

Northern Flank by Göran Haglund

The spy who went back into the cold

Justice Minister Wickbom is but one victim of the intelligence warfare now raging in Sweden.

Months of intelligence warfare in Sweden have begun to take their toll of high-level government officials. The most prominent victim so far is Justice Minister Sten Wickbom, forced to resign on Oct. 19. Wickbom's demise was followed by the firing of three of his underlings at the Justice Department, among them the number-two man, Harald Fälth, and the resignation of Director General Ulf Larsson of the Swedish Prisons Board, which runs the nation's prisons.

Wickbom was already discredited through his backing of ex-Police Chief Hans Holmér, who had to resign in March over his conduct of the investigation into the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme. But the immediate trigger of the present wave of downfalls of Social Democratic justice officials was a scandal erupting two weeks before, after the escape from prison of Russian spy Stig Bergling on Oct. 5.

Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1979 for Soviet espionage, Bergling escaped while on a leave of absence, under a number of peculiar circumstances, hardly attributable to chance:

First, Bergling was granted a two-day leave from prison, despite his conviction for espionage, severely damaging to the nation, and despite his refusal to cooperate in controlling the damage. Bergling was a Soviet mole inside the Security Police (SÄPO), and a liaison between SÄPO and military intelligence.

Second, not only was Bergling granted a leave, in itself outrageous, but he was on an "accompanied leave of absence," meaning that a prison

guard accompanies the prisoner away from and back to the prison, but leaves him unwatched during the night.

Third, Bergling was given leave despite his known desire to escape. In October 1985, a letter intercepted from Bergling revealed a plan to escape. Nonetheless, he was again granted a leave in January 1986. His former lawyer stated, "He is a very dangerous and experienced spy and has all the time aimed at getting out one day."

Fourth, Bergling's leave was granted after the application to convert his life imprisonment to a delimited jail term had been rejected. He had little to lose.

Fifth, despite serving an unlimited jail term, Bergling, as part of his "rehabilitation" by the ultra-liberal Swedish Prisons Board, had already been given a new identity, including a new passport, issued for the name of "Eugen Sandberg," and he had changed his looks during the eight years in jail.

No wonder a police officer in charge of searching for Bergling, Division Head Esbjörn Esbjörnson at the National Criminal Police, told the press on Oct. 7 that "this is a case with gross political overtones." The incident is but the latest in the intelligence war among SÄPO, military intelligence, and the Social Democratic intelligence networks—nicknamed SAPO—run by Foreign Minister Sten Andersson and his deputy Pierre Schori, both eager to trade a favor to Moscow against a kick in the teeth.

Moscow's preference in the factional battle was signaled in the Sept. 27 *Pravda*, which painted a picture of

incompetence and absurdity at the SÄPO, typified by their keeping Palme on a "black list" of people who might be unreliable during a crisis. *Pravda* cites the now-deposed Wickbom saying it's time to investigate the SÄPO.

When Bergling's prison guard, as per an "agreement" with Bergling, arrived at 12:45 p.m. on Oct. 6 to pick him up at his wife's house, both Bergling and wife were gone, to everybody's alleged surprise. It then took until 10:45 a.m. before a nationwide search warrant was issued, perhaps 24 hours after the escape.

At first, the Social Democratic officials of the Prisons Board, all champions of "humanization of prison care," blamed the SÄPO for not watching Bergling. But soon it was made known that Bergling's frequent and lax leaves were imposed by the Prisons Board over SÄPO resistance. As recently as May 1987, when a four-man SÄPO team had watched Bergling visit a restaurant, SÄPO was attacked by the Prisons Board for "spoiling Bergling's fun" during his leave, by deploying too strong surveillance!

Newly appointed SÄPO chief Sune Sandström said that the Prisons Board knew the SÄPO wasn't going to watch Bergling during the night, and that the board was responsible for watching him. The board, he added, would have granted Bergling leave even without any SÄPO deployment at all. "Given the humanization they're pushing, this is how far we've come."

Among the military, outrage was visible over Bergling's escape. "It is extremely remarkable that a person with his criminal record is granted an unwatched leave, giving him the chance to escape," said Defense Staff press spokesman Hans Gustaf Wessberg. "It wasn't even known to us that he had leaves."