

Through Polish eyes. Polish-Swedish relations during the Second World War

Paweł Jaworski
Marzyciele i oportuniści:
Stosunki polsko-
szwedzkie w latach
1939–1945
[Dreamers and
opportunists: Polish-
Swedish relations in
1939–1945]

Warsaw 2009: IPN
448 pages



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Paweł Jaworski's *Dreamers and opportunists: Polish-Swedish relations in 1939–1945* is the first monograph covering the complex of Polish-Swedish relations during the Second World War. The author uses a vast range of sources from Polish, Swedish, and British archives, the Swedish press, and the Polish exile press. The book is only available in Polish, which is unfortunate given its potential readership among Swedish and Nordic scholars if published in English. Such a publication would not only provide a coherent picture of Swedish-Polish relations, but also add fuel to the heated debate between the representatives of the “realistic” approach in interpreting Swedish policy during the Second World War and scholars who can be defined as representing “the moral turn”, focusing on what they view as a policy of appeasement of first Germany, then – to a much lesser degree – the Soviet Union.¹

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED into three thematic parts. The first deals with the evolution of the diplomatic contacts and political relations between the two states during the war, starting with a brief introduction to their interwar relations. As the author notes, the interwar period in the history of the Scandinavian countries was one of popular pacifist sentiments, disarmament, and a fierce policy of non-alignment. The insular policy was supposed to shield the countries from the armed conflict that loomed as inevitable from the late 1930s on. So was the policy – Sweden’s at least – of keeping a safe distance from states viewed as too adventurous, such as Poland. Then the monograph traces relations between the states from the German attack on Poland in September 1939 (a summary of the prior history is provided) to the establishment of *de jure* relations between Sweden and the People’s Republic of Poland in the summer of 1945. This automatically meant the abolition of diplomatic relations with the Polish government in exile based in London, and the acceptance of “Lublin Poland” (after the town where the state was declared) as the sole representative of the Polish people. Needless to say, that government was a representative of the rulers of the Soviet Union. In general, the author finds, Polish-Swedish relations were reserved due to strong German pressure before early 1943, and to growing Swedish fears of Soviet domination in the Baltic Sea area after Stalingrad and the successes of the Soviet counteroffensive. The conflict between the Soviet Union and the Polish government in exile after the German Army found thousands of bodies of Polish officers in the woods outside Smolensk in the spring of 1943 was most unwelcome in official Sweden and the majority of the newspapers. By its calls for an independent investigation, Poland was considered to be obstructing the Allied war effort, although most Swedes with the exception of the Communists very well realized who the perpetrators were. The official attitude of Sweden towards the government in exile turned from lukewarm to frosty as the war proceeded. Besides the Katyn question, the Polish stance on the non-negotiability of its eastern borders was considered particularly unrealistic and harmful,

supposedly confirming the prewar image of Poland as an inflexible and irresponsible adventurist.

The second part of Jaworski’s work examines economic relations and how they were maintained through the war. Swedish imports of coal from Upper Silesia constituted the main issue. Sweden depended on German coal, and a majority of the coal imports had been estimated to come from Polish mines. When the end of the war was approaching, the Swedish government initiated talks with the Polish government controlled by the Soviet Union to secure imports of this important fuel after the war. During the war, there was considerable doubt as to the judicial aspects of purchasing products and raw materials that came from an occupied country where industry and important infrastructure had been seized and nationalized by Nazi Germany.

The third part deals with the life of Polish refugees and soldiers and sailors who were interned in Sweden during the war. It also digs into the activities of the Swedish Red Cross in the General Government and the liberated part of Poland controlled by the Soviet Union. The author views Sweden’s humanitarian aid in Poland in 1944 and 1945 as a step towards gaining goodwill from the new Communist authorities. At the same time, Jaworski discerns true empathy and commitment to the Polish cause among the Swedish public who massively supported the humanitarian aid.

THROUGHOUT THE BOOK, the author maintains a very critical approach to Swedish policies towards Poland during the Second World War, which were rooted in maneuvering between German and Allied (increasingly Soviet) demands. One almost gets the impression that it was Sweden that framed Poland in its new borders and pushed it into the Soviet embrace, and not the decisions at the conferences in Teheran and Yalta, where Polish freedom was disposed in one of the darkest acts of *realpolitik* of the century. While Jaworski acknowledges the strains on the actions of small states in the international political space, he sees Swedish policies as going far beyond what was required to maintain a status quo and keep Sweden outside the conflict. To be frank, I do not agree with this proposition. It would have been advisable to dig deeper into

the works of A. W. Johansson rather than using a single book, as Johansson’s thoughts on Sweden and the Second World War are more multifaceted than Jaworski indicates, reflecting the complexity of the Swedish situation and the choices made. In fact, Johansson can be considered the grand old man of the realistic paradigm in Swedish historiography.² However, the question of official Swedish foreign policy during the Second World War will always remain a matter of interpretation, and positions range from the moralistic to the realpolitik (or “pragmatic”) view. The writing of history is a political act. From the Polish perspective, given the gigantic human and material losses during the war, Sweden’s policy might be viewed as one of cowardliness.

To my mind, these minor shortcomings do not overshadow the fact that the book as a whole constitutes an impressive work based on sources painstakingly gathered and analyzed over a long period. It is a well-researched piece of historical science and should be translated into English in order to further discussions of Sweden and the Second World War. For a Swedish reader, the book also would refocus some of the attention paid to the Swedish appeasement policies towards Nazi Germany to such policies practiced towards the Soviet Union, and thus bring a new dimension to the never-ending discussions of Sweden’s position towards totalitarian regimes during the Second World War. ✘

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references

- 1 This topic is extensively discussed in Wawrzeńnik, Piotr, “Låt oss vara realistiska” [Let us be realistic], in *Historisk tidskrift för Finland* [Historical journal of Finland], 2012:4, pp. 571–578, a book review of Stenius, Henrik et al., *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War: National Historiographies Revisited*, Lund 2011: Nordic Academic Press.
- 2 Johansson, Alf W., *Den nazistiska utmaningen: Aspekter på andra världskriget* [The Nazi challenge: aspects of World War II], Stockholm 1997 [1983]; Rabén Prisma, is a very good introduction to approaches to security and neutrality among a number of states with stakes in the Baltic region.