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Review by **Michael Jonsson**, Uppsala University

Why, in spite of its close cultural, economic, and historical ties to – and military dependence on – other Western democracies, did Sweden choose to stay out of NATO and remain neutral during the 1950s? To its critics, this policy left Sweden "vulnerable to an attack by the Soviet Union, without providing the deterrence and prepared assistance that would come with membership of the Atlantic alliance" (176). Furthermore, Sweden's neutrality becomes all the more puzzling given that the country would almost inevitably have been drawn into any superpower conflict in northern Europe. Cognizant of this, its political leadership authorized the armed forces to prepare to receive military assistance from the West (180). Even so, Sweden officially remained neutral, a policy which is has largely maintained to this day.

In spite of the neutrality policy being the singularly dominant theme in the study of Swedish security policy, the motives behind it have never been entirely satisfactorily explained. Taking a decisively novel angle, Robert Dalsjö argues that the underlying logic of the neutrality policy was *not* that Swedish politicians believed that they could dodge a third consecutive world war, nor was the policy mainly used for domestic purposes in peacetime, as previously claimed.[1] Instead, the "hidden rationality" of the neutrality policy was that while Swedish decision-makers realized that the country would likely be dragged into a regional superpower confrontation, they hoped that by remaining neutral Sweden could be spared from an initial, devastating exchange of nuclear weapons (188). This was based on military thinking during the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, which assumed that a superpower conflict would begin with an "apocalyptic rain of hydrogen bombs" – since NATO could not counter the conventional capabilities of the Soviet Union – followed by "broken-backed warfare" (189). Since the limited arsenals would soon become depleted, Swedish incentives to remain neutral initially were strong, "until the Soviet Union had had its nuclear fangs removed" (189).

This is a grand claim to make, especially given that it is almost an article of faith in Sweden that the neutrality policy was based on lofty political ideals, not crass military calculations. But Dalsjö supports his claim with a

[1] Michael af Malmborg, *Neutrality and State-Building in Sweden* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001), 165–166, 201–202.

persuasive chain of evidence, couching the reasoning of key decision-makers in the military realities and beliefs at the time. Firstly, he shows that Sweden likely would have been drawn into any superpower conflict in the region and that Swedish decision-makers were fully aware of this. Using Swedish airspace would have provided several advantages to both strategic bombers and fighter jets from NATO, and Sweden most likely would not have resisted such overflights, just as they "turned a blind eye to massive Western overflights during the Second World War" (181). Cognizant of this, the Soviet Union did not trust Sweden to remain neutral in the event of a war. Furthermore, that Swedish decision-makers realized that the neutrality policy might well have failed is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that then Prime Minister Tage Erlander was personally involved in building the core of a resistance movement in case of Soviet occupation (178). But this reiterates the question of why Sweden would chose this ambiguous middle way, incurring the disadvantages of alignment with the West, "without sharing in the advantages (explicit security guarantees, subsidized equipment, prepared assistance)" (183)? These points are well-recognized in the debate, but are typically used to criticize the neutrality policy, not to inquire as to why decision-makers would willingly take on such potential risks and disadvantages.

This, Dahlsjö argues, was because Swedish powerbrokers at the time were hoping to buy time, to "avoid being immediately drawn into a future world war" (187, quoting Erlander), since this was likely to involve a brief but devastating "atomic duel" (190). In order to reinforce these key claims, he draws on public speeches by former prime and foreign ministers, diaries, and communications between Swedish diplomats and their US and Norwegian counterparts. Furthermore, Dalsjö illustrates how Swedish military thinking shifted during the 1950s, from arguing that early entry into a conflict would increase Sweden's chances of receiving reinforcements, to arguing that a brief "grace period" would be immensely valuable in the event of a nuclear war (191). The one glitch in an otherwise impressive chain of evidence is the absence of war plans confirming this, but Dalsjö instead cites war games at the National Defense College, which offer a window into Swedish military thinking at the time.

By the late 1960s, this 'hidden rationality' became increasingly militarily irrelevant, as the advent of second strike capability and nuclear parity implied that Sweden could no longer hope to evade a devastating, initial nuclear phase of war (193). But by then, "small-state realism" aiming to stay out of a superpower confrontation "beyond good and evil" (169) had begun to change into "small-state idealism", in which neutrality turned into a "bully pulpit", providing not only an opportunity but also a duty to speak out on behalf of the down-trodden (179-180). In recognizing this shift, Dalsjö reinforces the plausibility of his claims, by showing that what was rational in the 1950s was largely irrelevant by the 1970s. But by then neutrality had become an official 'orthodoxy' (176) which was extremely difficult to back away from or even criticize publicly, a fact which remains partly true to this day.

In advancing a novel explanation of the motives behind the Swedish neutrality policy – supported by meticulously collected and engagingly presented primary evidence – Dalsjö makes a major contribution to the debate on Sweden's foreign policy during the Cold War. In pin-pointing the fear of an initial nuclear exchange as driving the wish to formally remain militarily neutral, Dalsjö does indeed seem to uncover the 'hidden rationality' behind Sweden's neutrality policy at the time of its birth. This is no mean feat, especially given how well-researched the topic has become over the past two decades. Given the wealth of evidence presented – which remarkably seems to indicate that key decision-makers at the time were trying to communicate precisely the logic which Dalsjö now re-uncovers - those who wish to dispute this explanation have a heavy burden of proof stacked against them.

Michael Jonsson holds a Ph.D. in political science and is currently a researcher at the Department of Government, Uppsala University. He is the editor (with Svante Cornell) of *Conflict, Crime and the State in Postcommunist Eurasia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) and has published several articles on security politics in the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe. His current research is focused on rebel recruitment, retention and defection during civil wars.