of the Swedish public sphere. This also includes the amount of determinations of *propaganda: hate, lie, tendentious and malicious, anti-German, deliberately untrue, one of powerful forces conducted* and so on. Criticism does not stop at this kind of slogans level, but is overall quite elaborated.

A fundamental problem with the news was said to be that it mainly relied on British and French wire services and that fewer and fewer newspapers had their own staff in Germany. This was a point made even before the outbreak of the war and the problem had allegedly been at hand since 1933. ‘How many of the major Swedish newspapers have now their own correspondent in Berlin?’ one asked rhetorically in the June issue in 1938, and continued: ‘Does anyone think or even ask for that news on Germany from [the French news agency] Agence Havas is or shall be objectively true?’ And since the unilateral use of sources could not be motivated by lack of access to German ones, this could not be understood as anything but ‘deliberately dishonest’. This tendency was even reinforced, it was felt, after the outbreak of war. Probably quite right and as the effect of the Swedish government’s information policy—which largely aimed at not giving the Germans any reason to complain—it was considered that the harshest criticism of Germany actually waned. But instead, according to *Sweden–Germany*, it became more insidious: bold headlines accompanied the news of British and French origin while the German ones were hidden away on some obscure page—‘not without the insertion that “the Germans allegedly claim”’ (May 1940) or with ‘mocking headlines’ (January–February 1940); the letter to the editor which claimed this concluded: ‘I just ask—is this neutrality?’ Another common form of this criticism was to complain about the practice to make use of uncontrollable sources (e.g. July 1943). This is in other words a criticism emanating from journalistic rules and procedures, that is, the foundations of the modern journalistic objectivity ideal.

Whether these alleged trends in the Swedish press corresponded to any actual conditions is difficult to say. Historians have to my knowledge not investigated these matters. More often, they have instead been interested in emphasizing examples to the contrary (i.e. expressions of appeasement towards and understanding for Germany), to highlight the bright shining anti-Nazi heroes (like Segerstedt), and to map when and what the Swedish audience could actually read concerning the brutalities of the Nazis.³⁰ There is of course nothing wrong with these research foci per se. However, and given that the dominant opinion in Sweden apparently was not 'pro-German',³¹ systematic studies of the use of sources, of headlines and of placement within the newspapers could very well point in a German-critical direction. More important, however, is to note that this criticism could be perceived as coherent and reliable; conditions almost to be expected, of those with German sympathies. This is particularly true in light of a First World War in recent memory where the newspaper propaganda on both sides of the conflict and its impact on the extent of the slaughter was an established truth.³²

Partly on the same track as the biased news gathering were the recurring complaints about newspapers not accepting refutations and corrections of this one-sidedness (e.g. May 1940). Thus, the newspaper service mentioned above—that is, the idea to provide provincial newspapers with perceived factual but positive information about Germany—proved not to be a viable approach. Hence, it was concluded that 'in our country exists in practice an actual censorship' (May 1941). In addition to criticism on a general and structural level the journal's columns were therefore also allotted to fill in gaps in the daily press and to concrete rectifications. The hook was just that it was 'a gigantic work' to systematically monitor the Swedish newspaper output (May 1940). And the RST lacked those resources. To this end, they on several occasions called on readers to contribute with examples, that is, a form of participation and collective contribution more commonly associated with democratic contexts than with propaganda (meaning some sort of deliberate falsification of reality). Of course, propaganda has historically very deliberately made use of various types of make-believe democracy. There is a sliding scale in this particular case: from to sift through actual reader responses—convinced of one's own impartiality or deliberately strategic—to simply fabricate them. But again, the question here is not to determine what it really was an expression of when the RST in this way enrolled its audience, but to try to understand how it could be perceived by actual and potential sympathizers.

For these 'pro-Germans', the situation was of course partly self-explanatory. The propaganda distributed by the Swedish press was an effect of the propaganda it faced. But it was, it was claimed, grounded also in the ownership structure of the press industry. This can be seen as a conservative footed general criticism of partiality and vested interests, which of course is much older than Nazism.³³ German contemporary scholarship could nevertheless provide support for such an attitude. In February 1939, *Sweden-Germany* reported on a new German thesis series on newspaper research, the first issue of which was focused on the Stockholm press.³⁴ A question the dissertation posed was to what extent the Swedish press was 'commercialized', and it was from the author's German perspective—as it with some reservation from the reviewer's side was put—understandable that he considered the German press freer than the Swedish, since the former was not dictated by any private economic interests. The review, however, ended more categorically:

the thesis was said to creditably have 'clarified' that private interests ruled the Swedish press. Hereby said, that academic scholarship had made it clear that the Swedish press was not, by definition, objective.

To another part, it was about the specific interests who actually owned the press in Sweden, that is, from the perspective of these 'pro-Germans', above all the Jews and the labour movement. It is easy to find anti-Semitic expressions in *Sweden–Germany*, and anti-labour is a basic chord. But one can also note that it was quite possible to adopt a supposedly neutral position on the issue: that the Jews and the Social Democrats had a very negative and biased attitude to what happened in the New Germany was not strange at all.

Now and then the notion was expressed that the propaganda and the skewed news service had made the Swedes hostile towards Germany (May 1940). But a more common conclusion close at hand was the populist one, that the Swedish press was not at all representative of public opinion. The Biblical figure 'the quiet in the land' was common (Psalm 35:20). In a conservative context it was used already during the 1800s regarding the onrushing liberal press (which conservatives considered on very vague grounds claimed to speak for the majority of the population).³⁵ And as in the 1800s it was often linked to a traditional Enlightenment optimism, free from partisan judgement and all kinds of isms: the truth will eventually prevail.

Den tystade opinion som förtegs av dagspressen anspelar bland annat Lizzie Carlsons redan berörda recension på. That 'pro-Germans' were intimidated into silence by the virulent propaganda was a prominent theme that eventually began to be classified as 'persecution of opinion'. This 'spiral of silence' was confirmed by reports from the members.³⁶ Others asked that the journal and other items from the association would be sent with all due discretion. Still others, it was claimed, apparently dared not even join the association.³⁷ Eventually they also realized that the organization was under surveillance by the authorities. And when 'irreproachable Swedes were exposed to telephone and mail espionage' this was, of course, understood as a result of the propaganda (June 1942).

Radicalization and Continuity

So far the early years of the RST, from 1937 until 1941, have been in focus. The society radicalized during the course of the war. As long as Germany was victorious, the explanation may partly be sought there: it was with certain aplomb one went the whole hog. When the situation began to seem precarious for Germany it may on the other hand also have warranted clearer standpoints. If there still was some public acceptance in Sweden for an association of this kind in 1938, this was significantly lower after 1942, or to use Hallin's terminology: the association and the question of Nazi Germany had wandered towards the sphere of deviance. One can also imagine that those more moderate supporters left the organization and more radical ones flocked to—both an effect of a radicalization and a cause of the same. For 1941 a 'greatly heightened interest' was reported after the German–Russian pact had been broken and a total number of members of 5141 (*Sverige–Tyskland*, June 1942).

The journal became less 'lame'. In 1943 'Chatham's Chronicle' became a regular feature. Here, one Gösta Chatham in a 'humoristic' way scoffed at democracy and hated above all the British and the Jews. In March 1944 he called himself 'a Jew-hater', and in

May the same year he claimed: 'where democracy goes in, reason goes out'. Of course the genre allows for a different tone but the chronicles are nevertheless significant for a radicalization of the journal, and of its kind they are quite unthinkable during its early years.

Nevertheless, other things remained the same, and the journal was still characterized by a marked heterogeneity. The objectivity rhetoric did not disappear, and they continued to criticize the public sphere in the same way as before, albeit often on the defensive trying to stay in the sphere of legitimate controversy. An example is the leading article of June 1943, entitled 'What is truth?'

A reproach, frequently addressed to Swedish pro-Germans is that they refuse to 'face the truth', meaning that they do not unresistingly accept the versions of world events spread in the Anglophile rectified books and newspapers. [—] What reason do we have to without reservation believe all the information about conditions in the German-occupied countries, spread across Sweden? It is a well-known fact that Germany for ten years systematically has been slandered and defiled, and anyone, with a little thought and good will, has been able to see through the fabric of false information and incitement to hatred. [—] Is it under these conditions peculiar that we pro-Germans are quite skeptical about the details of German tyranny and atrocities, which in abundant numbers appear in newspaper columns and books?

The question of how Swedes could sympathize with Nazi Germany has occupied many historians. Admiration and fear, the good will, and ideological blindness have been proposed.³⁸ These sympathizers own answer—in the event they against all odds were mistaken—was apparently media related: since the public sphere was impregnated by Allied propaganda, objective information to draw any different conclusions was not at hand. This does not exclude other explanations. Ideological conviction, for example, decided what they wanted to see and therefore could absorb. But the opposite is also true: the conviction of living in a propaganda war entrenched the ideology. Of course, it is not true that the Swedish public sphere was completely permeated by Allied propaganda. However, to dismiss the perceived problem—what was possible to really *know*?—and just refer to what actually could be read in the newspapers as if it were self-evident truths, actual knowledge and pure information, is to make things far too easy.

The journal's last issue was published in 1958. The post-war years are hard to summarize. Central themes are the brutality of the occupying powers; 'the so-called' war crime trial of Nuremberg; the Allied blame for the war and for the enormous material devastation; that no mass extermination of Jews had taken place; the scope and irrational basis of the hatred against Germans; that Nazism was still a force to be reckoned with; and the indispensable role of a strong Germany for the future of Europe. The content is pro-Nazi, anti-democratic and anti-Semitic.

The conceptual framework is at times completely inverted. In the Western zones 'an all-time greatest organized genocide' is taking place (May 1946); the victors are accused of excessive racial thinking (December 1946); there is an 'extermination' of Nazi supporters underway (January–March 1947); German prisoners of war are presented in an aesthetic that would otherwise be associated with the concentration camp survivor victims (January–March 1949); and 'the horrific cruelty of Nuremberg' must never 'fall into oblivion' and is 'a tremendous burden on the American people' (April–June 1949). It is often

nostalgic. 'The once blissful Germany', reads the caption to the cover in June 1946 depicting two happy little girls playing on a lion statue. In the very last number in 1958, but nothing signals that it is the last, there is a picture from Joseph Goebbels' famous speech in February 1943. 'Totaler Krieg—kürzester Krieg' ('Total war—shortest war') in giant letters across the swastika flags. Caption: 'Once ecstasy flamed at the Sports Palace in Berlin'.

'We Swedish pro-Germans have quite diverse political opinions. There are Nazis among us. Why deny that' (January–March 1948). Such is the tone in the beginning of 1948. It is more radical than during the war. Extremism is of course enhanced by the fact that one and the same position means something different in 1948 than it did in 1938. At the same time, there is a marked consistency. They continue to assert their political independence. Objectivity, facts, impartiality, accuracy, truth are often used words. The topic of press propaganda recurs constantly. Victors are by definition biased. And 'the Jews have influential positions everywhere in the world where news is mediated, e.g. Reuters', it is claimed as the author in the same breath talks about the propaganda 'of the influential Swedish press, film, radio, in the theater and in the unions among Swedish workers' (August 1946). If criticism during the early years had certain concreteness and was underpinned by a clearer argument, it now usually stops at phrases of this kind.

Concluding Remarks

The critique of the Swedish public sphere was absolutely central to the association—throughout its 20 years of existence. It is easy to see that this criticism for some might have appeared reasonable and rational, especially during the initial years. In comparison with pronounced Nazi groups, it was framed in a relatively democratic organizational context. Its driving actors were largely rooted in the scientific community. The organization invoked objectivity ideals, both journalistic, political and scientific ones; it based its arguments on an established historical truth about earlier propaganda sins of the press; it referred to academic research; and it based its critique on both structural reasoning and concrete examples, partly with the help from active members participation. This was underpinned by a conservative scepticism against party politics and private economically driven opinion building over all. The criticism of the public sphere, firmly related to Swedish neutrality, could also in principle be recognized within a much broader political spectrum than that which dominated within the RST; it was acknowledged even by the coalition government. An organization like the RST indeed operated under the protection of the government's desire that the Swedes would not choose sides in the war.

To say what the RST *actually* was, had demanded answers to other questions. Did they deliberately lie? Did they fabricate letters to the editor? Did they follow more or less direct instructions from Germany? And did the central actors in fact have a Nazi agenda? I have been interested in other issues and attempted to understand the argumentation itself and thus the attractiveness it could exercise. These two levels may be connected from at least two directions. The argumentation of the RST was not only consistent, it was not only reasonable in itself, but it also had some actual points. To take the most basic: Swedish news consisted not of pure, objective information, and trustworthiness of foreign news in wartime is a real problem. From a critical direction may

instead be noted that, although the arguments merged they could of course be questioned and tested. The idea of objectivity through competition, as balancing and correction, for example, has been very common. No single writer or no private media company, the argument goes, can claim objectivity. Everyone is too entangled in subjectivity, but through diversity the requirements are adequately met. This idea, however, preconditions the whole, the diversity, to be the solution, not the corrective in itself.³⁹ Moreover, to be explicitly biased might in theory be defended in this way, but it must at the same time raise high demands on transparency in terms of the choices actually made and the methods used. This kind of transparency was of course severely lacking in the case of the RST.

The lure of objectivity can be dangerous. We might live in (or at least move towards) a journalistic post-objective era, favouring instead transparency.⁴⁰ For various historical reasons, however, and partly because it is easy enough to convict one's opponents of not being objective, claims to objectivity still have a strong appeal, not least within far right-wing communities. The antidote is unlikely to reduce this type of opinion building to simple, easily see-through slogans, or to fall into the same narrow objectivity discourse. There is—and there was—an alternative, namely to openly acknowledge a bias for democracy itself.⁴¹

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Notes

1. Unsigned and undated manuscript, Herman Nilsson-Ehle's Papers, vol. 31, Lund University Library.
2. Welch, *The Third Reich*, 11, 20; and Welch's book is still the standard work. A Swedish example is Löow, *Nazismen i Sverige*, 209.
3. See footnote 9.
4. http://sv.metapedia.org/wiki/Metapedia_%E2%80%93det_alternativa_uppslagsverket. See also Holt, "media.criticim@metapedia.org."
5. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War"*, 116–7.
6. Ekelöf to RST, 7 December 1938, Herman Nilsson-Ehle's Papers, vol. 31.
7. E.g. Oredsson, *Lunds universitet*, 50; Bokholm, *Tisdagsklubben*, 66; Bokholm, *I otakt med tiden*, 245–6; Åmark, *Att bo granne*, 312.
8. The term 'pro-German' is problematic, partly because it was used in the Nazi propaganda (thus annoying anti-Nazi friends of German culture and science); Almgren, *Drömmen om Norden*, 52–5. Hence I use quotation marks.
9. Bokholm, *Tisdagsklubben* 2001, 66; see also Oredsson, *Lunds universitet*, 50; Bokholm, *I otakt med tiden*, 245; Svartvik, *Bibeltolkningens bakgator*, 108–18.

10. On the German cultural propaganda in Sweden see Almgren, *Drömmen om Norden*, Åkerlund, *Mellan akademi och kulturpolitik*, and Björkman, Lundell, and Widmalm, *De intellektuellas förräderi*.
11. Åmark, *Att bo granne*, 322–3.
12. *Ibid.*, 291.
13. Östling, *Nazismens sensmoral*, 286.
14. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 6–7; see also Schudson and Tiftt, “American Journalism,” 27; Brewin, “A Short History,” 216–7.
15. Lundell, *Attentatet mot Hiertas minne*, 81–98; cf. Olsson, *Rätten att tala politik*, 100.
16. Ekman, *Den svenska dagspressen*, 39, quoted in Jarlbrink, *Det våras för journalisten*, 202.
17. E.g. Sandler, *Hur man blir journalist*; Poppius, *Journalisten*.
18. Eskil Ståklint to RST, 24 May 1938, Herman Nilsson-Ehle’s Papers, vol. 31.
19. Berg to Nilsson-Ehle, 27 April 1938, Herman Nilsson-Ehle’s Papers, vol. 31.
20. Berg to Nilsson-Ehle, 5 November 1938, Herman Nilsson-Ehle’s Papers, vol. 31.
21. Vol. 1 Riksföreningen Sverige-Tyskland, Handlingar rörande kontroll av mediaföretag, journalister och enskilda utlänningar [Documents concerning surveillance of media companies, journalists and particular foreigners], F8EA, Allmänna säkerhetstjänsten [Security Service], Riksarkivet [National Archives] (Arninge), testifies to German involvement in the RST.
22. The American broadcasting company Fox’ slogan ‘Fair and Balanced’ comes to mind; cf. Brewin, “A Short History,” 222–3.
23. Quoted in Åmark, *Att bo granne*, 238.
24. *Ibid.*, 238.
25. *Ibid.*, 246–7.
26. Lundell, *Attentatet mot Hiertas minne*, 105–11.
27. Åmark, *Att bo granne*, 459.
28. For example, Oredsson, *Lunds universitet*; Bokholm, *Tisdagsklubben*; Bokholm, *I otakt med tiden*; Åmark, *Att bo granne*.
29. An exception, at least in passing, being Nilsson, *Svensk överklassnazism 1930–1945*, 160–1, 164.
30. The two former forms are legion; for the latter form see, for example, Svanberg and Tydén, *Sverige och förintelsen*; Leth, ‘*Kristallnatten*’ i *svenska dagstidningar*; Leth, “Mediernas svek.”
31. Åmark, *Att bo granne*, passim; Johansson, *Den nazistiska utmaningen*, 232–6.
32. Lundell, *Attentatet mot Hiertas minne*, 81–98.
33. Conservative media criticism is a poorly explored historical phenomenon. It has been reviewed rather than analysed. Lazere, “Conservative Media Criticism” is a good example of both this reviewing tendency and historical shortsightedness since it claims that conservative media criticism starts in the 1960s. Contrary to promises in passing, Berry and Theobald, *Radical Mass Media Criticism*, gives hardly any attention to right wing expressions. In Swedish press history, conservative opponents to the emerging liberal press are usually described as almost medieval figures; for a discussion see Lundell, *Pressen i provinsen*.
34. The dissertation in question was the first to be published in the series *Zeitungswissenschaftliche Abhandlungen*; Gerhard Kuhlmann, *Die Stockholmer Tagespress* [The Stockholm Daily Press] (Leipzig, 1938).
35. Lundell, *Pressen i provinsen*, passim.

36. For example, Carl Viksten to Efraim Liljeqvist, 1 June 1940, Efraim Liljeqvist's Papers, series 1, vol. 104, Lund University Library; cf. Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*.
37. Berg, *Riksföreningen Sverige-Tyskland*, 6, 10.
38. Richardsson, *Förtroligt och hemligt*, part 4, chap. 7; Nordin, *Fredrik Böök*, 429; Åmark, *Att bo granne*, 327.
39. Westerstähl, "Objective News Reporting."
40. Mindich, *Just the facts*, 138–43. See also Brewin, "A Short History," and Hellmueller, Voss, and Poepsel, "Shifting Journalistic Capital?"
41. Cf. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press*, 195.

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Patrik Lundell, Department of History of Science and Ideas, Uppsala University, PO Box 629, 751 26 Uppsala, Sweden. Tel: +46184711580. E-mail: patrik.lundell@idehist.uu.se