“Shot down over Sweden”: Family Loss, Neutral Fire and Swedish Neutrality in the Second World War.

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Peter Leeton Kirkpatrick was 15 years old when the Second World War began and only 20 when he was killed in the dying months of the conflict. He had followed his older brother, Philip and many other young men from Britain’s dominions to join the battle of the air being waged by Bomber Command over Europe, a battle that helped win the war against Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. His older brother, Philip flew over thirty missions from the small airfields that dotted the English countryside, returned to Australia with his English bride and lived a long life. Peter died on his tenth mission, shot down by anti-aircraft fire as they passed over Helsingborg, Sweden on the way to bomb a synthetic oil plant in Politz, Germany on the night of 8th February, 1945. The only survivor of Lancaster Bomber PB 382, was the pilot, Bruce Clifton who was blown out of the plane, as the smaller bombs they were carrying exploded. Clifton eventually realised what had happened and released his parachute, landing in a field, miraculously unscathed. Even though he is now 91 years old, he still recounts meticulously the details of that night as if it was a recent event. He has been interviewed many times by journalists and researchers and his story is a remarkable one, but the larger story surrounding that night has mostly gone untold. My research into my uncle’s death has led me to question the reasons why Sweden, a neutral country, fired at Allied aircraft at that stage of the war and what Sweden’s policy of neutrality actually meant.

At the start of the Second World War, twenty European states declared their neutrality with only five retaining their neutral status by the end of the war, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and Sweden. [[1]](#footnote-1) Each state was free to make the initial decision, as there was no obligation under international law, at that time to take part in a war, even against aggression. [[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that most of the fifteen original neutrals who were “dragged into the war” [[3]](#footnote-3), did so against their will, indicates the extremely aggressive nature of the conflict. The rise of aggressive political extremism in the form of Fascism, National Socialism and Communism with their attendant racial ideologies, and expansionist plans, emphatically challenged ‘normal’ international relations and rejected the restraint and balance that small states needed to maintain their neutral status. [[4]](#footnote-4) All three political groups, in differing degrees, utilised ideological warfare to propagate their extremist beliefs and justify the plummeting humanitarian standards of warfare, but it was Hitler’s National Socialism with its fanatical plans for a thousand-year Reich where the Aryan and Nordic people would subordinate all others, that posed the greatest threat and made neutrality into what has been aptly described as “a threadbare garment.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The neutrals did have their position defined by international law, mainly drawn from the Hague Conventions of 1907 and the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War of 1929.[[6]](#footnote-6) They were entitled to defend their territory by force, they were allowed to engage in trade with both sides, excluding military goods and they had the right to communicate with all parties.[[7]](#footnote-7) Above all, their most important obligation was strict impartiality, not only in trade but also in refusing their territory from being used for military purposes.[[8]](#footnote-8) Neutral powers were also obliged to intern, any troops which were received on their territory from the theatre of war[[9]](#footnote-9) for the duration of the conflict, as is done with prisoners of war, so as to deny any military advantage from crossing into neutral territory.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The historian, Joachim Joesten commented in January, 1945 in relation to Sweden, that neutrality required “a complete balance in the neutral country’s relations with the two belligerents” which in practice is seldom achieved but “in the present war has been conspicuous by its absence.”[[11]](#footnote-11) During the First World War, Sweden was consistently pro-German and in the years between the wars, Germany was Sweden’s main trade and cultural partner but there was not any significant Nazi political development in Sweden before or after the war.[[12]](#footnote-12) Initially Sweden strictly adhered to the neutrality rules, with the Social Democrat SAP[[13]](#footnote-13) government of Per Albin Hansson “doggedly pursu[ing] a policy of absolute impartiality,” even though public sympathy was largely on the side of the Allies.[[14]](#footnote-14) Hansson had previously been Defence Minister and had later chaired a Defence Commission between 1930-1935[[15]](#footnote-15) so Sweden’s modest, but steadily increasing defences, were “armed and vigilant from the start.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Sweden needed to secure food and fuel supplies throughout the war so immediately began negotiating long-term trade deals with both belligerents.[[17]](#footnote-17) Germany was keen for Swedish iron ore for its steel production, vitally needed for the German armaments industry, a fact not lost on the British Foreign Office,[[18]](#footnote-18) particularly as the high grade of the ore saved mining and transporting large quantities of coke and coal to process the lower quality German and French ore.[[19]](#footnote-19) After the initial phase of Swedish neutrality that lasted from the start of the war until the German invasion of Norway and Denmark on 9 April1940 which effectively isolated Sweden from the West,[[20]](#footnote-20) the Allies were sympathetic to Sweden’s position as a fellow democracy stranded strategically but became concerned over the increased levels of Swedish ore and wood products that assisted the German war effort.[[21]](#footnote-21)

During the difficult second phase, which began that month and continued until mid 1943, Sweden’s appeasement towards Germany resulted in a number of controversial concessions[[22]](#footnote-22) prompted by the power that the Nazis now had over the Swedish economy and the threat of invasion.[[23]](#footnote-23) From 25 April, 1940, Germany began pressing Sweden to allow German troops and military supplies to be moved by the Swedish rail system.[[24]](#footnote-24) These requests were initially denied but eventually Sweden acquiesced and began granting Germany both political and economic concessions. These included the controversial ‘transit’ agreement which allowed the transporting of over 2 million German troops and war equipment back and forth to Norway, allowing both German warships and commercial vessels to use Sweden’s coastal waters (thus evading Allied forces) as well as raising Germany’s iron ore imports.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even access to Swedish air space was allowed as German ‘courier’ planes flew unimpeded over Sweden.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Even though it is understandable that Sweden was coerced into violating its neutral obligations, it is harder to grasp the fact that Sweden cared whether these concessions were successful for the Germans. The Swedish Foreign Minister, Gunther, upon learning that he believed Britain intended bombing attacks on the German trains travelling between Kornsjo and Trelleborg, shortly after the transit agreement was signed in July, 1940, notified the German Legation in Sweden that Sweden would “strengthen the anti-aircraft defences along this line very considerably and intends, …to do away with the arrangement of prior warning shots which ha[d]previously existed”.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is also interesting to note that both British and French requests for transit permission around the same time were refused.[[28]](#footnote-28)

It was during this contentious period that the Swedish government began restricting the freedom of the press regarding pro-Allied or anti-Nazi opinions, banning books, newspapers or magazines that offended German sensitivities and resulting in editors being jailed or dismissed.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even theatre and movies were censored to be ideologically neutral[[30]](#footnote-30), a distortion of the Nazi tradition- the suspension of ideology. It was allowed however, to openly criticise the Allies, the irony of which, was not lost on Herbert Tingsten, a Swedish intellectual who commented, ”The only thing that can’t be criticised are governments in countries which threaten our government.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

During the third phase of Swedish neutrality, from around September, 1943 until the end of 1944 the Allies applied continual pressure on Sweden to cease trade with Germany, of iron ore and particularly ball-bearings which Germany received in massive quantities, peaking in 1943 with 70 per cent of those Germany imported and 10 per cent of total usage.[[32]](#footnote-32) Ball bearings are specialty-engineering components, which were used in aircraft engines, tanks, vehicles, weapons and submarine engines amongst other war necessities.[[33]](#footnote-33) Due to the heat and pressure that surrounds a ball bearing, even a small defect can cause an engine to explode[[34]](#footnote-34) so high quality ball bearings were a precious commodity. In Britain, (and similarly in Germany) in July 1943, of the top quality British ball bearings produced, only 34 per cent were suitable for use in aircraft while 100 per cent of the imported Swedish ball bearings were aircraft-worthy.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Recent Swedish historiography has been much more critical than in the past in appraising Sweden’s justification in continuing to stall the cessation of trade in “militarily vital supplies” with Germany for at least a year after the threat of invasion had disappeared and the ultimate outcome of the war was in little doubt.[[36]](#footnote-36) In an astute Swedish economic study by Martin Fritz in 1975, [[37]](#footnote-37) the author downplays the importance of Swedish ball bearings after explaining how the Swedish Foreign Office used “a skillful deception” by an increase in ball-bearing steel and machinery imports to Germany to compensate for the Allied demands for reduced supply of the bearings themselves, tricking the unwitting Americans.[[38]](#footnote-38) British intelligence sources revealed that the trade in both goods and labour between Sweden and Germany was greater than what the Swedish government revealed but even when confronted with this damaging evidence, Sweden was slow to respond.[[39]](#footnote-39) Peter Tennant, who served as the British Press Attaché in Stockholm from1939 to 1945 and was secretly one of Britain’s Special Operations Executive’s (SOE) men in Sweden, summed up the situation of Swedish neutrality in relation to trade as dependent “on not being found out.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

The censorship of public opinion was reduced gradually in 1943, revealing an urgent indignation in Swedish public opinion and after a mass meeting on 5 April in Stockholm; a demand was made to the government to revoke German ‘transit’ benefits that finally came into effect in late August, 1943.[[41]](#footnote-41) Sadly, it was also during this time that the Swedish railway leased freight cars to ease the urgent demand on the overloaded German rail system[[42]](#footnote-42), which was extensively used for transporting Holocaust victims to their deaths.

A continuing game of German appeasement was being played even when there was no actual need for Sweden to oblige them. This is patently obvious when reading the telegrams of the U.S Foreign Affairs Department, the British Office and the Swedish diplomats.[[43]](#footnote-43) The frustratingly protracted and pedantic negotiations that the Swedes put the Allies through to stop the German ‘transit traffic’, (even though this was merely resuming her obligations as a neutral) finally ended in August with Boheman, the Secretary-General of the Swedish Foreign Ministry commenting that on receiving the news from Sweden “the way it was handled in Germany, … gave him the impression that Hitler was no longer functioning” and that he doubted if he was even told of the matter.[[44]](#footnote-44) This did not stop the Swedish from continuing to trade with Germany right up until 1 January, 1945, “provid[ing] direct aid to a genocidal government doomed to lose the war.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Associate Professor Paul Levine, historian and senior lecturer at Uppsala University, Sweden argues that even though democracy in Europe was “genuinely at risk” at the start of the war and continued to be at stake up until early 1943, Social Democrat Sweden, “did precious little - indeed, almost nothing- to diminish the threat” but “continued ‘business as usual’ with Nazi Germany.”[[46]](#footnote-46) He argues that this was then compounded when the Swedish government failed “to do anything substantive to aid the approaching Allied victory” creating an uncomfortable moral imbalance.

What the Allies were doing in the meantime, was struggling to end the war in Europe by halting the German war machine. Germany needed fuel, particularly refined oils to maintain that machine and not having much natural oil, had since the 1930’s built up a large synthetic oil industry.[[47]](#footnote-47) A combined offensive against German oil production began in April, 1945 but “oil targets are small, strongly defended and hard to hit”[[48]](#footnote-48) so the bombing continued until September when bad weather halted the attacks by which time, oil levels all over Germany were at a very low level. Albert Speers, the Nazi armaments minister recalls telling Hitler in May, 1944, “the enemy has struck us at one of our weakest points. If they persist at it this time, we will soon no longer have any fuel worth mentioning.” [[49]](#footnote-49)

During the long spell of bad weather, during the European winter of 1944, the Germans determinedly carried out repairs and Speers predicted that, “ we can in five to six weeks restore production to about two-thirds of the level…prior to the attacks.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Bomber Command was determined and using the new ‘GEE-H’ markers continued to hit the oil plants one by one including the more remote plants at Politz, Leuna and Brux.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Meanwhile on 8 February, 1945 in East Kirkby, one of the many temporary airfields that Bomber Command had set up near the east coast of England, nineteen Lancaster Bombers of R.A.F. Squadron 57,[[52]](#footnote-52) each manned with a pilot and six crew were preparing for their operation that night, bombing the synthetic oil plant at Politz. The target had been bombed before, in fact some of the crews had already flown the long eight to nine hour journey to north-eastern Germany before, including the crew of Lancaster PB382 which included two 20 year old Australians, the pilot, Bruce Clifton and my uncle, Peter Kirkpatrick, the wireless operator (known in RAF parlance as a WOp.) The nineteen bombers leaving from East Kirkby were joining a total force of 475 Lancasters and 7 of the lighter Mosquitoes that would attack Politz in two waves that night. [[53]](#footnote-53)

The first of the heavy bombers took off from East Kirkby at 16.34 and within twenty minutes, 12 of them had taken off but PB382 and her crew were still on the ground.[[54]](#footnote-54) One of the Lancaster’s four engines was not turning over and with a heavy bomb load needed to be operational, so a ground staff crew began working while the crew watched the bulk of their squadron take off.[[55]](#footnote-55) Twenty nine minutes after the first plane had left the ground PB 382 finally took off for her long mission to Politz.[[56]](#footnote-56) The pilot, Bruce Clifton who supplied me with the map below, which marks the course that PB382 took to Politz recounts:

“…and the best course was across the centre of Denmark and to avoid heavy targets at Emden and Kiel and Wilhelmshaben, and the navigator told me that we would be turning onto a course south-south-west, south-south-east, I should say.[[57]](#footnote-57) … We were to fly down the Kattegat which is a strip of water between Copenhagen or Denmark and Sweden and that would take us straight towards our target at Politz, the oil refinery.”[[58]](#footnote-58)



It was just as PB382 was about to turn south down the Kattegat that they were fired on by Swedish anti-aircraft guns, a total of eight shells in all hit the plane, severing the controls and sending the plane into a steep dive before detonating four of the bombs they were carrying.[[59]](#footnote-59) Clifton recounted a few months later in a letter to his mother:

When I collected my scattered wits and the glare subsided, I found I had been blown out of the aircraft, so I pulled the rip-cord and my parachute opened immediately. A few minutes later I dropped into a ploughed field just on the outskirts of a large town called Helsingborg. From there it is only three and a half miles from German held islands belonging to Denmark. From there I could see the aircraft burning, every so often there were explosions, either bombs or petrol tanks going off. It was some miles away…There was nothing I could do to help my boys…[[60]](#footnote-60)

The raid on the oil refinery that night was a great success, rating an entry in Bomber Command’s Campaign Diary: “Severe damage was caused to this important synthetic oil plant. It produced no further oil during the war.”[[61]](#footnote-61). Speer mentioned this raid in his post-war interrogation as being another big setback to Germany’s war effort.[[62]](#footnote-62) Out of the 482 planes that flew to Politz that night, 12 Lancasters were lost including one shot down by ‘neutral fire’.[[63]](#footnote-63) The sole survivor of PB382, the pilot, Bruce Clifton was interned by the Swedish and on the way to being moved to his bed for the night at about 1am he saw the huge formation of British bombers returning from their mission at Politz. Amazingly, the Helsingborg gunners opened fire at the planes travelling overhead at around four thousand feet causing the shrapnel and shells to fall over the town.[[64]](#footnote-64) There would have been no doubt to the Swedes that the huge formations of British bombers were Allied planes. Swedish anti-aircraft fire that night was described as “their heaviest barrage yet.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

On 16 February, 1945 there was a funeral with full military honours including a band and dignitaries at the Palsjo Cemetery in Helsingborg for nine RAF airmen including one Australian, Peter Kirkpatrick.[[66]](#footnote-66) Documents relating to this funeral including a local Swedish newspaper report along with an English translation, photographs, an order of service and a list of wreaths were sent to Kirkpatrick’s parents by the R.A.A.F. Overseas Headquarters and saved in a scrapbook labeled ‘Peter’ along with other memorabilia relating to his death. [[67]](#footnote-67) The newspaper article mentions nine British airmen specifying, “six were from the aircraft that crashed in Helsingborg.”[[68]](#footnote-68) It makes no mention across the three-page article of the other three men and how they died.

The funeral attracted a large attendance including an impressive Swedish military presence and diplomatic representatives. Most of the article is devoted to describing the large local community presence, the laying of wreaths, stirring battle hymns played by a military band, the firing of a salute and the solemnity of the occasion. There is no explanation as to why this funeral accorded such attention. Neither is there any indication as to how the three other “British” airmen died. Six of the nine young men buried were the crew from PB382 that had been shot down on the night of 8 February, 1945. After identifying them from the Commonwealth War Graves database[[69]](#footnote-69), further investigation with the British National Archives revealed that the other three were part of a crew of seven Royal Canadian Air Force men flying a Halifax bomber MZ865. They were killed after being shot down by Swedish anti-aircraft fire near Falsterbo Lighthouse on the night of 14 February, 1945 while heading for mine laying duties in the Kadet Channel between Denmark and northern Germany. Both the British and Swedish records confirm this. [[70]](#footnote-70) Only three of the dead had been recovered at that time[[71]](#footnote-71) and were buried along with the six dead shot down six days earlier. [[72]](#footnote-72) In the Swedish newspaper report sent to the family, there is no mention that either crew had been shot down by Swedish fire. Thirteen Allied airmen killed by neutral fire in six days in two separate incidents. This at a time when the outcome of the war seemed certain and the finalisation of the war was paramount and excruciatingly near.

After discovering the truth regarding the shooting down of the two planes and returning to the Swedish newspaper article,[[73]](#footnote-73) there are traces of the reality of the situation that were not initially apparent. The large military contingent and the diplomatic presence now makes sense, the fact that throughout the service, each coffin had a wreath from the Swedish Defence forces at its foot. Details in the article such as specific wreaths from two different Swedish Defence Field Posts given with “sincere words” could feasibly be taken as an indication that these two field posts were responsible for downing the two Allied planes.

The attendance of local families and Danish refugees as well as the large number of wreaths from the town folk, indicate a public sympathy at odds with their government’s actions. On the official list of wreaths sent to the family, the final wreath listed has a card enigmatically written in German which translated reads, “Also for our freedom have you given your lives. You have our thanks.”

While the documents sent to the family remain silent in relation to how these airmen died, the newspaper article suggests that it should be a comfort to the grieving that these men, “have found a last resting place in the soil of a friendly country” even though it was common knowledge to the Swedish, at least in relation to the first plane that Swedish fire had killed them. Some of the less conservative Swedish newspapers were not so reticent and made clear the moral conflict which the Swedish public felt. These views were echoed in small articles in both the British and the Australian press. The question was asked, “Why are we firing on Allied planes when they pass over Sweden? We didn’t shoot down German planes when they flew over in 1940 and 1941.”[[74]](#footnote-74) It is also worth noting that Sweden allowed access to its air space for a total of 3,157 so-called German courier flights between 1941 and 1944.[[75]](#footnote-75) The pretence of this practice was uncovered when a German courier plane had to make an emergency landing and was found to have armed and uniformed Germany military on board.[[76]](#footnote-76)

It is probably pertinent to point out that it is generally accepted that national sovereignty extends a nation’s territorial waters to three nautical miles from its coast.[[77]](#footnote-77) Many of the airspace incursions occurred along the Swedish coast or over the Kattegat as Allied planes attempted to avoid flying over occupied territory to reach their targets and were shot down over the sea or along the coastline. Most night-time missions were flown without navigation lights over “blacked-out” occupied or enemy territory. British newspapers reported after the raid on Politz on 8 February,1945 that, “a message quoted by the Nazis” said, “They used the lights of the Swedish West Coast Railway as ‘road signs’ and followed this line.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

A few days after the funeral, newspaper reports indicate that the Swedish Foreign Affairs Commission and later the *Riksdag*, the Swedish parliament were discussing allowing Allied planes “free passage” after public opinion demanded they help the Allies. [[79]](#footnote-79) The debate in the Swedish parliament or *Riksdagen* centred on whether, in view of the atrocities being committed by the Germans in Norway and Denmark, Allied planes should be fired on at all, but the parliament was referred to the anti-aircraft battery rules which had been set down in 1939, which stated that warning shots needed to be fired first and then effective fire.*[[80]](#footnote-80)* Anti-aircraft fire had been used since the beginning of the war to prevent incursions into Swedish airspace rather than from fear of a deliberate attack. [[81]](#footnote-81) After a Russian plane was shot down by anti-aircraft fire in December, 1939 during the Winter War, the rules of engagement were amended to include warning shots and allowed for damaged aircraft or medical emergencies to land without being fired at.[[82]](#footnote-82) However, Sweden’s controversial ‘transit concessions’ to Germany from 1941 included overflying rights and an easing of firing warning shots which effectually meant that single German and Finnish planes would not be fired on at all. [[83]](#footnote-83)

The Swedish archivist and historian of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Professor Wilhelm Carlgren concedes that by late 1944, Sweden’s practice of neutrality had been “considerably diluted” and even though professed, was actually at whim to “the needs of the hour.” [[84]](#footnote-84) Carlgren states that the Swedish public had an emphatic desire for “an early end to the war, the annihilation of Hitler’s regime and the liberation of Denmark and Norway” which “demanded” decisions by the government and the *Riksdag* favouring the Allies.*[[85]](#footnote-85)* Carlgren’s assertion that Sweden’s relaxation of neutrality laws at this time, in favour of the Allies is blatantly misleading. The “concessions” to the Allies to which he refers relate to the cessation of trade in iron ore and ball bearings and the cessation of “transit traffic” from Norway through Sweden and on to Germany thus evading Allied attack. These were merely the reversal of ‘concessions’ that Sweden made to Germany for the bulk of the war and for which the Allies had constantly petitioned Sweden to cease. It is evident that the Swedish public, along with most of the civilized world, desired an end to the war, the downfall of the Nazi regime and the liberation of their Scandinavian neighbours but a stubborn adherence to strictly preventing even the slightest air-space incursions by the Allied defenders did nothing to help bring these about.

The Swedish Foreign Minister, Christian Gunther was quoted as publicly announcing that Berlin was aware that “the new killings and acts of violence against the Norwegian people have caused the greatest indignation and disgust among the Swedish people.”[[86]](#footnote-86) However, the government’s policy guided by the *Riksdag*, did not reflect the public sentiments. The Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson reportedly announced in a statement to the *Riksdag,* that Swedish anti-aircraft batteries would continue to fire on Allied planes attempting to liberate Norway and Denmark, “even though they are dropping food and arms to the fighting Norwegians.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

The ambiguous nature and irony of Swedish neutrality during the Second World War was not lost on some Swedes. After an RAF bomber was shot down by Swedish anti-aircraft fire over his home county of Skane, in August 1944, the famous Swedish writer, Frans G. Bengtsson penned a poem meant as a satirical funeral speech by a Swedish official at that crew’s burial.[[88]](#footnote-88)

You saved us from the tramp of Hitler’s boot,

We’re safe and sound while neighbours pine to death.

And now we bury you with thanks and shoot

To consecrate our neutral shibboleth.

This evil Hydra will e’er long be slain

And so our now secure neutrality

Can well afford to shoot to kill and gain

Credit for helping you into eternity.

Bengtsson obviously undertood the nature of Swedish diplomacy as the real speech given at the funeral at Helsingborg, for the two crews shot down, six months later, spoke of the fallen airmen’s sacrifice for their country whilst never acknowledging Sweden’s part in sending them on “their journey to the land of eternity.” [[89]](#footnote-89) It is also ironic that the Canadian plane shot down over the sea near Falsterbo Lighthouse for a minor air incursion over territorial waters, was very close to the Falsterbo Canal, which Sweden cut through the toe of Sweden in 1941, providing German vessels with not only a short cut to England, but a way of avoiding over thirty miles of Allied mined waters. [[90]](#footnote-90)

In defence of Sweden, both Allied and Axis soldiers were treated well and usually interned together in comfortable accommodation for a short period before being repatriated. Bruce Clifton was interned on the night of 8 February, 1945 and returned to England on 10 March, 1945 rejoining his squadron for active duty.[[91]](#footnote-91) The crews of many Allied planes, (a large majority from the United States) who made emergency landings in Sweden or crashed, were saved from becoming German prisoners of war or being killed by the enemy. Sweden did tarnish this reputation by negotiating arrangements for the release of internees in exchange for aircraft, equipment and training, particularly towards the end of the war when Allied internees outnumbered German, creating an imbalance to the *quid pro quo* release system*.[[92]](#footnote-92)*

John Gilmour argues that since 1945, Sweden has followed “a policy of minimal disclosure, avoidance of moral issues, occasional concealment and propagation of a new, non-aligned humanitarian image,” in order to re-invent their embarrassing wartime performance. [[93]](#footnote-93) During my research for this paper I noticed a distinct change in the historiography from around 1990 with the Swedish historians from the 1960’s referring to the conflict as between “the Great Powers’ and nothing to do with smaller states such as Sweden. It was not seen until recently as a struggle for democracy and a fight against tyranny. I also noticed what has been described as national ego(t)ism[[94]](#footnote-94) or selfishness in many Swedish accounts. It seemed that a pedantic, “we’ll do it on our terms” stance was more important than defeating the aggression of the Axis powers. Krister Wahlback attributes “the prevailing self centredness and latent xenophobic or anti-Semitic feeling” of the Swedish public from the beginning of the war as shaping policy.[[95]](#footnote-95) It should be pointed out that historians of this time were largely “blindfolded” by the lack of access allowed to official records with at least two; Wahlbeck in 1967 and Lonnroth in 1977, complaining of Sweden’s restrictive access to wartime documents because of strict adherence to the 50 year rule.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Recent Swedish historiography relating to Sweden’s actions during the war has changed markedly after calls to “stop sweeping history under the carpet”[[97]](#footnote-97) and also following the general European trend for historical transparency. Critical re-evaluation of Sweden’s role in the war, particularly in relation to the Holocaust has instigated the teaching in schools of the ‘Living History’ program which aims to look critically at what happened and learn from it.

In the final analysis, Peter Leeton Kirkpatrick was shot down over Sweden by neutral fire from a country for which neutrality had become an empty catchword devoid of any moral or ethical reasoning. There could be a number of factors that contributed to the rise in Sweden’s offensive form of neutrality at such a late stage of the war, namely the increase in Allied planes infringing Swedish airspace in their quest to reach German targets or Swedish anger over the restrictions on trade and shipping the Allies had finally forced upon them. It is without doubt that this incident was not an isolated one and was a result of a deliberate policy decision by the Swedish government from mid 1944 until the end of the war to enforce a strictly enforced defence of their airspace. The courtesy of giving ‘warning shots’ appears to have been as *ad hoc* as their neutrality. Understanding why Sweden, a democratic country, chose to obstruct the final stages of the fight against the fascist powers, requires acknowledging that Swedish policy was dictated by a dogmatic determination to keep out of the war at all costs, no matter what the moral consequences. The morality of Sweden’s wartime actions is now being scrutinised in relation to the much more heinous charge of furthering the extent of the Holocaust, causing another generation to question the actual experience of neutrality for a democratic and egalitarian society. The important historical issue is not about blame in an international conflict. It is about a national conflict in Sweden between a belief in democracy and a decision to actually fight for it.

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66. Kirkpatrick was an RAAF Flight Sergeant on loan to the RAF through the Empire Air Training Scheme. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
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68. Newspaper article on the funeral in the *Helsingborg Dagblad* dated 17 February, 1945. ‘Peter’ scrap-book. It is interesting to note that Peter Tennant, the British Press Attaché in Sweden during the war, named the *Helsingborg Dagsblad* as one of three provincial newspapers that were “mouthpieces of German propaganda.” Tennant, *Touchlines of War,* 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
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72. The bodies of the three Canadians buried at Helsingborg were recovered the day before the funeral and transported around 100 kilometres to Helsingborg for the funeral even though there were two other Commonwealth War Graves closer at Malmo and FJelie. This would not only have been expedient but also helped avoid the publicity that a second funeral would have generated so soon after the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
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