

# From Communist Cadre to Outsider: Ideals, Opportunism and Coping with Change in Moscow and Stockholm, 1929–1948

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## Abstract

*This article builds on recent research on Scandinavians in the international communist movement and on intelligence operations in Sweden before and during the Second World War. Through a microhistorical approach that centres around the Swedish communist cadre Ingvar Larsson, who was first an operative of the Comintern's highly secret communications and courier network (OMS) and later was estranged from the communist movement, the article looks beyond structures and organizations, focusing instead on the choices and options of people driven by both ideology and opportunism. By exploring a diverse collection of Comintern, Soviet, and Swedish archival sources, the article highlights some of the peculiar challenges of intelligence history and of constructing a narrative in a way that illuminates both the agency of individuals and the wider culture of tensions and uncertainties between ideals and realities.*

**Keywords:** Ingvar Larsson, intelligence, OMS, Second World War, Soviet Union, Sweden

## Introduction

In late May 1948, Commissioner Erik Lönn at the intelligence section of the Swedish General Security Service (*Allmänna säkerhetstjänsten*) was looking at an opportunity to recruit a new informant. Working within the structure of the State Police in Stockholm, Lönn was the responsible officer for the

surveillance of communists. A colleague in Gothenburg had just sent him an article from *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, which described how two decades ago some 50 Swedes had left their homes to study at the Comintern's main educational institutes in Moscow, the International Lenin School (MLS), and the Communist University for National Minorities of the West (KUNMZ). The author was not named, but the police had done their research and believed he was Ingvar Larsson, a 41-year old Stockholm-based journalist who had left the Communist Party and now made his living by 'screwing' (*djävlas*) his former comrades by writing revelatory articles. An unnamed source assessed that for a good payment, Larsson could be recruited as a police informant.<sup>1</sup>

A decade earlier, Ingvar Larsson had himself been one of the men and women that the article described, the 'tough guys in every respect' who had not only spent months or years of their youth training both in theory and paramilitary skills but who had also survived the Great Terror, the large-scale political purges that had peaked in 1936–1938 and targeted many Comintern operatives. However, Larsson had been among an even more select cadre, one that the article does not mention. Towards the end of his two-year course at KUNMZ in 1929–1931, he was chosen to join the ranks of the innocently named but highly secretive 'International Liaison Department' (*Otdel mezhdunarodnykh svyazey*, OMS) of the Comintern. The OMS, established during the early 1920s, was a network of couriers, radio operators, and other specialists whose responsibilities ranged from clandestine communications and forgery of identification and travel documents to overseeing the leadership of national Communist organizations and distributing Soviet funds to them. In Stockholm, the OMS operated one of its most important 'points' for contacts and communication that also extended beyond Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

In August 1934, three years into his OMS career, which had included a secret 16-month assignment in Stockholm, Larsson had written to his superior, Aleksandr Abramov-Mirov, and declared his enthusiasm for another posting outside the Soviet Union: 'I can say that I love this profession'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Svenska kommunister studerar gatustridernas praktik i Moskva!', author marked with acronym 'XB 48', *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* 9 April 1948; Trägårdh to Lönn, 25 May 1948, Säpoarkivet in Riksarkivet, Stockholm Arninge (SA), personakt (P) 663 (Larsson, Karl Gustav Ingvar).

<sup>2</sup> Rosenfeldt, *'Special' World*, vol. 2, 220–308; Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 81–92; Firsov, Klehr, and Haynes, *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933–1943*, 7–50; Huber, 'Structure of the Moscow apparatus', 41–60; Möller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer', 328. Regarding OMS and Sweden see Björilin, 'För svensk arbetarklass', 212–17; Björilin, 'Russisk guld i svensk kommunisme', 88–108; Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> Larsson to OMS leadership, 2 August 1934, Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoy istorii, Moscow (RGASPI), fond (f.) 495, opis (op.) 275, delo (d.) 387, list (l.) 5. At the time, Larsson was under

After the purges and the upheaval caused by the German–Soviet nonaggression pact of August 1939, his choices suggest that he was not primarily driven by ideology or loyalty, but was quick to adapt to changing circumstances. Eventually, he became an outsider, estranged from virtually all that defined his former life as a Communist cadre. Immediately before and during the Second World War, however, he still sought to stay involved with his old acquaintances while retaining independence for seizing new opportunities unique to Stockholm as a haven that had stayed out of war but was still very much touched by it.

In existing research that discusses the OMS, Scandinavia and especially Denmark have had a prominent role both in terms of origin and geographical focus.<sup>4</sup> This originates from Copenhagen’s importance for the network of illegal communications and money transfers that the Comintern’s central administration in Moscow used to keep a tight rein on national Communist parties.<sup>5</sup> Even though Stockholm also had a central role in the OMS network during the 1920s, research with a Swedish focus was for a long time limited to only a handful of pioneering contributions, most notably by Lars Björlin.<sup>6</sup> Within the past few years, Sweden and Stockholm have received renewed attention as Morten Møller, Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, and Wilhelm Agrell have highlighted how the relative independence of the Stockholm OMS point offered particular challenges and frustrated the OMS

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advanced training for ‘Stations-Dienst’ at the secret OMS compound in Pushkino, near Moscow. In some publications, Abramov-Mirov’s name is given in the opposite form, Mirov-Abramov.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Møller and Rosenfeldt, ‘Koder, kapital og kurerer’; Rosenfeldt, *‘Special’ World*; Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*; Rosenfeldt, Jørgensen, and Møller, ‘Det hemmelige forbindelsespunkt’; Jørgensen et al., *Komintern og de danske-sovjetiske relationer*. Earlier important publications include Thing, *Kommunismens kultur 1–2*, as well as several books by Erik Nørgaard, e.g. *Revolutionen der udeblev*. In recent years, Danish–Russian collaboration has also enhanced the accessibility of Danish Comintern files, which are published in Jørgensen et al., *Datskije kadry Moskvy v stalinskoye vremya*.

<sup>5</sup> Additionally, several important OMS operatives were Danish-born, such as Borge Houmann and Richard Jensen, who both also later disclosed some of their Comintern activities in published accounts, as well as Georg Moltke (born Laursen), and Arne Munch-Petersen. See Houmann, *Kommunist under besættelsen*; Jensen, *En omtumlet tilværelse*. Jensen was also active in the *Internationale der Seeleute und Hafendarbeiter* (International of Seamen and Harbour Workers), which was established in Hamburg in 1930 and moved to Copenhagen after the Nazi takeover. See e.g. Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*; Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*; Weiss, ‘Stockholm – Hamburg – Köpenhamn’.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Björlin, ‘Russisk guld i svensk kommunisme’; Rosenfeldt, *‘Special’ World*; Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*; Rosenfeldt, ‘Komintern og de hemmelige apparat’.

leadership in Moscow.<sup>7</sup> The case of Larsson provides an opportunity to build on their work, as well as the wide research that has focused on the operations of the Swedish General Security Service and the State Police during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup>

Methodologically, this article is both a study in microhistory and an attempt to highlight the challenges of working with intelligence and police documents. As a microhistorical undertaking that contributes to the 'biographical approach' in Comintern studies, the article aims to present how certain challenges of this approach can be managed.<sup>9</sup> By looking beyond the structures of covert intelligence organizations, this case study strives to illustrate the agency of people who mostly stay in the shadows but still make similar decisions to those that people in power must make, although they rarely get, or wish, to tell their stories. This is one of the core ideas of microhistory, as defined by Jill Lepore: however singular a person's life may be, the value of examining it lies in how it serves as an allegory that illuminates the culture as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

With Larsson at the core of this examination, the narrative can be constructed only by navigating significant archival silences. In the specific case of the OMS, strict restrictions on the use of its archive in Moscow continue to complicate research, especially regarding its strategies and priorities.<sup>11</sup> For this article, an important addition to the usual assortment of police and intelligence documents originates from the archive of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries

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<sup>7</sup> Møller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer', 328–9; Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan*, 60–71. Signe Sillén, or 'Gondel', who oversaw the Stockholm OMS point in the first half of the 1930s, was an SKP veteran and the spouse of Hugo Sillén, the leader of the Comintern-oriented SKP minority after the party split in 1929. After Sillén apparently both fell ill and out of favor in 1935, she was succeeded by Karl Gustav Johansen and later Karl Fritjof Lager. See also Police memo, 6 July 1933, SA P 647 (Karlsson, Johan Arthur); Björlin, 'Russisk guld i svensk kommunisme', 53–108; Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, Björkman, *Säkerhetstjänstens egen berättelse*; Flyghed, *Rättstat i kris*; Flyghed, 'Außenpolitik und Recht'; Eliasson, *Övervakning i försvarets intresse*. In 2002, the Swedish government-appointed Commission of Inquiry to the Security Service (*Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen*) published several extensive reports. Among them, see, in particular, *Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen, Övervakningen*. Journalist Anders Thunberg's biography on the double agent Karin Lannby (pseudonym 'Annette') also presents a vivid and extensive overview of the war-time functions of both Swedish and foreign intelligence services in Stockholm.

<sup>9</sup> On the biographical approach in Comintern studies, see the above-mentioned Danish contributions as well as Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Agents of the Revolution*; Studer, *Transnational World*.

<sup>10</sup> Lepore, 'Historians who love too much', 130–3, 141.

<sup>11</sup> Møller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer'; Møller, 'Fra Komintern-kurér til modstandsmand', 337–8.

(*Vsesoyuznoye obshchestvo kul'turnoy svyazi s zagranitsey*, VOKS), which technically hosted Larsson's visit to the Soviet Union in February–March 1940. Still, with access to very few documents that contain Larsson's own voice, his agency must be analysed almost completely from second-hand sources. The article strives to demonstrate that this is not only possible but also necessary in order to better understand history that would otherwise be lost: how the communist movement actually functioned at the transnational rank-and-file level, in which individuals of varying motives and loyalties navigated through uncertain times.<sup>12</sup>

Fragmentariness and irregularity of primary sources are familiar challenges for every historian, but in the research of unofficial networks, illegal activities, surveillance and intrigue, they come with the territory.<sup>13</sup> This article presents a particular but representative process of finding, scrutinizing, and combining information that is crucial for case studies of people and organizations that elude detailed and comprehensive analysis by nature. The narrative highlights source criticism and makes visible the decisions on when to build the narrative on uncertainties that may not tell the truth as such but tell *of* the truth – and, again, help to characterize the surrounding culture.<sup>14</sup> All this is the reasoning for the following effort to trace and contextualize an individual journey through intrigue and espionage, from the cadres to independent opportunism and finally estrangement, with plenty of ambiguity in between.

## From Cadre to Survivor

Ingvar Larsson remains the master of his own story only until 1929. When tracing his life, the earliest pieces of the puzzle are found from the Comintern archives in Moscow.<sup>15</sup> From two short handwritten

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<sup>12</sup> On 'lost' history and archival silences in the research of international communism, see Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists*, 12–13. On transnational Comintern history, see Studer, *Transnational World*.

<sup>13</sup> On the challenges of writing intelligence history, see e.g. Kerr, 'Investigating Soviet Espionage and Subversion'.

<sup>14</sup> Farge, *Allure of the Archives*, 29. The approach in my article is further inspired by Morten Møller's eloquently constructed book *Ellen og Adam*, a 'documentary narrative' of a Scandinavian communist couple, the Danish OMS courier Ellen Schou and her Norwegian spouse Adam Egede-Nissen, by Yvonne Hirdman's *Den röda grevinnan*, a narrative of her Baltic German mother Charlotte Hirdman who probably was involved in OMS operations and later settled in Sweden, and by Erkki Tuomioja's *A Delicate Shade of Pink*, a study of his Estonian–Finnish grandmother Hella Wuolijoki and her sister Salme Pekkala-Dutt in the international communist movement.

<sup>15</sup> The files in question are RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387 (Larsen Engbar) and RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 328 (Felt Ingvar Larsovich). The 'Larsen' file contains several documents directly related to his involvement in

autobiographical reports, first for KUNMZ in January 1930 and the second for the OMS in March 1931, we can roughly trace how a boy from a working-class family, born in April 1907 in Njurunda, Västernorrland County, ended up in Moscow. At the age of 14, Larsson lost his father and took up a seasonal job at the pulp factory at Essvik. By the age of 17, he was a member of both the Swedish Paper Workers' Union and the local Communist Youth Club. By 1928, he had become the Youth Club's chairman and consequently a delegate at the yearly congress of the Young Communist League of Sweden (*Sverges Kommunistiska Ungdomsförbund*, the Swedish section of the Communist Youth International) in Stockholm.<sup>16</sup>

Even though there are no available records that would detail Larsson's appointment in August 1929 by the local district boards of the Young Communist League and the Communist Party to be trained as a party cadre at KUNMZ in Moscow, his position as a local youth organization chairman was a typical background for a recruit. By 1929, KUNMZ had expanded to a genuinely international institution, with 16 national sectors and more than 900 students, for whom the courses were an important stage for becoming a 'real Bolshevik' and rising through the ranks of their respective national communist parties.<sup>17</sup> In Moscow, Larsson was given the pseudonym 'Ingvar Fält', under which he became one of a dozen Swedes who started a two-year course in their respective national sector, which had been established only the previous year. At the end of the first study year in May 1930, the pedagogic board evaluated him, along with his classmates. The short report described Larsson's

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the OMS, and it also mentions that his studies at KUNMZ started in September 1929. It was thus relatively easy to identify his KUNMZ pseudonym 'Ingvar Fält' (*Ингвар Фэльт*, first name also spelled 'Ingvald' in some documents) among the dozen young Swedes of his class.

<sup>16</sup> Larsson's autobiography from 31.1.1930, Moscow, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 328, l. 10; Larsson's autobiography from 18.3.1931, Moscow, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 328, l. 3; Sverges Kommunistiska Ungdomsförbund, *Protokoll*, 7. Similar autobiographies were required from all cadres. While Larsson's concise descriptions do not contain anything questionable, the autobiographies could also be used to narrate a favourable image of people aspiring for positions in the Comintern and their national parties. See also Studer, *Transnational World*, 15–18.

<sup>17</sup> Studer, *Transnational World*, 90–107. KUNMZ also had a smaller branch in Leningrad (LOKUNMZ) that hosted more than 200 simultaneous students, mainly Finnish and Estonian. For the most comprehensive available studies of KUNMZ, see Köstenberger, 'Die Geschichte der "Kommunistischen Universität"'; Rønning, *Stalins elever*. The Swedish sector as such has not yet been studied in detail, but an overview with a general Nordic perspective is provided in Krekola and Rønning, 'International cadre education'. In the Swedish language, KUNMZ was commonly referred to as 'Västernuniversitet'.

performance as somewhat below average and criticized him for lack of energy and only ‘satisfactory’ discipline. The notes also offer the first hints of an independent, stubborn character. While he had improved ‘politically’ and in collective work, he had passed his courses only conditionally.<sup>18</sup> Later developments suggest that Larsson did better in his practical studies, during which he worked at two different Moscow factories as an electrical mechanic and radio assembler. There he was able to build on his earlier experience from part-time work with radios in 1924 while he was still in Sweden.<sup>19</sup>

Between 1928 and 1938, dozens of Swedes received training at KUNMZ, the MLS, or both.<sup>20</sup> The so-called Secret Sector of the Comintern, established in 1930, oversaw the process of recruiting potential students for illegal work outside the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> Larsson was recommended to the OMS by Allan Wallenius, a Finn who then served as the head of the KUNMZ Swedish sector.<sup>22</sup> The reasons for Wallenius’ recommendation are not known, but the clandestine network relied on operatives skilled in assembling and operating radios. The exact numbers of those enlisted are not available, but, in the case of the small countries such as Sweden, there were simultaneously no more than a handful of individuals being trained at the OMS Pushkino facility at a given time.

Those in OMS service received new pseudonyms. Comrade Ingvar Fält became comrade Stefan Borisov, or Borissow, the form used when communicating in German. According to an informant who later gave a statement to the Swedish police, Larsson made at least one visit to Germany in 1931.<sup>23</sup> Plausible explanations for this include a detour or a cover story for his period of OMS training outside Sweden or a courier delivery of funds, forged travel documents, or other confidential assets.<sup>24</sup> The police in Sweden did not have information about the nature of this visit. Larsson’s position within the Comintern intelligence apparatus and his related involvement in potentially illegal activities also remained unknown to the Swedish authorities during the whole of his OMS assignment in Sweden, between April 1932 and August 1933.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> KUNMZ assessment from 22.5.1930, Moscow, RGASPI, f. 529, op. 1, d. 635, l. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Larsson’s autobiography from 18.3.1931, Moscow, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 328, l. 3.

<sup>20</sup> The KUNMZ Swedish sector was suspended in 1932, after which Swedes were trained at the MLS. See Köstenberger, ‘Die Geschichte der “Kommunistischen Universität”’, 253–5.

<sup>21</sup> Köstenberger, ‘Die Geschichte der “Kommunistischen Universität”’, 252.

<sup>22</sup> Zysman’s reference (*spravka*), 2 November 1939, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 6.

<sup>23</sup> Memo for case 306/40, 12 February 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>24</sup> For more information on how OMS couriers operated, see Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> The assignment in Sweden is mentioned in Zysman’s reference, 2 November 1939, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 6.

There are no available details about Larsson's responsibilities during the assignment, but 1932 was also the year in which the OMS in Stockholm was equipped with a secret radio station.<sup>26</sup> Its exact location remains unknown, but, in any case, the radio facility was only one of several changing facilities that the OMS was using to support its courier and communications network.<sup>27</sup> However, Larsson actually spent most of his OMS career within the Soviet Union and in the OMS Pushkino communications school. In August 1934, he was already growing frustrated and wrote directly to Abramov-Mirov. In the same letter in which he assured his passion for his job, he tried to convince OMS leadership that his skills would be best used in independent work.<sup>28</sup> His superiors saw things differently, and an assessment of Larsson from March 1935 by former OMS deputy Leo Flieg<sup>29</sup> described a character that was again seen as impatient and uncommitted. In an organization in which loyalty was constantly questioned, Flieg's observation that Larsson's 'political interest was on the decline' and that his command in Sweden had left him 'bourgeois, if not even morally compromised' meant that he would not be considered for new independent assignments. Additionally, while Flieg noted that comrade Borissow was a completely qualified radio operator as such, his skills in 'sending' were assessed as inferior to those in 'receiving'.<sup>30</sup>

It is not known how and when Larsson found out that his hopes of getting another covert assignment were in vain, but, by November 1935, OMS leadership had had enough. After Abramov-Mirov learned from Wallenius that Larsson was bored with nothing to do, the troublesome Swede was sent to 'rest in a sanatorium' in the city of Torzhok in the Tver region.<sup>31</sup> Then, sometime during the tumultuous year of 1936, when the OMS was reorganized and renamed as 'Communications Service' (*Sluzhba svyazi*, SS), Larsson finally left Moscow. It is completely unclear how much of the purges he personally witnessed, or whether he was faced with the prospect of turning against his former comrades, but in any case, anyone in his position was fortunate to still have a non-Soviet passport and another home country to return to.<sup>32</sup> Abramov-Mirov was removed from the lead of the OMS in late

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<sup>26</sup> Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Møller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer', 328–9; Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan*, 60–71.

<sup>28</sup> Larsson to OMS leadership, 2 August 1934, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Huber, 'Structure of the Moscow apparatus', 55; Weber and Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten*, 252–3.

<sup>30</sup> Flieg's assessment of Larsson's character, 20 March 1935, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Handwritten note to Abramov-Mirov on behalf of Wallenius, 29 November 1935, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 16; Handwritten note to Abramov-Mirov, 11 December 1935, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Møller highlights similar uncertainties when discussing Ellen Schou and Adam Egede-Nissen's departure from the Soviet Union during the height of the Great Terror. See Møller, *Ellen og Adam*, 310–22.



1935, and in May 1937 he was arrested and later executed.<sup>33</sup> In June, the experienced OMS agent Arne Munch-Petersen attempted to return to Denmark but was arrested, brutally interrogated and left to die in imprisonment.<sup>34</sup> The German exile Flieg, who had returned to Moscow from underground work for the Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, KPD) in France, lasted until March 1938.<sup>35</sup>

### **New Acquaintances and Opportunities**

Back in Sweden, Larsson settled in Stockholm. More than three years would still pass before the Swedish Security Service became interested in him, but his contacts and actions can be traced from later police memos. They outline a network of people whose undertakings constitute a mix of committed political activity, opportunism and intrigue, as well as more mundane efforts to benefit professionally, have a meaningful life, or simply to survive. Before the Second World War started, Stockholm and its Östermalm neighbourhood in particular had already grown to become an important staging ground and marketplace for intelligence operations, where huge numbers of Swedish and foreign security officials, spies, and exiles all frequented the same streets, restaurants, and hotels. As the war broke out and intensified around Sweden, Stockholm quickly became the ‘Casablanca of the north’, the only capital of a neutral European country that was in the immediate military strategic interests of the major political powers.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the relatively free and diverse Swedish press provided many opportunities for not only resourceful freelancers but also those who needed a cover for their clandestine activities. We may not have certainty of Larsson’s motives, but we do know that during 1938, he established himself as a journalist.

The examination of Larsson’s dealings in the press business illuminates the inner workings of the profession, the networks that operated, and the relationship between the publishers and the police. Larsson himself was hardly noticeable as a journalist, and his articles were straightforwardly based on Russian-language publications, such as a portrait of the Soviet President Mikhail Kalinin (*Adam* 1/1940), or an anonymously published summary of recent developments in Soviet theatre (*Scenen*

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<sup>33</sup> Rosenfeldt, *‘Special’ World*, 237–42, 358; Huber, ‘Structure of the Moscow apparatus’, 52.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 252–74; Rosenfeldt, *‘Special’ World*, vol. 2, 297.

<sup>35</sup> Weber and Herbst, *Deutsche Kommunisten*, 252–3.

<sup>36</sup> Agrell, *Stockholm som spioncentral*; Agrell, ‘Sweden and the Dilemmas’, 637; Skjeseth, *Nordens Casablanca*, 109–24.

9/1939).<sup>37</sup> He also worked on general news stories, which, according to a police informant, he regularly wrote or edited for *Stockholms-Tidningen*, which was then published by the anti-socialist and pro-German Torsten Kreuger.<sup>38</sup> While it seems unlikely that the journalist profession was Larsson's long-term goal, however – especially for someone whose weakness and only 'satisfactory' study discipline in the Swedish language had been noted in his KUNMZ record<sup>39</sup> – that is what came to define him. However, for a while he also had other responsibilities that were a better fit for the still relatively young man in his 30s, who only recently had been part of an elite cadre and had declared his 'love' for perilous undercover field work. During an unspecified period in 1937 or 1938, he was employed by the Soviet trade legation, located at Skeppargatan 27. Like the main diplomatic legations, the trade legations were also involved in the Comintern's secret communications network and connected it with Soviet state intelligence services.<sup>40</sup>

The information about Larsson's involvement with the trade legation originates from a later reference by Georg Moltke, a distinguished veteran of foreign conspiratorial work both for the Comintern in Germany and for Soviet military intelligence in China, and more recently the responsible official for Scandinavian affairs in the Comintern's Cadre Department.<sup>41</sup> Moltke confirms that Larsson served with the OMS 'during Abramov's time', and follows by citing information from a 'comrade Karlson', possibly Johan Arthur Karlsson who himself was an important member of the OMS network

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<sup>37</sup> Larsson mentions both publications in his letter to VOKS, 30 October 1939, Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Moscow (GARF), f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Memo for case 3784/40, 13 June 1944, SA P 663. Larsson had also done translation work for Arbetarkultur and other communist businesses. See Memo for case 3740/40, 2 December 1940, SA P 663. On the position of Kreuger, see McCay, *From Information to Intrigue*, 227; Nycop, *Hög spel i luften*, 10–15; Tennant, *Vid sidan av kriget*, 110, 112.

<sup>39</sup> KUNMZ assessment from 21.5.1930, Moscow, RGASPI, f. 529, op. 1, d. 635, l. 8.

<sup>40</sup> The role of trade legations is noted in e.g. Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutions generalstab*, 90; Møller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer', 319. Though the Swedish police later received reports that Larsson was on good terms with Alexandra Kollontay, the Soviet Minister Plenipotentiary in Stockholm, they again remained unaware of his formal role. See Memo for case 3780/40, 18 January 1941, SA P 663.

<sup>41</sup> The Danish-born Moltke became a Soviet citizen in 1928. Details on his career are found in his personnel file in the Comintern archives. See Belov's reference (*spravka*), 31 August 1943, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 208, d. 332, ll. 44, 44ob; Moltke's autobiography (confidential), 10 November 1943, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 208, d. 332, l. 38–40. Both documents are published in Jørgensen et al., *Datskiye kadry Moskvyy v stalinskoye vremya*. For a detailed study of Moltke, see Birkedal Riisbro, 'Georg Laursen', parts 1–2.

in Stockholm and whose company, *Bildtjänst*, apparently employed Larsson at the time. According to 'Karlson', Larsson had a 'bohemian and adventurist nature', had led a 'fairly worldly lifestyle', had been in constant monetary difficulties and had dealings with bourgeois newspapers while he worked for the Soviet trade legation in 1937, until being dismissed for 'insufficient competence'. It was also noted that Larsson had left the Communist Party of Sweden for unknown reasons, and that his attitude toward the USSR was unknown.<sup>42</sup> However, parting ways with the party was also used as a strategic manoeuvre: for someone who had distanced themselves from the public communist organization, there were more opportunities for clandestine and illegal work.

Again, we are faced with intriguing challenges on how to interpret both hints and facts that appear in the documents. What can we conclude from the fact that, even though Larsson constantly received critical assessments of his character, this did not prevent him from getting involved with the Soviet intelligence apparatus in Stockholm? In the aftermath of the purging and reorganization of the Comintern's Liaison Department, someone with Larsson's credentials would not have been welcomed so warmly if he had actually become an unwanted person. While his flaws of character were repeatedly noted, radio specialists were always important. Most importantly, however, Larsson's assignment with the trade legation illuminates the different realities of the Swedish capital and the barbed wire-enclosed radio school compound in Pushkino. The spy hub of Stockholm was an environment that tempted and favoured the independent-minded.

While Larsson was dismissed by the Soviet legation, he quickly found a new acquaintance who had great potential to encourage his adventurism. He was Gerhard Liebenthal, a well-connected middleman between British intelligence, the Stockholm-based anti-German civilian group *Tisdagsklubben*, several foreign legations, and newspaper publishers. Born in 1896 in Berlin, Liebenthal was already an experienced journalist when he arrived in Sweden in July 1935 as a political exile. A police report from October 1936 – probably based on information received from Nazi authorities – noted that Liebenthal was not only Jewish but also had been 'enthusiastically active' in Hamburg with the KPD. His alleged pseudonym 'shipmate' (*skeppspojske*) falls short of proving anything, but hints at

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<sup>42</sup> Moltke's reference (*språkka*, top secret), 25 February 1940, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 1. At the time when the reference was issued, Larsson was back in the Soviet Union, visiting Moscow and Leningrad as a guest of VOKS. This indicates that the reference was probably commissioned when the Soviet intelligence services were trying to decide what to do with Larsson. On Karlsson, see e.g. Police memos, 6 July 1933, 15 December 1939, 19 February 1940, 24 August 1942, all in SA P 647; Bojerud, 'Spionen som aldrig funnits', 63–6, 86–7. On Larsson's connection with *Bildtjänst*, see memo for case 306/40, 12 February 1940, SA P 663.

involvement with the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers (*Internationale der Seeleute und Hafearbeiter*, ISH), which was also based in Hamburg and had an important role in the Comintern's clandestine courier and communications network.<sup>43</sup> After Liebenthal had settled in Sweden, the authorities received details on his contacts with both British intelligence and Tisdagsklubben from one of their most important informants, the double agent Karin Lannby or 'Annette', who was recruited by the Swedish military intelligence in 1939 and had wide connections in the press and public diplomacy circles in Stockholm. Throughout the Second World War, Lannby worked as a translator and in assistant positions for several people involved with German, Allied, and Soviet interests. In September 1940, Lannby even came close to being recruited by VOKS to distribute Soviet propaganda material to the Swedish press.<sup>44</sup> Apparently through Liebenthal, Larsson was also connected with the Swedish-Jewish Leopold Gawatin, who was in charge of the pharmaceutical company Drogon and was under police surveillance for suspected black-market dealings and probable ties to British and Polish intelligence operations.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Police memo, 1 October 1936, SA P 289 (Liebenthal, Gerhard Friedrich Martin). When Liebenthal was arrested and questioned by the police in Stockholm in February 1941, he described himself as a social democrat, which would have been the smartest story to tell regardless of its accuracy. See Examination records, 11 and 17 February 1941, SA P 289. On the ISH, see Rosenfeldt, 'Komintern og de hemmelige apparat', 104; Weiss, 'Stockholm – Hamburg – Köpenhamn', 141–4.

<sup>44</sup> See 'Annette' memos, e.g. 23 February, 13 April, 7 May and 8 September 1940, SA sakakt XII:77, (Annettes lista); Police memo and examination record, 17 February 1941, SA P 289. Liebenthal was interned for several months from March 1941 onwards on the basis of his extensive dealings with the British, but he was allowed to stay in Sweden, and he remained a somewhat public figure in Stockholm until his death on May Day 1954. Shortly after the war, Åhlen & Åkerlund and Fants published his books on war-time espionage and the Nuremberg trials. Liebenthal did not discuss his own role in these books. See the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) to Stockholm police (copy), 25 February 1942, SA P 289. On the SOE and Sweden, see Tennant, *Vid sidan av kriget*, 151–72; Cruickshank, *SOE in Scandinavia*, 2, 48; McKay, *From Information to Intrigue*, 64. On Lannby, see Thunberg, *Karin Lannby*; Pryser, *Tyske hemmelige tjenester i Norden*, 136–9; Roth, *Hitlers Brückenkopf in Schweden*, 319–21.

<sup>45</sup> Memos for case 3780/40, 21, 22 and 28 January 1941, SA P 663; Summary on Leopold Gawatin, case 4564/40, 2 January 1943; Examination record, 13 December 1944; both from SA P 979 (Gawatin, Leopold). Gawatin was also noted as having had a 'phony marriage' with Rica Ortman, a Moscow-based German woman who was arrested in the Soviet Union for 'conspiracy, treachery and Trotskyism' in 1936 or 1938. See also Police memo, 14 December 1942, SA P 979.

## Comrade Borisov Returns to Moscow

By April 1939 at the latest, Larsson was again involved with the Soviet legation in Stockholm and communicating with VOKS through Consul Vladimir Smirnov. During the course of several months, Larsson repeatedly wrote to VOKS asking for Soviet books, journals, and photographs and sent back his articles as examples of his efforts to promote Soviet progress in the Swedish press. While this could otherwise be evaluated as insignificant, the fact that Larsson, in late December, successfully applied for a Soviet visa raises questions. Although Larsson ultimately only visited Moscow and Leningrad on his two-week trip between 19 February and 16 March 1940, he had also applied for permission to travel behind the lines of the Soviet front against Finland near Leningrad, Petrozavodsk, and Murmansk to report about the Winter War from a rare perspective.<sup>46</sup> For someone who had recently inserted himself in journalism, that would have been a lucrative opportunity. Larsson's background, however, meant that there was also another undercurrent in his interactions with his hosts. For someone who had been individually flagged for questionable morals and incompetence by his former superiors, and who must have understood how the Stalinist regime had killed several of his colleagues and churned up the whole OMS as well, the decision to return to the Soviet Union deserves to be investigated in some detail.

Why was Larsson so willing to return to the Soviet Union, and what did he hope to achieve with the visit? If his trip is evaluated on the basis of its known events and visible aftermath, the conclusion would be that it certainly fell far short of his ambitions. When, in early January 1940 Larsson had asked VOKS to support his visa application, he claimed to be a correspondent for *Se* illustrated magazine. While in Moscow, he had no reservations about presenting himself as a 'permanent' [*postoiannyi*] correspondent' for the publication.<sup>47</sup> The editor of *Se*, Carl-Adam Nycop, later told the Swedish police a different story. According to Nycop, Larsson had succeeded in getting only a conditional agreement that the publisher would buy his photographs as long as they were 'objective and not influenced by Russian propaganda'. Afterwards, Nycop started having second thoughts and came to the police, presuming that Larsson was just trying to take advantage of him and would eventually sell his work to the highest bidder.<sup>48</sup> None of these worries ultimately materialized, as, by 26 February, VOKS had informed Larsson that his request to travel beyond Leningrad was denied, which naturally

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<sup>46</sup> Larsson's correspondence with VOKS, April 1939–January 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 12–32.

<sup>47</sup> Larsson to VOKS, 2 January 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 12.; Kamenkovich's memo, 20 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Memo for case 306/40, 14 February 1940, SA P 663; Kamenkovich's memo, 20 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 8.

meant that any reporting from behind the front would be impossible.<sup>49</sup> VOKS memos suggest that Larsson then had to settle for conventional visits to cultural institutions, industrial sites and theatre and film events.

Even without Larsson's history of working for the Comintern and Soviet intelligence, his visit would have been an uncommon event. The initial reason for my interest in him actually originates from the fact that, in VOKS archival records, Larsson stands out as the only Swedish 'journalist' with an individual file about a visit that took place between the abatement of the Great Terror by early 1939 and the German attack in June 1941. That file does not contain any references to his past other than a mention that he had 'lived' in the Soviet Union for approximately six years and travelled around the country, formulations that catch attention because of their brevity.<sup>50</sup> However, his Comintern personnel file reveals that, by early November 1939, before his formal visa application, Larsson was again under increased scrutiny. A short memo from 2 November written by Sector Chief Zysman of the rearranged Communications Service (SS) critically refers to Larsson's OMS service record from 1933–1934, noting that working in Moscow did not suit him and that he persistently sought an assignment outside Moscow.<sup>51</sup> As the memo was sent to a 'Smorodinsky', and as a Senior Lieutenant by that name served in Soviet military counterintelligence (the 'Special Section' of the Main Directorate of State Security, *Glavnoe upravlenie gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*, GUGB), it is clear that the intelligence services of both Comintern and the Soviet state were communicating about him. Later, in February and during Larsson's time in Moscow, Georg Moltke also provided his aforementioned reference.<sup>52</sup>

The scrutiny that Larsson received illustrates how VOKS had become closely integrated with different branches of the Soviet intelligence apparatus after the Great Terror. Although the aforementioned statements are not included in Larsson's VOKS file, there is no reason to assume that they were unknown to the organization's ranking official Grigori Kheifets, who was also responsible for Larsson's programme in Moscow. Kheifets was technically a VOKS vice chairman, but was actually a seasoned veteran of intelligence operations with both OMS and later NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, *Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del*). With his Latvian–Jewish background and international experience, including assignments in Germany, China, and the United States, Kheifets was himself among the lucky ones who had barely escaped the Great Terror and found a position in the

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<sup>49</sup> Volkov's memo (*zapiski*), 26 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 5–7.

<sup>50</sup> Kamenkovich's memo, 20 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 8

<sup>51</sup> Zysman's reference, 2 November 1939, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Moltke's reference, 25 February 1940, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 387, l. 1.

cultural diplomacy organization, in which senior positions formerly held by purged officials were now staffed by veterans of intelligence operations.<sup>53</sup> The timing of Moltke's critical reference of Larsson on 25 February, the day before Larsson found out that his wishes to travel beyond Leningrad were denied, strongly suggests that two such *chekists* were communicating about their guest. Although no paper trail is available to verify this, Kheifets may have been privy to the same information as Sector Chief Zysman at the Liaison Service and Senior Lieutenant Smorodinsky at GUGB. Still, even Kheifets had some limitations in his options, as all information regarding the Liaison Service was highly classified,<sup>54</sup> and it can thus be assumed that lower-level VOKS officials actually had no idea that both their boss and guest were OMS veterans.

Unfortunately, there is no way to assess whether Kheifets or Larsson made any attempts to acknowledge or discuss the elephant in the room. If that did happen, the mundane content of the VOKS memos could still be explained by a need to conceal sensitive information within VOKS itself. A singular passing mention among Kheifets' notes can be interpreted as an indirect reference to the OMS, but it is so brief and isolated that its significance is impossible to define: on the first full day on Larsson's visit in Moscow, he had asked Kheifets about the whereabouts of his compatriot Bertil Wagner, whose former wife (until 1938), Maj Ingrid, had worked as an OMS courier between Moscow, Copenhagen, and the Baltic states in the mid-1930s.<sup>55</sup> However, there are no other available references to Wagner, and the memos by other VOKS officials are standard reports of the guest's impressions and opinions. After an opera performance at the Bolshoi theatre on 26 February, VOKS departmental chief Volkov and Larsson had an extensive discussion about politics, including Swedish attitudes to the ongoing war and potential British interests in drawing Scandinavia into conflict against the Soviet Union. According to Volkov, Larsson's view was that the bourgeoisie in France and Britain wrongly

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<sup>53</sup> For more on VOKS and the Great Terror, see David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, 300–4. For more on Kheifets, see Laamanen, 'VOKS, Cultural Diplomacy and the Shadow of the Lubianka', 1034.

<sup>54</sup> Rosenfeldt, *Verdensrevolutionens generalstab*, 73–4.

<sup>55</sup> Kheifets' diary entry, 20 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 10. In May 1937, the Swedish Communist Party had sent Wagner to Moscow, where he worked as a translator for the party newspaper *Ny Dag*. Maj Ingrid Wagner (née Olsson) was also known as 'vackra Maj', the announcer of Swedish-language radio programming sent from Moscow. Summary on Bertil Wagner, undated; Extract from case 608/40, 28 February 1940; Memo for case 3847/40, undated; Extract from Personnel file P 78, 11 August 1940; Summary of P 811 (Wagner, Maj Ingrid), 15 January 1948; all from SA P 810 (Wagner, Bertil Karl Otto); Statement on Bertil Wagner, 9 June 1951, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 275, d. 602, l. 9; Møller and Rosenfeldt, 'Koder, kapital og kurerer', 306–9.

feared the Soviet Union, when Hitler should be their primary enemy.<sup>56</sup> His incredulous attitude towards France and Britain was not only in line with general Soviet policy during the German–Soviet pact period but was also suitable for a former Comintern cadre willing to convince his hosts that he still understood the fallacy of these bourgeois societies.<sup>57</sup>

There are no documents available from the second week of Larsson’s trip, which he spent in Leningrad, and no summarizing follow-up analysis whatsoever. Thus, it is ultimately unknown what comrade Borisov’s unusual return had possibly set in motion. Nevertheless, the possibility of another rapprochement with the Soviet intelligence apparatus must be considered when examining his later actions back in Sweden.

### Norway and ‘Larssondienst’

The Swedish State Police took notice of Larsson because of informants. The first statement came in early February 1940 from a ‘Mrs Persson’, who claimed to know Larsson through his sister and was convinced that he was ‘in Russian service’. In her interview by the police, Persson explained that, although Larsson did not have a steady job, he travelled often and frequently visited the Soviet legation. Additional statements soon followed by the aforementioned Nycop from *Se* and the editors of the jazz magazine *Orkesterjournalen*, which Larsson also had contacted to offer articles about the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, Larsson remained a person of only limited interest for Police Commissioner Lönn and the 6<sup>th</sup> division all the way through his February–March Soviet visit and until later in the spring of the same year. Postal and telephone surveillance on him were established only months later.<sup>59</sup> Even though his personnel file eventually grew quite thick, Larsson was not among the almost 2 000 people arrested because of suspected treasonous activities.<sup>60</sup> In fact, there is no indication that the police even

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<sup>56</sup> Volkov’s memo, 26 February 1940, GARF, f. R5283, op. 5, d. 875, l. 5–7.

<sup>57</sup> During the German–Soviet pact period, Moscow tried to direct the Scandinavian communist parties (DKP, NKP, and SKP) to strengthen their fight against the ‘imperialist war’ waged by not only Great Britain and France but also their supporters-at-home, the Social Democrats. See Hirdman, *Sverges kommunistiska parti 1939–1945*, 22–79; Egge and Halvorsen, ‘kriteriet på en kommunist’, 22; Björilin, ‘För svensk arbetarklass’, 212–3.

<sup>58</sup> Memos for case 306/40, 2, 11 and 12 February 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>59</sup> Order for mail surveillance, 13 August 1940; mention of telephone surveillance in memo for case 3780/1940, 28 January 1941; both in SA P 663.

<sup>60</sup> The total number of arrested people was 1,957, with 505 cases prosecuted. For the statistics, see Flyghed, *Außenpolitik und Recht*, 316.



questioned him. Between 1939 and 1942, when the war broke out and escalated around Sweden and the General Security Service intensified their actions against actual and suspected communists, they uncovered over two dozen distinct instances of espionage and sabotage with links to Comintern or Soviet intelligence.<sup>61</sup> In Larsson's case, the authorities were unable to perceive that they were collecting a dossier on a Comintern agent who was extensively trained in illegal covert operations and had completed his first such assignment in Sweden in 1932–1933.

At the turn of the 1940s, Stockholm had no shortage of communists, Nazis, and those somewhere in between socialism and 'national socialism'.<sup>62</sup> For most of the time, Larsson actually was under police surveillance as an individual of the latter group of people, among whom nationally known former socialists such as Nils Flyg, Allan Ekberg-Hedqvist, and Sigrid Gillner had since become antagonistic towards the Soviet Union and sympathetic to Germany.<sup>63</sup> The first documented incident that mentioned these suspicions dates from April 1940, when the police tried to uncover Larsson's dealings with a Norwegian with a similar name: Gustav Adolf Larssen. He was described as a suspected Nazi collaborator who had recently crossed the border to Sweden with a group of refugees and had declared his intention to travel to Stockholm and stay with Larsson. According to a report by a local official in Vindeln, Västerbotten County, Larssen had presented a false name for the Swedish authorities, had a lot of money on hand, and had showed suspicion-rousing interest in the Swedish air force base in Vännäs. Because of this, the official suspected that Larssen actually intended to stay in Vännäs to gather intelligence for a foreign power.<sup>64</sup> Later, the police found out that Larssen had arrived in Stockholm and registered at the Frivillighetellet on 25 April, then left on 2 May, claiming his intention to 'cross the border and join the Norwegian troops' but returning only five days later and declaring Vindeln as his previous place of stay.<sup>65</sup>

Even without any reliable information on the Norwegian's true ambitions, his actions suggest that he was involved in espionage.<sup>66</sup> As the overall situation was complicated by both the Soviet–

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<sup>61</sup> Gilmour, *Sweden, the Swastika and Stalin*, 143.

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. Agrell, *Stockholm som spioncentral*; Björkman, *Säkerhetstjänstens egen berättelse*; Eliasson, *Övervakning i försvarets intresse*.

<sup>63</sup> For more on the Nazi sympathies of former socialists, see e.g. Carlsson, *Nazismen i Sverige*; Blomqvist, *Gåtan Nils Flyg*. For a case study of five Norwegian socialists who joined the *Nasjonal Samling* party, see Sørensen, *Fra Marx til Quisling*.

<sup>64</sup> Memo for case 306/40, 27 April 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>65</sup> Memo for case 306/40, 9 May 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>66</sup> Memo for case 306/40, 28 April 1940, SA P 663.

German pact and the fighting in Norway, Larsson's alleged help to a Nazi sympathizer coming to Sweden over the border could be explained by several different motives. It might have been a genuine attempt to get acquainted with anti-British and pro-German circles, or part of a more sophisticated plan to infiltrate them. If Larsson still was involved in Soviet intelligence after his Soviet visit, his interactions with people crossing the border in both directions could also be related to connecting with Soviet agents and saboteurs, such as those of the NKVD-supported 'Wollweber League' who at the time were escaping the German invasion and occupation of Norway.<sup>67</sup> In any case, it is impossible to determine how Larsson was actually influenced by Stalin's de facto approval of the German National Socialist regime and abandonment of the Popular Front policy through the nonaggression pact in August 1939. For most communists, the pact and the Comintern's quick adaptation to it was a hard pill to swallow.<sup>68</sup> While the majority of them tried to adapt, many abandoned the movement. For some, the upheaval presented new opportunities.

Unverifiable but noteworthy references to Norway also appear later, in a report from Karin Lannby from May 1944. She briefly summarizes information originating from Bjarne Landgren, a Norwegian pilot and a member of the *Nasjonal Samling*, who was recruited by the German military intelligence service (*Abwehr*) to infiltrate the Royal Air Force as a refugee via Sweden, where he had arrived in March 1943. Lannby characterized Landgren as someone who wanted to make easy money regardless of the honesty of his methods. He also 'knew every airfield in the country, every air force unit, their equipment and the production of aircraft', and had inspected the aircraft factory in Linköping. According to Landgren's story, Larsson and the photographer Per-Olov Andersson, who was involved with British military espionage (Special Operations Executive, SOE) activities but seems to have been a double agent for the Germans, had crossed the Norwegian border in 1940, presumably to photograph German military installations.<sup>69</sup> Another reference to Norway emerges in a March 1944 report by the Swedish Tourist Association, which stated that Larsson had recently rented a place to stay on the Sylarna fells in Jämtland County by the Norwegian border, and that he had made a similar trip a

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<sup>67</sup> For a detailed study of the Wollweber League, see Borgersund, *Wollweber-organisasjonen i Norge*. On examples of Wollweber's agents moving from Norway to Sweden from April 1940, see e.g. Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan*, 149–50, 258.

<sup>68</sup> On Comintern and the German–Soviet nonaggression pact, see e.g. McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 191–204; Halvorsen, 'Scandinavian Communist Parties', 248–60.

<sup>69</sup> Memos for case 3784/40, 15 May and 13 June 1944, SA P 663; 'Annette' memos, 15 and 25 October 1943 and Police memo, 11 November 1943, all from SA sakakt XII:77; Pryser, *Tyske hemmelige tjenste i Norden*, 114.

few years earlier.<sup>70</sup> However, these mentions are among the sketchiest content in the police files that discuss him. If Larsson indeed collaborated with Andersson, it is still impossible to assess whether he was aware of the larger scheme around him or working only for his own benefit.

The second case, which the police investigated and documented in greater detail, suggests that Larsson had a self-serving hidden agenda when he was directly dealing with the Germans. Between November 1940 and January 1941, he had a close and formalized relationship with the German Embassy in Stockholm as its main distributor of propaganda material to the Swedish press, especially through *Stockholms-Tidningen*. In the reports of the German Embassy, Larsson is referred to as ‘informant [*Gewährsmann*] Larsson’ or ‘Larssondienst’. He operated through *Europa-Reportage*, a company that was camouflaged as Swedish but originally intended by the Germans to remain in the direct control of the Embassy and its chief of press department Gerhard Kleeberg.<sup>71</sup> However, in practice it was more like Larsson’s very own press bureau, which he was able to exploit for some time.

It is impossible to determine whether Larsson acted according to an assignment from the Soviet intelligence apparatus, but he developed his relationship with the German Embassy after his return from Moscow. In November, he both rented an apartment in Östermalm for *Europa-Reportage* and officially registered the company with the Swedish authorities.<sup>72</sup> Even at a time when the German–Soviet pact was in effect and political conversion was not uncommon, the ability of an OMS veteran to establish himself as a German confidante and gain practically independent use of dedicated German resources was no mean feat. According to what Larsson’s acquaintance Gerhard Liebenthal later told the police, the contact was facilitated by the former communist Allan Ekberg-Hedqvist, who had since become a leading member of the far-right *Sveriges Nationella Förbund* (SNF).<sup>73</sup> In December 1940, the police received information that a ‘German propaganda central’ had been recently set up. The office of *Europa-Reportage* was managed by an Austrian-born Swedish citizen named Herbert Ebner, who used to

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<sup>70</sup> Police memo, 27 march 1944, SA P 663.

<sup>71</sup> German Embassy in Stockholm (Below) to Auswärtiges Amt, references in Roth, *Hitlers Brückenkopf in Schweden*, 288; Memo for case 3780/40, 11 January 1941, SA P 663. The brief mention of Larsson in Roth’s book is the only known reference to him in previous research.

<sup>72</sup> Memos for case 3780/40, 14 and 19 December 1940, SA P 663. Larsson himself also changed apartments in the neighbouring Gärdet neighbourhood, from Smedsbackgatan to Rindögatan.

<sup>73</sup> Ekberg-Hedqvist joined SNF in December 1935. See Carlsson, *Nazismen i Sverige*, 126–7; McCay, *From Information to Intrigue*, 220. Based on information from Liebenthal, Larsson and Ekberg-Hedqvist had at one occasion discussed their common past at ‘some political college’ in Moscow, i.e. apparently KUNMZ. See Examination record, 10 February 1941, SA P 289.

be a local *Sturmabteilung* chief and active member of the Swedish National Socialist Party until its internal divisions in 1933.<sup>74</sup> According to an informant from the same Östermalmstorg building, radio receivers in other apartments had experienced disturbances until the Germans upgraded their equipment. Before the windows were covered, photo developing equipment could also be seen in the apartment, which had earlier been used as a photography studio.<sup>75</sup>

For a German propaganda central, the business model of *Larssondienst* was quite remarkable. On 2 December, Larsson signed a contract with Liebenthal, who agreed to supply *Europa-Reportage* with British, French, and US photos. According to what Liebenthal stated in a police interview in February 1941, Larsson was catering to the needs of customers complaining about the lack of sources other than German and Italian.<sup>76</sup> A more plausible explanation would be that two men, motivated by a mix of ideological and financial ambition, were seizing the opportunity to disrupt German propaganda efforts. There are no details available on how Larsson actually was able to pull off his dealings with Liebenthal and the Allies, but, by late January, Ebner apparently took action and Larsson was ousted from *Europa-Reportage*.<sup>77</sup>

In addition to describing Larsson's activities in Stockholm, his State Police file contains a report that indicates that he also travelled around the country during the time he was associated with the Germans. In late December 1940, Manager J. W. Klöver of the Kur- och Högfjällshotell in Sälen, a resort near the Norwegian border in Kopparberg County, wrote to the local County Governor of Kopparberg to report on Larsson. At the end of Larsson's week-long stay at the hotel, he had made a contract with Klöver about photos of 'events that had national interest'. The reason for this was probably related to the fact that the Norwegian Crown Princess Märtha Louise was staying in exile at the resort, and Klöver had himself taken a famous photo of the Norwegian King Haakon VII under German air attack in Nybergsund back in April. In his letter, Klöver explained that he had heard from another hotel guest, a representative of the German Zeiss company who had advanced photography equipment with him and seemed to know Larsson well, that Larsson intended to visit more than 25 other localities on similar business. The Zeiss representative had also mentioned that Larsson had been

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<sup>74</sup> Ebner's wife Märta was also involved, and she was interviewed by the police in early 1941. See Police memo, 26 February 1945; Personnel card on Herbert Ebner; both in SA P 997 (Ebner, Herbert Maria).

<sup>75</sup> Memos for case 3780/40, 14 and 19 December 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>76</sup> Police records of Liebenthal's interview in Stockholm, 6 February 1941, SA P 663.

<sup>77</sup> Memos for case 3780/40, 11 January and 5 February 1941; Examination record of Gerhard Liebenthal, 6 February 1941; all from SA P 663.

trained in Moscow, although he had since ‘left behind those contacts’. Klüver himself made a point of noting that Larsson was ‘very ingratiating’ and gave a naïve impression of himself.<sup>78</sup>

After Klüver’s letter was forwarded to Commissioner Lönn at the State Police, Larsson’s surveillance was intensified.<sup>79</sup> In January 1941, the police noticed that Larsson also had meetings with representatives of a Swiss company based in Stockholm, Schweiziska Ur. The connections to Switzerland are noteworthy because of the status of the country as another base and connections node for both German and Soviet intelligence operations, in the latter case especially for sabotage through the so-called ‘Liebersohn organization’, which was coordinated by the Swiss–Jewish Jakob Liebersohn (alias Fritz Rom), supported by Soviet military intelligence (GRU) and had ties to the NKVD-supported Wollweber League.<sup>80</sup> Another notable source for the police about Larsson’s connections was the editor Tor Brunius, from the Swedish Employers Association (*Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen*), who, through a Swiss contact, was trying to gather information about the communist underground network in Switzerland. Brunius did not explicitly connect Larsson with the Swiss, but the same January 1941 police report about a conversation with him that touches upon Switzerland also mentions that Brunius specifically discussed Larsson and Liebenthal. Brunius explained that, although Larsson was now rumoured to be a National Socialist, there was a possibility that he was actually spying for the Soviet legation in Stockholm.<sup>81</sup>

### **Opportunism and Estrangement**

Soon after the police found out that the Germans had severed ties with Larsson, his active surveillance practically stopped for the next three years. The last available detail from the winter of 1941 originates from Märta Ebner’s police interview on 10 February. According to Ebner, Larsson had, since his departure made a few visits to *Europa-Reportage* together with Liebenthal and boasted about his success in the press business. Ebner also mentioned that Larsson had already offered his services to the British Embassy as a photo distributor. Ebner clearly felt betrayed, and thus described Larsson’s behaviour as arrogant and certainly as unfitting to someone who ever had any genuine interest in supporting

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<sup>78</sup> Klüver to the Kopparberg County Governor, 29 December 1940, SA P 663.

<sup>79</sup> Surveillance memos on Larsson, 21, 22 and 28 January 1941, SA P 663.

<sup>80</sup> Agrell, *Stora sabotageligan*, 170–84, 239–50; Borgersund, *Wollweber-organisasjonen i Norge*, 416–8.

<sup>81</sup> Memo for case 3780/40, 18 January 1941, SA P 663; Memo for case 107/41, 18 January 1941, SA P 2493 (Brunius, Tor Patrik Fredrik).

German goals or in actually gaining their trust.<sup>82</sup>

Nothing that is known about Larsson's involvement with the Germans indicates that there were any significant gains for Moscow. Even if his winter 1940 visit to the Soviet Union did play a role in his subsequent dealings, his almost immediate outreach to the British and the French on behalf of *Europa-Reportage* ruled out any long-term possibilities to remain on good terms with the Germans. Therefore, Larsson's behaviour was likely motivated by common interests with Liebenthal, who had found mutual interests with the British. In addition to Liebenthal, Larsson also had plenty of other examples of how people with evolving loyalties were trying to benefit from their environment. Even though his actual motives remain hidden, a close look at Larsson demonstrates how people seized opportunities and coped with change in Stockholm during a tumultuous period.

Between the winter of 1941 and spring of 1944, the surveillance of Larsson's telephone and mail continued, but they produced only brief references to his subscriptions of communist publications: *Världen i Dag*, the Swedish version of the Comintern magazine *Inprekorr*, in March 1941, and *Nyheter från Sovjetunionen*, published in Russian and in Swedish by the Soviet legation in Stockholm, in November 1943.<sup>83</sup> In December 1943, one of Lannby's reports mentions Larsson as 'the kind of man who works for a while for the English and for a while for the Germans'. In another report referenced by the police a few months later, Lannby notes that Larsson had been able to establish himself in the Stockholm press business and had for some time received a regular salary from Torsten Kreuger's *Stockholms-Tidningen*. The report also claims that Larsson had stopped dealing with both the Russians and the British, and that he was making his living by 'copying news stories from the Moscow radio for newspapers in Stockholm'.<sup>84</sup> The information thus suggests that Larsson effectively was now an outsider, estranged from the communist movement, and no longer a relevant asset for any foreign intelligence service.

After late in 1944, there are no available entries about Larsson until the late spring of 1948. Then, on 25 May, Officer Trägårdh from the Gothenburg office of the reorganized 3<sup>rd</sup> district (the former equivalent was the 6<sup>th</sup> district) of the *Kriminalstatsspolisen* wrote to Lönn about the *Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* article.<sup>85</sup> His letter does not specify what else Larsson was possibly suspected of writing,

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<sup>82</sup> Police records of Märta Ebner's interview in Stockholm, 10 February 1941, SA P 663.

<sup>83</sup> Memos for case 3780/40, 6 and 27 March 1941; Police memo, 22 November 1943; both from SA P 663. The November 1943 memo also notes Larsson's new address, Östermalmsgatan 94.

<sup>84</sup> Report from 'Annette', 17 December 1943, SA sakakt XII:77; Extract of a report from 'Annette', 15 May 1944, SA P 663.

<sup>85</sup> Trägårdh to Lönn, 25 May 1948, SA P 663.

but searches within the digitalized Swedish newspaper database<sup>86</sup> reveal that similar stories were published in the smaller *Sölvesborgstidningen*, the local paper in Blekinge County in the south of Sweden. In a 10-part series titled ‘The Red Nazism’ (*Den röda nazismen*), the anonymous author is openly antagonistic towards the Swedish Communist Party, which is portrayed as a follower of a leader principle similar to Nazism as well as unpatriotic on the basis of its ‘direct obedience to the Russian regime’. The eighth article, published on 22 May and titled ‘Communist spies were trained in Moscow’, names more than a dozen prominent Swedes, mostly socialist politicians, who attended either the MLS or KUNMZ. The story also notes that ‘especially trustworthy’ students were taught in sabotage and espionage, but, even then, no direct reference to the OMS is included.<sup>87</sup> In another police memo from 2 June 1948, Larsson is referred to as ‘Ryska Lasse’ because of his revelatory articles. He is again described as someone who ‘travels often’ and who had just recently returned from abroad.<sup>88</sup> Although the police references alone do not confirm that Larsson in fact wrote any of the articles, their content strongly suggests that their author or authors had personally attended KUNMZ.<sup>89</sup> If officer Trägårdh’s information was correct, it would make sense that Larsson had left the most clandestine circle unmentioned, be it because of pride, caution or some form of solidarity he might still have had for his former OMS comrades.

## Conclusions

Ingvar Larsson was initiated into the inner circles of the international communist movement, but he was unwilling or unable to adapt to the strict expectations from party cadres. After the Great Terror

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<sup>86</sup> Kungliga biblioteket, Svenska Dagstidningar: <https://tidningar.kb.se/>.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Den röda nazismen 8: Kommunistiska spioner blev skolade i Moskva’, no author information given, *Sölvesborgstidningen*, 22 May 1948.

<sup>88</sup> Police memo, 2 June 1948, SA P 663. The memo also highlights a Polish exile, Fritz (actually Ficzel) Bojmal who ‘works for the Russians’ and himself had connections to Liebenthal and Gawatin during the war. See memo for case 4524/40, 13 February 1940, SA P 1713 (Bojmal, Ficzel).

<sup>89</sup> The *Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen* reports discuss a few communist insiders turned informants, such as source ‘Toddy’, who, during 1947–1948 identified to the police 25 different ‘Comintern messengers’, ‘Russian agents’, and other Soviet collaborators. See *Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen, Övervakningen*, 220. The identity of these agents and collaborators is not revealed in the report. When determining the value of identifying individuals by name and contemplating their possible or actual involvement in criminal or controversial activities or role as police informants, I have attempted to follow the example of the Swedish government-appointed *Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen* project (2002). See *Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen, Rikets säkerhet*, 91–6.

and the German–Soviet pact of August 1939, he made several choices that can best be explained not by ideology but by a readiness to seize new opportunities and embrace uncertainties. By tracing Larsson’s life over three decades, this article has attempted to illuminate the tensions and uncertainties that people in similar positions had to cope with when they were trying to find their way between ideals and realities during changing times and in the distinct environment of Sweden and its capital before and during the Second World War. As a case study that has had to navigate several ambiguities, archival silences, and, most importantly, the lack of Larsson’s own voice, the article also aims to present an example of how narratives can be pieced together in a meaningful way, even from such partial premises.

The most obvious and complete silence that remains concerns the final decade of Larsson’s life. Because of current Swedish legislation, all documents in the Security Police archive newer than 31 December 1948 are unavailable by default, and even older documents that contain particularly sensitive information can also be withheld from any personnel or case file prior to access for researchers. Thus, several pieces are missing from the puzzle that could reveal whether the police actually contacted him and, if so, whether he became an informant.<sup>90</sup> At least until 1953, Larsson did continue to write about the Soviet Union under his own name as well, and managed to publish articles on various topics, ranging from speculations about Soviet nuclear secrets to how the satirical magazine *Krokodil* had changed after Stalin’s death.<sup>91</sup> His stories were sourly commented on by the Swedish Communist Party (*Sveriges Kommunistiska Parti*, SKP) paper *Arbetartidningen*, which on one occasion referred to Larsson as someone who ‘for years has worn out his soles by running daily between newsrooms in Stockholm’.<sup>92</sup> Beyond that, on the basis of publicly accessible information, we only know that he died in October

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<sup>90</sup> Upon my written request (22 January 2019) for access to the content of Larsson’s State Police personnel file after 31 December 1948, the Swedish National Archives reviewed the case and released (6 February 2019) 15 pages of normally classified documents from the years 1950 and 1951. Based on the released documents, it is likely that, while the police continued Larsson’s surveillance, they withheld from attempts to recruit him as an informant at least until October 1950. However, some of the content of the Larsson file is still classified, and developments after October 1950 are thus impossible to evaluate.

<sup>91</sup> See e.g. Larsson, ‘Sovietunionens atomstad ett – Shangri-La’, *Aftontidningen* 7 September 1948; Larsson, ‘Krokodil ömsar skinn’, *Folket i Bild* 23/1953.

<sup>92</sup> Pseudonym ‘Pettersson den äldre’, ‘Rött och Rapp’, *Arbetartidningen*, 9 September 1948.



1959 at the age of 52 and was buried in Skogskyrkogården, in a grave that no longer exists. The record of his burial contains no information about children or a spouse.<sup>93</sup>

As a contribution to research about the Comintern's intelligence apparatus (OMS/SS), which is still hindered by restrictions on primary sources in Russian archives, the article has offered a microhistorical approach to examining how people operated behind the doctrines, titles and pseudonyms. As Larsson survived the Great Terror and continued to seize opportunities to stay involved in various competing intelligence networks in Stockholm, his case highlights temporal and physical spaces that a mid-level operative with some sensitive knowledge could utilize for individual adventurism and opportunism. Even though Comintern and Soviet intelligence officials repeatedly criticized Larsson for his flaws, their decision to let him return to Moscow and Leningrad on his VOKS-hosted trip in 1940 may still have been the least risky choice. It enabled the Soviet intelligence apparatus to retain a former insider as an associate, however unpredictable that associate was. Larsson's later dealings with pro-German and pro-British circles can also be approached with the same logic: in the Casablanca of the North, friends, adversaries, and those in between should all be kept close.

Police and intelligence documents are often plainly written, and people tend to appear on them mainly as suspects, informants, and subordinates. While highlighting Larsson and his acquaintances, this article has strived to make the process and challenges of working with these kind of sources more visible and understandable. As the French historian Arlette Farge has eloquently noted, this is, nevertheless, a slow and uncertain process, during which one must 'read and reread, trudging forward doggedly through this bog, without a breath of fresh air unless the wind picks up'. And still, the dangers of misunderstanding the documents and overemphasizing that which strengthens the narrative remains a constant temptation.<sup>94</sup> As I have accepted this challenge, I have also had to accept that the narrative I have traced, scrutinized, constructed, and presented contains ambiguities.

Ingvar Larsson's path from a communist cadre to the estranged 'Ryska Lasse' included twists and turns that are difficult to interpret with certainty. Nevertheless, his life illustrates a wider culture that can only be understood when ideology, opportunism, conviction, and adventurism are all evaluated in their context. By resurrecting Larsson as the agent of a biographical narrative and microhistorically exploring the small mysteries of an elusive life that might otherwise seem unremarkable, we can assess how people in comparable positions navigated through loyalties and temptations. Thus, each case study

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<sup>93</sup> Information obtained from the Cemeteries Administration in Stockholm (*Stockholms kyrkogårdsförvaltningen*) on 15 November 2016.

<sup>94</sup> Farge, *Allure of the Archives*, 62, 71–3.

adds to a panorama of views that will never grow complete, but will help us imagine and assess choices and fates unknown, and other than our own.

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