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Middle East History—It Happened in September

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Jewish Terrorists Assassinate U.N. Peacekeeper Count Folke Bernadotte

By Donald Neff

It was 47 years ago, Sept. 17, 1948, when Jewish terrorists assassinated Count Folke Bernadotte of Sweden as he sought to bring peace to the Middle East. His three-car convoy had been stopped at a small improvised roadblock in Jewish-controlled West Jerusalem when two gunmen began shooting out the tires of the cars and a third gunman thrust a Schmeisser automatic pistol through the open back window of Bernadotte's Chrysler. The 54-year-old diplomat, sitting on the right in the back, was hit by six bullets and died instantly. A French officer sitting next to Bernadotte was killed accidentally.

The assassins were members of Lehi (Lohamei Herut Israel—Fighters for the Freedom of Israel), better known as the Stern Gang. Its three leaders had decided a week earlier to have Bernadotte killed because they believed he was partial to the Arabs. One of those leaders was Yitzhak Shamir, who in 1983 would become prime minister of Israel.¹

Bernadotte had been chosen the United Nations mediator for Palestine four months earlier in what was the U.N.'s first serious attempt at peacemaking in the post-World War II world. As a hero of the war, when his mediation efforts on behalf of the International Red Cross saved 20,000 persons, including thousands of Jews, from Nazi concentration camps, Bernadotte seemed a natural choice for the post.² Theg2

terms of the mediator's mandate were to "promote a peaceful adjustment of the future situation in Palestine" and to allow him to mediate beyond the terms of the Partition Plan.³

It had been only on Nov. 29, 1947 that the U.N. General Assembly had voted to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states. Yet, as had been widely predicted, that action had led to war. Fighting intensified after elements of five Arab armies moved into Palestine the day after Israel proclaimed its establishment on May 14, 1948. Bernadotte's first action had been to arrange a truce, which lasted from June 11 to July 9.

During the lull, Bernadotte had put forward his first proposal for solving the conflict. Instead, it was to seal his fate. Bernadotte's transgression, in the view of Jewish zealots, was to include in his June 28 proposal the suggestion that Jerusalem be placed under Jordanian rule, since all the area around the city was designated for the Arab state.⁴

The U.N. partition plan had declared Jerusalem an international city that was to be ruled by neither Arab nor Jew. But the Jewish terrorists, including Shamir and Menachem Begin, the leader of the largest terrorist group, Irgun Zvai Leumi—National Military Organization, also known by the Hebrew acronym "Etzel"—had rejected partition and claimed all of Palestine and Jordan for the Jewish state. These Jewish extremists were horrified at Bernadotte's suggestion.

By July Sternists were already threatening Bernadotte's assassination. *New York Times* columnist C.L. Sulzberger reported meeting with two Stern members on July 24, who stated: "We intend to kill Bernadotte and any other uniformed United Nations observers who come to Jerusalem." Asked why, "They replied that their organization was determined to seize all of Jerusalem for the state of Israel and would brook no interference by any national or international body."⁵

Since Bernadotte's first set of proposals had caused criticism from all parties, he spent the rest of the summer working up new proposals, which he finally finished on Sept. 16. Unknown publicly was the fact that in his new suggestions Bernadotte dropped his idea of turning over Jerusalem to Jordan and instead reverted to the

partition plan's designation of it as an international city.⁶ Thus when Shamir's gunmen cut down Bernadotte the next day, they were unaware that he no longer was advocating giving Jerusalem to the Arabs.

The assassination brought an official condemnation from the Israeli government and promises of quick arrests. However, no one was ever brought to trial nor was there any nationwide outcry against the assassination.⁷ None of Lehi's leaders or the actual gunmen were ever caught, although they were early known to Israel's leaders.⁸

Israel's obvious reluctance to prosecute the assassins brought the first U.N. Security Council criticism of the new country. On Oct. 19, 1948, the council unanimously passed a resolution expressing its "concern" that Israel had "to date submitted no report to the Security Council or the Acting Mediator regarding the progress of the investigation into the assassination."⁹ An official inquiry by Sweden produced a report in 1950 that charged Israel's investigation had been so negligent that "doubt must exist as to whether the Israeli authorities really tried to bring the inquiry to a positive result." ¹⁰

Israel later admitted the laxity of its investigation and in 1950 paid the United Nations \$54,628 in indemnity for Bernadotte's murder.¹¹

The assassination and Israel's failure to punish the culprits struck a hard blow against the fledgling United Nations. The first secretary-general, Trygve Lie, said: "If the Great Powers accepted that this situation in the Middle East could best be settled by leaving the forces concerned to fight it out amongst themselves, it was quite clear that they would be tacitly admitting that the Security Council and the United Nations was a useless instrument in attempting to preserve peace."¹² To Secretary of State George Marshall, Lie had written on May 15, 1948 that Egypt had warned him it was about to send troops beyond its borders and against the Jewish state in Palestine, saying: "My primary concern is for the future usefulness of the United Nations and its Security Council...I must do everything to prevent this, otherwise the Security Council will have...created a precedent for any nation to take aggressive action in direct contravention to the Charter of the United Nations." ¹³

But, as author Kati Marton has observed: "If the United Nations spoke with 'considerable authority' early that summer, by fall its voice was barely above a whisper in Palestine. Unwilling or unable to enforce its own decisions, the U.N. [United Nations Organization, as it was generally called in 1948] became for many Israelis in Ben- Gurion's memorable putdown, 'UNO, schmuno.'" She also observed: "So muted was the world body's reaction, so lacking in any real sanctions against the Jewish state for its failure to pursue the murderers of the United Nations' mediator, that for Israel, 'world opinion' became an empty phrase."¹⁴

Indeed, the ideal of the U.N. acting as the world's peacemaker and peacekeeper was badly wounded with Bernadotte's death in Jerusalem. After this display of weakness, other nations did not hesitate to thumb their noses at the U.N. when it suited their purposes. The Serbian successor to the former Yugoslavian government is only the latest in a long list of countries that have contributed to the weakening of the world body that celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

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