

Olof Palme Was an Internationalist Hero

From South Africa's ANC to Chilean socialists, in the 1970s, liberation movements around the world had few greater allies than Swedish prime minister Olof Palme. He used high office to speak out for the oppressed abroad — and to build an internationalist movement in his homeland.



Olof Palme, then Sweden's prime minister, at a May Day rally at Norra Bantorget, Stockholm, in the early 1970s. Wikimedia Commons

“Olof Palme is also a Social Democrat. Why is he so different from bloody [Harold] Wilson?” Such was the question the English theater critic Kenneth Tynan posed to [a twenty-three-year-old Tariq Ali](#) in a Stockholm restaurant in January 1967. Ali replied that it was Sweden’s military neutrality that gave Palme, then a senior cabinet minister, leeway to host the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm. Organized by philosophers Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, the symbolic tribunal put the United States on trial for its crimes in Vietnam. Neutrality certainly played some role in Palme’s decision — but it wasn’t the full story. As Palme [famously told](#) fellow Swedish Social Democrats in 1964, “Politics, comrades, is to want something.” While Britain’s Labour prime minister Harold Wilson rebuffed Russell’s request to host the tribunal in London, Palme was no ordinary social democrat. He was a deeply committed internationalist who

enthusiastically supported various anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggles from the 1960s until his tragic assassination in 1986.

Prime minister of Sweden from 1969 to 1976 and from 1982 until his death, Palme showed that a skilled politician who truly did “want something” could straddle the worlds of activism and statecraft — supporting international solidarity efforts at home while empowering movements for human dignity abroad. Decades later, the culture of solidarity he brought to the forefront of Swedish politics is embattled, even under attack, from many in his old party. But Palme’s legacy can inform the foreign policy program of left-wing leaders vying for power even today.

Wanting Something

Born into a bourgeois family in Stockholm’s posh Östermalm district, Palme was an unlikely figure to become the leader of Sweden’s Social Democratic Party (SAP). His political awakening, in fact, occurred in the United States, while he was a student at Kenyon College, a liberal arts college in central Ohio. There, he spent his weekends learning about the US labor movement from workers at a nearby turbine factory.

After graduating from Kenyon in 1948, Palme hitchhiked through the Jim Crow South, where he developed an understanding of racial segregation and the economic deprivation faced by many African Americans. His experiences in the United States would shape his later support for the anti-apartheid struggle of the African National Congress and national liberation wars in Namibia, Western Sahara, and occupied Palestine.

While downplayed in many accounts of the late 1960s, the International War Crimes Tribunal, also known as the Russell Tribunal, was a momentous event on the world stage. The adjudicating committee including such figures as James Baldwin, Stokely Carmichael, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, and former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas.

In order to gather evidence for the tribunal, a delegation led by Scottish communist and National Union of Mineworkers activist Lawrence Daly traveled through North Vietnam, documenting the US military’s targeting of civilian infrastructure, use of chemical weapons, and torture of Vietnamese prisoners of war.

The tribunal was concluded with an excoriating speech by Jean-Paul Sartre, with the committee finding the US guilty of genocide and its chief allies guilty of various war crimes. The tribunal and its verdict were widely publicized by the Swedish media, particularly in *Arbetet* and *Aftonbladet*, mass circulation newspapers financed by the SAP and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen, LO*).

Palme keenly took up the Vietnamese cause — in 1968, while serving as education minister in the government of his mentor Tage Erlander, he even marched alongside the North Vietnamese ambassador to Sweden in an antiwar protest. Yet this commitment to radical internationalist movements set Palme apart from his peers in the SAP, many of whom had become deeply enmeshed in the state bureaucracy.

Invested in the expansion of Sweden’s military-industrial complex, certain factions in the state bureaucracy strongly supported the neutral country’s unspoken alliance with NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Indeed, the SAP’s stance toward the

Soviet Union and its allies was governed not only by the widespread phenomenon of social democratic anti-communism, but also by the historical enmity between Sweden and Russia.

Prime Minister Palme

When Palme succeeded Erlander as SAP leader and prime minister of Sweden in October 1969, his government turned decisively to the left amid a [tidal wave of radicalism](#) in Swedish society. A well-organized left-wing movement embedded in all aspects of Swedish society hoped to move beyond the Fordist-Keynesian welfare state that had come to maturity under Erlander.

But Palme's internationalism drew a sharp reaction from the United States. In 1972, the US froze diplomatic relations with Sweden, after the prime minister [gave a speech](#) that compared the Christmas Bombings of Hanoi with the bombing of Guernica and the Nazi extermination camp at Treblinka.

While fiercely critical of US foreign policy, Palme was no friend of the Soviet Union or its Warsaw Pact allies. He strongly condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the subsequent repression of dissent under Gustáv Husák's authoritarian regime. In fact, Palme had been a fierce critic of the Soviet Union longer than he had been a Social Democrat — in the 1950s, he played a key role in organizing the anti-Soviet International Student Conference.

That said, Palme was one of the Western leaders most sympathetic to the Cuban Revolution and allied national liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa. When Palme visited Santiago de Cuba in 1975, Fidel Castro lauded the Swede's unwavering support for the struggles of the Angolan, Mozambican, and Bissau-Guinean people against Portuguese colonial occupation. These acts of international solidarity are vividly remembered by some. But it was Palme's support for democratic socialism in Chile that left an indelible imprint on Swedish society.

Solidarity With Chile

Addressing Parliament on November 7, 1973, Prime Minister Palme left no doubt as to why Chile's socialist president, Salvador Allende, had been overthrown:

The bottom line is this: Allende's victory in the 1970 elections gave the poor hope of a better society and greater human dignity. These hopes were quashed with violence . . . The overthrow of a government elected by the people in Chile has raised the question of whether, in general, it is possible to carry out profound changes in a poor and unfair society without having privileged groups resorting to violence.

Harald Edelstam, the Swedish ambassador to Chile from 1972 to 1973, would write [a decade after the Chilean coup](#) d'état that "The goals of Allende and the Popular Unity fully coincide with those the Swedish nation has set for itself. They wanted to attain, in a short period of time, what Sweden had achieved in 150 years of peace."

In his short time as ambassador, Edelstam helped save the lives of hundreds of people. These included Popular Unity officials, labor leaders, and Uruguayan and Bolivian dissidents who had sought refuge in Allende's Chile. During the junta's September

11, 1973 assault on Santiago, Edelstam walked to and from the besieged Cuban embassy with a Swedish flag in hand to offer diplomatic protection to such people and to Cuban government officials.

In October 1973, the Swedish national airline flew 200 radical leftists out of Chile as Edelstam began to attract the negative attention of the Pinochet regime and the right-wing press. In November 1973, the headline of the [pro-junta newspaper *La Segunda*](#) [read](#): “Another incident by the Red Pimpernel. How Long Must We Tolerate Ambassador Edelstam?” Three days later, the paper called for his expulsion: “Out of Dignity, the Swede Must Go.”

On December 4, 1973, the junta declared Edelstam persona non grata. Upon arriving in Stockholm, he was greeted with a hero’s welcome by the growing Latin American diaspora and treated with scorn by right-wing social democrats and conservative career bureaucrats.

Count Wilhelm Wachtmeister, the Foreign Ministry’s director of political affairs and a [frequent tennis partner](#) of George H. W. Bush, [later wrote](#) that Edelstam’s expulsion was a “convenient solution” to an “untenable situation,” whereby the embassy’s work was made impossible due to the large number of refugees it housed. Throughout his time as ambassador, Edelstam always had the backing of Palme and the majority of the Swedish public.

In contrast to Edelstam, Norway’s reactionary ambassador, Julius August Christian Fleischer, did not initially admit any refugees. Desperately trying to force the ambassador’s hand, Swedish officials drove refugees to the Norwegian embassy, assuming they would grant them asylum if they managed to enter the premises. Instead, Fleischer called the police and attempted to have the refugees arrested, only changing his mind at the last minute on account of the presence of two Swedish journalists.

Chilekommitté

During the brief period of Allende’s Popular Unity government, Swedes created more than a hundred organizations in support of Chile (*Chilekommitté*). They organized demonstrations, concerts, and information campaigns. One of the organizers of the first *Chilekommitté*, Anna Rydmark Venegas, recounted in 2016 that they “were young amateurs, not career politicians of anything of the sort, we just felt that we had to do something.” After the coup, the *Chilekommitté* shifted focus from supporting Popular Unity to organizing opposition to the junta.

From 1973 to 1977, Swedish political parties, civil society organizations, and faith communities aided the escape of 30,000 Chilean dissidents, many of whom were academics, students, and labor organizers. Today, Sweden is home to the world’s third largest Chilean diaspora population, after the United States and Argentina.

When the Chilean refugees first arrived in Sweden, the *Chilekommitté* played a vital role in welcoming them. The *Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen*, the now-defunct state agency responsible for housing refugees, supported the *Chilekommitté* financially so that they could bus people across the country and put them in contact with friends and family, both in Sweden and at home. When refugees arrived at Stockholm Central Station,

there were [more volunteers than refugees](#). Some volunteers were disappointed to “return home without a Chilean.”

The newly arrived Chilean refugees were invited into ordinary people’s homes and immediately absorbed into an already existing political infrastructure. They were quickly integrated into Swedish society, with many continuing their labor and political organizing in towns and cities across the country. The ethos of Chilean Solidarity (*Chilesolidariteten*) had a strong effect on the [internationalist ideology and practice](#) of left-wing organizations, networks, and campaigns in Sweden for decades to come. By 1974, Pinochet’s junta was becoming increasingly concerned about international solidarity campaigns, with one Chilean diplomat declaring that “the battlefield has moved outside Chile’s borders.” As part of a counteroffensive, the junta sent \$5,000 to the Chilean Embassy in Sweden to organize “cultural activities” aimed at improving Swedes’ image of the junta. Such efforts were dwarfed by the Left. Just a year prior, Olof Palme personally handed \$100,000 raised by the Swedish labor movement to Beatriz Allende, Salvador Allende’s daughter and chief political adviser. The Swedish public’s interest in Chile grew enormously when many filmmakers and artists were granted government stipends to pursue various projects aimed at spreading information about the Pinochet regime. Labor union activists traveled from workplace to workplace holding lectures. Chilean culture and music were popularized, contributing to a growing affinity with Latin America in general, as reflected in later movements in solidarity with the Sandinistas and left-wing guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala.

No wonder that in 2016, Chilean president [Michelle Bachelet visited Stockholm](#) to express gratitude for Sweden’s efforts during this period — saying, “Chile will never stop being grateful for that helpful hand” extended by Olof Palme and Harald Edelstam.

Fast Forward

This culture isn’t just a matter of the past. Today, SAP ministers are aligned with their EU counterparts in support of Washington-backed *golpistas* like Juan Guaidó. But the Swedish public is kept abreast of current events in Latin America by a public service broadcaster that closely follows developments in the region. When left-wing former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was released from prison on November 8, 2019, Swedish Radio canceled its regularly scheduled programming to broadcast live from the streets of Curitiba.

While this legacy is still significant, Sweden’s Social Democratic internationalism began to erode following the assassination of Olof Palme in 1986. With the investigation [still ongoing](#), several theories have arisen. Some are more plausible than others, but many point toward the enemies Palme made during his decades-long career as an anti-imperialist international statesman.

The 1989 “Lucia Decision” is especially seen as marking the SAP’s break with Palme’s internationalist legacy. Coinciding with the Scandinavian pre-Christmas holiday Lucia Day, Palme’s successor and former deputy Ingvar Carlsson ordered the suspension of non-UN-mandated asylum visas for two years. The SAP immigration

minister Maj-Lis Lööv made explicit the party's reactionary turn by warning Parliament that without such a restriction, five thousand Bulgarian Turks would be granted asylum in Sweden that year.

At the same time, the SAP turned to the right economically, Carlsson having been an early adopter of Third Way ideology. The economic impacts of this programmatic shift led many workers to abandon the party, first for the center-right Moderate Party and eventually for the far-right Sweden Democrats. Nonetheless, a robust civil society carries the torch of internationalism once borne by the Swedish labor movement.

Braving the cold Stockholm rain in September 2015, tens of thousands of Swedes took to the streets chanting, "[Refugees welcome](#)." Greeted by [roaring applause](#), the Social Democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven took to the stage, proclaiming, "My Europe doesn't build walls!" But his internationalism proved rather shallow. Just one month later, Löfven announced that Sweden would be closing its southern border with Denmark in order to stop migrants from arriving.

Later that autumn, with echoes of the early 1970s, thousands of ordinary Swedes gathered at train stations across the country to distribute food and clothing to refugees as doctors and nurses provided medical care to those in need. Volunteers shuttled the newcomers to short-term accommodation organized by faith communities and civil society groups. Their actions showed that social-democratic internationalism is alive and well in Sweden — even if it has been abandoned by the party that once nurtured it.