

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Sweden

by *Sven Hirdman*

Former Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, whose 100th birthday is commemorated this year, had several contacts with Sweden from 1948 until 1984. To Swedish diplomats he was a very well-known figure and, I would say, a respected statesman. I met him on a few occasions, as described below.

Andrei Gromyko's first contact with Sweden was in 1948. He was then the Soviet Representative to the United Nations. Suddenly, he had to return to Moscow for family reasons and boarded the Swedish Atlantic liner *Gripsholm*, being the fastest connection. Had he, as originally planned, taken the Soviet ship *Pobeda*, he would have suffered disaster, as the *Pobeda* caught fire in the Black Sea and many people died. Gromyko describes the incident in his memoirs and remembers fondly the Swedish Smorgasbord served on board the ship. On the way to Moscow he passed through Göteborg and Stockholm.¹

The relations between Sweden and the Soviet Union got on to a new footing when, in April 1956, Prime Minister Tage Erlander and his coalition partner Minister for the Interior, Gunnar Hedlund, paid an official visit to the Soviet Union – the first ever by a Swedish Prime Minister. As First Deputy Foreign Minister, Gromyko should have participated in this event. Substantial talks took place with the Soviet Government, led by Nikita Khrushchev and Nikolai Bulganin, on international issues and on Swedish – Russian relations, including the well-known Raoul Wallenberg case. A year later, in February 1957, it was Gromyko who handed the Swedish Ambassador in Moscow, Mr Rolf Sohlman, a *note* saying that Wallenberg had died in the Lyubyanka prison in July 1947. The Swedish Government was initially not convinced of the truth of this information but arrived at the substantive conclusion 40 to 50 years later that Raoul Wallenberg

¹ Gromyko, Andrei: *Memories*, London 1989

had indeed been executed by the MVD, as indicated by Gromyko.

Prime Minister Erlander invited Prime Minister Khrushchev to pay a return visit to Sweden. The date was provisionally set for 1959. However, as the time for the Soviet visit approached in August 1959, there was much agitation in Sweden, particularly from the political opposition, against the visit by the Soviet Communist leader. This caused Khrushchev to cancel his visit at a late stage; he was then also engaged in plans to visit the United States. A month later, in September 1959, the Swedish Foreign Minister Professor Östen Undén (Foreign Minister 1945-1962) and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko met in New York at a private dinner arranged by the Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Dag Hammarskjöld. Undén then asked Gromyko why Khrushchev did not carry out his visit to Sweden, Gromyko answered: *We had our reasons*, and with that the conversation ceased. Both Foreign Ministers were, in fact, rather austere personalities.²

In a few years, after the Cuban Missile Crisis had been settled in 1962, the international climate improved again. The partial nuclear test ban was concluded in 1963. In the same year, in May, the new Swedish Foreign Minister Torsten Nilsson paid a visit to Moscow for talks with Foreign Minister Gromyko. He was also received by Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev to

whom he conveyed a renewed invitation to pay an official visit to Sweden. The date was fixed at June 1964 and would in addition include Denmark, Norway and Finland.

The spring of 1964 was devoted to preparing the Khrushchev visit. In early spring, Sweden was visited by two Soviet cosmonauts, Gagarin and Bykovsky, who received much public attention. The next step was the official visit by Andrei Gromyko for talks with his Swedish colleague Torsten Nilsson 17–21 March. As a young diplomat and in charge of the Soviet desk at the Swedish Foreign Ministry, I participated in these talks as a note-taker. The two foreign ministers, as in their meeting in Moscow, devoted most of their time to international issues, particularly the German issue and the test ban treaty. As is evident from the recording of the talks, Gromyko found his Swedish counterpart somewhat too optimistic as to the détente implications of the test ban treaty.

In the official communiqué from Foreign Minister Nilsson's visit to Moscow it was noted that "Foreign Minister Nilsson referred to the fact that Sweden intends to pursue its traditional policy of neutrality. The two parties agreed that this policy constitutes a contribution to the calm and security in Northern Europe". In the communiqué from Foreign Minister Gromyko's visit to Stockholm this point was formulated slightly differently: "At the talks it was

2 The memoirs of Ambassador Wilhelm Wachtmeister, Stockholm 1996

once more confirmed that the traditional Swedish policy of neutrality constitutes an important contribution to the calm and security in Northern Europe". Thank God, that we have now left this theology behind us. I was in fact instrumental in persuading the Swedish Government in 1978 that we should forego the practice of bilateral communiqués in connection with official visits.

In his memoirs, Andrei Gromyko writes about his visit to Stockholm in March 1964. His greatest impression seems to have been the meeting with the King of Sweden, about which he writes:

My talk with King Gustav Adolphus, the grandfather of the present King Charles Gustav XVI, left a special impression on me. I was met at in the royal palace by a tall, middle-aged man, one of the few European monarchs to have stayed firmly on his throne. He was a cultivated man, his special interest being archaeology, in which he said he tried to keep up with all the latest findings.

"I am especially interested in archaeological literature, including Russian publications" he said. "Perhaps you would send me some of the latest works?"

In due course, I sent him some books from Moscow.

As Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko participated in Nikita Khrushchev's official visit to Sweden 22 – 27 June 1964, as did I on a low level. One amusing in-

cident occurred at the private dinner that Prime Minister Tage Erlander hosted for the Soviet leader and the top members of the Soviet delegation at his official summer residence, Harpsund, on June 25. While drinking Swedish aquavit and Russian vodka, Erlander asked Torsten Nilsson to start singing, which is customary in Sweden when drinking aquavit. Nilsson was a good singer, which challenged Khrushchev, and soon the two socialist politicians were competing in revolutionary songs. At the end, Khrushchev exclaimed to Erlander:

Let us switch Foreign Ministers! You can have Gromyko! I will take Torsten Nilsson. He is better because he can also sing.

Erlander jokingly agreed...³

Khrushchev's roguish treatment of Gromyko at Harpsund, reminds one of the story when Khrushchev said of Gromyko:

If I ask him to remove his trousers and sit on a block of ice he will sit there until the ice has melted.

Prime Minister Erlander paid a return visit to Moscow in June 1965 accompanied by his young future successor, Olof Palme. I was then serving at our embassy in Moscow and met the two delegations, including Andrei Gromyko, at receptions

3 The memoirs of Ambassador Gunnar Jarring, Stockholm 1989

but did not participate in the talks. What I remember, *inter alia*, from my first years in Moscow is that I made use of the *Diplomatic Encyclopaedia* edited by Foreign Minister Gromyko. It was a useful work of its time.

Another work co-edited by Andrei Gromyko is the “*History of Soviet Foreign Policy*”, published in 1973. It contains an assessment of Sweden that is both positive and negative:

The Soviet Union maintains friendly and good-neighbour relations also with Sweden, the third neutral country in Europe. Underlying these relations is the mutual desire to strengthen peace and international security, especially in Northern Europe... Some circles in Sweden disrelish the time-tested policy of neutrality, which has won respect throughout the world and has the Soviet Union’s full understanding. Under pressure from these circles attempts are being made in Stockholm to find the ways and means of entering the Common Market... In Sweden they have every reason to fear that their country’s membership of the EEC would seriously limit its sovereignty and, consequently, make it impossible to pursue a neutral foreign and domestic policy independently of the Common Market and NATO.

In hindsight, I hope that Andrei Gromyko himself did not write this rather stark interference in Sweden’s foreign policy.

As Director of the Northern Department of the Swedish Foreign Ministry, I prepared the first Swedish State visit to the

Soviet Union by King Charles XVI Gustav and Queen Silvia. Gromyko writes in his memoirs that

the King’s visit was to some extent a landmark in Soviet – Swedish relations, as it showed that Sweden was genuinely interested in developing a businesslike relationship with her eastern neighbour.

Andrei Gromyko’s last personal contact with Sweden was in January 1984 when he attended the important Stockholm Conference on Confidence Building Measures, Security and Disarmament in Europe. In his book, he relates the positive talks he again had with the King. It is worthy of thought that the old Soviet professional that Andrei Gromyko was had such fond memories of Swedish royalty.

In Stockholm, Gromyko also had substantive talks with Prime Minister Olof Palme. In a personal remark on the murder of Palme he adds:

Of Olof Palme we sadly now have to speak in the past tense. He was killed on 1 March 1986 by a terrorist. There were reports that suggested he may have been the victim of a right-wing organisation that could not swallow the Prime Minister’s liberal views, his predisposition to good relations with the Soviet Union and his role in creating the group of leaders of six countries – Argentina, Greece, India, Mexico, Tanzania and Sweden – which came out for peace, disarmament and international collaboration. Or, of course, he may simply have been the target of a lunatic.



The grave memorial of Andrei Gromyko.

Photo: Genealogy Archives

My former Ambassador in Moscow, Mr Gunnar Jarring, had many contacts with

Andrei Gromyko both as Swedish Ambassador and in his capacity as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for the Middle East. Jarring writes in his memoirs that he always found Andrei Gromyko correct, amiable and quite often humorous with a sort of quiet, dry humour that well suited Gromyko's personality as Jarring understood him.

My own recollection of Andrei Gromyko is of an outstanding Soviet professional who with great devotion and tremendous capacity for work served his country in good as well as in bad times. When serving as Swedish ambassador to Moscow 1994 – 2004 I often visited the Novodevichy cemetery and always went to admire the grave memorial of Andrei Gromyko. His face is hewn in a block of black granite with one side convex and the other concave against a white background. It gives food for much thought.

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