

# Swedish National Archive Documents Shed New Light on Bernadotte Assassination

By Göran Burén

Special Report



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Count Folke Bernadotte (l) and American diplomat Dr. Ralph Bunche, who succeeded Bernadotte as U.N. mediator in Palestine following the Count's assassination on Sept. 17, 1948, arrive in Lausanne, Switzerland, Jan. 1, 1948.

Swedish Count Folke Bernadotte was assassinated Sept. 17, 1948 in Jerusalem, where he was serving as U.N. mediator in Palestine (see Donald Neff's "Jewish Terrorists Assassinate U.N. Peacekeeper Count Folke Bernadotte," September 1995 *Washington Report*, p. 83). Also killed in the attack carried out by Lehi, or Stern Gang, terrorists—and approved by, among others, future Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir—was French U.N. observer Col. André Sérot. The car carrying the U.N. diplomats was stopped by an Israeli military jeep blocking its way on Ha-Palmach St., well within the part of Jerusalem controlled by the new state's government. Despite the fact that Israeli authorities were obliged to guarantee Bernadotte's security,

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he and his colleagues were traveling without armed protection.

A few hours after Bernadotte's assassination, his deputy, Dr. Ralph Bunche, cabled to Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett: "This act constitutes a breach of the truce of utmost gravity for which the Provisional Government of Israel must assume full responsibility."

The Israeli government condemned the assassination in the most forceful words, and immediately pointed out that the Stern Gang was a banned organization. But once the official condemnations subsided, nothing much happened. History records that the Stern Gang indeed was ultimately responsible. But Swedish documents show that Dr. Bunche's statement was entirely accurate.

It was the Swedish consul in Cairo, Widar Bagge, who drew his government's attention to Israel's lack of interest in finding the perpetrators, as well as to the U.N.'s passivity. When, after some pressure, the Israeli gov-

ernment produced a report on its investigations into the assassination, it was considered so inadequate that Sweden undertook an investigation of its own, conducted by then-Prosecutor-General Maths Heuman. In March 1950 the Heuman Commission issued its report. The criticism was devastating.

The Israeli investigations were revealed to have been very inferior. Witnesses had not been questioned, the scene of the crime had not been sealed off, obvious clues had been neglected, and so on. According to the Swedish report, "the shortcomings are of such a serious nature as to cast doubt on whether the Israeli authorities have tried to bring the investigation to a positive conclusion."

Heuman also addressed the escort issue: "The troubled circumstances in Jerusalem at the time of the assassination should have caused the Israeli authorities to provide Count Bernadotte with an armed escort. It had done so on one of Count Bernadotte's earlier visits to Jerusalem, on Aug. 3, when the situation in the town was less tense than on the day of the assassination. It is certainly tragic to be forced to call attention to the fact that the simplest precautionary measures would have prevented the carrying out of the outrage."

The release of the Heuman report placed the Swedish government in an awkward position. The Jewish state claimed a strong moral position following the revelation of the European Holocaust's grotesque cruelties. Moreover, Israel was a member of the U.N. and recognized by several countries. Among the Western countries, it was only the Scandinavian states that withheld their recognition, citing Israel's mismanagement of the Bernadotte case. In the long run, however, it was impossible for Stockholm to withhold its recognition.

At the same time, the Heuman report generated wide criticism in the Swedish press which the government could not ignore. After all, Bernadotte was a relative of the king. The government therefore sent Foreign Ministry Director-General Baron Karl Lagerfeld to Tel Aviv to inform the Israelis that if they produced an acceptable reply to Heuman's criticism and apologized for their oversights, the matter would be settled. The Israelis appointed a commission led by Supreme Court Justice Shimon

Agranat to examine the Heuman report.

In June 1950 Sweden received the Israeli commission's report. While Swedish government officials were allowed to read it, the general public was not. It seems fair to surmise that had the officials been satisfied with the Israeli "apology," it would have been released to the public.

The background material for the Heuman report is stored at the Swedish National Archive. Filed under "Bernadotte investigation," it was classified until 2000, and contains many interesting details that were never made public. Because it is written in Swedish, it has escaped the attention of previous researchers, including Israeli Amitzur Ilan and American author Kati Marton.

Also housed at the National Archive is the Agranat report. Read together, it is clear that the Israeli "explanations" simply are not credible.

With regard to the lack of protection provided Bernadotte, the Israelis maintained that neither the government nor its representatives in Jerusalem had failed in their obligations by not providing the mediator with an armed guard. Nevertheless the government acknowledged the criticism slightly by saying that "it is obvious that had the government acted more wisely, had it better learned of Count Bernadotte's real wishes and attitudes instead of relying on presumptions—regardless of how well founded these were—which led to the understanding that he had not wished an armed protection due to his special position as United Nations mediator..."

Note that Israel expressly assumes responsibility for the lack of protection provided Bernadotte. Clearly, however, it was a deliberate decision not to protect him, not a matter of neglect or carelessness. Nor was it a decision that Jerusalem's Military Governor Dov Joseph made by himself. Note also that the Israeli response offers no other reason for the lack of protection other than its "presumptions."

The Israeli memorandum then addressed the failed police investigation. It accepts

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Heuman's harsh criticism in principle, but blames the chaotic conditions in Jerusalem at the time.

With regard to the question of armed protection, which is the crucial one, the Israeli commission argued along two lines.

First, concerning the issue of the authorities failing to provide an escort to Bernadotte and his colleagues, the Agranat commission maintained that even if Israeli sympathy for the count's mission was declining, one could not deduce that Bernadotte was detested. "It was natural for the authorities to believe that neither the IZL [Irgun terrorist group] nor LHY [Lehi/Stern Gang] would go so far as to plot his actual assassination, having regard for the great personal prestige of the man who represented the Supreme International Organization."

This argument is pure nonsense. Not only had the Stern Gang repeatedly warned of their plans, but U.S. Ambassador to Israel James G. McDonald had on at least two occasions raised the death threats against Bernadotte with Israeli authorities. The air was abuzz with rumors of an attack.

Secondly, according to the Israeli response, an escort was not offered because the U.N. mediator did not wish one—and this, moreover, was a conscious component of his peace policy. "To sum up: it was a matter of common knowledge that the system adopted by the mediator absolutely rejected the possibility that he and his staff would circulate in the areas of their duty in the company of armed escort."

However, several testimonies, including from Bunche and from Bernadotte's driver, confirm that while Bernadotte never explicitly asked for protection, he never rejected it when offered. There is nothing in either the Swedish or the Israeli report that confirms that the U.N. mediator opposed having an escort. Moreover, according to a special U.N. Security Council resolution adopted a month earlier—and which merely confirmed established international law—the Israelis were obligated to guarantee Bernadotte's security.

It has been suggested that Israel's failure to protect the U.N. mediator was due to carelessness on the part of the authorities. The State of Israel was only four months old, after all, and conditions were still rather chaotic.

But when Count Bernadotte traveled into Jerusalem's Jewish sector that day, he had a scheduled meeting with the military governor, Dov Joseph—the very person who held the ultimate responsibility for

the U.N. diplomat's security. It seems highly improbable, not to say unthinkable, that under these circumstances Joseph could have "forgotten" to arrange for Bernadotte's security—especially in light of what Joseph had said to Bernadotte's personal representative, Gen. Aage Lundstrom, only four days before the assassination: "I can't imagine anything worse than if something would happen to the Count."

Moreover, according to the U.N.'s chief observer, Col. Nils Brunsson, Joseph had always arranged armed protection on earlier occasions, when "I announced the visit to Dr. Joseph and received information concerning the escort. On none of these occasions did I have reason to object to the security measures."

To summarize: The Israeli authorities were well aware of the imminent risk to Count Bernadotte. Nevertheless they neglected to protect him, which they were obliged to do, and which they had done on earlier occasions.

But the Swedish government chose to accept the Israeli explanations and establish diplomatic relations with the new state. Since then the accepted version has been that Bernadotte was killed by Jewish terrorists and that the Israeli government condemned and regretted the crime. Anyone who studies the Swedish National Archive documents, however, will find it difficult to escape the conclusion that Count Bernadotte was assassinated with, at best, the tacit acquiescence of the Israeli government. □

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