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Sweden's Neutrality During World War II: A Retrospective Analysis and Modern Tendencies

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Abstract. The entry into force of the Protocol on Sweden's Accession to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on 7 March 2024 draws a historic line under the Scandinavian country's more than 200-year policy of neutrality. First proclaimed by King Carl XIV Johan of Sweden in August 1814 and put into practice in 1834, the principle of permanent neutrality has been an integral pillar of Sweden's foreign policy. Adherence to the policy of neutrality allowed Sweden to avoid the devastating consequences of the two world wars and to remain an economic beneficiary of the confrontation between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War. On the other hand, what is commonly referred to as 'permanent neutrality' — with reference to the Swiss benchmark — in the case of Sweden deserves at least a more detailed analytical approach and at most a critical rethinking. The authors of this study use the methodology of historical and political science: the historical and analytical method, the method of comparison, the method of socio-historical and socio-political analogies and the method of political analysis. The authors also apply a behavioral approach and rational choice theory to identify the factors that influenced the decision of Sweden's political elites to end the era of neutrality and join the NATO politico-military bloc. The subject of the proposed article is Sweden's policy of formal neutrality during the World War II. It is no coincidence that the authors use the term 'formal' to refer to the nature of Swedish neutrality in the period 1939–1945, since it was during the World War II, in the authors' opinion, that the practical content of the Swedish understanding of 'neutrality' was most clearly demonstrated. This, in turn, makes it much easier to understand the motives behind the country's rapid accession to NATO in 2024. Assessing the current trends in the development of Sweden's foreign policy course, the authors in the final part of the study cite the key factors behind the decision to join NATO: historical continuity and traditional political Western-centrism.

Key words: Sweden, permanent neutrality, Germany, USSR, USA, NATO, geopolitical environment



Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions. N.P. Parkhitko: data curation, development of research methodology, preparation of the draft manuscript, editing of the manuscript following the review. K.P. Kurylev: conceptualization, development of research methodology, research supervision. A.A. Suchilina: document selection, data validation. E.V. Danilova: proofreading. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article.


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Нейтралитет Швеции в годы Второй мировой войны: ретроспективные оценки и современные тенденции

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Аннотация. Вступление в силу 7 марта 2024 г. Протокола о присоединении Швеции к Организации Североатлантического договора (НАТО) подводит историческую черту под более чем 200-летней политикой нейтралитета этой скандинавской страны. Впервые озвученный в августе 1814 г. королем Швеции Карлом XIV Юханом и реализованный на практике в 1834 г. принцип постоянного нейтралитета Швеции представлял собой интегральную основу ее внешнеполитического курса. Следование политике нейтралитета позволило Швеции избежать разрушительных последствий двух мировых войн, а также оставаться экономическим бенефициаром противостояния США и СССР в годы холодной войны. Вместе с тем то, что принято характеризовать как «постоянный нейтралитет», имея в виду швейцарский эталон, в случае Швеции заслуживает как минимум более детального аналитического подхода, как максимум — критического переосмысления. Для решения поставленной академической задачи авторы исследования оперируют методологией исторической и политической наук: историко-аналитическим методом, методом сравнения, методом социально-исторических и социально-политических аналогий и методом политического анализа. Также применены бихевиоралистский подход и теория рационального выбора, при помощи которых выявлены факторы, повлиявшие на решение политических элит Швеции о завершении эпохи нейтралитета и присоединении к военно-политическому блоку НАТО. Предмет исследования — политика формального нейтралитета, которой придерживалась Швеция в годы Второй мировой войны. Авторы неслучайно употребили сочетание «формальный» применительно к характеру шведского нейтралитета в 1939–1945 гг., поскольку именно в годы Второй мировой войны, по мнению авторов, практическое содержание шведского понимания «нейтралитета» было продемонстрировано наиболее иллюстративно. В свою очередь, это существенно упрощает нам понимание мотивов столь быстрого вступления страны в НАТО в 2024 г. В заключительной части приведена оценка актуальных тенденций развития внешнеполитического курса Швеции, а также ключевые факторы, обусловившие решение о вступлении Швеции в НАТО: историческая преемственность и традиционный политический западнцентризм.

Ключевые слова: постоянный нейтралитет, Германия, СССР, США, НАТО, геополитическая обстановка

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Пархитко Н.П.: разработка методологии исследования, подготовка черновика рукописи, редактирование рукописи по итогам рецензирования. Курылев К.П.: концептуализация, разработка методологии исследования, руководство исследованием. Сучилина А.А.: подбор источниковой базы, валидация данных. Данилова Е.В.: редактирование материала. Все авторы ознакомлены с окончательной версией статьи и одобрили ее.

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Introduction: Historiography and Research Methodology

The purpose of the present study is to identify the reasons for the transformation of Swedish neutrality from non-participation in military campaigns and coalitions of foreign countries to accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on 7 March 2024. In a broader sense, the authors aim to carry out a fundamental historical and dialectical analysis, which would allow them to find an answer to the key question: why was such a transformation possible in principle? Whilst the relevance of the study is not immediately apparent, the authors identify profound historical antecedents in contemporary events that inform the exceptional precedent established by the Swedish leadership's decision to relinquish the country's neutral foreign policy in 2023–2024.

The authors propose that the policy of neutrality adopted by Sweden during the World War II should be the subject of the study, on the grounds that it was during this period that the fundamental 'assumptions' that underpin the practical steps taken by Sweden today were revealed. The issue pertains to the dual implementation of the principles of neutrality. This is exemplified by the transit of troops and military cargoes through its own territory, as well as the formation of volunteer units within the country's borders during the Winter War.

The research methodology employed by the authors encompasses the historical and analytical method, the method of comparison, as well as both the method of social and historical and social and political analogies. The systematization of their dialectical content necessitates the consideration of historical events, processes and phenomena in the context of their significance and influence on

modernity. The instrumental and practical value of this methodology is twofold. Firstly, it provides a means to study historical facts. Secondly, it enables an understanding of how the past shapes the present and the future. In addition, it demonstrates how events and ideas from the past remain relevant and useful for analyzing contemporary problems and processes.

The issue of Swedish neutrality has been the subject of extensive academic scrutiny since the end of the Cold War. The authors of the study drew upon a comprehensive array of materials, encompassing monographs, scientific articles, and documentary sources. Among the monographic studies devoted to the problem under study, the work of F. Braconier is worthy of mention, as it contains a historical analysis of the formation of Swedish neutrality policy from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the end of the twentieth century and the country's accession to the European Union (EU) (Braconier, 1989); Ch. Agius, a British-Australian political scientist specializing in Scandinavian politics, neutrality and identity, whose research is devoted to analyzing the social and political dimension of the problem and explaining how neutrality became a part of the national identity (Agius, 2012), and also M. Malmberg (2001), who examined Sweden's policy of neutrality in the context of the development and functioning of the country's state institutions. Of particular interest is the analysis of the neutrality policy of small states by E. Karsh (1988), and the detailed examination of the "specific character" of Swedish neutrality in the context of changing geopolitical realities by K. Wahlbäck (1986).

The authors would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of scientific articles by Swedish and American researchers, including

A. Björkdahl (2013), C. Archer (1996), C. Devine (2011), L. Goetschel (1999; 2013), and S. Rundqvist,¹ B. Bushard,² etc.

The work of U. Bjereld is of particular interest. Bjereld is a Swedish political scientist and professor at the University of Gothenburg. He specializes in Swedish foreign policy, neutrality and security. He is also the co-author of the book *‘Sveriges Säkerhet och Världens Fred: Svensk utrikespolitik under kalla kriget’* (Swedish Foreign and Security Policy during the Cold War), which presents an analysis of Swedish neutrality policy in the context of the Cold War and its transformation (Bjereld, Johansson & Molin, 2008). A.-S. Dahl, a Danish-Swedish political scientist specializing in Scandinavian security, NATO and neutrality, analyzed the correlation of Swedish neutrality with NATO and US policies in detail in a monograph published in 2008. This analysis enabled the reader to understand why Sweden decided to join NATO in 2022 (Dahl, 2008).

The work of the Swedish historian Bo Hultdt merits particular attention. Hultdt is an expert in international relations and former director of the Swedish Institute of International Relations. He has authored numerous works on Swedish security and neutrality. His research analyses the historical context of Swedish neutrality and its evolution (Hultdt, 1977; Hultdt & Lejins, 1984).

These works provide arguments both ‘pro’ and ‘contra’ for Sweden’s rational choice in favor of pragmatic economic cooperation with Russia. This, in turn, correlates with the theory of rational choice (the principle of the motivation of preferences — in this case, economic choice), to which the authors appeal below.

¹ Rundqvist S. Sweden Celebrates 200 Years of Peace // The Local. August 15, 2014. URL: <http://www.thelocal.se/20140815/sweden-celebrates-200-years-of-peace> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

² Bushard B. Sweden Officially Joins NATO in Blow to Russia // Forbes. March 7, 2024. URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianbushard/2024/03/07/sweden-officially-joins-nato-in-blow-to-russia/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

In the realm of Russian research on Swedish neutrality during the World War II, it is imperative to acknowledge the seminal monograph by A.S. Kahn (1967), a foundational study in the field. Additionally, the article by S.S. Gulyakin (2018) and the research by A.A. Smirnova and V.V. Fedorov (Smirnova & Fedorov, 2016) provide crucial insights, particularly the former’s analysis of Sweden’s foreign policy during its period of neutrality. It is imperative to direct attention to the works of K.V. Voronov (2013; 2018), Al.A. Gromyko (Gromyko & Plevako, 2016) and E.M. Malysheva (2016), which provide a substantial foundation for the study’s argumentation.

In the context of the historiography of the problems under study, the article by E.V. Korunova deserves special attention. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors that hindered the formation of a Scandinavian Defense Alliance, a concept proposed by Sweden at the conclusion of the World War II. As E.V. Korunova observes, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland were oriented towards different, opposing great powers on the eve of the war, and this became a key obstacle to the development of their military and political cooperation (Korunova, 2017).

The philosophical dimension of the problem is presented in the study by P.P. Kalugina and E.A. Sergeev. The present authors have focused on identifying the theoretical and philosophical aspects that determine the contradictory nature of the EU’s foreign policy vector. This is expressed in the simultaneous desire to increase the EU’s influence on the world stage and the rejection of the model of developing relations with Russia that has proved itself over many decades (Kalugina & Sergeev, 2025). In this case, Sweden serves as an illustrative example of such a practice, albeit a private one.

Moreover, in order to analyze Sweden’s accession to NATO, it was necessary to utilize a variety of primary and secondary sources. In particular, the materials of Russian and foreign news agencies, as well as the interviews with

Swedish and NATO politicians conducted in 2023–2024, were deemed to be significant sources of information.

The most effective method for studying the motivating factors that influenced Sweden's accession to NATO is the method of political analysis, which the authors used to study Sweden's political motivation in the context of the decision to abandon the policy of neutrality.

History of Swedish Neutrality

Firstly, the concept of neutrality must be considered in the context of international law. According to the definition established in the early 20th century, neutrality is defined as non-participation in war, and in peacetime, it is defined as a refusal to participate in aggressive military-political blocs and not to join them, as well as a reduction of military arsenals and budget expenditures on defense.³

In the context of modern international law, neutrality is defined as the stance adopted by a state that does not engage in hostilities with other powers. The international law of neutrality imposes three restrictions on the actions of a neutral state or country during a war between other states:

- 1) Non-provision of its own armed forces to the belligerents,
- 2) Non-making its territory available for use by the belligerents (basing, transit, flight, etc.),
- 3) Non-discriminating either party in the supply of arms and military goods (i.e. restrictions are either the same or none at all) (Kruzhkov, 2000).

As S.S. Gulyakin notes in his study, "There is not a single document where the provision on Sweden's neutrality is fixed. The neutrality of this state is based only on the unilateral will of Sweden itself; it is not written in the Constitution of Sweden and is not enshrined in any other normative documents. The neutrality of this

country cannot be considered permanent in the full sense of the word, as, for example, the neutrality of Switzerland" (Gulyakin, 2018, p. 47). Thus, the phenomenon of Swedish neutrality should be considered in the context of the specifics of Sweden's historical development and its foreign policy.

The decision to adopt the principle of neutrality as the basis of its foreign policy positioning can be traced back to Swedish policy as early as the Napoleonic Wars. In accordance with the provisions of the Fredrikshamn Peace Treaty, which ended the Russian-Swedish war of 1808–1809, Sweden relinquished its control over Finland in favor of Russia. This development represented a significant historical turning point, marking the end of the country's long-standing aspirations to achieve a dominant military and political position in the Baltic region (Fomin, 2013). A form of foreign policy retribution was the brief Swedish-Norwegian war in the summer of 1814, which culminated in Norway's withdrawal from the Danish-Norwegian kingdom (Denmark's stance at the time was pro-French) and the dissolution of the Swedish-Norwegian union.⁴ The principles of non-adherence to military alliances and refusal from direct participation in armed conflicts were articulated in the address of Crown Prince Carl XIV Johan⁵ to the Riksdag in 1818 (Agius, 2012, p. 61). As A.A. Smirnova and V.V. Fedorov have noted, it is also the case that a different perspective exists, according to which Sweden only became neutral only in 1834. This is based on the premise that, as Carl Johan was on the verge of the war on the Eastern Question between Great Britain and Russia, he sent memoranda to the governments of both countries. In these memoranda, he

⁴ The Swedish-Norwegian Union was in force from 1814 to 1905.

⁵ It is noteworthy that the actual name of the Crown Prince of Sweden and later King of Sweden and Norway was Jean-Baptiste Jules Bernadotte. He was a Marshal of the Empire, a participant in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, and Prince Pontecorvo, who founded the Bernadotte dynasty in 1809, which still reigns in Sweden today.

³ Neutrality // Small Encyclopaedic Dictionary. 2nd ed., newly revised and suppl. In 2 vol., 4 issues. Vol. 1–2, issues 1–4. St. Petersburg : Izdanie Brokgauz i Efron publ., 1907–1909. (In Russian).

announced Sweden's intention to maintain neutrality in the event of a conflict. In any event, the fundamental rationale behind the decision to pursue a course of non-participation in armed conflicts was Charles XIV's aspiration to consolidate society, thereby establishing the foundations for subsequent social, economic, and political advancement of the state (Smirnova & Fedorov, 2016, p. 18).

The authors of the study propose that the starting date for Swedish neutrality should be 14 August 1814, when the Treaty of Moses was signed with Norway, because from that moment Sweden officially did not participate directly in wars for more than 200 years.

Sweden's Neutrality During the World War I and the Interwar Period

The apparent simplicity of the formulation of the concept of neutrality should not confuse. In the case of Sweden, it is important to recognize that the appeal to a policy of neutrality was more a political tool than a philosophical constant. It is also important to note that, at first glance, this 'historical choice' of Sweden did not represent the consensus of representatives of all political forces in the country. As M. Malmberg observes, "Since the 19th century, political discourse has expressed concerns regarding the deterioration of the nation's reputation, Sweden's reliance on the volition of substantial and belligerent states and censured the repudiation of war as an efficacious and even innate instrument of politics" (Malmberg, 2001, pp. 102–107). The authors posit that this circumstance largely elucidates Sweden's pragmatic approach, not only to the interpretation of the concept of 'neutrality' itself, but also to its direct implementation. The World Wars I and II provide particularly pertinent examples in this context.

During the World War I, the Swedish political elites demonstrated a remarkable degree of empathy towards Kaiser's Germany. This was partly due to the fact that the German war industry was in dire need of iron ore from the

mines of Berslagen, Dalarna and Kiruna, as well as petroleum products, which the Swedes profitably resold to the Germans with the active participation of Emmanuel Nobel (Ahlund, 2012, p. 105). It is also noteworthy to mention that King Gustav V Adolf of Sweden was married to Victoria of Baden, the daughter of the Grand Duke of Baden, Frederick I, and Louise of Prussia. Consequently, it would be erroneous to interpret his foreign policy position towards Germany as neutral.

It is a logical conclusion that Germany's position towards Sweden was symmetrical, given the factors mentioned above. As A.S. Kahn observes, "In 1915, at the time of its major victories on the Eastern Front, Germany made several unofficial offers to Sweden to form an alliance against Russia. The Germans made several promises to the Swedes, including a commitment to cede the territory of Åland, the establishment of a buffer state within Finland, and other concessions. Nevertheless, the number of militant and influential activists was insufficient, and the ruling class as a whole had a vested interest in maintaining a neutral stance."⁶

The decision of Sweden to remain neutral during the World War I appears to have been motivated primarily by economic factors. Sweden's highly developed metallurgical industry was dependent on imports of British and German coal. It was therefore vital for Sweden to consider the fact that Great Britain supplied 90% of this raw material, while Germany supplied only 10%. Consequently, given the prevailing system of military alliances within the Entente, Sweden, despite its preparedness to enter the war on the side of Germany against Russia, was not prepared to engage in hostilities with Britain. This was evidenced by its limited activities, including mining the Øresund Strait in the vicinity of the Kogrundrennan fairway from the

⁶ Kahn A. S. Chapter XI. Scandinavian countries during the period of imperialism (before 1917) // History of the Scandinavian countries. Part II: Modern history // Norway-Live. (In Russian). URL: <https://norway-live.ru/library/istoriya-skandinavskih-stran13.html> (accessed: 24.01.2025).

summer of 1916, despite significant pressure from Germany (Czarny, 2018, p. 31).

It is imperative to consider Sweden's attitude towards Germany in the interwar period as a discrete entity. The military-technical restrictions imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles prohibited the importation and production of a wide range of military products, including but not limited to airplanes, tanks, warships and submarines. Consequently, Germany endeavored to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles in every possible way, without provoking the ire of the Allies by subjecting its factories to numerous inspections. One of the solutions that was proposed was the withdrawal of high-tech military production abroad. This was achieved through the establishment by German aircraft manufacturers of branches in countries where they could freely build military aircraft.⁷ For instance, Dornier possessed facilities in Italy and Switzerland, while *Junkers* had facilities in Sweden, where the *Junkers G24* three-engine bomber and the *Junkers W33* multi-role aircraft were assembled. In order to enhance the conspiracy, unarmed versions of the *W33* — transport, liaison and patrol — were shipped as separate units to Sweden, where they were subsequently assembled and armed.

The *Junkers W33* was employed for the transportation both passengers and mail in Canada, China, and the USSR. In Germany itself, the subjects worked for *Deutsche Luft Hansa* (known today as *Lufthansa*, the largest airline in Germany). The company was founded on 6 January 1926 and served as a training facility for communication pilots. The reliability of these aircraft is evidenced by their continued operation in Sweden, which remained unaffected by World War II, until the mid-1950s.

By the outbreak of the World War II, Sweden and Germany had cultivated trusting and mutually beneficial bilateral relations, the

economic dimension of which had been assessed through the experience of the World War I. These aforementioned factors were instrumental in shaping Sweden's neutrality during the period 1939–1945.

Between Opposing Sides: Sweden's 'Special' Neutrality During the World War II

Subsequent to the formal declaration of war in Europe on 1 September 1939, Sweden has formally declared its neutrality on at least three occasions. The first instance of neutrality was declared by Sweden on the day of the German attack on Poland, thereby adopting a stance of impartiality in the ongoing armed conflict between Germany and Poland. A second declaration was issued a mere 48 hours after the first, on 3 September, following Britain and France's declaration of war on Germany. In response, Sweden declared its neutrality in the ongoing "European war" (Rzheshevskiy, 1995). On 12 April 1940, the Swedish Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, reiterated Sweden's strict neutrality and emphasized that the utilization of Swedish territory by belligerent countries for the transportation of military supplies was incongruent with its neutrality (Wahlbäck & Boberg, 1966, p. 114).

It is necessary to provide a brief overview of Per Albin Hansson's cabinet. Three months after the outbreak of the World War, II on 13 December 1939, the bipartisan government of Social Democrats and Agrarians resigned and was replaced by a 'government of national unity' consisting of Social Democrats, Liberals, representatives of the Peasants' Union and the National Organization of the Right. Per Albin Hansson retained his position in the renewed cabinet and immediately initiated active steps to prevent Sweden from being drawn into the burgeoning European conflict. The series of measures implemented included both political and military decisions.

It is no secret that Nazi Germany was developing plans to seize the territories of all neighboring states, including neutral ones. For

⁷ *Junkers Luftverkehr* and *Deutscher Aero Lloyd*, which merged in early 1926 to form *Deutsche Luft Hansa* under the leadership of future Luftwaffe Generalfeldmarschall Erhard Milch.

example, the operation to defeat and occupy Switzerland, code-named ‘Tannenbaum,’ was developed by the German General Staff after the defeat of France in the period from July to October 1940. Realizing that Sweden was in an extremely disadvantageous strategic position (especially after the German occupation of Sweden’s neighbors Denmark and Norway), the country was forced to increase its military expenditures: from USD 58.6 million in 1938, it more than quintupled in 1939 to USD 322.3 million. The peak of Swedish military expenditure during the World War II was in 1942, when it totaled USD 527.6 million (Karsh, 1988, pp. 117–119).

Moving on to a systematic analysis of the problems of Swedish neutrality during the World War II, it is necessary to focus on two key aspects: military, economic and political.

As the hostilities broke out in Europe, Sweden forcibly concluded treaties on trade and shipping with the leaders of the opposing sides: with Great Britain on 7 December 1939 and Germany on 22 December 1939. Melin, Johansson & Hedenborg state that “The main exports of Swedish goods before the war were traditionally directed to Great Britain and the United States, where they accounted for about 40 per cent of Swedish exports and 35–36 per cent of imports. The disruption of traditional foreign economic relations for the country, caused by the war, necessitated a comprehensive restructuring of the national economy, the exploration of raw materials for its industry, and the organization of the production of new substitute products. A radical redistribution of the labor force was also required” (Melin, Johansson & Hedenborg, 2002, pp. 303–304).

In our opinion, the foreign policy course chosen by Sweden during the Soviet-Finnish conflict, known in Russian historiography as the ‘Winter War,’ is extremely revealing. In contrast to the statements made by the Swedish government on 1 and 3 September 1939, on the day of the beginning of the Soviet-Finnish conflict on 30 November 1939, Sweden declared itself to be a ‘non-belligerent state,’ which

differed from its previously proclaimed neutral status in the hypothetical conflict. In practice, such a declaration meant the following: Sweden would not take a direct part in the ‘Winter War,’ but reserved the right to provide extensive assistance to the Finns. This is evidenced by the following facts.

As stated in the study by L. Gyllenhaall and L. Westberg, “As early as December 1939, military caravans from Sweden began to be systematically sent from Sweden to Finland to organize an effective defense. Sweden provided military assistance to a neighboring country, including 800 sea mines, about 350 field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, 135,000 small arms, and about 20 aircraft” (Gyllenhaall & Westberg, 2004, p. 291). The Swedish Volunteer Corps was formed in a short period of time, with 8,260 men joining, including 725 Norwegians. The corps fought on a relatively quiet section of the front in Lapland. Throughout its irregular engagements with the Soviets, it lost 33 men killed and the same number wounded. The Swedish Volunteer Squadron operating in the country scored 12 air victories, losing two aircraft (Gyllenhaall & Westberg, 2004, p. 292). During the period of the Soviet-Finnish conflict from 30 November 1939 to 13 March 1940, Sweden provided Finland with arms and related materials worth 1.47 billion Finnish marks. At the same time, Prime Minister Hansson categorically rejected the Anglo-French offer of aid to the Finns for fear of provoking Germany.⁸

Since June 1940, after the German occupation of Denmark and Norway, the exit from the Baltic Sea became critically difficult for Sweden, and the main foreign trade partner for the kingdom was Germany, trade with which, as E.M. Malysheva notes, “increased by more than a third” (Malysheva, 2016, p. 11). Occupied Norway was turned by Germany into a base for surface and submarine fleets and aviation designed to wage sea and air warfare against

⁸ Swedish Neutrality in the World War II // Istoriya.rf. (In Russian). URL: <https://histrf.ru/read/articles/shvedskiy-neytralitet-vo-vtoroy-mirovoy-voyne> (accessed: 17.01.2025).

Great Britain, and from the summer of 1941, against the Soviet Polar Regions. The non-freezing northern ports opened up to the Germans favorable operational opportunities for action in the Atlantic and Arctic Oceans. In addition, the German leadership had access to strategic raw materials (copper, nickel, molybdenum). The Norwegian port of Narvik also provided the Germans with access to Swedish iron ore.

This prompted the Swedish government (and a part of Swedish society influenced by the pro-German media, since even before the outbreak of war Germany had systematically financed a number of major newspapers, including the popular *Aftonbladet*) to start thinking about expanding political and economic co-operation with Germany. Consequently, this led to the following decisions, some of which cast serious doubt on the “neutral” nature of Sweden’s foreign policy during the World War II:

— On 18 June 1940, Sweden granted permission for German servicemen on leave from occupied Norway to pass through Swedish territory,

— On 5 July 1940, the transit of trains carrying German military personnel and military cargo through Swedish territory to Norway and Finland was authorized,

— On 13 September 1940, the Swedish merchant navy was granted authorization by Germany to pass through the Skagerrak Strait unimpeded, thereby establishing a direct maritime route between the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Furthermore, the German navy also provided escort services for Swedish ships through minefields. This enabled Sweden, as a neutral country, to engage in unrestricted trade in various regions of the world, functioning as a trade intermediary for the warring powers (Kahn, 1967, pp. 214–218),

— On 25 June 1941, Sweden granted the Wehrmacht’s 163rd Infantry Division Engelbrecht (comprising 18,000 troops) permission to traverse its territory en route to Finland. Thereafter, the division engaged in

combat operations against the Soviet Union. This constituted a flagrant violation of the neutrality policy that had been formally declared by the Swedish government on 1 and 3 September 1939, directly contradicting Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson’s explicit statement on 14 April 1940.

After the German attack on the USSR, the Swedish Navy escorted German transports in the Baltic Sea, in effect waging an undeclared war against the USSR Navy. In addition, a Swedish volunteer battalion (*Svenska Frivilligbataljonen*) of about 800 men was formed in July 1941 and fought against the USSR as part of the Finnish army. These “volunteers” (many of whom had fought on the Finnish side in the Winter War the previous year) took part in the capture of the Soviet naval base at Hanko in October–November 1941, after which they returned home. It is estimated that at least 315 Swedes fought in the SS, in divisions such as the Nordland, Viking, Totenkopf, Hohenstaufen and Charlemagne. The Swedish company of the Nordland Division was particularly famous, having fought against Yugoslav partisans in Croatia, Soviet troops in Leningrad, Courland, Pomerania and during the Battle of Berlin.⁹

In the context of the anti-Soviet nature of Swedish “neutrality,” the authors consider it necessary to highlight a political episode that took place on 28 October 1941. On that day, amid the German offensive operation against Moscow codenamed ‘Typhoon,’ King Gustav V of Sweden transmitted a message to Adolf Hitler thanking him for the defeat of Bolshevism. The following is an extract from the aforementioned publication: “My dear Reich Chancellor! It is imperative that I address a matter of significant concern to both me and my country in an open and transparent manner. The crux of the matter pertains to the Russian question. It is my conviction that this issue is of paramount importance with regard to the future, and further

⁹ Swedish Neutrality in the World War II // *Istoriya.rf*. (In Russian). URL: <https://histrf.ru/read/articles/shvedskiy-neytralitet-vo-vtoroy-mirovoy-voynе> (accessed: 17.01.2025).

elucidation on my perspective on the fundamental question can be found in the following discourse. It was evident even in the aftermath of the World War I that Bolshevism posed a significant threat not only to the Northern regions but also to the entire European continent. It is therefore my wish to express my profound gratitude for your determination to eradicate this plague by every possible means. It is to be noted that considerable success has already been achieved. It is my earnest hope that you are well and that you receive this message with the knowledge that I am thinking of you with warm wishes and remain devoted to you, Gustav” (Thorsell, 2006, pp. 256–258).

The authors consider it unnecessary to provide any ethical estimation of the content and tone of the aforementioned letter, as this was adequately addressed by the King himself in his actions accompanying the delivery of the letter to the addressee. Prior to dispatching the aforementioned correspondence to the German Führer, Gustav V deemed it necessary to apprise the Swedish Foreign Minister, Christian Gunther, of the situation. Although the Minister did not object to the King’s initiative, he recommended that the letter be kept as private correspondence. In accordance with the stipulated directives, the Royal Foreign Minister duly apprised the Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, of the existence of the aforementioned correspondence. In contrast to the Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister unequivocally expressed his opposition to the Royal initiative. It is evident that, consequently, on 28 October 1941, Gustav V invited the German ambassador, Prince Carl Victor von Wied, to the royal residence. At this meeting, the King orally read the content of the letter to the Ambassador and requested that it be communicated to Reich Chancellor A. Hitler with all possible haste. Consequently, at 23:45 on the same day, the letter’s text had already been delivered to Berlin, and the following day, it was forwarded to the military headquarters of A. Hitler in the vicinity of

Rastenburg.¹⁰ The authors of this study posit that the aforementioned gesture of the head of the Kingdom of Sweden provides substantial evidence to support the most critical interpretation of the “neutrality” of this nation towards Germany.

Continuing the analysis of economic cooperation between Sweden and Germany, let us highlight December 20, 1941. On this day, a Swedish-German trade agreement was concluded, according to which Germany exported 38 million tons of iron ore from Sweden by 1944, covering the critical deficit of this raw material for the Reich’s military industry. On average, each German gun and tank contained up to 30 per cent Swedish metal (Kahn, 1967, pp. 227–228).

Furthermore, Sweden exported ball bearings, timber, ferroalloys, high-grade steel, cellulose, man-made fibre, machine tools, electrical equipment, tools and naval vessels to Germany, which were vital to the German war industry. As a third country, Sweden played a pivotal role in facilitating the transcontinental trade of goods and commodities. The country’s strategic location and robust infrastructure enabled the efficient transit of a diverse range of goods, including petroleum products, as well as valuable items such as wool, leather, coffee, wine, tobacco, and clothing. These goods, which were in short supply in their respective countries of origin, were crucial for the economic development of Germany, which received these goods primarily from two sources: the United States and Argentina. Conversely, Sweden exported coal, coke, synthetic rubber and artificial fertilizers to Germany. Swedish banks provided substantial loans to German industries, including those engaged in the production of military goods. In Swedish banks, Germany and its citizens deposited considerable financial resources, including valuables illegally exported from the occupied territories of European countries (Kahn, 1967, pp. 244–247).

¹⁰ This is the military headquarters ‘*Wolfschanze*’ (Wolf’s Lair), located 8 kilometers east of Rastenburg.

As Kahn (1967, pp. 252–253) noted, numerous Swedish firms involved in the production of armaments, with a particular emphasis on artillery pieces and small arms, supplied components to the Wehrmacht throughout the war, as well as to the armies of Germany's allies in Hungary, Finland and Romania.

In 1941, Sweden, relying on its declared neutrality, received permission from the belligerents, Germany and Great Britain, for limited and controlled licensed shipping under the so-called Gothenburg Agreement. Germany exercised a significant degree of influence over the composition of Swedish exports and imports. This agreement was of exceptional importance for Swedish shipping, as it maintained foreign trade relations with the Allies. During the period 1941–1942, the proportion of Sweden's imports and exports conveyed via this route amounted to just over 20 and 14% respectively.¹¹ For instance, Sweden exported paper, cardboard, pulp, and engineering products, while importing rice, coffee, vegetable fats, dried fruit, industrial raw materials such as wool, cotton, leather, hemp, and animal feed from Latin America and the USA.

On 13 March 1942, the Swedish police confiscated the circulation of 17 Swedish newspapers that reported on the use of torture against Gestapo-arrested resistance members in occupied Norway (Wahlbäck & Boberg, 1966, p. 192).

A comparison of Swedish exports to Germany in 1942 with those in 1939 reveals a substantial increase, with the value of exports increasing almost twofold to reach 410.3 million Reichsmarks. By the onset of 1943, Swedish exports to Germany and the allied states had accounted for 72.8 per cent of the trade turnover. From January to July 1943, 10.8 million tons of

iron ore were mined in Sweden, of which 10.3 million tons were shipped to Germany (Kahn, 1967, pp. 271–272).

As a concise overview of the policy of Swedish neutrality during the World War II, the authors reveal a prevailing trend. Until approximately the middle of 1943, Stockholm was subject to the military and political pressure of Berlin. This pressure gradually intensified until the Battle of Kursk, after which point the Soviet front finally began to move westwards. This was expressed in concessions from Sweden in the matter of transit of German troops through its territory, stable and diversified supplies of strategic raw materials and supplies, regular lending to the German economy, which was in dire need of foreign exchange earnings. However, as the war took on a different character and the defeat of Nazi Germany became increasingly evident, Sweden consistently toughened its policy towards Germany.

On 20 August 1943, Sweden instigated a halt to the passage of German furloughs through its territory. By this time, more than 2,140,000 German troops and over 100,000 wagons carrying German military supplies had passed through Swedish territory in violation of the Hague Convention on the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in the Event of Land Warfare (Sayamov, 2017). By mid-1943, 10 per cent of the capacity of Sweden's road network was being utilized to serve German interests. According to Melin, Johansson & Hedenborg (2002, p. 239), the total expenditure by Germany on transit services amounted to 85 million crowns.

On 1 June 1944, Sweden prohibited air transit for the German Air Force across its territory. Following the strategic realignment of the Allies in the summer of 1944, Sweden proceeded to reorient itself towards a policy of cooperation with the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition.

In the early spring of 1945, as the Allies were planning the liberation of Denmark and Norway, the United States expressed a desire for

¹¹ Kahn A. S. Chapter XV. Norway and Denmark — participants of the Second World War. Neutral Sweden // History of the Scandinavian countries. Part II: Modern history // Norway-Live. (In Russian). URL: <https://norway-live.ru/library/istoriya-skandinavskih-stran17.html> (accessed: 24.01.2025).

Sweden to participate in the operation. The Swedish armed forces commenced preparations for Operation Rädde Danmark ('Operation Rescue Denmark'), the objective of which was to invade Zealand from Skåne. Following the liberation of Denmark, Sweden was assigned the task of aiding the Allies in their invasion of Norway. Despite the absence of an explicit imperative, American aircraft were granted permission to utilize the Swedish military facilities for the purpose of bombing German military installations in Norway from the spring of 1944 to 1945. The Allies also cooperated with the Swedish military intelligence and security services. In particular, Sweden facilitated the Allies' access to German radio signals transmitted from a station on Eland. As Carlgren (1977, p. 236) notes, a radio beacon was established in Malmö with the purpose of aiding British military forces in navigating their bombers to Germany.

The authors of this study address the key question of whether Swedish neutrality during the period 1939–1945 can be considered as 'classical.' The following question must be posed: Was it possible in principle under the geopolitical conditions in which Sweden found itself during this historical period?

Taking into account the interpretation of the concept of neutrality in modern international law, to which we referred at the beginning of our study, the answer to both questions seems to be negative. Sweden, caught between two warring world centers of power — Hitler's Germany (the leader of the Axis powers, including neighboring Denmark and Norway, occupied by the Reich in 1940, and Finland, a German satellite until the autumn of 1944) and the anti-Hitler coalition (Great Britain, the USA and the USSR), was doomed to maneuver, making concessions and 'exceptions' to the detriment of its own neutral status. However, from the perspective of the behavioural approach, which consists in studying individual behavior on the basis of the principle of objectivity, which implies that human actions can be explained and predicted through the analysis of external stimuli and reactions to

them, scaled from the level of the individual to the state, as well as from the position of the state's rational choice, the authors call for a clear distinction between entirely voluntary and non-motivated by military necessity reactions to the Soviet Union's actions towards Finland in the winter of 1939–1940.

The authors believe that, despite some political pressure on the country from NATO following the start of Russia's special military operation (SMO) in Ukraine, Sweden's decision to join the bloc was dictated by considerations that are dialectically identical to the circumstances of 1939–1940. In addition, the objective political factor cannot be ignored. After the self-dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the collapse of the USSR, the Swedish paradigm of 'balancing' between the two military-political blocs objectively outlived itself. As K.V. Voronov notes in his study, "The change in the European defense within the EU / Western European Union remained in the nascent phase. At the same time, the authorities in Stockholm, as a full member of the European Union since 1995, made significant efforts to increase the level of integration of their country — to connect as soon as possible to the structures and mechanisms of the monetary, financial and political union, to join its 'hard core'" (Voronov, 2018). Thus, from the point of view of political analysis, this decision can be explained with the strategic context took place against the background of the establishment of the Alliance as the most effective military and political organization with global tasks, with help of the theory of rational choice, which in this case consists in the primacy of political conjuncture over economic benefit. The explanation of this process should be sought in the systematic training of the country's electoral contingent, which has been carried out since the early 1990s (Plevako, 2018).

The authors would also like to draw attention to the philosophical dimension of the problem, although this may not be immediately apparent when first addressing the topic under study. As the Russian researchers P.P. Kalugina

and E.A. Sergeev observe, “In conditions when, on the one hand, the European Union is striving for greater agency and independence in its actions in the international arena, and, on the other hand, there are crisis tendencies in European integration and a crisis of the normative power of the European project, the problem of the European Union’s identity is becoming increasingly relevant” (Kalugina & Sergeev, 2025, p. 28). The authors argue that Sweden is currently experiencing a similar identity crisis to that currently being faced by the European Union. The nation is currently engaged in an endeavor to enhance its geopolitical influence by aligning itself with the most substantial military and political alliance on the global stage. Concurrently, it has relinquished a time-tested foreign policy principle that has ensured its national sovereignty and security for over two centuries.

Instead of a Conclusion: The End of Swedish Neutrality

Are the authors surprised by Sweden’s accession to NATO? Rather no than yes. Although some element of surprise is still present, because for more than 200 years of declared neutrality Sweden has provided its people and state with extremely stable economic development and social well-being. It is largely due to this circumstance that in economic theory today there is such a notion as the ‘Swedish economic model,’ which is sometimes also called ‘the Swedish model of socialism.’ And the voluntary abandonment of a system that has proved itself for more than two centuries seems

irrelevant and counterproductive in the historical context.

However, it is not in vain that the authors appealed in their scientific analysis to the history of the World War II, because it was during this historical period that the Swedish state demonstrated the key principle of its foreign policy, according to which neutrality is only a forced measure and not a historical choice of this country. The historical and analytical method allowed us to trace a clear line of continuity of the anti-Russian vector in the country’s foreign policy during the period of aggravation of the international situation. The historical-comparative method convincingly revealed practical parallels between the events of 80 years ago and today’s topical agenda. It seems that the anti-Russian foreign policy line turned out to be more relevant and historically precedent-setting for Sweden than economic pragmatism, which is confirmed on the basis of the comparative analysis of Sweden’s foreign policy steps during the World Wars I and II and at the present stage. According to the authors, this explains the country’s forced accession to NATO and the rejection of the social and political system that had guaranteed the country stable and, most importantly, peaceful development for more than two centuries. In fact, we are talking about a neoliberal form of Western-centrism, which is the basis of the policy of the states that belong to the ‘golden billion’ and are referred to in the domestic historical and political academic environment as the countries of the collective West.

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