

Northern Flank by Göran Haglund

Like talking to a wall

Experienced Swedish diplomats do their best to uphold normal relations with the Kremlin, but it isn't easy.

The discovery of at least 30, and possibly 100 microphones built into the walls of the Swedish embassy in Moscow has refocused the debate on Swedish-Soviet relations. Not that wiretapping or related surveillance of embassies *per se* would be very surprising, particularly not in Moscow, but the extent and nature of this surveillance, coupled with the arrogant Soviet response to Swedish protests, have raised the blood pressure of more than one official in the Swedish foreign ministry.

During extensive rebuilding of part of Sweden's Moscow embassy by Swedish construction workers in mid-October, the first microphones were discovered. Specialists called upon from the Swedish Security Police quickly discovered scores more, reportedly made of a plastic material defying conventional detection equipment, located throughout the large embassy compound.

The location of the microphones inside the embassy walls showed that they must have been placed there during the embassy's initial construction in 1968-72—carried out by Russian workers. For 14 years, the Russians had overheard daily conversations, responses to Soviet moves, gossip, and unguarded words among embassy staff, under five successive Swedish ambassadors.

On Oct. 31, the Swedish government officially protested the Soviet surveillance of the embassy. In a low-profile mode, Soviet Ambassador Boris Pankin was summoned to a meeting with Foreign Ministry Undersecretary Pierre Schori. Pankin was

handed a note stating that the microphones could not have been placed in the embassy without the knowledge of the Soviet government, in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention regarding the integrity of foreign embassies.

The protest note, which was not made public, was characterized by Swedish officials as "serious" but "not sharp." It did not demand any explanation, much less any excuse from the Soviet side, but rather stressed that the Swedish government continues to seek "good and stable relations" with the Soviet Union. Foreign ministry comments made clear that the Swedish-Soviet negotiations expected to commence in December concerning the fishery and economic exploitation borders in the Baltic Sea were not going to be postponed, nor affected in any way.

"We have now handed over our protest and no further measures are considered," Foreign Ministry Press Chief Bo Heinebäck told Swedish media on Nov. 1.

But the Russians wouldn't be what they are, were that the end of the story. On Nov. 6, Ambassador Pankin personally returned to the Swedish foreign ministry, with a Soviet reply to the Swedish protest. This could only make matters worse—and it did.

Moscow's reply shamelessly claimed that the Soviets didn't know anything about the microphones, and that "somebody else" must have put them in the walls of the Swedish embassy! Denying the Russian nationality of dozens of intruding submarines is one thing, but this was a bit too thick even for the Swedish government.

In a national TV interview on Nov. 8, Foreign Minister Sten Andersson said that the Swedish government had not asked for a Soviet explanation, as it was only too obvious what had happened, and that the explanation now given was totally unacceptable.

"It is altogether out of the question that somebody could make such installations in the Swedish embassy, without our knowledge or that of the Soviet authorities. We see the explanation as a flight from all clear and cold facts," Andersson asserted. The same message had been given personally to Ambassador Pankin, who again had been summoned to Undersecretary Schori on Nov. 7, where the Swedish protest was repeated.

That same day, the Soviets were named in the Swedish parliament as possible perpetrators of the assassination of Olof Palme. Communist parliamentarian Jörn Svensson had introduced an official question regarding the political background to the Palme murder, implying that Western interests wanted Palme killed. Conservative parliamentarian Nic Grönwall denounced Svensson for mouthing unfounded speculation, saying it was just as likely the Soviets were behind the murder, maybe because they wanted to protect an agent in place in Sweden.

"Prime Minister Olof Palme might have received information that there was a Swedish Treholt," Grönwall charged, in reference to the Norwegian foreign ministry official who was caught working for the KGB. "Assume, and we don't know with certainty, that he received such information. Olof Palme would then be a danger. Suppose that Olof Palme in his contacts with the Soviets had received information that the superpower was afraid would be spread. This could be a motive for a political murder."