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“Common sense not bravado”: the Butler-Prytz
interview of 17 June 1940

On 17 June 1940, Björn Prytz, the Swedish Minister in London, had a meeting with R A Butler, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office. Prytz was not a career diplomat but a successful businessman who had been appointed to head the legation in London in 1938; Butler was a young Conservative politician with a distinguished career ahead of him who had served as a junior minister under the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, since 1938. The two men discussed the international situation, and that evening Prytz reported by telegram to the Swedish Foreign Ministry on his conversation with Butler. This telegram has been the cause of controversy in both Britain and Sweden. In 1940 discussion was confined to a restricted circle, but between 1944 and 1965 the contents of the Prytz telegram were gradually made public and became the subject of speculation in the press. In Britain, interest has focussed on what, if anything, the telegram tells us about attitudes, or at least about Butler's attitude, towards the possibility of a compromise peace with Germany in the summer of 1940, while in Sweden there has been disagreement about what effect, if any, the telegram may have had on the policy of the Swedish government. This article falls into several parts. It begins with the Prytz telegram itself and the exchanges it provoked in 1940. It goes on to discuss whether the telegram influenced Swedish policy in 1940 and to describe how the contents of the telegram became public knowledge. Finally, it analyzes the Butler-Prytz episode and the claims made about it at the time and subsequently in the context of events which preceded and surrounded it.

I.

The conversation between Butler and Prytz on 17 June took place against a background of dramatic developments on the international stage. On 10 May Germany had launched a great offensive against the French and British armies on the western front, and in the following weeks the German

forces had gained one of the most rapid and decisive military victories in European history. On 14 June German troops entered Paris. By that time the French government had withdrawn to Bordeaux and was contemplating asking the Germans for an armistice. On 16 June Paul Reynaud, who still manifested some inclination to continue the war, resigned as Prime Minister of France and was succeeded by Marshal Pétain, who was convinced that France had no option but to abandon the struggle. At midday on 17 June Pétain broadcast to the French people to announce that France had applied to the enemy for an armistice. The Anglo-French alliance had been shattered, and Hitler was now master of continental western Europe. Britain was without a European ally and faced the prospect of German air attack and perhaps invasion. In a speech to the House of Commons on 18 June, which was also broadcast that evening, Winston Churchill stated his determination to continue the struggle in all circumstances and without thought of compromise. Two days later, he reaffirmed his government's resolution when the House of Commons met in secret session.

The interview between Butler and Prytz occurred at the very darkest hour, on 17 June, the day on which the British government learnt that France had sued for an armistice. Prytz's telegram was concise, but its contents were arresting. It reads, in English translation, as follows.

Telegram No. 723 from Prytz, 17 June 1940

During [highly confidential] conversation today with Butler at Foreign Office he confirmed that France had capitulated without any reservations concerning her fleet or colonies. Everything had been attempted yesterday to support Reynaud but in vain. Britain's official attitude will for the present continue to be that the war must go on, but he assured me that no opportunity for reaching a compromise peace would be neglected if the possibility were offered on reasonable conditions and that no "diehards" would be allowed to stand in the way in this connection. He thought that Britain had greater possibilities of negotiation [today] than she might have later on and that Russia would come to play a greater role than USA if conversations began. During the conversation, Butler was called in to see Halifax, who sent me the message that "Common sense not bravado would dictate the British Government's policy". Halifax added that he realised such a message would be welcomed by the Swedish Minister, but that it should not be interpreted as "peace at any price". It would appear from conversations I have had with other members of parliament that there is an expectation that, if and when the prospect of negotiations arises, possibly after 28 June, Halifax may succeed Churchill.¹

The parts of the telegram that are in inverted commas are not a translation but were given in English in the original telegram. The three words in square brackets, "highly confidential" and "today", do not appear in the decyphered version of the telegram in the Swedish Foreign Ministry archives, but they do feature in the unencyphered original in the papers of the Swedish legation in London.² Prytz did not say at what time of day the

interview took place, but the afternoon or early evening seems likely for two reasons. Firstly, the telegram was not despatched until 20.20 hours. Secondly, Butler's reported statement that France had capitulated without conditions suggests that he knew of Pétain's broadcast at midday on 17 June when he spoke to Prytz.

On 18 June Christian Günther, the Swedish Foreign Minister, reported the contents of Prytz's telegram both to his colleagues in the Swedish government and to the Foreign Affairs Committee (*utrikesnämnd*) of the Swedish parliament. Copies of the telegram were sent to the Swedish Ministers in Berlin, Moscow, Helsinki, Oslo and Copenhagen for their information.³ Günther also took steps to ascertain whether the remarks Prytz had ascribed to Butler and Halifax were intended for communication to the German government. On 19 June he asked Victor Mallet, the British Minister in Stockholm, to call on him. Mallet's account of his interview with Günther was telegraphed to the Foreign Office in London the same day.

Telegram No. 743 from Mallet, 19 June 1940

The Minister for Foreign Affairs asked me to call today and read me the Swedish Minister's account of the interview with Mr. Butler on June 17th. It included a statement described as a message from Your Lordship [i. e. Halifax] to the effect that “common sense and not bravado would dictate His Majesty's Government's policy. This would be of interest to the Swedish Minister but could not be interpreted as peace at any price”.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs was puzzled by the account of the interview and asked whether I could enlighten him which I told him I was unable to do. He realised that it ought to be kept secret unless some further indication were to be given him, but he had been wondering whether Mr. Butler's remarks were intended as a hint. He had sent for me because he naturally did not intend to say or do anything which might embarrass His Majesty's Government.

I could only call his attention to the Prime Minister's broadcast last night and remind him of the determination therein expressed to continue the war with all our strength.

I should be grateful for guidance in case the Minister for Foreign Affairs reverts to this matter.⁴

This telegram is the first reference in the official British papers to Butler's interview with Prytz on 17 June, since Butler did not make any record of the conversation. In his telegram, Mallet stated that Günther read Prytz's account of the interview to him, but the only part of that account which Mallet reported to London was Halifax's supposed message to Prytz. The probable explanation is that Günther did not really read out the whole telegram to Mallet. At any rate, over four years later, when Mallet and Günther once again had occasion in November 1944 to discuss the Prytz-Butler interview, Mallet reported, after being shown the actual text of the

telegram, that "I do not believe that at the time [i. e. on 19 June 1940] he read me the whole of the telegram".⁵

Mallet's telegram of 19 June clearly called for a response. The reply was drafted by Butler, though it was worded, in accordance with normal Foreign Office practice, as if it came from Halifax.

Telegram No. 531 to Mallet, 20 June 1940

Certainly no hint was intended.

In course of conversation Parliamentary Under-Secretary remembers saying that the honourable end to hostilities which neutral countries such as Sweden no doubt desired would best be achieved by a policy governed by courage and wisdom.

Conversation took this turn as a result of apparent anxiety of Swedish Minister lest war should be perpetuated and extended. Minister however assented to view of Parliamentary Under-Secretary that force must be opposed to force. No special message from myself was intended but Parliamentary Under-Secretary was called away to see me during his talk and Minister may have exaggerated the importance of this coincidence and of any polite message conveyed to him by way of explanation.

I approve your language to Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁶

This was the first version of his conversation with Prytz which Butler gave, and it paints a very different picture of the interview from the one provided by Prytz.

On the evening of 19 June, after he had spoken with Mallet, Günther telegraphed to Prytz to inform him that he had mentioned the contents of his telegram to Mallet and had cautiously attempted to discover whether Mallet believed the British attitude was meant to be communicated in some way to Berlin. Günther added that it was desirable to know whether Prytz thought this had been the intention.⁷ Prytz replied the following day.

Telegram No. 750 from Prytz, 20 June 1940

The conversation with Butler is probably to be regarded as an expression of his and Halifax's private attitude and as not intended to be conveyed further. While awaiting the outcome of the Franco-German discussions and today's secret session of parliament, the attitude of the government has not yet crystallised.⁸

That might have been the end of the matter, but on 20 June a further telegram from Mallet arrived in London, which kept the issue alive. Mallet clearly wrote it before he had received Butler's reply to his earlier telegram.

Telegram No. 748 from Mallet, 20 June 1940

From what the News Chronicle correspondent tells me it is clear that Foreign Affairs committee of the Riksdag are aware of the substance, but will (group undecypherable) with the Swedish Minister.

The correspondent having obtained story from two members of the committee

telegraphed his paper last night that Mr. Butler had said Britain would only continue the war if certain of ultimate victory.

I have asked the correspondent not to telegraph any more on this subject before consulting me and have pointed out the danger of Germans reading his telegrams and drawing false conclusions from them. He readily agreed to my request.⁹

The leak of information in a garbled form from the Swedish Foreign Affairs Committee to the *News Chronicle's* correspondent in Stockholm led to a further interview between Butler and Prytz on 21 June. As a result of this conversation, Prytz telegraphed to Stockholm that evening.

Telegram No. 763 from Prytz, 21 June 1940

Mallet has reported to the Foreign Office on his conversation with Günther arising from my telegram no 723, marked extremely confidential. He appears to have obtained the impression that Sweden is anxious to play a mediating role. He added that the *News Chronicle's* correspondent in Stockholm had told him that two members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of parliament had quoted to the correspondent as part of my telegram the following in connection with Butler's name: “Britain would only continue to fight if certain of ultimate victory”. Although no publicity has occurred, Butler has experienced unpleasantness, since suspicion of defeatism is a serious matter in these days. I have given Butler an account of the appropriate parts of my telegram nos. 723 and 750. Quite apart from other considerations, I do not believe that my wording justified the above quotation and I have authorised Butler to telegraph to Mallet that it does not accord with either his words or my report of them. The matter is probably now closed here, but must be regretted from the point of view of future prospects of obtaining information.¹⁰

This report from Prytz suggests that Butler's main purpose when he spoke to him on 21 June was to obtain from Prytz authority to deny the remarks imputed to Butler by the two unnamed members of the Swedish Foreign Affairs Committee who had spoken to the *News Chronicle's* correspondent. Butler's version of this conversation was sent to Mallet on 23 June. It is not clear why the despatch of this telegram was delayed, but there can be no doubt that the “to-day” mentioned in the first sentence refers to 21 June.

Telegram No. 534 to Mallet, 23 June 1940

Swedish Minister who called here to-day agrees with Mr. Butler that statement attributed to him in your telegram is quite inaccurate. Swedish Minister further informed Mr. Butler that he telegraphed on his own responsibility on June 20th to Minister for Foreign Affairs that in his view His Majesty's Government's attitude had certainly not had time to crystallise “awaiting French events and results of secret session”. These the Swedish Minister said had been his own views, and he certainly had no authority for these from Mr. Butler. He said that he thought that the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs had derived an exaggerated impression and he was very surprised that the matter should have been put to the Foreign Affairs

Committee of the Riksdag who incidentally were sworn to secrecy and should not speak to Press.

For your private information, M Prytz told Mr. Butler that he could not help thinking that certain interested parties in Sweden had mixed themselves up in this affair in an attempt to cause mischief.

I trust you will continue to prevent any further exaggerations.¹¹

There is no contradiction between Prytz's and Butler's accounts of their interview on 21 June. Indeed, they coincide quite closely. However, both their accounts focussed on the remark imputed to Butler by two members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which Prytz had never ascribed to him. Prytz's telegram no. 750 of 20 June, upon which Butler placed such emphasis in his telegram to Mallet on 23 June, was also peripheral to the main issue, which was what Butler did or did not say to Prytz on 17 June. In fact, neither account makes any reference to the remarks which Prytz really did ascribe to Butler on 17 June. The misinterpretation of Prytz's telegram of 17 June by the two Foreign Affairs Committee members obscured this issue by distracting attention from it. Prytz cannot therefore be said to have retracted his claims in any way.

The questions raised by the Prytz telegram of 17 June had not therefore been clarified by the various discussions and telegrams it provoked, but the episode was nonetheless drawing to a close. On 21 June Mallet had reported that on receiving Butler's telegram of 20 June he had called on Günther and spoken to him in the sense suggested. Günther had replied that he hoped Halifax "would not misinterpret his interest in the message as originally conveyed" by Prytz. He expressed regret that two members of the Foreign Affairs Committee had spoken to the *News Chronicle's* correspondent and assured Mallet that he was already taking steps to contradict false rumours. Günther clearly wanted to drop the whole matter in view of the British response.¹² On 27 June Erik Boheman, the permanent head of the Swedish Foreign Ministry, assured Mallet that he had killed the story which had been told to the *News Chronicle's* correspondent.¹³

This was the end of the Anglo-Swedish discussions on the subject in 1940, but not of "unpleasantness" for Butler. The telegrams exchanged between Mallet and the Foreign Office between 19 and 23 June (though not telegram no 531 of 20 June to Mallet) were seen by the Prime Minister, and on 26 June Churchill sent the following letter to Halifax.

My Dear Edward,

It is quite clear to me from these telegrams and others that Butler held odd language to the Swedish Minister and certainly the Swede derived a strong impression of defeatism. In these circumstances would it not be well for you to find out from Butler actually what he did say. I was strongly pressed in the House of Commons in the Secret Session to give assurances that the present Government and all its Members were resolved to fight on to the death, and I did so, taking personal responsibility

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for the resolve of all. I saw a silly rumour in a telegram from Belgrade or Bucharest and how promptly you stamped upon it, but any suspicion of lukewarmness in Butler will certainly subject us all to further annoyance of this kind.

Yours ever,
Winston S Churchill¹⁴

The Prime Minister's observations elicited a long, handwritten letter from Butler to Halifax the same day.

26 June 1940

Dear S[ecretary] of S[tate],

Thank you for showing me the Prime Minister's letter on the subject of my interview with the Swedish Minister on June 17th.

I feel sure that M. Prytz did not derive any “impression of defeatism” and I know that he would be glad to give you his own impression of the talk we had, if you would care to send for him. Meanwhile his view, and I believe the true view, is included in No. 534 Dipp [i. e. the telegram of 23 June to Mallet] which I attach and which he and I thought had cleared up the matter.

It has been a source of great distress to the Swedish Minister and myself that this matter should have assumed the wrong significance which it has. I happened to meet him in the Park and he came into the Office for only a few minutes; not being an arranged interview I did not keep a record.

You know that I send you records of all my talks and you know that I see most of the foreign ministers and transact Office business with them. I am prepared for you to ascertain from any of them whether any “lukewarmness” has been exhibited in my conversation. To suggest enquiring from them may seem odd, but the fact is that our relations are so friendly that this might be the most effective course.

In my public defence of most contentious public policy over the past ten years, and through perpetual heckling, I am not aware that I have trembled or been regarded as giving away a single unnecessary point. This instance of my private conversation can only be judged by the Swedish Minister, since no one else was present. I do not recognise myself or my conversation in the impression given.

You may enquire why any conversation with a Foreign Representative took this line at all and why I was reported as saying that “common sense and not bravado would dictate our policy”. On meeting me, the Swedish Minister has since agreed with me that he opened the conversation by saying that there was more need than ever for successful diplomacy now that Great Britain was left alone to continue the struggle. We ran over the many efforts to improve our position in the international field, and M Prytz was quite clear that it was in the interest of the neutrals to see an end of the war. I reminded him that if we were to negotiate, we must do so from strength, and that force must be met by force. From this he did not demur and he has since agreed with me that this account of our talk is correct.

It may be that I should have entertained no conversation with M. Prytz on the subject of an ultimate settlement. But I am satisfied that I said nothing definite or specific or that I would wish now to withdraw. I am usually cautious in following the leads of foreign representatives. I can see that in this case I should have been more cautious, and I apologise.

I now place myself in your hands. It is essential in the work I do, that there should

be absolute confidence between those whom I serve and myself. Had I not been ready to subscribe to the Prime Minister's courageous lead in the House of Commons, I should have felt bound to inform you and to leave the administration.

I feel that I have been placed in a wrong light, but I absolutely understand the Prime Minister's enquiry.

Under the circumstances I await your and the Prime Minister's final opinion after you have read this letter and made any further enquiries.

Yours ever,
R A Butler¹⁵

Once he had Butler's response, Halifax wrote to Churchill on the following day.

27 June 1940

My Dear Winston,

I had been into the matter of Butler's conversation with the Swedish Minister with Butler before I got your letter last night. He has since given me a full note of what passed between him and the Swedish Minister, and I have discussed the matter fully with him. I am satisfied that there is no divergence of view, and that the explanation is partly to be found in the last paragraph but one of telegram No. 534 Dipp of June 23rd that we sent to Sweden, after we had explored the matter further with the Swedish Minister here. I should be very sorry if you felt any doubt either about Butler's discretion or his complete loyalty to Government policy, of both of which I am completely satisfied.

Halifax¹⁶

After receiving Halifax's reply, Churchill did not pursue the matter further.

Although there were no further Anglo-Swedish discussions in 1940 about the Butler-Prytz interview on 17 June, the episode was rounded off by an epilogue. Arvid Richert, the Swedish Minister in Berlin, was visiting Stockholm at the time the Prytz telegram was received. When he called at the Foreign Ministry on 18 June before setting off on his return journey to Berlin, Richert was shown a copy of the telegram by Boheman. On the following day, back in Berlin, Richert mentioned to Ernst von Weizsäcker, the permanent head of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, that he had seen a telegram from Prytz in Stockholm which suggested that a certain common sense was making itself felt within leading circles in London on the question of peace negotiations. Richert reported that Weizsäcker had seemed interested by this information, but was sceptical about its accuracy. Richert claimed long after the war that he mentioned Prytz's telegram to Weizsäcker entirely on his own initiative and not on instructions from Stockholm.¹⁷ Certainly the Swedish Foreign Ministry archives contain no record of such an instruction. As we have seen, copies of the Prytz telegram were sent to the Swedish legations in Berlin and certain other capitals, but for information only. This does not rule out the possibility that Richert was given an oral

instruction before he left Stockholm, but it is more likely, especially in view of Richert's subsequent claim that he acted on his own initiative and the vague form in which he mentioned the telegram to Weizsäcker, that Günther would have wanted to clarify British intentions before approaching the Germans.

When Richert called on Weizsäcker again on 22 June, conversation turned once more to the subject of Prytz's telegram. The two men discussed which British politicians might be willing and able to pursue "a common sense policy". According to Weizsäcker's account of the conversation, Richert ruled out Churchill, Eden, Duff Cooper, Chamberlain and Simon, and indicated that Halifax represented the group within the British government which was prepared to negotiate. In Richert's report, it is Weizsäcker who expressed an opinion about individuals. Both their accounts agree, however, that Weizsäcker remained sceptical about the existence of any sort of peace party inside the British government.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the very fact that Weizsäcker had reverted to the subject indicated a certain degree of German interest and this was evidently the point that struck the Swedish Foreign Ministry when Richert's account of his second interview with Weizsäcker was received in Stockholm on 25 June.

By this time, of course, the British authorities had made it clear that Butler's reported remarks on 17 June were not to be treated as any sort of peace feeler. On the other hand, the Swedish Foreign Ministry did not wish the British government to remain unaware of the interest Weizsäcker had expressed in peace negotiations. The quandary was resolved by informing Mallet semi-officially, as it were, of Weizsäcker's remarks, while concealing the information that those remarks were prompted by knowledge of Prytz's telegram. The messenger chosen was Marcus Wallenberg, a prominent Swedish businessman who had played an active role in Anglo-Swedish war trade negotiations since September 1939. Wallenberg called on Mallet on 25 June,¹⁹ and as a result of their meeting Mallet sent the following telegram to the Foreign Office.

Telegram No. 774 from Mallet, 25 June 1940

The Swedish Minister at Berlin had long conversation yesterday with high official in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs who asked whether the Swedish Government had seen any signs of inclination on the part of His Majesty's Government to negotiate for peace. He said that the German Government had seen none. The Swedish Minister replied that he knew of no such signs. He gained the impression that the German Government were keen to negotiate. The German official said that they could not negotiate with Mr. Churchill, Mr. Eden or Mr. Cooper but would be ready to negotiate with your Lordship.

This information was given me from Swedish official quarters but through the intermediary of Wallenberg as the Minister for Foreign Affairs was anxious that there should be no suspicion in London that it was in any sense an official communication. He and Wallenberg quite understand our determination to continue the strug-

gle and they are anxious not to be thought to be butting in. They thought, nevertheless, that this information ought to reach you.²⁰

The statement in the telegram that the conversation between Richert and the "high official" had occurred "yesterday" was a misunderstanding. The real date was 22 June.

This report from Mallet made little impact in London. No reply was sent to him and the telegram was filed together with a number of similar reports that reached the Foreign Office around this time. On 21 June the British Minister in Belgrade reported that rumours were current that Neville Chamberlain, supported by Halifax and Simon, was advising the King to make peace with Germany. The British Consul in Willemstad and the British Ambassador in Tokyo reported on 26 and 27 June respectively on rumours that Chamberlain might soon attempt to overthrow Churchill and form a government which would come to terms with Germany. The only one of these telegrams to receive a reply was that from Belgrade. On 22 June the British Minister there was told that "These reports are a typical example of German propaganda and you should deny them categorically".²¹ The British Minister's telegram is presumably "the silly rumour . . . from Belgrade or Bucharest" to which Churchill referred when he wrote to Halifax about Butler on 26 June. Mallet's report was disregarded and led to no action. Neither he nor the Foreign Office realised that the remarks of the "high official" in Berlin to Richert were in any way a consequence of the Butler-Prytz interview on 17 June.

II.

The Butler-Prytz episode raises a number of questions about British attitudes to the possibility of a compromise peace in the summer of 1940. It also raises questions about Swedish behaviour, because it is quite clear that the Swedish authorities, and especially Günther and Richert, did much to prolong the discussions and exchanges which the Prytz telegram provoked. The Swedish government initially had no reason to doubt that the telegram conveyed an accurate picture of British opinion. Even after Mallet had denied that Britain was prepared to contemplate peace negotiations, there was still scope for uncertainty, since Prytz had reported Butler as saying that this would be the "official" British attitude for the time being.²² Moreover, it was perfectly natural for the Swedish authorities to assume that Britain might be interested in a compromise peace in the circumstances of June 1940 and also that Halifax would hardly have bothered to send such a message to the representative of a minor and neutral power unless he wanted it transmitted to Berlin. Nonetheless, the Swedes followed up the Prytz telegram with pronounced enthusiasm, and they did so

because they believed a compromise peace would serve Sweden's interests.

The attractions of a peace settlement for Sweden are easy to understand. Since the outbreak of war in September 1939 Sweden's position had often been acutely dangerous and exposed. Sweden adopted a policy of neutrality towards the war between Germany and the western powers, but her neutrality had frequently been threatened by developments which directly affected the other Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland and Norway. The Nordic states were linked by a sense of cultural and social affinity, and Sweden also had a vital interest in the continuing independence of the other three, since they constituted a buffer zone which shielded Sweden from the outside world. The two most intense periods of crisis had arisen from attacks by a great power on one or more of the other Nordic countries. The first was the Winter War between the Soviet Union and Finland. The Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939 enabled the Soviet Union to improve its strategic position in relation to Finland without fear of German intervention, and Finnish resistance to Russian demands led to a Soviet invasion of that country on 30 November 1939. The ensuing conflict was concluded in March 1940 on terms which involved far-reaching Finnish territorial concessions but which allowed the survival of Finland as an independent state. This was a satisfactory outcome from a Swedish point of view, but renewed Soviet expansion into Finland in the future was a strong possibility.

The second period of intense crisis was caused by the German invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940. The Danes capitulated on the same day, but the Norwegians, aided by British and French forces, resisted the German invaders for two months. The last Norwegian units did not surrender until 10 June 1940. The German conquest of Denmark and Norway was a catastrophe for Sweden. A German invasion of Sweden would now involve attack not only across the Baltic from the south but also by the substantial German forces in Norway. The presence of German troops in Norway also effectively prevented any hope of assistance from the western powers in such an eventuality. Moreover, Sweden's transoceanic trade could not continue after 9 April, and Sweden had become economically dependent on Germany for many vital supplies. However, the most immediate problem the Swedish government faced was caused by the repeated German demands that the Swedish railway network should be used to send armaments to the German forces in Norway. The Swedish government rejected these demands during the Norwegian campaign, but on 16 June Ribbentrop reiterated them with particular force and on 18 June, the very day the Prytz telegram was received in Stockholm, this new German demarche was considered by the Swedish government. By this time, the situation in the east had also become threatening once again. Soviet troops began to occupy Lithuania on 15 June and Estonia and Latvia on 17 June.

It was natural to fear that this development might be the prelude to further Soviet demands on Finland.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the Swedish government found the prospect of a peace settlement between Germany and the western powers an attractive one. During the winter of 1939–40 the Soviet threat to Finland had encouraged Swedish interest in such a settlement,²³ since it was primarily the war in the west which enabled Soviet expansion to take place. In June 1940 the Swedish authorities had even more reason to regard a compromise peace as in Swedish interests. Not only had the Soviet move into the three Baltic States revived fears about Russian intentions, but the war in the west also damaged Swedish interests more tangibly than before. A peace settlement would enable Sweden's transoceanic trade to resume and might involve some loosening of the German grip on Denmark and Norway. It would also alleviate the problem of German demands for transit facilities across Swedish territory to Norway.²⁴

Despite the country's neutral status anti-Nazi sentiment was strong in Sweden, and this had inhibited the government's willingness to participate in any mediation attempt in late 1939.²⁵ By June 1940 such inhibitions had been swept aside by the magnitude of Germany's triumph, and a more defeatist acceptance that there was no prospect of Germany's ultimate defeat had become widespread.²⁶ It is appropriate to ask whether it was realistic to believe that a meaningful measure of independence from Germany was possible for Sweden, let alone Denmark and Norway, in the sort of Europe that a compromise peace in June 1940 would have produced. This, however, was a question the Swedish government preferred not to consider, and the immediate benefits of peace between Britain and Germany outweighed all more long-term considerations. The Swedish authorities certainly pursued the possibility of a compromise peace with some persistence in the summer of 1940. The exchanges which arose from the Prytz telegram led nowhere, but the Swedish government decided at the end of July that the King of Sweden should explicitly offer to mediate between Germany and Britain. This offer was declined by both parties, but bears witness to the continuing attractiveness of a compromise peace to the Swedish government at this stage of the war.²⁷

The role of the Swedish authorities in prolonging the Butler–Prytz episode is relatively straightforward. A more complex question, and one which has caused some discussion in Sweden, is whether the Prytz telegram influenced Swedish policy towards the German demands for transit facilities across Sweden to Norway. Throughout the Norwegian campaign the Swedish government had consistently, if with some trepidation, rejected German demands for such facilities. On 16 June Ribbentrop raised the matter again with Richert, who had been taken to meet him at a castle somewhere in Belgium. The German government assumed, Ribbentrop explained, that in view of the cessation of active hostilities in Norway, Swe-

den would allow armaments and members of the German armed forces, especially soldiers on leave, to move between Germany and Norway using the Swedish railway network. He added that a refusal would be interpreted as an unfriendly act, while agreement would restore good relations and eradicate the unfavourable effects of the previous Swedish attitude. Richert flew to Stockholm on the following day, and reported to a meeting of the Swedish government at 9 am on 18 June. After considerable discussion, the Swedish government agreed unanimously to accept the German demands in principle. The Foreign Affairs Committee of parliament was consulted later in the day and, with a few dissenting voices, endorsed the government's decision. After several weeks of detailed negotiations, a German-Swedish transit agreement was signed on 8 July. The agreement allowed certain parts of the Swedish railway network to be used by German soldiers in Norway going on or returning from leave and to transport armaments and other material to Norway.²⁸

Why did the Swedish government yield on 18 June to German demands it had persistently rejected during the Norwegian campaign? To answer this question it is necessary to consider the composition of the Swedish government and the development of opinion among ministers over the preceding weeks. The outbreak of the Winter War had led to the formation of a national government in December 1939, when the ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Agrarians was widened to include the other two major parties represented in parliament, the Conservatives and the Liberals. As the largest party in the country, the Social Democrats had five places, including the premiership, in the new government, while the other three parties had two ministers each. The new Foreign Minister, Günther, was a career diplomat who did not belong to any political party. There was fundamental agreement within the government on the need for neutrality, but ideological considerations caused some differences in outlook; the Social Democrats were particularly anti-Nazi, while the Conservatives were inclined to place special emphasis on the Soviet threat to Finland.

In the second half of May and early June the Swedish government had outwardly maintained its firm attitude to German demands for transit facilities, but under the impact of Germany's growing triumph on the western front the resolution of many ministers weakened. Günther had been inclined to give way to the German demands as early as 17 May, and most of the non-socialist ministers were expressing similar sentiments by the end of the month. The Social Democratic Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, vacillated. However, there is no evidence that the other three leading Social Democrats in the government – Gustav Möller, Per Edvin Sköld and Ernst Wigforss, the Ministers of Social Affairs, Defence and Finance respectively – had begun to change their views before 18 June. Hansson's own personal preference was generally towards caution and it is very likely that his instincts were with his non-socialist colleagues, but as leader of the

Social Democratic Party he did not feel he could be separated from the other Social Democratic ministers on this question. If they refused to yield to the German demands, he could not do so either. In the last resort, the issue could lead to the resignation of the Social Democratic ministers and the formation of a new and more right-wing government.²⁹

It did not come to that on 18 June. Ministers were unanimous in their decision and the national government was preserved. It is quite clear that the overriding reason for this outcome was fear of Germany. On the previous day the French government had applied to Germany for an armistice, and Hitler was now the undisputed master of continental western Europe. Fighting had ceased in Norway and that country was completely in German hands. Ribbentrop conveyed the German demands in menacing tones, and Richert, when reporting to the Swedish government on 18 June, expressed the opinion that it was necessary to accede to German wishes if a German attack on Sweden were to be avoided.³⁰ Such an attack would have involved Sweden in a hopeless struggle, without any prospect of assistance from Britain or elsewhere. Even if the Germans did not invade Sweden, the country was extremely vulnerable to German economic reprisals. The fact that the Norwegian armed forces had laid down their arms facilitated the government's decision in the sense that it eased the conscience of ministers³¹ and was likely to make the decision more palatable to parliamentary and public opinion in Sweden. Another factor was the Soviet move into the three Baltic States in the preceding days, which made a strong impression on Günther and Gösta Bagge, the Conservative leader. They believed that it might be the prelude to renewed Soviet pressure on Finland, and thought it important that Sweden, while remaining neutral, should maintain reasonable relations with Germany so as to be able to lend Finland some support if necessary.³² There is no direct evidence that any minister other than Günther and Bagge ascribed much importance to the Russian aspect of the situation, but the risk of complications in the east may have exerted some influence on other members of the government.

The final element the Swedish government had to consider when assessing the situation on 18 June was the Prytz telegram, which was received and deciphered at the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm during the early hours of the morning. The government met at 9 am to hear Richert's report on his interview with Ribbentrop. Discussion had begun but no decision had been reached when the Prytz telegram was brought to Günther, who interrupted Sköld "rather dramatically" in order to read out the telegram to his colleagues.³³ Its contents obviously provided additional arguments for acceding to the German demands. If Britain were about to come to terms with Germany, there was little risk of British retaliation against Sweden.³⁴ Fear of British reprisals had been one factor that had persuaded the Swedish government to reject earlier German demands for transit facilities.³⁵ There was clearly less danger of effective retaliation now that

British forces had been withdrawn from Norway, but Sköld, just before he was interrupted by Günther, referred to the danger that British bombers might attack parts of the Swedish railway network, if the German demands were accepted.³⁶ However, the most important implication of the Prytz telegram was that the war might be over within a few weeks. In such circumstances, it was essential for Sweden to play for time and to avoid provocation of Germany.³⁷

The Prytz telegram gave Swedish ministers good reason for yielding to the German demands. But did it exercise any decisive influence on the government's decision? Was not the threat from Germany alone quite sufficient? In his memoirs, published in 1954, Wigforss, who was perhaps the strongest opponent within the government of concessions to Nazi Germany, suggested that the telegram exercised an important influence. He claimed that it was uncertainty about British intentions which "tipped the scales" (*fällde utslaget*) within the government on 18 June, and "took the last ounce of strength from the will to resist" (*tog . . . sista kraften ur motståndsviljan*) among ministers.³⁸ In his memoirs, published in 1955, the Liberal leader, Gustaf Andersson i Rasjön, maintained that the telegram had an "almost paralysing" (*nästan förlamande*) effect and that it was probable that the government's decision was influenced by the information it contained.³⁹ Can these claims be substantiated? It is quite clear that the Prytz telegram did not influence Günther and most of the non-socialist ministers. They had been moving in the direction of accepting the German demands for some weeks, and it is suggestive that Bagge does not even mention the telegram in his diary, even though he gives a detailed account of the government's discussions on 18 June.⁴⁰ As for Rasjön, he expressed the view at the meeting on 18 June that the German demands should be accepted before Günther read out the Prytz telegram,⁴¹ so his claim that it probably influenced the government is misleading, at least if the claim is meant to apply to himself. However, the telegram may have influenced the three Social Democrats most opposed to concessions to Germany – Möller, Sköld and Wigforss. They had given no outward indication before 18 June that their resolve was weakening and all three only expressed a willingness to yield to the German demands after Günther had read out the Prytz telegram. Möller and Wigforss had said nothing at all on 18 June and Sköld had not committed himself either way before he was interrupted by Günther. The attitude of these three ministers may well have determined Hansson's. On 18 June he mentioned privately to two of his colleagues who had remained behind after the government had taken its decision and the other ministers had departed that he had still not made up his mind which way he would go when the government assembled at 9 am.⁴² His behaviour during the meeting supports his claim. After Richert had given his report, the Prime Minister spoke first. He did not express an opinion and merely outlined the arguments for and against accepting the German demands. It

was only after Möller, Sköld and Wigforss had expressed the view that the government should give way that Hansson did so too.⁴³

It is therefore conceivable that these three ministers at least were decisively influenced by the Prytz telegram. It is also, of course, conceivable that Wigforss was simply being dishonest in his memoirs or that he had by 1954 convinced himself that his claim was true. The reasons for surrender to the German demands were quite compelling without the Prytz telegram, and the outlook of Swedish anti-Nazis by mid-June 1940 was a bleak and despairing one.⁴⁴ It is important to emphasize that what was at stake in practice on 18 June was not the nature of the government's decision but whether the Social Democratic ministers would share responsibility for it. There was no prospect that the non-socialist ministers would have agreed to reject the German demands, and Sköld had referred to the possibility that this issue might lead to the formation of a more right-wing government as early as 18 May, to Hansson's evident distress.⁴⁵ In the last resort, it is always impossible to determine whether a group of men who took a decision in the light of several factors would have taken the same decision if one of those factors had been absent. It is clear that the Prytz telegram was not decisive for the government as a whole or for the nature of Sweden's ultimate policy. It may, however, have been important for preserving a national government in Sweden.

III.

Günther's attitude was not determined by the Prytz telegram, but he made good use of it to influence others. It was natural and proper that he should bring the telegram to the attention of his ministerial colleagues and the Foreign Affairs Committee, but it is significant that he interrupted Sköld "rather dramatically" to read it out and that later in the day, when reporting to the Foreign Affairs Committee, he began by giving an account of its contents, even before he mentioned the German demarche.⁴⁶ He also found that the telegram could serve a useful purpose several years later. The Swedish government's decision on 18 June 1940 was the first of many concessions it made to Germany during the following couple of years, but as Germany's position weakened Sweden's policy became less conciliatory and in 1943 the German-Swedish transit agreement was cancelled. The Swedish government's accommodating attitude towards Germany between 1940 and 1943 was at the time the subject of criticism from parts of the Liberal and Social Democratic press. After 1943 this criticism of earlier policy grew in intensity, and it gained more widespread support both then and after the war.⁴⁷ Günther was, quite fairly, attacked with particular severity as one of the main architects of Sweden's submissive policy towards Germany.⁴⁸ The Swedish government's decision on 18 June 1940 became

a symbol of Swedish policy during the period of German ascendancy.⁴⁹ In the last years of the war Swedish ministers sought to defend themselves against criticism of their earlier policy, and Edvard Therman, a sympathetic political scientist, was appointed to write an official history of Sweden's wartime foreign policy on the basis of the papers in the Foreign Ministry's archive.⁵⁰ It was in this context that the Prytz telegram was dusted off.

On 31 October 1944 Günther was the guest of honour at a dinner arranged by the Swedish Institute for Foreign Affairs (*Utrikespolitiska institutet*). The purpose of the dinner, which was attended by about 230 persons, including many prominent journalists and politicians, was to provide Günther with an opportunity of defending Swedish foreign policy since the outbreak of war in debate with some of its severest critics inside Sweden. Günther spoke after dinner, without notes, and in the course of his talk he revealed that on 17 June 1940 (*sic*) the Swedish government had received information from London which suggested that Britain might come to terms with Germany. This intelligence had reached Stockholm at the very time when the Swedish government was considering the German demands for transit facilities, and Günther claimed that it had influenced the government's decision to yield to German pressure. These remarks aroused great interest among Günther's listeners and he was repeatedly pressed for further details during the ensuing debate, but he declined to supply them.⁵¹

Only Swedish citizens were allowed to attend this gathering, but several of the people present provided the British legation in Stockholm with accounts of what had been said, and Mallet was not best pleased by what he learnt. In a long report to the Foreign Office on 18 November, he observed that

The net result of Monsieur Günther's 'revelations' was that a large number of Sweden's leading journalists, politicians and cultural personalities were left with the definite impression that the Swedish concession to Germany in the summer of 1940 had in fact been based upon a broad hint from His Majesty's Government that Great Britain might come to terms with the Nazis.

Mallet regarded such an impression as “entirely misleading”. He pointed out that the Prytz telegram could only have influenced the Swedish decision on the transit question if that decision had been taken during the period between the receipt of the telegram and 21 June, when Mallet had put the record straight about British policy. Boheman had admitted to him in private conversation that the decision had been made in principle before the Prytz telegram reached Stockholm. Boheman's memory was at fault on this point, but Mallet did not know that and this misunderstanding was to colour British thinking about the issue at the time and later. However, Mallet conceded that, although the telegram had not influenced the

Swedish government's decision, Günther had mentioned it to the Foreign Affairs Committee of parliament and Mallet assumed that he had used it "to dispel any doubts which the Committee may have entertained as to the wisdom of the . . . concession".

Mallet suspected that Günther was now using the Prytz telegram for the very same purpose. "Perhaps he thought its disclosure now to a wider public might once and for all silence the persistent critics of past Swedish policy". All in all, Mallet found it "unfortunate" that Günther "should have appeared to attempt to shift the responsibility for an unpopular measure on to His Majesty's Government". It was "most undesirable that this misrepresentation of British policy in 1940 should gain credence among the Swedish intelligensia, as it is now doing". Mallet was also concerned that the "misrepresentation" would later reappear in the official history of Sweden's wartime foreign policy which Thermaenius was due to publish after the war. Thermaenius had previously mentioned the Prytz telegram to Mallet in private conversation, and Mallet felt that the British government could not allow him to incorporate the misrepresentation in his book unless he also included Mallet's explanations to Günther on 21 June 1940. Mallet raised the matter with Günther on or before 6 November. Günther, Mallet reported, "seemed rather shamefaced but insisted that Monsieur Prytz had reported Mr. Butler's remark correctly because he had used the actual English words". Günther added that had Britain and Germany come to terms in 1940, "Sweden's position might have been extremely difficult". Mallet contented himself with replying that he had called Günther's attention on 19 June 1940 to Churchill's broadcast and expressed the hope that Günther would make this fact clear to anyone who questioned him on the subject.⁵²

Here the matter might have rested, but on 17 November the new Stockholm evening newspaper *Expressen* published an article on the subject, and gave the story first place on its newsbill for the day. *Expressen* reported that documents which threw fresh light on the concessions Sweden had made to Germany in June 1940 might in due course be published and that "remarkable revelations" were to be expected. There were conflicting versions of what precisely had happened, but some alleged that Mallet had, on Halifax's instructions, informed the Swedish government that Britain might be compelled to come to terms with Hitler. Mallet had therefore wished to warn Sweden to behave cautiously towards Germany and to say that the British government would fully understand if Sweden felt obliged to make concessions to Germany. The period 16–17 June was given as the time when these events occurred. The article stressed that this was only one version of what had happened and that the whole affair was surrounded by "considerable mystery". However, it added that it had now been established that Prytz had had an interview with Butler. During the conversation Butler was called away to see Halifax and returned with a greeting from the

Foreign Secretary to Sweden. The article did not describe this greeting, but indicated that its contents were important.⁵³

The article in *Expressen* presented a garbled and inaccurate account of the whole incident, but it was clearly based on some inside information and not merely on Günther's remarks on 31 October. Now that the press had become involved Mallet had to take further action. In reply to enquiries from Reuter's and other correspondents on 17 November, he issued an emphatic denial that he had passed on any message of the kind described in *Expressen*. On 17 November he requested an interview with Günther and was received the same day. Günther claimed to be very annoyed that *Expressen* had published the article and regarded it as a breach of faith, since he had spoken at the Institute for Foreign Affairs on the understanding that his remarks were off the record and not to be reported in any way. Günther did not point out, and Mallet also refrained from mentioning it, that the article was obviously based on more information than was contained in his after-dinner remarks on 31 October. Günther then showed Mallet the Prytz telegram and Mallet gave him a copy of the Foreign Office telegram no. 531 of 20 June. Günther remarked “how strangely different” the two versions of the conversation were. He explained that he had referred to the incident on 31 October “merely in order to give an instance of the atmosphere which was prevailing all over Europe at the time”. He had avoided mentioning the names of Butler and Halifax, and very much regretted that *Expressen* had dragged their names into the affair. Günther concluded by saying that he intended to deny publicly that Britain had ever in any way condoned Sweden's concessions to Germany over the transit question.⁵⁴ On the following day the newspaper *Morgontidningen* contained an interview with Günther in which he accused *Expressen* of having cooked up a sensation in the knowledge that the documents in question could not be published at the moment and made it clear that the British government had never acquiesced in, still less recommended, the Swedish concessions to Germany over the transit question.⁵⁵ He also ensured that the copy of telegram no. 531 which Mallet had given him was filed along with the original of the Prytz telegram in the Foreign Ministry's archive.⁵⁶

It is noteworthy that in his report of 18 November Mallet adopted an ambivalent attitude towards the question of whether Prytz reported Butler's remarks accurately. On the one hand, Mallet wrote that “Prytz himself appears to have been largely responsible” for the “alleged message” from the British government which his telegram contained. On the other hand, after Günther had shown him the Prytz telegram on 17 November, he seemed to accept Günther's assertion that the words given in English in the telegram could only have been a direct quotation of Butler's words. Mallet observed that “Obviously Monsieur Prytz had written them down at the time when he was with Mr. Butler or he would not have made this English quotation in his telegram”, and he referred to Butler's

other reported remarks as being “in the same defeatist vein”.⁵⁷ However, Mallet did not treat what Butler really did or did not say on 17 June 1940 as his primary concern. Mallet was anxious above all to rebut any suggestion that the Swedish government had made concessions to Germany in 1940 because it thought Britain might come to terms with Hitler, and Boheman’s statement that the decision had been taken before the telegram was received gave Mallet every reason to feel justified in taking this line. Mallet was also concerned to emphasize that, quite regardless of whether Prytz reported Butler’s remarks accurately, those remarks did not reflect British policy and that he (Mallet) had quickly put the record straight on this point.

Mallet was content to pursue the matter no further, but it soon cropped up again. In late October and early November 1944, Trygve Lie, the Foreign Minister in the Norwegian government-in-exile, paid an official visit to Stockholm to discuss a wide range of issues with the Swedish authorities. The German-Swedish transit agreement was a particular Norwegian grievance against Sweden, and during Lie’s visit Günther told him about the Prytz telegram in order to excuse, at least in part, the Swedish government’s decision on 18 June 1940. Shortly after his return to London, Lie met Laurence Collier, the British Minister to the Norwegian government-in-exile, at a dinner on 12 December 1944. Lie told Collier that Günther had shown him the Prytz telegram and had “implied” that it was “one of the reasons” why the Swedish government had yielded to German pressure. According to Collier, Lie “had not been much impressed by this, knowing Prytz and knowing also a good deal about the inner history of the troop transit story . . . It was, he said, just another example of Günther’s disingenuous proceedings”. Collier and Lie agreed that the Swedish government knew by the time it made its decision that the Prytz telegram did not contain an accurate picture of British policy. In his report to the Foreign Office, Collier added that this view had been confirmed by Boheman, who was in London for negotiations on economic questions and who had been present at the dinner on 12 December.

Boheman, with whom I walked home in the fog after Lie’s dinner . . . , told me definitely that Prytz’s reports had had nothing at all to do with the decision on troop transits, and added that he himself had written on the first one . . . ‘I do not believe this’. Clearly, he does not approve of Günther’s action.

Once again, Boheman’s memory appears to have been faulty: there is no such minute on the copy of the Prytz telegram in the Swedish Foreign Ministry’s files.

Collier’s report led Christopher Warner, the Head of the Northern Department at the Foreign Office, to write to Mallet on 28 December 1944 to enquire whether the public denials he and Günther had made had

entirely dispelled the impression created by Günther’s ‘revelation’. Should there be any doubt about this, it might well be desirable for some statement to be given out

to indicate that you took action with the Swedish Government on the 19th June, 1940 to dispel any misapprehension as to our attitude. Our stoutheartedness when we stood alone is such a tremendous asset to our prestige in the world – and is likely to remain so – that we ought to be certain on the point.⁵⁸

The British Legation in Stockholm was not, however, keen to initiate further public discussion on this subject. The First Secretary, G P Labouchere, observed in a minute to Mallet on 8 January 1945 that quotation from the Foreign Office's telegram no. 531 "will not, I fear, make a very good impression either here or in England, since there is no doubt that Mr Butler's remarks were not as strong as they might have been"; and Mallet agreed that the telegram would be thought "very fishy".⁵⁹ Mallet contented himself with impressing upon Boheman, whom he saw on 18 January, that if the matter were raised in public again, Günther ought to mention that Mallet had made the nature of British policy clear to him on 21 June 1940. Mallet also emphasized that the explanations he had given ought to receive "proper weight" in any work that Thermaenius might publish. Boheman's replies were reassuring, and Mallet did not think it desirable to take further action. On 18 January 1945 he wrote to Warner that "the whole excitement about Günther's 'revelation' has completely died down". He thought it would be "bad tactics to resurrect this ghost now", but would consider issuing a statement if the matter became the subject of public discussion once again. He agreed "most heartily" with Warner's view that misapprehension about British attitudes in 1940 should be avoided, but he struck a note of caution. If Prytz's telegram and the Foreign Office's telegram no. 531, he wrote

were published side by side, . . . the ordinary man in the street would say that Prytz's telegram gave a very detailed report of the conversation whereas the Foreign Office telegram was elusive and vague. I do not believe that we should stand to gain much by a public controversy on the point, and I cannot help feeling that embarrassment might be caused both to Lord Halifax and to Mr. Butler if some sections of the American press, for instance, were to start on their favourite type of malicious gossip-writing around this subject. Perhaps therefore you will agree with me that for the time being we had better let sleeping dogs lie.

The Northern Department was content to accept Mallet's advice,⁶⁰ and there were no further Anglo-Swedish exchanges about the Prytz telegram until the question resurfaced in the summer of 1946.

By that time, the idea that Thermaenius should write an official history of Sweden's wartime foreign policy had been abandoned. After the war, the national government in Sweden was dissolved and a purely Social Democratic administration took office. The new Foreign Minister, Östen Undén, had considerable ministerial experience but had been out of office during the war years and had been one of the critics of concessions to Germany at that time. Undén decided that, instead of an official history, a col-

lection of documents, a “white book”, should be published and that Thermaenius should be assisted in the task of editing this collection by another scholar and a retired diplomat. Undén presumably wished to strike a balance: as Foreign Minister, he did not want Sweden’s international standing to be damaged by excessive criticism of her wartime policy, but as a former critic of that policy he perhaps feared that a history written by Thermaenius would be too much of an apologia. The first white book, which dealt with the transit question from June to December 1940, was ready in June 1946,⁶¹ and it included the three telegrams from Prytz printed earlier in this article. It also contained, presumably in an attempt to meet one of the points Mallet had made in 1944, Günther’s note of November 1944 in which telegram no. 531 was quoted. In accordance with international practice, the British government was asked on 6 July 1946 whether it objected to the publication of those documents (twelve in number) which related to Anglo-Swedish exchanges. English translations of the documents in question were supplied.⁶² This meant incidentally that the British authorities finally obtained a copy of the Prytz telegram.

When on 6 July Baron Lagerfelt, the First Secretary at the Swedish legation in London, brought the twelve documents and the letter requesting British agreement to their publication to R M A Hankey, who had succeeded Warner as Head of the Northern Department, he was given little reason to hope that the British government would be forthcoming over the four documents relating to the Butler–Prytz incident. Hankey evidently regarded the Foreign Office telegram no. 531 quoted in Günther’s note of November 1944 as showing beyond any doubt that “Prytz had completely misunderstood what was said to him”. Lagerfelt explained that the Swedish decision to allow the Germans transit facilities was taken on 18 June after receipt of the Prytz telegram. The publication of these documents was therefore “of particular importance from the Swedish Government’s point of view” and he added, emolliently, that “the subsequent documents explained the misunderstanding”. Hankey told Lagerfelt that the matter would be considered, but that his immediate reaction

was entirely against publication. It seemed to me to show the Swedish Government in rather a poor light, taking such an important decision on premature information; it was a deplorable reflection on M. Prytz for grossly misunderstanding what was said to him on such an important occasion; and most important of all it seemed to me quite unfair to publish these diplomatic misunderstandings casting such unpleasant reflections on Mr. R A Butler, Lord Halifax and the Foreign Office in general.

In the following weeks an effort was made within the Foreign Office to find the British papers from 1940 and 1944 which related to the events described in the twelve Swedish documents that had been received. This exercise did not make the Foreign Office inclined to revise Hankey’s initial response.

On 26 July W J Ewart, an official in the Northern Department, noted that there was a discrepancy between what Boheman had told Mallet in November 1944 and what Lagerfelt had recently said to Hankey about the date on which the Swedish government had decided to accede to the German demands for transit facilities. Moreover, Mallet had gained the impression in 1944 that Günther "had raised the whole question in order to try and justify his actions in 1940". He therefore concluded that for the reasons given by Hankey on 6 July permission should be refused for the publication of the four documents relating to the Butler-Prytz incident. A E Lambert, another Northern Department official, agreed. Examination of the relevant British documents confirmed Hankey's initial response, and he added that "it looks as if the 'confusion' over the date of the decision about the transit of German troops is deliberate". Hankey naturally agreed that the four documents relating to "the extraordinary misunderstanding . . . involving Mr R A Butler" should not be published, and this view was endorsed by Warner, who was now an Assistant Under-Secretary of State supervising the Northern Department and several other Departments.

A somewhat different problem was that the twelve Swedish documents also included two further reports by Prytz, one from August and the other from November 1940, on interviews he had had with Butler. Neither concerned the incident in June or reflected any possible discredit on Butler. However, no record of the two interviews could be found in the Foreign Office files and consequently, while Hankey did not regard Prytz's versions as "objectionable in themselves", he thought Butler should be consulted. On 15 August 1946 Hankey wrote to Butler, enclosing copies of these two documents and asking if he objected to their publication. He pointed out that the Foreign Office could see "no harm" in them and also informed Butler that the Foreign Office intended to object to the publication of some documents concerning a conversation on 17 June 1940 between him and Prytz, "who misunderstood or misrepresented what was said to him".⁶³ By this time Butler was a prominent member of the Conservative opposition. He replied in a brief letter on 19 August that he had no objection to the publication of the two documents and added "I note that you are suppressing the conversation of June 17th of which you did not enclose a record. I am ready to leave this matter to your discretion". It was now possible to reply to the Swedish approach on 6 July. On 30 August 1946 Miss D A Bingley of the Librarian's Department at the Foreign Office wrote to Prytz agreeing, with some modifications in two cases, to the publication of eight of the Swedish documents. In relation to the four documents concerning the Butler-Prytz incident, she wrote, however, that "I regret that I should not feel justified in giving my consent to the publication of correspondence arising from what was, in effect, a misunderstanding of what had been said by Mr R A Butler".⁶⁴

The British response came as no surprise to the Swedish authorities.⁶⁵

Two days earlier, on 28 August, Prytz reported to the Foreign Ministry that Lagerfelt was convinced from what had been said to him that British agreement to the publication of the four documents was not to be expected. However, Prytz added that he had received confirmation the previous weekend for his account of Butler's attitude in 1940. At dinner, he had happened to sit next to "a well-known British conservative publicist with good American contacts who used to be close to Butler". The conversation turned to Butler's political future and the possible rivalry between him and Eden for the leadership of the Conservative Party. Prytz's interlocutor, whom he did not name, expressed doubt whether Butler was sufficiently "steadfast" (*ståndaktig*) to occupy such a senior position and said that Butler had asked him the day after France's capitulation to call on Joseph Kennedy, the American Ambassador in London, in order to sound him out in case his services were required as a peace mediator. He had done this immediately and later reported to Butler Kennedy's willingness to play the role suggested for him. However, after that Butler never reverted to the subject and indeed avoided Prytz's dining companion for some time. Prytz concluded his report by observing, somewhat sourly, that belief in Britain's unwavering resolution in 1940 had so far been maintained and "will doubtless be maintained for the benefit of future historians as far as is possible".⁶⁶

When he penned these last remarks, Prytz was doubtless in a bitter mood, as he must have suspected that the British Foreign Office was questioning his integrity or at least his competence. However, despite their subjective origin, his concluding comments probably identified an important consideration which influenced the Foreign Office. As Warner had pointed out in 1944, a part of Britain's prestige in the world was derived from the impression of united resolve in the summer of 1940. If Prytz's version of his interview with Butler on 17 June 1940 were allowed to gain credence or even publicity, it might undermine this impression and therefore also British prestige. When examining the question in 1946, the Northern Department simply assumed that the documents in the Foreign Office files proved beyond doubt that Prytz had misunderstood or misrepresented Butler, but a moment's serious thought would have revealed that they did no such thing. The Northern Department was simply not prepared to consider the possibility that Prytz's report might have been accurate. It is significant that when he saw Lagerfelt on 6 July, Hankey dismissed this possibility before he could have had time to look into the matter or even read carefully the documents he had been given. Mallet's long report of 18 November 1944 was unearthed and pillaged for arguments damaging to the Swedes, but no one in the Northern Department referred to the passage in which Mallet seemed to accept the accuracy of the Prytz telegram. Nor was any reference made to Mallet's letter of 18 January 1945 in which he observed that the Foreign Office's telegram no. 531 sounded less convincing than the

Prytz telegram, though this does not mean that the point was necessarily lost on the Northern Department in 1946. Another factor was clearly that Günther's behaviour in 1944 had queered the pitch for his successors in 1946. It led to justified suspicion, which Boheman's remarks to Mallet and Collier in 1944 fuelled, that the Swedish authorities were attempting to pin part of the blame for Sweden's concession to Germany in 1940 on to Britain. In these circumstances, it was quite natural that the Northern Department saw the issue primarily as a matter of current politics rather than historical accuracy.

The Foreign Office probably hoped that Miss Bingley's letter to Prytz on 30 August 1946 would be the end of the matter, but the Swedish authorities were not quite beaten yet. When the Swedish White book appeared in February 1947, the preface revealed that the British government had refused permission for the inclusion of a telegram from Prytz received at 1 am on 18 June 1940.⁶⁷ On 18 February the Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet* claimed that the mysterious missing telegram contained a warning from “official British quarters” to Sweden advising caution in dealings with Germany on the grounds that negotiations between Britain and Germany might well take place. According to *Aftonbladet*, the telegram exercised great influence on Swedish policy.⁶⁸ A number of newspapers in the other Nordic countries also referred to the missing document and some repeated the story published in *Aftonbladet*.⁶⁹

The Foreign Office was extremely annoyed that the preface to the White book had revealed British refusal of permission to publish the Prytz telegram. C H Fone, an official in the Librarian's Department, observed that “Consultation between governments as to what should or should not be published is a matter of diplomatic courtesy, but the whole business becomes a farce when a government refers to the fact that it has been refused permission to publish a particular document”.⁷⁰ Warner agreed: “The Swedes should clearly have given our reason for withholding publication in referring – quite unnecessarily – to the matter in the preface to their White Book. They have behaved badly in the matter”.⁷¹ On 20 February Undén told Bertrand Jerram, who had replaced Mallet as British Minister in Stockholm in 1945, that the preface had mentioned the refusal of permission to publish the Prytz telegram because the Swedish press and public were already aware of its existence (presumably through *Expressen's* article in November 1944) and would have asked why it was not included had nothing been said in the preface.⁷² This was not, perhaps, a very convincing explanation, but the British authorities made no protest. Jerram, and also Collier in Oslo, were merely told to say, if anyone enquired, that permission had been refused because Prytz had misunderstood Butler.⁷³

The Foreign Office was spurred to consider more drastic action when Jerram reported on 11 October 1947 that the most recent edition of the monthly pocket magazine *Allt* contained a fairly detailed account of the

Butler–Prytz affair and that the author of the article had clearly seen a copy of the telegram. The article claimed that the telegram had had a decisive influence on the Swedish government, and Jerram added that the story had been reported by British and American news agencies to their head offices.⁷⁴ Jerram's report reopened the question of whether the Foreign Office should oppose the publication of the Prytz telegram. As early as February, after the appearance of the Swedish white book, Collier had written to Warner from Oslo and suggested, "with all respect, that it would have been best to let the Swedes publish the telegram with a statement that the British Government denied its accuracy: after all, everyone acquainted with him knows that Prytz has a powerful imagination and no great regard for truth".⁷⁵ The news of the article in *Allt* produced a resigned acceptance within the Foreign Office that publication was probably inevitable. However, what the Foreign Office had in mind was the publication not only of the three relevant telegrams from Prytz but also of the telegrams exchanged between Mallet and London on the subject in June 1940. All these documents would be included in a press release issued jointly by the British and Swedish governments.

On 14 November 1947 Hankey put this suggestion to Jerram in a lengthy letter. Hankey explained that the Foreign Office was reconsidering its attitude because the story refused to go away. The telegram had been mentioned in the white book and had now been described in *Allt*. Moreover, although the story had not yet been taken up by the British and American press, it was probably only a matter of time before it was. In these circumstances, publication could do no real harm, especially if the telegrams exchanged between Mallet and the Foreign Office in June 1940 were published at the same time. Despite "the poor showing which Butler's vague recollection . . . as reported in our telegram no. 531 . . . would make if published beside Prytz's much more circumstantial account", Hankey felt that publication of the relevant British telegrams would "definitely strengthen our position and make misrepresentation less likely in the future. There might be a sudden flash of publicity but the embers would after that quickly burn out". Hankey added that if Jerram favoured the idea of publication, Butler would be consulted again, as would "higher authority" in London.⁷⁶

Jerram did not, however, favour the suggestion. He replied on 29 November that a joint press release "would only serve to throw a spotlight on a matter which is . . . at present attracting very little notice". *Allt* itself was "a journal of little importance" and, although the *Allt* article had been reproduced in "a North British newspaper", it "does not seem to have attracted any wide circulation". He did not believe the sort of rumours which had appeared in the Swedish press damaged British interests:

While I agree with the view expressed . . . in 1944 that our stand alone after the fall of France is a matter of outstanding importance which must not be impugned, the

fact that we did so is now an unassailable historical fact, and in this controversy it is rather the personal reputations of Lord Halifax and R A Butler which are at stake.

Prytz's account of the interview was "very circumstantial and Butler's defence is admittedly weak. The world would be left to draw its own conclusions which might not be wholly favourable to Butler". Moreover, Prytz, who had retired from the Swedish diplomatic service earlier in 1947, "might well be more categorical today when he is unfettered than when he was still Minister in London. Swedes are apt to rush into print on the slightest provocation". Jerram's conclusion was the same as that reached by Mallet in January 1945: the British authorities should make no public statement unless and until "the matter boils up again".

As Jerram indicated, the article in *Allt* had not led to renewed press interest in Sweden or to a wave of publicity in the British and American press, and in these circumstances the Foreign Office was content to accept his advice. However, Warner took the opportunity of discouraging further Swedish leaks to the press when Boheman, Prytz's successor as Swedish Minister in London, saw him on 10 December 1947 to discuss other matters. Warner mentioned that the British authorities had been annoyed by the article in *Allt* and would consider publishing the whole correspondence relating to the Butler-Prytz incident "if there were further publicity in Sweden which attracted more widespread attention". Boheman "volunteered the information, which we have had from him twice before, that the Prytz telegram arrived" after the Swedish government had taken its decision, and expressed the view that the Swedish government ought not to have used the telegram "to create the contrary impression". Warner implied that the way in which the Swedish government had used the Prytz telegram to justify its actions would be made clear if Mallet's reports were published, and he felt sure that the point was not lost on "the highly intelligent Boheman". Warner was confident that his remarks to Boheman would persuade the Swedish authorities to do what they could to prevent further publicity. He wrote to Jerram on 15 December to suggest that he might care to speak to Undén along similar lines, but gave Jerram discretion "to let the matter rest", if he thought fit.⁷⁷

Jerram was delighted by Warner's remarks to Boheman, which he thought "very valuable", but he chose not to pursue the question. Publicity had ceased and Undén did not mention it to him. On 3 February 1948 he observed that it was "best to let sleeping dogs lie" until and unless "the matter crops up again".⁷⁸ And there the matter did finally rest. There was no further discussion of the Prytz telegram in the Swedish press until the publication of Wigforss's and Rasjön's memoirs in 1954 and 1955. The most substantive article to appear at that time was written by Thermaenius in connection with the appearance of Wigforss's memoirs and it was printed

in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* on 1 October 1954. In his memoirs, Wigforss had been relying on his memory and merely recorded that the Prytz telegram had indicated British interest in a compromise peace and that the only words he could recall were that “common sense and not bravado” would determine British policy.⁷⁹ Thermaenius confirmed the accuracy of Wigforss’s memory on this point, and revealed that Prytz’s interlocutor had been the “second in command” at the Foreign Office, who had also passed on a message to Prytz from the Foreign Secretary. He pointed out that it was highly improbable that Prytz, an experienced minister whose mother tongue was English, could have misunderstood his interlocutor, and added that the whole episode revealed the existence of a difference of opinion within the British government, at least for a short time, on the question of peace negotiations. Thermaenius’s view on the degree to which the Prytz telegram influenced the Swedish government was moderate and balanced. He expressed the belief that the Swedish government would have reached the same decision even if the Prytz telegram had not been received, and cited Wigforss’s reference to “the *last ounce of strength from the will to resist*” (my italics) in support of this opinion.⁸⁰

By the mid-fifties the substance of the Prytz telegram had been publicly disclosed in Sweden on a number of occasions, but the information seems to have made no impact in Britain. The situation changed in this respect in September 1965, when Swedish radio broadcast a series of programmes on the Second World War. On 7 September 1965 Prytz was interviewed on one of these programmes and in the course of the interview he read out his telegram of 17 June 1940.⁸¹ On this occasion the British press did take notice, and full reports of what Prytz had said appeared in a number of British newspapers.⁸² By this time Butler was about to become Master of Trinity College, Cambridge after a distinguished career in which he had occupied some of the most senior offices of state and had twice been a serious contender for the premiership. Despite his retirement from active politics, he remained a well-known public figure and the story aroused great interest.

Butler was naturally asked for his comments, but was not very forthcoming. His initial reaction was to claim that he needed time to study Prytz’s remarks: “Butler said . . . he could not remember phrases attributed to him in Mr. Prytz’s talk . . . ‘It was all so long ago’”.⁸³ His more considered response was to refer to the fact that Churchill had been aware of the incident but had not dismissed him and indeed had later promoted him:⁸⁴ “I feel the whole thing is rather exaggerated. I rely on the confidence placed in me by Mr. Churchill”.⁸⁵ He declined to make any direct comment on Prytz’s version of their interview. As for Prytz, he reaffirmed his claims when questioned by a journalist from the *Daily Express* on 10 September: “I know that it is being put around that I did not report Mr. Butler properly. All I can say is that I know that I did not misunderstand him and that I quoted

him word for word". Prytz also explained that he had decided to make his telegram public, because it had "been referred to obliquely on so many occasions but never quoted in full", and indicated that Butler's retirement from active politics had made it easier for him to speak out.⁸⁶

Prytz's radio interview also reopened discussion on whether his telegram influenced the Swedish government's decision over the transit question. Boheman, reiterating the misconception he first expressed to Mallet in 1944, declared publicly that the telegram arrived too late to influence the government. Günther pointed out that Boheman was mistaken and claimed that the telegram had a certain, though not decisive, influence on the government.⁸⁷ Public discussion did not go much further than this. On 15 September the Swedish government decided that the Prytz telegram should still not be published,⁸⁸ but Prytz had already made it public and it was in fact printed in a non-official collection of documents on Sweden during the Second World War in 1966.⁸⁹ The story that had begun with Günther's talk to the Institute of Foreign Affairs on 31 October 1944 had finally come to an end.

IV.

It is now time to turn to the question of whether Prytz reported Butler's remarks accurately. Three interpretations are possible: that we are dealing with a misunderstanding, a peace feeler or an indiscretion. If we begin by considering the possibility that, to quote Hankey's accusation in 1946, Prytz "misunderstood or misrepresented" Butler, one notion can be dismissed immediately, namely that Prytz, because of linguistic insufficiency, failed to grasp what was being said to him. Prytz's mother was English and he had spent a great part of his childhood in Britain, attending Dulwich College. Clearly Prytz had a good command of English.⁹⁰ Deliberate misrepresentation is another matter. Butler claimed on 20 and 26 June that Prytz made it clear during their interview on 17 June that a compromise peace was in Swedish interests. It is very probable that Prytz, like his government, wanted to see a peace settlement in June 1940. After his appointment to London in 1938 he seems to have been sympathetic towards the British government's appeasement policy. Part of the reason may well have been the good contacts his earlier business career had given him in the City of London, where pro-appeasement attitudes were widespread.⁹¹ In late December 1939, when the Winter War was at its height, Prytz spoke of possible Scandinavian mediation, "if and when the time becomes ripe for western Europe to bury the hatchet in face of the threat from the east".⁹² On the other hand, in April 1940, just after the German invasion of Denmark and Norway, Prytz was sympathetic to the idea that Sweden should enter the war on the Allied side against Germany,⁹³ and his other

reports in the summer of 1940 did not suggest that British opinion favoured a compromise peace. In a letter to Boheman dated 14 June, only three days before his interview with Butler, Prytz wrote that British determination to continue the war seemed to increase with every setback. The only groups which favoured a compromise peace were in the City and among those Conservative Members of Parliament who were close to financial circles.⁹⁴ He made the same points in another letter to Boheman on 5 July. Once again he emphasized that the will to fight on had grown, and he added that it was now greater than at any time since the outbreak of war. Doubt was sometimes expressed in private, but only by business interests in the City which feared the war would ruin them financially and by certain individuals who felt the continuance of the war was unrealistic. Neither group, he added, was important.⁹⁵ If therefore Prytz was attempting to talk up British interest in peace negotiations in his telegram of 17 June, it was not part of a consistent pattern. On the contrary, the telegram is the odd man out among the reports he sent to Stockholm around this time. Moreover, it is hard to understand what Prytz thought he could gain by putting words into Butler's mouth.

It is therefore difficult, unless one simply accepts Collier's assertion in 1947 that Prytz had "a powerful imagination and no great regard for truth", to see how Prytz could have misunderstood Butler or why he should have sought to misrepresent him. These are negative reasons for accepting his veracity. Let us now examine the positive arguments for doing so. One is the point made by Günther and apparently conceded by Mallet in 1944 that the words given in English in the Prytz telegram could only have been a direct quotation of Butler's words. This argument is certainly not conclusive in itself, as Günther claimed to believe, but it is not entirely without force. A further argument in favour of accepting the broad accuracy of the Prytz telegram is the evasive and unconvincing explanations Butler offered in 1940, a point Mallet and Jerram noted in 1945 and 1947 respectively. There are also the statements of the "well-known British Conservative publicist" reported by Prytz on 28 August 1946. If there is any truth to this story, it is obviously strong confirmation for Prytz's version of his interview with Butler. However, by August 1946 Prytz knew that the veracity of his telegram was being challenged and was eager to find such confirmation. The story also sits a little strangely with the remark ascribed to Butler in the Prytz telegram that Russia would come to play a greater role than the United States if peace negotiations began. Clearly, any statement after a lapse of six years and preserved at second-hand by someone who had become an interested party must be treated with great caution. The story cannot simply be dismissed out of hand, but in the absence of corroborating evidence it is probably safest to disregard it when considering the accuracy of the Prytz telegram.

The main argument in support of Prytz's veracity is that Butler conceded

in 1940 that a significant part of Prytz's account of their conversation was true. In his telegram Prytz made two central claims.

1. Butler had said that, while Britain's official attitude would for the present be that the war must go on, no opportunity for reaching a compromise peace would be neglected if reasonable terms were offered and that no "diehards" would be allowed to stand in the way.
2. When he returned from seeing Halifax, Butler conveyed what he claimed was a message from the Foreign Secretary that "common sense and not bravado would dictate the British Government's policy", but that this should not be interpreted as meaning "peace at any price".

Only the second of Prytz's claims was reported by Mallet on 19 June and it is probable that, as Mallet suspected in 1944, the rest of the telegram was not read to him by Günther. As a result, the British authorities were not aware of Prytz's first claim, and Butler did not need to comment on it in 1940. Indeed, it is uncertain whether even Butler knew of the full contents of the Prytz telegram. Prytz reported on 21 June that he gave Butler an account of "the appropriate parts" of the telegram, but did not specify which they were.

Butler did, however, need to comment on Prytz's second claim and he did so twice in 1940, in telegram no. 531 on 20 June and in his letter to Halifax on 26 June. On the first occasion he conceded that he was called away to see Halifax during the interview, but suggested that Prytz "may have exaggerated the importance of this coincidence and of any polite messages conveyed to him by way of explanation". In his letter to Halifax, Butler wrote that "You may enquire . . . why I was reported as saying that 'common sense and not bravado would dictate our policy'", but does not answer the question he had posed. Neither of these comments constitutes a denial, though the phrasing is too slippery to be described as an admission either. But surely if Butler felt able to deny the truth of Prytz's claim, he would have done so. His failure to deny its accuracy must be taken as a strong indication that Prytz had reported his words correctly on this point.

Butler also made a number of statements about the interview which did not directly relate to Prytz's claims, though they constitute indirectly a comment on his first claim. Butler conceded that the possibility of peace negotiations was discussed but insisted on both 20 and 26 June that it was Prytz who raised the topic and that Prytz made it clear that a peace settlement was in Sweden's interests. Butler claimed on both occasions to have said that force must be met with force, on 20 June that an honourable end to the war could best be secured by "a policy governed by courage and wisdom" and on 26 June that if Britain were to negotiate, it had to be from a position of strength. He also denied on 26 June that he gave an impression of defeatism. Nonetheless, on 26 June he admitted that "I can see that . . . I should have been more cautious" and that "It may be that I should have entertained no conversation with M Prytz on the subject of an ultimate set-

tlement". But why should he have been more cautious, if all he said was what he admitted saying? And how does what he admitted saying fit in with the remarks about "common sense and not bravado", which he did not deny? Butler's admission that he discussed the possibility of peace negotiations and his failure to deny Prytz's second claim taken together suggest at the very least that Churchill's suspicion that "Butler held odd language to the Swedish Minister" was justified. It may well be, as Butler asserted, that it was Prytz who raised the subject of peace negotiations, but the evidence indicates that Prytz gave an essentially correct report of his interview with Butler.

In his memoirs, which appeared in 1971, Butler was more forthright in his denials. He wrote that "I certainly do not recall giving the amusing Swedish Minister . . . ground for supposing that any of us had become less bellicose" and claimed that

I certainly went no further in responding to any neutral soundings than the official line at the time, which was that peace could not be considered prior to the complete withdrawal of German troops from all conquered territories. This was common sense, not bravado.

He reproduced Halifax's letter to Churchill of 27 June 1940 and referred to the Foreign Office telegram no. 534 of 23 June, which he maintained, included denials from Prytz "that a construction could be placed on his language which could imply defeatism on my part". Butler's denials were more categorical than in 1940, but they were not supported by substantive arguments and his memoirs provide no new grounds for rejecting Prytz's version of their interview.⁹⁶

Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that the Prytz telegram contains a substantially accurate account of what Butler said. But why did he say it? Unfortunately, there is no other direct evidence on Butler's attitude towards a compromise peace in mid-June 1940. After becoming a junior minister at the Foreign Office in 1938, he had staunchly supported the government's appeasement policy. He was on friendly terms with both Halifax and Chamberlain, and greatly admired the Foreign Secretary.⁹⁷ He was a junior but well-placed member of the dominant group within the Conservative Party and the government. In October 1939 he tried to soften the negative British response to the peace offer Hitler made at that time,⁹⁸ and in March 1940 he was sympathetic to the idea of a "truce" with Germany.⁹⁹ During the political crisis in May 1940 Butler attempted, in vain, to persuade Halifax to accept the premiership,¹⁰⁰ and he took Churchill's succession to the post with ill grace. On the evening of 10 May, shortly after Churchill had been asked to form a government, he expressed the view that "the good clean tradition of English politics . . . had been sold to the greatest adventurer in modern political history . . . He believed this sudden coup of Winston and his rabble was a serious disaster". Churchill, he suggested,

was "a half-breed American whose main support was that of inefficient but talkative people of a similar type".¹⁰¹ All this does not tell us anything definite about Butler's outlook in mid-June 1940, but it does suggest that he did not support a hard line towards Germany during the winter of 1939–40 and that he was hostile towards the new Prime Minister and what he stood for.

However, Butler's outlook cannot be considered in isolation. It can only be examined in the broader framework of British attitudes towards peace with Germany in the early summer of 1940. The success of the German offensive on the western front naturally raised the question of a compromise peace, and the issues involved were considered by the War Cabinet on 26, 27 and 28 May. Discussion revolved around a proposal that Mussolini, who had not yet entered the war on Hitler's side, should be invited to mediate between Germany and the western powers. The context for this debate was provided by the catastrophe that had overtaken the Anglo-French armies on the western front and the impending evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. The debates within the War Cabinet have frequently been discussed, and only a few salient features will be described here.¹⁰² The discussions in the War Cabinet on this issue developed into a sharp disagreement between Halifax and the new Prime Minister. Halifax argued forcefully that no harm could come from ascertaining Hitler's peace terms. He told his colleagues that "we had to face the fact that it was not so much now a question of imposing a complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of our own Empire and if possible that of France". He did not favour taking whatever conditions might be on offer, but thought that if "we could obtain terms which did not postulate the destruction of our independence, we should be foolish if we did not accept them". Halifax conceded that decent terms were unlikely to be forthcoming, but did not rule out the possibility that Hitler, owing to Germany's internal weaknesses, might be keen to end the war and would therefore offer reasonable terms. Churchill, in contrast, thought the chances that Hitler would offer terms which did not "put us completely at his mercy" were "a thousand to one against". He conceded that peace on reasonable terms would be the best solution, but insisted that such terms were not available and that to become involved in negotiations would destroy British morale. If Britain could only hang on for two or three months, the position would be transformed.

In the end, Churchill carried the day in the sense that an immediate approach to Italy was rejected, but Halifax argued his case with great force. Churchill was supported by the two Labour members of the War Cabinet, Attlee and Greenwood, but what was probably decisive was Chamberlain's attitude. The former Prime Minister expressed great sympathy for Halifax's views, but ultimately failed to back him on the immediate question of an approach to Mussolini.¹⁰³ The clash with Churchill brought Halifax to the brink of resignation, and on 27 May he wrote in his diary

I thought Winston spoke the most frightful rot, also Greenwood, and . . . I said exactly what I thought of them, adding that if that was really their view, and if it came to the point, our ways would separate . . . it does drive me to despair when Churchill works himself up into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason.¹⁰⁴

Churchill had been hard pressed and had been obliged to argue his case over several days before he overcame Halifax. The clash between them highlights the delicacy of Churchill's position in late May. Chamberlain was still leader of the Conservative Party and a member of the War Cabinet, and the Chamberlainites remained the dominant group within parliament and the government. It is doubtful whether Churchill could have become Prime Minister on 10 May but for Halifax's reluctance to take on the job, and three weeks later he was still dependent on Chamberlain's forbearance.

The debate in the War Cabinet at the end of May revealed Churchill's vulnerability, but in fact his victory over Halifax on 28 May proved definitive. The possibility of seeking peace negotiations was not discussed again by the War Cabinet, and in the following weeks the successful evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk and several of Churchill's most celebrated speeches and broadcasts contributed to a growing resolution within Britain to continue the war whatever the consequences. A small group in parliament favoured acceptance of a reasonable peace offer should Hitler make one,¹⁰⁵ but Churchill's hold on British opinion became increasingly secure. As a result, the balance of political power gradually began to shift. In early June there were attacks on Chamberlain in sections of the press,¹⁰⁶ and in July criticism was extended to include his closest associates, like Halifax.¹⁰⁷ By the time Butler spoke to Prytz on 17 June the context of British politics had already begun to alter.

There are similarities between what Butler said to Prytz on 17 June and the line Halifax had taken during the War Cabinet's discussions in late May. Both emphasized that there was no question of peace at any price, merely a willingness to consider reasonable terms. Moreover, the remark about "common sense not bravado", which can only have been directed at Churchill, the prime exponent of "bravado" in mid-June 1940, bears some resemblance to Halifax's complaint on 27 May that Churchill "works himself into a passion of emotion when he ought to make his brain think and reason". However, it cannot be assumed that Butler's remarks to Prytz on 17 June necessarily reflected Halifax's views not only in late May but also in mid-June. There is some evidence that Halifax may have changed his mind. On 17 June, the very day the Butler-Prytz interview occurred, Halifax wrote in his diary

I had a talk to Winston in the afternoon, who is very robust and almost convincing himself that we shall do better without the French than with them. I think he is right

in feeling that if we can, with our resources concentrated, hold the devils for two or three months there is quite a chance that the situation may turn in our favour. Anyhow for the present, at least, there is no alternative.¹⁰⁸

This is too brief to permit a detailed analysis of the outlook it reflected, but it certainly represents a change of tune from late May. On the other hand, the diary of Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, provides evidence that Halifax had not entirely abandoned his earlier outlook. On 2 July Cadogan noted that the Pope was making “tentative, half-baked suggestions” for a peace settlement and that “Silly old H[alifax is] evidently hankering after them”.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps Halifax was not sure in his own mind as to how to proceed. These were times of extraordinary drama with every day bringing fresh and unexpected news. An element of vacillation or uncertainty would not have been unnatural. At any rate, there can be no absolute certainty about Halifax’s thinking in mid-June.

Such then is the background for Butler’s interview with Prytz. The uncertainty about Halifax’s attitude in mid-June adds considerably to the difficulty of interpreting Butler’s purpose, because the role of Halifax is crucial and this brings us to one of the most curious aspects of the whole affair. In the Prytz telegram, the remark about “common sense not bravado” is described as a message from Halifax to Prytz transmitted by Butler. However, in his letter to Halifax on 26 June, Butler makes no reference to this fact and, as it were, assumes personal responsibility for the phrase. The implication must be that, when speaking to Prytz, Butler put words into Halifax’s mouth. However, Halifax does not seem to have taken great offence. When he wrote to Churchill on 27 June, he simply exonerated Butler. He made no mention of the points Butler had conceded, his apology for incaution or his offer to resign. This is all puzzling, but in theory two interpretations seem possible. One is that Butler had indeed put words into Halifax’s mouth, that Halifax was wholly uninvolved in what was said to Prytz but chose to shield Butler from Churchill’s displeasure. The other is that Butler was Halifax’s agent throughout, that he took sole responsibility for what had been said and was in return protected by his chief from the consequences.

This second interpretation is highly implausible. It suggests that Halifax acted, using Butler as his agent and the Swedes as his postmen, to send a message to Berlin in the hope that a statement of reasonable terms, which did not amount to peace at any price, would be elicited in reply. After the discussions in the War Cabinet at the end of May, and in view of the growing mood of resolution in Britain, it was unlikely that the War Cabinet could be persuaded to take the initiative and enquire what the German terms might be. The only hope of establishing contact was to encourage the Germans to take the initiative and state their terms. This interpretation

implies, in other words, that we are dealing with some sort of tentative, unofficial peace feeler, and there are a number of grounds for dismissing this possibility. One is Halifax's diary entry for 17 June, which does not suggest that on that day at least he was thinking in terms of peace negotiations in the immediate future. Another is Butler's letter to Halifax on 26 June, which must be regarded as a complete charade if this interpretation is accepted, and the letter seems too genuinely embarrassed and defensive for that. However, the most compelling reason for rejecting the notion of a peace feeler is that on 20 June Prytz told Günther that Butler's remarks were not intended for transmission to Berlin. There was not much point in sending a message without making it clear to the messenger that it was intended to reach Berlin.

This last point argues against a peace feeler not only on the part of Halifax but also on the part of Butler. In any case, it is virtually inconceivable that Butler would have put out a peace feeler on his own initiative. He was a young, junior minister in 1940. His subsequent prominence in public life is one reason why the Prytz telegram has aroused so much interest, but does not detract from his insignificance in 1940. In his letter to Halifax on 26 June, Butler claimed that his interview with Prytz was fortuitous. They met in the Park, fell to talking and Prytz came into the Foreign Office for a short time only. If we accept this claim – and it was a rash claim to commit to paper so close to the event if it were untrue –, then any sort of deliberate peace feeler, either by Butler alone or indirectly by Halifax, is improbable. In that case we are dealing with an indiscretion. Butler simply spoke out of turn on the spur of the moment and told Prytz his personal views, something he ought not to have done, since those views were out of line with government policy. Believing, perhaps correctly, that his remarks reflected Halifax's opinions as well as his own, Butler associated the Foreign Secretary with his statements. If this interpretation is accepted, then the indiscretion was Butler's alone and Halifax was not responsible for the message Butler attributed to him. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that in his letter to Churchill on 27 June, Halifax shielded Butler. We can only speculate as to why he did so. It may have been loyalty or kindness to a young colleague, it may have been because of underlying sympathy with the opinions Butler had expressed.

Prytz cannot be faulted for reporting what Butler said to him, but he has been criticised by a former colleague in the Swedish diplomatic service for failing to place Butler's remarks in a broader political context. Prytz ought to have made it clear in his telegram, which he must have realised would make a strong impression in Stockholm, that Butler's statement did not reflect the policy of the British government or the current state of opinion in Britain.¹¹⁰ There is some force in this charge. Prytz's letter to Boheman three days earlier provided such a broader context, but the two reports are not entirely compatible and he should have made an attempt to relate them

to one another. In Prytz's defence, it can, of course, be said that he could not be certain that Butler's statements were unrepresentative. Butler claimed after all to be speaking for the Foreign Secretary. These were times of rapid change: each day brought fresh and often astonishing news; in France Reynaud had just given way to Pétain. Nonetheless, it is difficult to escape the impression that Butler's remarks caused Prytz to lose his head and that he failed adequately to relate those remarks to the other things he had seen and heard.

However, even if Prytz did not give his government a full picture of British attitudes in his telegrams of 17 and 20 June, this does not detract from his reliability as a witness to what Butler actually said. The evidence outlined in the previous pages does not suggest that we are dealing with a misunderstanding or misrepresentation on Prytz's part or with an unofficial peace feeler on the part of either Butler alone or Halifax and Butler in conjunction. The balance of probability points to an indiscretion for which Butler was solely responsible. It may be that new evidence will come to light which permits greater certainty, but for the time being it does not seem possible to go further than that. As for the long-term effects of the Prytz telegram, its impact on Butler's later career is difficult to assess. The story must have been disseminated to some extent at least within Conservative political circles after the war and was presumably considered in conjunction with Butler's role as a staunch supporter of appeasement. In September 1965 the *Daily Telegraph* reported that "some conservative circles" believed the Prytz incident was "one of the obstacles" which had prevented Butler from becoming leader of the party and Prime Minister.¹¹¹ However, too few of the sources for the political history of the nineteen fifties and sixties are yet available to determine what price, if any, Butler paid for his indiscretion. What can be said with more certainty is that Butler was probably very fortunate indeed that the Foreign Office prevented the publication of the telegram in the Swedish white book in 1946.

In 1940 the Prytz telegram probably exerted some influence on political developments in Sweden, but it had no serious repercussions for Britain. Nor did Butler's remarks reflect the views of a significant political group. There were figures outside the government who shared his outlook in mid-June 1940, but ministerial circles were another matter. It is not even certain that Halifax would have endorsed his statements by that time. Butler's indiscretion was unrepresentative, a manifestation of attitudes which by mid-June 1940 had been rendered outmoded by the march of events and Churchill's ever stronger grip on British opinion.

NOTES

1. Tel 723 from Prytz, 17 June 1940, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA (Swedish Foreign Ministry Archive). Printed in Krister Wahlbäck and Göran Boberg, *Sveriges sak är vår. Svensk utrikespolitik 1939–45 i dokument* (Stockholm, 1966) (henceforth cited as Wahlbäck-Boberg), p 120; and Wilhelm M Carlgren, *Svensk utrikespolitik 1939–1945* (Stockholm, 1973) (henceforth cited as *Carlgren*), p 194, n 2.
2. *Carlgren*, p 194, n 2.
3. Minute on tel 723 from Prytz, 17 June 1940 and circular despatch to Berlin, Moscow, Helsinki, Oslo and Copenhagen, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA.
4. Tel 743 from Mallet, 19 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO (Public Record Office). I am grateful to the Controller of HM Stationery Office for permission to print this and the other documents from the PRO papers which appear in this article.
5. Desp 689 from Mallet, 18 Nov 1944, FO371/43509–N7788/865/42, PRO.
6. Tel 531 to Mallet, 20 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO.
7. Tel 777 to Prytz, 19 June 1940, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA. Printed in *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, p 120.
8. Tel 750 from Prytz, 20 June 1940, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA. Printed in *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, pp 120–121.
9. Tel 748 from Mallet, 20 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO.
10. Tel 763 from Prytz, 20 June 1940, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA. Printed in *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, p 121.
11. Tel 534 to Mallet, 23 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO.
12. Tel 758 from Mallet, 21 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO.
13. Tel 778 from Mallet, 27 June 1940, FO371/24859–N5848/112/42, PRO.
14. Churchill to Halifax, 26 June 1940, FO800/322, PRO. Printed in Martin Gilbert, *Finest Hour. Winston S Churchill 1939–41* (London, 1983) (henceforth cited as *Gilbert*), pp 598–599.
15. Butler to Halifax, 26 June 1940, FO800/322, PRO.
16. Halifax to Churchill, 27 June 1940, FO800/322, PRO. Printed in R A Butler, *The Art of the Possible* (London, 1971), p 81.
17. *Carlgren*, pp 195–196; *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, pp 121–122; *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–45*, Series D, volume IX (Frankfurt am Main, 1962), p 513, doc 487.
18. *Carlgren*, pp 195–196; *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, pp 122–123; *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–45*, Series D, volume IX (Frankfurt am Main, 1962), pp 563–564, doc 529.
19. Memorandum by Wallenberg, 25 June 1940, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA.
20. Tel 774 from Mallet, 25 June 1940, FO371/24407–C7377/89/18, PRO.

21. Tel 377 from Campbell (Belgrade), 21 June 1940; tel 291 to Campbell, 22 June 1940 (quotation); tel 48 from British Consul Willemstad, 26 June 1940; and tel 1103 from Craigie (Tokyo), 27 June 1940, FO371/24407-C7377/89/18, PRO.
22. *Carlgren*, p 194.
23. Peter W Ludlow, "Scandinavia Between the Great Powers. Attempts at Mediation in the First Year of the Second World War", (Swedish) *Historisk Tidskrift*, 1974, pp 24-34, 52.
24. *Carlgren*, p 197.
25. Ludlow, *op cit*, pp 33-34.
26. Alf W Johansson, *Per Albin och kriget. Samlingsregeringen och utrikespolitiken under andra världskriget* (Falköping, 1985) (henceforth cited as *Johansson*), p 153; Gustaf Andersson, *Från bondetåget till samlingsregeringen* (Stockholm, 1955), p 249.
27. *Carlgren*, pp 197-198; Gunnar Hägglöf, *Det kringrända Sverige* (Malmö, 1983) (henceforth cited as *Hägglöf*), pp 343-345.
28. *Carlgren*, pp 183-185, 186-187.
29. *Johansson*, pp 162-173; Krister Wahlbäck, *Regeringen och kriget. Ur statsrådets dagböcker 1939-41* (Stockholm, 1972), pp 89-98.
30. K G Westman, *Politiska anteckningar, september 1939-mars 1943* (Stockholm, 1981) (henceforth cited as *Westman*), p 111.
31. Gösta Bagge's diary, 18 June 1940, Riksarkivet, Stockholm.
32. *Carlgren*, pp 185-186; *Johansson*, p 174; Per G Andreen, *De mörka åren. Perspektiv på svensk neutralitetspolitik våren 1940-nyåret 1942* (Stockholm, 1972), p 23.
33. *Westman*, p 112.
34. *Johansson*, p 175.
35. Thomas Munch-Petersen, *The Strategy of Phoney War. Britain, Sweden and the Iron Ore Question 1939-1940* (Uddevalla, 1981), p 215.
36. *Westman*, p 112.
37. *Johansson*, p 175.
38. Ernst Wigforss, *Minnen*, vol III, 1932-1949 (Stockholm, 1954), pp 156, 157.
39. Gustaf Andersson, *op cit*, p 249.
40. Per G Andreen, *op cit*, p 21.
41. *Westman*, p 111.
42. *Westman*, p 113.
43. *Westman*, pp 111-113.
44. *Johansson*, p 153.
45. *Westman*, p 104.
46. Utrikesnämndens memorialprotokoll, 18 June 1940, UDA.
47. *Johansson*, pp 319, 411-412.
48. *Johansson*, pp 191, 321; Gunnar Unger, *Porträtt och pamflett* (Stockholm, 1953), pp 43-44.
49. *Johansson*, p 172.

50. *Johansson*, p 412; see also the papers in HP1U/1, UDA.
51. Gunnar Unger, *op cit*, pp 44–45; desp 689 from Mallet, 18 Nov 1944, FO371/43509–N7788/865/42, PRO.
52. Desp 689 from Mallet, 18 Nov 1944, FO371/43509–N7788/865/42, PRO. Tel 1318 from Mallet, 6 Nov 1944, FO371/43509–N6968/865/42, shows that 6 Nov is the latest possible date for Mallet’s interview with Günther.
53. *Expressen*, 17 Nov 1944.
54. Desp 689 from Mallet, 18 Nov 1944, FO371/43509–N6968/865/42, PRO. See FO371/43509–N7280/865/42 for Mallet’s public denial of the story in *Expressen*.
55. *Morgontidningen*, 18 Nov 1944.
56. Memorandum by Günther, 22 Nov 1944, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA.
57. Desp 689 from Mallet, 18 Nov 1944, FO371/45309–N6968/865/42, PRO.
58. Collier to Warner, 13 Dec 1944 and Warner to Mallet, 28 Dec 1944, FO371/43468–N7869/11/30, PRO.
59. Minute by Labouchere, 8 Jan 1945, and undated note in margin by Mallet, FO188/488, PRO.
60. Collier to Warner, 18 Jan 1945 and minutes on FO371/48008–N887/11/42, PRO.
61. Swedish Foreign Ministry, *Transiteringsfrågan juni–december 1940* (Aktstycken utgivna av Kungl Utrikesdepartementet, Stockholm, 1947), pp 111–V. See also the papers in HP1U/I, UDA.
62. Desp 2317 from Grafström to Ihre, 26 June 1946, HP1U/I, UDA; Ihre to Bevin, 6 July 1946, FO370/1321–L2796/2728/402, PRO.
63. Minutes by Hankey, 6 July 1946; Ewart, 26 July 1946; Lambert, 27 July 1946; Hankey, 31 July 1946; Warner, 10 Aug 1946; Hankey to Butler, 15 Aug 1946, FO370/1321–L2796/2728/402, PRO.
64. Butler to Hankey, 19 Aug 1946 and Bingley to Prytz, 30 Aug 1946, FO370/1321–L3526/2728/402, PRO.
65. Ihre to Grafström, 1 Aug 1946, HP1U/I, UDA.
66. Prytz to Westman, 28 Aug 1946, HP39A/XXXIII, UDA.
67. Swedish Foreign Ministry, *op cit*, p V.
68. *Aftonbladet*, 18 Feb 1947.
69. For example, *Land og Folk* and *Næstved Tidende*, 18 Feb 1947; *Friheten* and *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 19 Feb 1947.
70. Minute by Fone, 21 Feb 1947, FO371/66493–N12965/119/42, PRO.
71. Minute by Warner, 26 Feb 1947, FO371/66493–N12974/119/42, PRO.
72. Tel 136 from Jerram, 20 Feb 1947, FO371/66493–N12973/119/42, PRO.
73. Tel 143 to Jerram, 24 Feb 1947 and tel 84 to Collier, 27 Feb 1947, FO371/66493–N12965/119/42 and N12974/119/42 respectively.
74. Tel 677 from Jerram, 11 Oct 1947, FO371/66493–N12976/119/42, PRO.
75. Collier to Warner, 20 Feb 1947, FO371/66493–N12974/119/42, PRO.
76. Hankey to Jerram, 14 Nov 1947 and minutes on FO371/66493–N12976/119/42, PRO.

77. Jerram to Hankey, 29 Nov 1947 and Warner to Jerram, 15 Dec 1947, FO371/66493–N14272/119/42, PRO.
78. Minutes by Jerram, 17 Dec 1947 and 3 Feb 1948, FO188/609, PRO.
79. Ernst Wigforss, *op cit*, p 157.
80. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 Oct 1954.
81. *Dagens Nyheter*, 8 Sept, 1965.
82. *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Sept 1965; *Daily Express*, 10 Sept 1965.
83. *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Sept 1965.
84. *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *Daily Express*, 10 Sept 1965.
85. *Daily Express*, 11 Sept 1965.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Daily Express*, 11 Sept 1965; *Svenska Dagbladet*, 12 Sept 1965; and *The Times*, 13 Sept 1965.
88. *The Times*, 16 Sept 1965.
89. *Wahlbäck–Boberg*, p 120.
90. See obituaries of Prytz in *The Times*, 30 July 1976 and *Dagens Nyheter*, 1 July 1976.
91. *Hägglöf*, p 340.
92. *Carlgren*, p 89, n 33.
93. Thomas Munch-Petersen, *op cit*, p 219.
94. Prytz to Boheman, 14 June 1940, HP39A/XXV, UDA.
95. Prytz to Boheman, 5 July 1940, HP39A/XXXIV, UDA.
96. R A Butler, *op cit*, pp 81–82.
97. Patrick Cosgrave, *R A Butler, An English Life* (London, 1981), pp 41–63.
98. Robert Rhodes James (ed), *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (Penguin Books, 1970 and 1984), p 274.
99. *Gilbert*, p 190.
100. Robert Rhodes James (ed), *op cit*, p 306; John Colville, *The Fringes of Power. Downing Street Diaries 1939–1955* (London, 1985), p 122.
101. John Colville, *op cit*, p 122.
102. See David Reynolds, “Churchill and the British ‘Decision’ to fight on in 1940: right policy, wrong reasons” in Richard Langhorne (ed), *Diplomacy and Intelligence during the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1985), pp 149–150 and the works cited in notes 7 and 30. See also Peter W Ludlow, “The Unwinding of Appeasement” in Lothar Kattenacker (ed), *Das ‘Andere Deutschland’ im zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1977), pp 44–45.
103. War Cabinet minutes of 26 May (9am and 2pm), 27 May and 28 May 1940, CAB65/13–WM(40)139,1–CA; WM(40)140–CA; WM(40)142,CA; and WM(40)145,1–CA respectively, PRO.
104. Halifax diary, 27 May 1940, Hickleton Papers, Borthwick Institute, York.
105. David Reynolds, *op cit*, p 150.

106. *Gilbert*, pp 474–475; David Dilks, “The Twilight War and the Fall of France: Chamberlain and Churchill in 1940” in David Dilks (ed), *Retreat from Power. Studies in Britain’s Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century*, vol 2, *After 1939* (Bristol, 1981), pp 60–62.
107. Henry Pelling, *Britain and the Second World War* (Glasgow, 1970), pp 91–92; Angus Calder, *The People’s War* (London, 1969), pp 86–87.
108. Halifax diary, 17 June 1940, Hickleton Papers, Borthwick Institute, York.
109. David Dilks (ed), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938–1945* (London, 1971), p 309.
110. *Hägglöf*, p 341.
111. *Daily Telegraph*, 10 Sept 1965.