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Becoming a Traitor

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ABSTRACT

In this autobiographical essay, I narrate my experience of being positioned in public as naive in my profession and a traitor to my country after publishing an op-ed in Sweden's largest daily newspaper, in which I argued that Sweden should not join NATO — the transatlantic military alliance. Some of the negative reactions came from within my own workplace. I had just been promoted to Professor at the Swedish Defence University and colleagues thought I had also betrayed them and the university by publishing the piece. In this essay, I disclose some of the reactions I encountered but, more importantly, I try to understand the effect they had on me, recounting my own inner dialogue of shame and resistance. At times I worried that I lacked expertise or even secretly harboured an affinity with the country that is now seen to motivate a Swedish NATO membership — i.e. Russia. At other times, I tried to turn the tables on the stigmatisers, claiming that it was they who had to change. While I work in a highly militarised environment, I think the fear of social death and professional shame I explore in this essay has broader resonance.

KEYWORDS

Resistance; security; shame; traitor

I.

Standing in the middle of the schoolyard in the suburban community south of Stockholm where I live, I anxiously observe the large crowd of well-dressed parents and relatives. My kids' summer graduation ceremony is about to begin. The morning sun is blindingly bright, but that is not only why I regret having forgotten to bring my sunglasses. It would have felt so good to hide behind them right now. I may look myself, but my body is restless — hands and legs trembling imperceptibly, while the stomach is sending out signals of both uncontrollable hunger and profound nausea. I am not sure if she can sense that something is wrong, but my wife takes my hand.

We are approached by two neighbours, one of whom asks smilingly: 'Did you get much reaction to your NATO piece?' Based on what I think I know about his political views, I interpret the question as insinuating and perhaps scornful. But he might just be feeling uncomfortable about seeing me given that this very morning, editorials in two of Sweden's major dailies have accused me of toeing the Kremlin's line for arguing that

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Sweden should stay out of NATO, the transatlantic military alliance (*Dagens Nyheter* 2015; Johansson 2015; Johansson 2015a). We are surrounded by music. The ceremony is starting now so there is no time to ask what he meant, to try to defend myself or express disappointment at the apparent lack of moral support. I just nod defensively but moments later I can feel defiance rising up inside me. As the school choir starts to sing, I tell myself I do not need to hide; I have nothing to be ashamed of.

II.

Thirty-three hours earlier, I am lying in bed, scanning the Internet on my phone. I should have been able to fall asleep happily as my co-authored op-ed has just appeared online for the most prestigious page for political debate in Sweden. But my initial pride in having had the article published is already giving way to a growing sense of unease. As I update the newspaper's homepage time and again, waiting for readers' comments to appear, I scrutinise our argument: Swedish NATO membership risks aggravating the Russian sense of physical insecurity, a point University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer (2014) has made about post-Cold War NATO enlargement. It might also deal a further blow to a fragile Russian great power identity — a topic explored by Norwegian international relations scholar Iver Neumann (2016a, 2016b). To prove beyond reasonable doubt that Russia *is* a great power, insulted Russian leaders might act even more as if the country were one. This would then make Sweden less, rather than more, physically secure (Hagström and Lundborg 2015a).

My co-author and I were convinced that our argument would fill a gap in the Swedish security debate. Since its annexation of Crimea the year before, Russia has been increasingly represented as a threat to the extent that joining NATO is now supported by a majority of the Swedish population. I think we may have been hoping to defeat Swedish NATO supporters using an argument drawn partly from their own preferred theory. But the first few comments are critical and demeaning, and I start to worry that those who want Sweden to join NATO will not yield so easily. Lying there wide-awake in the light of early dawn I am haunted by two disturbing thoughts: Am I unqualified to take part in this debate? Do I sympathise with Russia? I know that the answer to both questions is no, but cannot help also feel: 'well, maybe'.

Is it possible that I remain a child in my outlook, despite the fact that I have become a professor of political science specialising in security policy, let alone one working at the Swedish Defence University? One childhood friend at least tells me that to this day I fail to understand that states have to fend for themselves through armaments and alliance-building. He says my childish naivety is a luxury typical of both Swedes and academics. But is it *just* naivety or do I remain a child also in the sense of being anti-American? Some of my earliest childhood memories are of demonstrations against the US war in Vietnam and against Franco and Pinochet — the US supported dictators in Spain and Chile. Is it possible that being raised to be critical of US foreign and security policy has made me inadvertently sympathetic to Russia? Have I fallen into the tiresome trap of treating the enemy of my enemy as my friend?

I am highly alert now and sleep does not feel like an option. I hope my tossing and turning will wake my wife. I want to tell her I feel vulnerable and hope that she will rub my back and say that everything will be fine — but she just continues to sleep

quietly next to me. After hours of agony over things I cannot control, I finally doze off after the blackbirds have already started to sing in our garden.

The following morning, I am riding the subway to work. Sitting there, sleep-deprived in the packed train, I remain anxious, but I also feel a tiny bit excited. My article has now appeared in the paper version of *Dagens Nyheter*, which several people on the train are reading on their way to work. I observe them and try to decipher from the looks on their faces if they might like our argument or if they, like some early readers last night, find it problematic and suspect. It is hard to tell, of course, and for now I decide to take it as a good sign that no one seems to recognise me.

In my briefcase, I have a red paper heart that my eight-year-old daughter gave me just as I was leaving for work, her sprawling letters say: ‘Good luck today, Dad’. She and her older brother know I am under some pressure at work but have only a vague notion of why. As I finally got a chance over breakfast to ask my wife how to deal with the criticism I had received during the night, they interjected all sorts of questions: ‘What is this NATO that some people want to join?’, ‘Is the USA better or worse than Russia?’, ‘Is Putin crazy?’, ‘Why are they criticising you, Dad?’ Not only did they constantly interrupt my private therapy session, but I was also unable to formulate any satisfactory answers. Perhaps there is less certainty than they think, and I need, but the heart in my bag at least provides me with a sense of comfort.

III.

As I arrive at work less than an hour later, I put up a shield as I walk the corridors filled with military memorabilia, and paintings and photographs of generations of Swedish officers. A few colleagues look up from their computers, smile and say ‘good morning’ as I rush by their open doors. We do this every day but one question — whether I am ‘ready for the rough ride’ — seems to confirm my suspicion that there is more than just curiosity in the air. I smile and respond with fake confidence, puffing myself up like a threatened frog. I do not want anyone to know that I am *not* ready.

Even the most mundane tasks prove challenging this morning. As my hand moves the mouse, the cursor circulates restlessly on the computer screen, but my mind does not quite follow. I jump at the ding of each new email, hoping to get some moral support at last, but there is just more scorn and contempt to process. One person asks, ‘the simple question’ whether we have ‘considered what might happen if we let Russia decide what Sweden should and should not do’. A retired brigadier general, moreover, writes to share his criticism of the ‘myth that Russia has been humiliated by the West’. Response op-eds from various politicians, pundits and scholars also start to appear in the online version of the newspaper — seven in two days, which is more than any op-ed on Sweden’s relationship with NATO has received in the past few years. They are unanimously critical of us for ‘lacking logical anchoring’ (Albinsson 2015), ‘presenting various excuses for Putin’s violations of international law’ (Askeljung et al. 2015) and, in essence, ‘proposing ‘Munich 2’, the result [of which] ... was the Second World War’ (Vinokuras 2015). The second biggest daily also publishes an editorial, saying that our op-ed is as unlikely as if two teachers at the Royal Institute of Technology were to argue that the earth is flat (Johansson 2015b).

The op-ed is shared on social media almost 4000 times in the first few days. On Twitter, the discussion explodes; my co-author and I are accused of ‘losing our academic integrity’

and ‘whoring around for Putin’ through our ‘tendentious analysis’. One tweet represents the op-ed as ‘shallow’ and ‘reflective of Russia’s propaganda model’. Other tweets say we are surely on ‘Putin’s payroll’ and express surprise that we are allowed to call ourselves ‘researchers’ and ‘be paid a salary’. Yet others question our authority to debate Swedish NATO membership in the first place — but there is no consensus on whether we are just a joke reminiscent of the Marx Brothers, as suggested by one tweet, or ‘traitors’ ‘for being officially used in Putin/the Kremlin’s propaganda war’, as argued by another.¹

My fears from last night appear confirmed. We are indeed being accused of both naivety and treachery. I know these are not the same thing, but both allegations pull the rug from under my feet in similar ways. In the end, it does not really matter whether I am writing ludicrous things because I am colluding with the enemy or because I just happen to lack expertise. The little support we do get does not make things any easier, as it comes mostly from people and organisations I do not want in my corner. Apart from a few disenfranchised social democrats, it is a motley crew of left wing anti-imperialists so sceptical about everything American that they seem to support anything anti-American, including North Korea or indeed Vladimir Putin; the Russian news agency, Sputnik News; and the booming online alt-right media, which argues that the Swedish military should be strong enough to take care of national defence on its own (*Fria Tider* 2015; Frick 2015; Jinge 2015; Romelsjö 2015; Sandin 2015; *Sputnik News* 2015; Widegren 2015). It feels strange and unnerving that almost no legitimate actors are offering any encouragement (one exception is Bjereld 2015). I try to comfort myself that they are keeping quiet because public support for us would just add fuel to the fire, by mobilising opponents and friends that no one wants. But any sense of relief is highly transient. If our op-ed also just ended up energising the wrong people, was it a mistake to write it? Or are opponents of Swedish NATO membership keeping quiet because they too have *realised* that Sweden must change its security policy in the face of a rapidly changing strategic environment? Why am I unable to recognise what so many others have begun to take for granted?

Colleagues from the Swedish Defence University also publish two rejoinders in the major dailies. One criticises Mearsheimer’s argument as ‘reflecting ... ignorance about NATO enlargement and Russian behaviour in Ukraine, and a theoretically one-eyed position with problematic implications for defence and security policy practice’ (Engelbrekt 2015). Under the headline, ‘The War at the Swedish Defence University’, the other ‘seeks to nuance the image of the research that is conducted’ at our university. It makes a distinction between the ‘insights’ it provides and our ‘opinions’, which ‘lack objective support’ (Edström et al. 2015). These articles are decidedly more academic in tone and content than some of the other criticism, but our colleagues seem equally annoyed by the op-ed.

‘Part of the university is in uproar’, a close confidante tells me in the late afternoon, ‘I hear that some people are really mad and want to see you guys fired’. Are faculty members concerned that the op-ed might rub off on the university and undermine the reputation for expertise and legitimacy it has carefully sought to craft over the years? Do they worry that if the government were to listen to us, it might jeopardise the funding hikes we are expected to get thanks to the notion that Russia is becoming increasingly threatening? It feels like an abyss is opening up at the university, and I cannot even conceive of a

way to bridge it by asking people in person. I try to understand them, but most of all I worry about how this might affect me.

On my way home from work my head continues to process different scenarios, as if on autopilot. There should be no legal grounds for my dismissal, but I am aware that employers have significant leeway in getting rid of employees they no longer want on the payroll. Being one of the newest political science faculty members might make it even easier for the university to get rid of me. Even if I am allowed to stay, I fear some colleagues might no longer take me seriously and I may have to change jobs anyway.

As this long day draws to an end, just before bedtime, I get an email from a superior with a lot of clout at the university — a commander on leave from the Swedish Navy. ‘Have you seen these?’ he writes, attaching links to various pieces of positive commentary on the op-ed, among them an article published by a neo-Nazi group (Nordfront 2015). When I seek her advice again, my wife gently chides me for checking my email at this late hour. She says I am usually too exhausted to handle what I get. But this is a rookie mistake I keep making, so the same procedure repeats itself the following night. I am not really sure what I hope to find in my inbox, but in his response to my reply, the commander now writes that debating NATO ‘is not an academic armchair exercise but one of the most central matters for a state related to the survival of the nation — it engages many ... and you have completely pissed off a number of people’.

IV.

I recognise this feeling of being out of sync with other people from my childhood. Growing up in an apartment in Stockholm’s northern suburbs, mainly inhabited by working class people, immigrants and young civil servants, I was not part of any significant in-group. I was seldom invited to play with the cool kids, but nor was I bullied. I think most people respected me, and I felt little pressure to conform. I did not pay much attention to the question of identity and difference until I was 13 years old, when my family moved to a house in a more affluent town further north of Stockholm, populated largely by private sector employees and owners of small businesses. From early on, I had the feeling that I was not going to be accepted here. Other kids made fun of my round glasses and red winter jacket and called me a communist. Verbal abuse was soon intertwined with mild physical bullying. Even though this was happening in the final years of the Cold War, being called a communist did not immediately make me a traitor. Many others suffered similar treatment and I do not know what — if anything — we had in common.

The changing rooms in the school gym were particularly violent in an arbitrary way, but I was initially more shocked and disgusted by what was going on there than concerned about my own safety. The other boys had discovered masturbation and engaged in various sexual games together. One day after gym class, they ran around the shower room urinating on each other. I tried my best to stay out of harm’s way but became a target, nonetheless. Embarrassed and indignant I told my teacher about this but felt as if her disgusted grimace was directed at me as much as at the urination per se. I was an ambitious student, often more comfortable in the company of adults than with other kids, but my teacher did not seem to get me. She was more at ease among, and even charmed by, the boys who interfered with her teaching — the very same ones who had peed on my leg. I think I may have sought some redress, from both the urination and

my teacher, and, encouraged by my parents, I proposed to bring up the changing room situation in a meeting of the whole class. My teacher reluctantly agreed.

Standing there in front of everyone, I tried my best to project clarity and confidence, but my shaky voice and stutter exposed me. The other boys behaved well, but their confident body language and amused exchanges of glances revealed what they were really thinking. Afterwards, they let me know in subtle ways that I was no longer just different but something worse. At times, I felt ashamed of having disclosed one of the secrets that seemed to glue the boys together. I tried to adapt or perhaps rather to become invisible. At other times I entertained heroic thoughts about how I would one day leave this town and prove my worth both to myself and to them. I remember clenching my fist in my pocket and thinking: ‘one day I will show these assholes ...’.

I have repeated this like a mantra ever since, but do not always know to whom ‘these assholes’ refers — or what it is exactly that I wish to ‘show’. Nonetheless, ‘they’ keep making me feel as if I do not belong. I worry about this but do surprisingly little to adapt. Instead, I continue to shout out how the terms of the community must change so that I can finally become part of it without reservation. Then I worry even more.

V.

Nearly 30 years later, it is the spring of 2015. I have been working at the Swedish Defence University for less than a year and just weeks earlier been promoted to Professor. I am invited for the first time to a lunch meeting for full professors in the department and try to figure out this partly unknown form of social interaction. I feel at ease as long as the conversation revolves around gossip and departmental politics, but the exchange takes an unexpected turn when one colleague recalls having watched a debate about Sweden’s relationship with NATO on television the night before. Someone says the female theatre director who spoke against Swedish NATO membership was naive and that her television appearance was embarrassing and inappropriate. No one dissents, including me, but by the time I get back to my office I am both puzzled and slightly agitated: Is this a university where professors can get away with making remarks that are theoretically and politically one-sided?

I run into a colleague who is also new to the university and tell him what happened at lunch. It turns out we are equally annoyed by the seeming lack of diversity of opinion among the professors. Perhaps both of us are also slightly uncomfortable in our new positions, being employed by a university that has an intimate relationship with the Swedish Armed Forces. It only takes us a few minutes to agree that international relations theory seems to provide a number of good arguments for why Sweden should not join NATO. When I call the editors in charge of the op-ed page to pitch our ideas, they seem excited about publishing an article opposed to Swedish NATO membership written by two faculty members at the Swedish Defence University. We are excited too as we start to smash the text back and forth between us.

VI.

As the graduation ceremony continues at my kids’ school, my fist is again clenched in my pocket as shame starts to give way to defiance and resolve. After listening to songs and

speeches and eating strawberry cake in the company of parents who may or may not find me suspect, I ride my bicycle home. I spend the rest of the day writing the first draft of a reply to all the expert rejoinders that have been published in the newspaper. I try to restore myself by asking: why does anti-NATO have to mean pro-Russia? (Hagström and Lundborg 2015b).

When the reply is published online a few days later, I circulate a link throughout the department, accompanied by a brief email that says I want the Swedish Defence University to become more inclusive, in the sense that researchers with opposite perspectives can coexist and be stimulated by lively internal debate. I invite people to come to my office to talk to me rather than about me. To my relief, a handful of people express their support — if not of my advocacy related to Sweden and NATO then at least of my right to take part in the national security debate.

An officer who is also a postdoc circulates a reply in which he explains that he ‘was angry because it [the op-ed] was so naive ... and because it represents the Swedish Defence University and thereby also me and all our colleagues’. He says he thinks the article ‘runs errands for the enemy’. When I respond, also to the whole department, another postdoc angrily asks us ‘to have this conversation outside of his mailbox’. Minutes later there is a knock on my office door and one of the faculty members who co-authored a public rejoinder comes into my room. His speech is loud and slightly forced, just like mine, but we agree at least that there should be more dialogue.

VII.

Despite all the brouhaha surrounding myself and the NATO op-ed a few years ago, I am still working at the Swedish Defence University. To my surprise, I have been given greater responsibilities and more power too. Most importantly perhaps, I have been elected representative of the faculty members on the university board. In that capacity I have a front-row seat to watch the ceremony in which the university is to commemorate 200 years as a military academy and 10 years as a more regular institution of higher learning. As I arrive at the hall where the celebration is about to take place, I am wearing my best suit. I seem to fit in relatively well, or do I? There is the king. There is the minister of defence. There is the commander-in-chief. The whole defence establishment is here too, including a number of current and former cabinet members, members of parliament, generals and admirals. People are standing in small groups. They seem happy to see each other and many of them engage in cheek kissing — a highly unusual form of social greeting in Sweden that I vaguely associate with the upper class. The other board members are too busy talking with dignitaries to take any notice of me. I tread a fine line between puffing up like a frog again and relishing my obvious invisibility. I try to meet the eyes of a general with whom I had some contact over East Asian security a few years before, but he seems keenly focused on ignoring me. The room is full of people, but I find my seat without speaking to anyone.

After the festivities, we all move to a room where there will be a standing lunch reception. On my way there, a director general who is a former cabinet member from the conservative party, as well as a former chairman of the board of my university sneaks up on me and introduces himself. He is clearly in high spirits after the celebration. We shake hands and he asks me who I am. When I tell him my name, he looks amused and says:

‘Oh yes, I have heard about *you*’. He then turns away and starts to talk to someone else. I can feel my heart pounding but I keep on walking.

Note

1. Searches on <http://twitter.com/>.

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Notes on contributor

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