

Kluwer Mediation Blog

When the Mediators Pay the Highest Price

Martin Svatoš (FORARB/Charles University) · Thursday, August 21st, 2014

Recent development in the Near East reminds how long and disastrous the Arabic-Israeli conflict is. Unfortunately, it has already claimed thousands of victims and every one of these tragedies could narrate a specific and sad story. One among them is especially important to be commemorated since it recounts a life and work of the first UN mediator who had saved thousands of prisoners in the Second World War and who was later killed carrying out his duties.

Folke Bernadotte, the Count of Wisborg was born in Stockholm into the House of Bernadotte on 2nd January 1895 as a grandson of King Oscar II of Sweden. He was raised in almost ascetic and simple manner which has shown to be an advantage later on when he proved to have great organising and communicative skills. He studied at the Military Academy Karlberg and later, he took the officer's exam and was promoted to the rank of major. Despite some military and diplomatic tasks in earlier period of his life, the time that tested his real qualities arrived with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Bernadotte was appointed vice chairman of the Swedish Red Cross in 1943. During the autumns of 1943 and 1944, he organized prisoner exchanges which brought home around 11,000 Allies' war prisoners from Germany via Sweden in exchange for captured German soldiers. Already this deed would require appreciation, yet his main and most glorious exploit was still to come. It was not before nearly the end of the War when he organized so called *white buses*: A transport of the prisoners from German concentration camps to Sweden.

Despite the significant danger caused by political difficulties and Allied bombing, he succeeded in rescuing more than 30,000 prisoners of Danish, Norwegian, French, Polish, Czech, British, American, Argentinean and Chinese nationality from German concentration camps. The rescue operation was carried out by using the entirely white buses with only the Red Cross emblem on their sides, thereof the name of the whole operation.

During the last months of the war, Bernadotte was introduced to Heinrich Himmler, Reich Minister of the Interior, by whom he was asked to deliver the proposal of a complete surrender to Great Britain and the United States under the condition of continuation of the fight against the Soviet Union in the East. The offer was passed on to the Swedish government and then to Winston Churchill and Harry Truman and not surprisingly rejected.

Bernadotte's most impressive deed is, however, connected with the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp that was one of the last standing facilities of its terrible kind in Germany. By the order of the SS general Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the camp should have been blown up in order to cover Nazi

crimes. When Bernadotte learnt about this intention, it was nearly 24 hours before the planned destruction. Yet, he started a massive and very intensive negotiation and finally succeeded to prevent the Germans to do so. All his heroic and prudent behaviour granted him an international reputation of skilful and sage diplomat which finally led to ironical twist of fate.

In 1948, following the UN Partition Plan for Palestine and the subsequent unilateral Israeli Declaration of Independence, the First Arab–Israeli war broke out and the recently established United Nations Organization was in seek of a trusted and gifted negotiator to become the “UN Mediator in Palestine”. The choice was unanimous: Folke Bernadotte became the first official UN mediator in the history.

Helping the parties being at war to settle is an uneasy task, yet he met the challenge. Since the parties were unwilling to meet face to face, he went aboard of his plane and pendulated between the disuniting parties. According to some, he was the first mediator who used the concept of shuffle diplomacy in the modern history: Just in first two months of his mission, he passed 215 hours in the air.

Anyway, his enthusiasm was appreciated by both parties. The representative of Arabic delegation within the negotiations of Rhodes, Henry Cattan described him as a personality who thought in independent and impartial manner. He added: *“Once he had discovered the injustice, he told it straight out – and this cost him his life.”* The Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Moshe Sharet thought back to him: *“It was amazing to observe how fast he was able to orient himself in the labyrinth of the conflict, how he was willing to listen and understand the other’s opinion”*.

And his effort panned out soon: The cease-fire was announced on 18th July 1948. Consequently he elaborated two different plans how to settle the conflict once for all, yet both the proposals were refused by the conflicting parties. He described the difficulties he faced in negotiation as follow:

“In putting forward any proposal for the solution of the Palestine problem, one must bear in mind the aspirations of the Jews, the political difficulties and differences of opinion of the Arab leaders, the strategic interests of Great Britain, the financial commitment of the United States and the Soviet Union, the outcome of the war, and finally the authority and prestige of the United Nations.”

Sadly, he was not able to propose the third plan since his peace effort was not appreciated by all: He was assassinated on Friday 17th September 1948 by members of the armed Jewish Zionist group Lehi (commonly known as the Stern Gang or Stern Group). Kind of sad paradox, given the fact, that he saved thousands of Jews from concentration camps during the Second World War. The paradoxes, however, do not stop by this. Together with Folke Bernadotte, the UN observer Colonel Andre Serot, a French hero from two world wars, was sitting in the car and met the same fate. He had only swapped places at the last minute so that he could personally thank Bernadotte for saving his wife from a Nazi concentration camp. Both were dead on arrival to the hospital.

Folke Bernadotte was succeeded by his American deputy Ralph Bunche who was successful in bringing the parties together to sign the Armistice Agreements in 1949, for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Regrettably, the history shows us that this was rather an *intermezzo* than the end of the conflict...

Anyway, Folke Bernadotte, the first UN mediator, paid the highest price for his peace effort. Unfortunately, he was neither the only one, nor the last one: Neither the only mediator who was killed, nor the last victim of the long lasting Israeli-Arab hostility.


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of stylized human figures, with one figure in the center being magnified by a magnifying glass. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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