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## Norway, Skiing and Swede Hate: Some Reflections on the World Ski Championship in Cortina d'Ampezzo and Its Consequences

The World Ski Championship in Lahti in Finland 2017 is just about to begin.<sup>1</sup> It will awaken strong national feelings in Norway, where skiing is still an important part of the cultural heritage and national identity, unlike in, for example, Sweden, where other sports like ice hockey and football compete for attention in media and among the general public. Skiing in Norway holds a unique position in the world and no equivalent can be found in any other country. The great Norwegian interest in skiing has dark undertones, however. When one listens to Norwegian sports commentators on TV or radio or reads Norwegian newspapers, one is struck by their nationalist tone and the “Swede hate” that slips in between the lines in connection with the reporting from international skiing competitions where Swedes and Norwegians fight for victory and coveted medals. Not least has the Norwegian ski star Petter Northug made it his mission to repeatedly express negative views about Sweden and Swedish skiers. He has even been associated with strong words like

“Swede hate”; something that Swedish and Norwegian media are quick to draw attention and add fuel to.<sup>2</sup>

As a Swede, one feels puzzled and uncomprehending when faced with these strong Norwegian reactions and the aversion to Sweden in connection with sport in general and cross-country skiing in particular. There are, of course, explanations for this in the countries’ complicated shared history. The dissolution of the union 1905 is of course a factor, but even more so, the Second World War, when Sweden, according to many Norwegians, betrayed their sister nation in the west by repeatedly making extensive concessions to Nazi Germany. Not least, the so-called traffic of military on leave<sup>3</sup> through Sweden to Norway was controversial. For several years, troops and war material, etc. were sent through Sweden to Norway (and Finland).<sup>4</sup> “Sweden’s cause never became ours, “unlike Finland’s, after the attack” by the Soviet Union in November 1939, during the Winter War. Sweden sent military equipment, volunteers and more to Finland to help the neighbouring country against the numerically and militarily superior opponent.<sup>5</sup> No help equivalent to this was ever sent to Norway in its struggle against the German occupying power.



Happy Sixtus Janson on his way to Olympic Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen 1936.

Even in terms of sport, there are examples of situations where Sweden did not stand by Norway against the German occupying power. On the contrary, sport exchanges with Nazi Germany were intense during the first years of the war. A concrete example of such a betrayal was, according to the Norwegians, the Swedish participation in the World Ski Championship 1941 in the Italian winter sport resort Cortina d'Ampezzo. After the war, this was strongly condemned by Norwegian ski leaders and a boycott of Swedish and international skiing was initiated in the autumn of 1945. A boycott that was retrospectively referred to as the Cortina affair. The purpose of the following is partly to highlight the Swedish participation in the Cortina World Cup in 1941 and partly to analyse the so-called Cortina affair and its consequences.

## Research mode

Sport and foreign policy is an overlooked area in Swedish sport history research and the need for research about the period after 1945 until today is great. In what follows, special focus is placed on the limited research that exists on the relationship between Sweden and Norway in the field of sport. The dissolution of the union in 1905 led not only to political friction between Sweden and Norway, but in a number of other areas, including sport. The Swedish historian Jan Lindroth has shown that the Norwegians boycotted the Nordic Games of 1905 due to the tense state between the countries. The Norwegians blamed “dejection of the most profound nature”. It was not until 1913 that the Norwegians participated in the Nordic Games again, that is, when the situation between the countries had finally been normalised.<sup>6</sup>

The Norwegian historian Matti Goksøyrr has also examined the Swedish-Norwegian relationships in the field of sport. He notes that the Swedes responded to the Norwegians' boycott of the Nordic Games by boycotting the skiing competitions at Holmenkollen in Oslo, Norwegian skiing's main event. Here, it should be noted that the boycott only related to skiing, which shows the unique position of skiing in Norway at an early stage. Goksøyrr suggests that the skiers were seen as national icons representing national characteristics and therefore it was skiing in particular that was used for political purposes vis-à-vis Sweden.<sup>7</sup>

Two things should be pointed out with regard to Goksøyr's research that are of great relevance to the following. Firstly, there is a history of skiing boycotts between the countries, dating from well before the Cortina affair blossomed in 1945. Secondly, the skiers had a unique position as "icons" in relation to other Norwegian athletes.

The Swedish historian Per-Olof Holmäng has in great detail and very proficiently accounted for the behaviour of Swedish sport during the Second World War, and has also briefly discussed the Ski World Cup in Cortina in 1941. He argues that the Ski World Cup in Cortina was just one of many examples of Swedish ski sport's actions and evasion vis-à-vis Germany. The consequence of the concessions to Germany was that Sweden not only participated in the 1941 World Ski Championship in Cortina, but in various other sports events as well, together with nations of dubious, to say the least, political affiliations, both during and after the Second World War. This stance was particularly apparent in the very frequent sports exchanges with Germany. According to the Holmäng, there was a professed desire by the Swedish government that the sports movement maintain its relations with Germany. The Swedish government wanted good relations with the powerful and expansionist neighbour in the south. The government's actions must be understood against the background of the situation in Europe. The German war machine rolled successfully forward in 1941 and one acted based on the belief in a final German victory in the war, and therefore chose to stay on good terms with the Germans; a tactically successful and clever approach, but, according to many in hindsight, morally questionable.<sup>8</sup> Norwegian historical research has not shown any particular interest in the Cortina World Cup and the so-called Cortina affair.

## Sources

There are mainly two types of sources that form the basis of the article. Firstly, a large collection of newspaper clippings that is stored in the Swedish Ski Association's archives in the Swedish National Archives. It contains a large number of newspaper clippings from both Swedish and Norwegian newspapers and presents a good picture of the events from

both countries' point of view. Secondly, the Swedish Ski Association's archives have been reviewed in search of minutes from annual meetings, board meetings and similar. Unfortunately, almost all correspondence in the archive from the period in question is missing, with the exception of Sixtus Janson's correspondence. He was a central person during the Cortina affair in his capacity as chairman of the Swedish Ski Association 1922–1952.<sup>9</sup>

## The World Ski Championships in Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1941

The World Ski Championships took place in 1937 for the first time. The event was organised by the International Ski Federation (FIS) and its chairman, the Norwegian Nicolai Östgaard. He was also the Norwegian Crown Prince's adjutant and fled to England with the royal family during the German occupation in April 1940. In Östgaard's place, the Secretary General for Swedish Skiing, C.G.D. Hamilton, stepped in as the acting President of FIS during the war, with the approval of Östgaard.<sup>10</sup> Hamilton's actions were supported by the German National Sports Leader and SA officer Hans von Tschammer und Osten, as the Germans wanted to maintain the international sport exchanges even during the war, despite the fact that many countries were occupied by German troops.

Hamilton's actions during the war in his capacity as chairman of FIS would have consequences for him personally. In 1946, he was ousted as President (and Vice President) of the International Ski Federation's board at the congress in the French town of Pau due to his pro-German stance during the war.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Hamilton, the Germans and FIS, the Norwegians and others felt that it was inappropriate, or rather, completely wrong, that the Ski World Cup in 1941 was organised in Cortina, considering:

- that the FIS had suspended the Ski World Championship in Oslo in 1940
- that the IOC had suspended the Olympic Games in 1940
- that the Ski World Cup was organised in a belligerent fascist country

- that large parts of Europe were occupied by German troops
- that the Ski World Cup was boycotted by France, England, Norway and the USA

But Hamilton was not the only one trying to maintain good relations with the Germans. Swedish ski leaders, sports leaders and the Swedish government felt that sport and politics should not be associated with each other. Therefore, it was not deemed problematic that Sweden took part in the Cortina Ski World Cup in 1941 or any other sports event against the Germans and their allies during the war. Furthermore, the government emphatically wanted to maintain the sport exchanges with Germany throughout the war, based on the pretence of a German final victory, which meant that the Swedes chose to be on Germany's side at the beginning of the war. When the success of the Germans in the war ceased, the Swedish government's and sport's attitude towards the sports exchange with Germany changed.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, it can be noted that the World Ski Championships in Cortina were a success for Swedish skiing. They came in second place in the medal standings after Finland. The newspapers praised the Swedish ski heroes and this seems to have fuelled the Norwegian aversion to Swedish skiing after the war. Not only did Sweden take part in the World Ski Championships, it also achieved great success in the Norwegian national sport, cross-country skiing.

The Swedish ski team consisted of 23 people, and in total, the trip through a war-torn Europe to Italy took approximately one month. In addition to the World Cup in Cortina, the Swedish team took part in the international winter sports week in German Garmisch-Partenkirchen. The Germans were eager for the Swedish ski team to participate and bore the cost for most of the trip and accommodation. The Swedes were happy to oblige and stopped over in Garmisch on their way home from Italy. The pure sporting events were at the forefront, not the war and the Nazi violations of human rights, which everybody was well aware of.<sup>13</sup> It should also be mentioned that one person from the Swedish ski met with Adolf Hitler during a stop-over in Munich on his way from Cortina, which speaks volumes about the importance the German regime attached to the Swedish participation in the competitions in Cortina and Garmisch-Partenkirchen.<sup>14</sup>

The legendary Swedish ski leader Sigge Bergman was as enthusiastic as he was naive about the conditions during the 1941 World Cup in Cortina, which is evident in the travel report he wrote after his Cortina trip.

“...the mood among the participating teams was the very best. The state of war in the world as though forgotten. Here, all lived as a big ski family taking part in a peaceful competition for trophies and medals.”<sup>15</sup>

Media reports also focused on sports, results, times, placements and so on. When they wrote about the war it was about access to food and petrol, blackouts and other practical technicalities. No criticism was directed at the political regimes in Germany or Italy. Nor did the skiers express any criticism of political nature in the press, it is sport that is in focus and nothing else. A notice in *Idrottsbladet*, the leading sports magazine in Sweden, stands out, however. There, it is pointed out that two Swedish skiers and some German downhill skiers vandalised fascist symbols in Cortina after the closing banquet and that the Italian police were involved.<sup>16</sup>

In Norway, the situation was different. The country was occupied by German troops since April 1940. To understand the strong Norwegian reaction vis-à-vis Sweden after the war, it is significant that Norwegian sport was much more polarised than its Swedish counterpart. There was a strong workers' sport that was organised as its own large and powerful national



In Holmenkollen, early 1930s

organisation under the leadership of Rolf Hofmo. It was carried out alongside the “bourgeois” sport. Moreover, both these Norwegian sports organisations had launched a strike in protest against the German occupation in April 1940. All sports activities were basically suspended during the war; a different and effective act of resistance, and therefore the Norwegians never even considered taking part in the Ski World Cup in Cortina.<sup>17</sup>

## The Cortina affair

After the war ended in 1945, the Norwegians hence protested against the Swedish participation in the Cortina World Cup in 1941. It was considered outrageous that their neighbour Sweden had participated in the World Ski Championships. The debate evolved into what they newspapers referred to as the Cortina affair and led to severe tensions between Sweden and Norway.

The Cortina World Cup did not cause any debate during the war itself, either in Norway or Sweden. In occupied Norway there was no possibility for debate, but apparently the dissatisfaction with the Swedes grew among Norwegian skiers and as soon as the war ended in May 1945, the Norwegian reaction came and it was powerful. The Norwegians felt deeply offended and



Summertime for ski-instructors, Malmahed 1942.



the betrayal stung even more because it had to do with skiing, the Norwegian national sport. In other disciplines, for example football, the Swedish complacency toward the Germans played a lesser roll and a sport exchange quickly started between the countries, albeit not in skiing. Skiing was culture and a national matter, not just a sport among many.

What started the Cortina affair was apparently an article in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* at the end of July 1945, where the Swedish actions were condemned: "Sweden has, after the capitulation, faced the consequences of Germany's defeat. All official German symbols in Sweden have been wiped out, not just the sport symbols."<sup>18</sup>

Norwegian ski leaders latched on and criticized the Swedes' participation in the Cortina World Cup. The chairman of Norway's ski association, Harald Römcke, announced that Norwegian skiers would refuse to compete against the Swedes, internationally as well, during the upcoming season. Swedish skiers were not welcome to compete in Norway. According to Römcke, there were many ambiguities with the Swedish behaviour during the war that needed to be cleared up before the ski exchanges between the countries resumed. The Chairman of the Norwegian Sports Federation, General Olaf Helset, who had spent several years in exile in Sweden, said that the day would come when the Swedes would be happy to have removed the Cortina World Cup from their history.<sup>19</sup>

The Norwegians demanded: (1) that the competitions in the Cortina World Cup be annulled by FIS; (2) that Sweden take the initiative in this in FIS; (3) that Sweden apologise to the Norwegians for its participation in the Cortina World Cup in 1941.

But the Norwegian ski boycott was slightly contradictory as it only applied to cross-country skiing, both the ski-jumpers and the downhill skiers were allowed to compete against the Swedes! Could this be because the Norwegians would not risk losing at their national sports at a time when the country needed positive news? The national identity and self-esteem had suffered a severe blow during the war when many Norwegians collaborated with the Germans. It should also be borne in mind that Norwegian skiers were completely physically unfit due to the war and the sports strike, and were therefore in danger of getting beaten by the Swedes. Norway was a deeply divided country in 1945. The day of reckoning had come and many

Norwegians who had collaborated with the Germans were given hard and long punishments.

The Swedish Ski Association's chairman Sixtus Janson became furious at the Norwegians. He considered the Norwegian demands unreasonable. Janson noted that they did not want any exchange with Sweden and that he, over the years, had done what he could for Norway's cause: "I personally have a clear conscience and so, I would think, does my association. Therefore, I have no desire to become some sort of whipping boy."<sup>20</sup>

Oddly enough, the Norwegians' boycott of Swedish skiing did not get any attention in Swedish newspapers. It took until 1945, when an intense debate commenced. At first, the press supported the Swedish Ski Association and a newspaper drew parallels with the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. "One might as well have dropped the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936." *Göteborgs Tidningen*, on the other hand, understood the Norwegian requirements and believed that it was in accordance with the wish of the Nazis that the Cortina World Cup was organised.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the press's attitude changed and became more critical of the Swedish Ski Association's unwillingness to resolve the conflict.

## Negotiations begin

There was, nevertheless, a willingness from both parties to resolve the conflict and negotiations were initiated between Swedish and Norwegian ski leaders, but these resulted in nothing and the situation between the parties was hence locked at the beginning of 1946 and no competitions were organised, despite the fact that the skiing season was already well under way. The Norwegians decision not to have a competition exchanges with Swedish skiing stood firm and the Swedes refused to apologise for their participation in the Cortina World Cup.

Swedish and Norwegian ski leaders decided to meet in Oslo at the beginning of 1946 to resolve the conflict. The meeting was very heated, judging by the preserved stenographic protocol with short, fast retorts between those involved. The Swedish Ski Association's chairman Sixtus Janson was the most aggressive and refused to make any concessions. Almost immediately, the parties decided to suspend negotiations, there was no desire to

resolve the conflict. The Swedes left Oslo incensed and took the train back to Stockholm the same days as they had arrived.<sup>22</sup> The Norwegian ski boycott continued.

## Ski peace?

So, what happened after the failed meeting in Oslo? The result was hence that the Norwegian boycott of Sweden stood firm. It was, however, revealed



Sixtus Janson in Olympic Games in St Moritz 1948.

in the press that informal contacts had been taken between sports leaders at the highest level in Norwegian and Swedish sport, respectively, that is, outside the field of skiing. There were also speculations in the press about a possible “ski peace”. The pressure on the Swedish ski leaders hardened and there was criticism against Sixtus Janson from various directions. Some newspapers argued that the Swedish Ski Association should yield to the Norwegian demands.

It was only when the Cortina affair reached its highest point in Swedish and Norwegian sport that it could be solved, and then it happened quickly. “After both Norway’s and Sweden’s Ski Associations had modified their original positions in the Cortina matter, the Swedish Ski Association has decided to propose to the International Ski Federation’s board that the world championship in Cortina be annulled.”<sup>23</sup>

Here it can hence be noted that both parties had compromised. The Swedish Ski Association yielded when it came to the important matter of principle of whether Sweden should take the initiative to have the Cortina World Cup removed from the competition statistics. The Norwegians were no longer pushing the demand for a formal apology from the Swedes for their participation.

## Ending

Why, then, did the Norwegians react so strongly to the Swedish participation in the Ski World Cup in Cortina as to boycott Swedish skiing? Can this even have contributed to the emergence of a Swede hate in many circles in Norway, a hate that is seldom or never expressed, or given the opportunity of expression outside of sport or the outspoken sports stands? Sport seems to be isolated in relation to the rest of society in terms of national outpourings of emotion.

The answer must be sought in the situation for sports in Norway during the war and the Norwegian sports strike. The Germans and the Norwegian collaborators attempted to keep the sports activities going, but largely failed to do so. The sports strike was successful. Here, it might be mentioned that among the many thousands of Norwegians who were sentenced in Norwegian courts for collaborating with the Germans were some sports leaders

who were active in Nasjonal Samling. One of the most famous of them was the former athletics star and sports journalist Charles Hoff. He was sentenced to no less than nine years in prison. Many who had broken the sports strike or for other reasons “failed” Norway and collaborated with the Germans.<sup>24</sup> They were excluded from their sports associations for varied periods of time and were banned from practising sports. It was not until 1955! that full amnesty was given to the “collaborators” in sports and they could resume practising sports.<sup>25</sup>

The Norwegian historian Stein Tønnesson offers an interesting observation that may explain the Norwegian grudge toward Sweden’s actions during the war and the Swede hate that flourished in some circles. He believes that many Norwegian refugees were badly treated in Sweden, something that is rarely or never mentioned in Sweden. Here, it should be mentioned that Sweden did not even receive Norwegian refugees at the start of the war, it was not until the war successes ceased for the Germans that the Norwegians were fully welcomed in to Sweden. Tønnesson’ claim is partly backed up by another Norwegian historian, Tor Arne Barstad. He points out that many of the more than 40,000 Norwegians who fled to Sweden encountered problems during their time in Sweden.<sup>26</sup> Hence, many pieces of the puzzle are needed to try to understand the Swede hate in Norway. The World Ski Cup in Cortina in 1941 is only a small part of this big and complicated puzzle.

## References

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- 2 See for example [www.expressen.se/sport/langdskidor/northug-berattar-om-hatet-mot-sverige/](http://www.expressen.se/sport/langdskidor/northug-berattar-om-hatet-mot-sverige/).
- 3 “Permittenttrafiken” in Swedish.
- 4 Here we generally refer to W.M. Carlgren, *Svensk utrikespolitik 1939–1945*. 1973; Rune Karlsson, *Så stoppades tysktågen*. 1974.
- 5 See for example Alf W. Johansson, *Finlands sak: Svensk politik och opinion under vinterkriget 1939–1940*, 1973.

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- 7 Matti Goksøy, Søta bror, storebror – læremester og likeverdig rival? Det historiske forholdet mellom Norge og Sverige på idrettsarenaen etter 1905. – 2000. *Studier i idrott, historia och samhälle*. Johan R. Norberg (red.). Stockholm: HLS, 2000, 43–56.
- 8 Per-Olof Holmäng, Idrott och utrikespolitik. Den svenska idrottsrörelsens internationella förbindelser 1919–1945. Kungälv, 1988, 283.
- 9 Here, it should be noted that Norwegian archives have not been used. There may be further information in these about the Norwegian ski leaders' actions.
- 10 Letter to the Swedish Ski Association from N.R. Östgaard 16 November 1940, Sixtus Janson's collection (2:1) Folkrorelsearkivet in Uppsala län.
- 11 Holmäng, *Idrott och utrikespolitik*.
- 12 Holmäng, *Idrott och utrikespolitik*.
- 13 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 101.
- 14 It was the Swedish sports journalist Wolf Lyberg who met Hitler, as described in his autobiography: *Jorden runt på 80 år. Ett resande i idrottens tecken, 1917-1997*. HLS, 1997, 69–70.
- 15 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 100.
- 16 *Idrottsbladet*
- 17 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 112–113.
- 18 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 102.
- 19 *Norrbottens Kuriren*, 6/12 1945.
- 20 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 103.
- 21 *Göteborgs Tidningen* 3/12 1945.
- 22 Yttergren, "Grannsämja i kris", 100–101.
- 23 *Stockholms Tidningen* 23/2 1946.
- 24 [https://nbl.snI.no/Charles\\_Hoff](https://nbl.snI.no/Charles_Hoff).
- 25 Finn Olstad & Stein Tønnesson, *Norsk idretts historie. Folkehelse, trim, stjerner 1939-1986*. Kungälv, 1986, 72.
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