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Defending Our Nation. Securing The Future.

(U) History Today - 27 October 2010

Run Date: 10/27/2010

(U) Sweden remained a neutral nation throughout World War II. Nevertheless, in spite of their official, pacific status, the Swedes were mindful of German intentions and of their own precarious geographic position. In consequence they maintained a vigilant eye on the Germans and their Italian allies, and routinely monitored Axis communications transiting their country.

(U) Swedish intelligence officers on one occasion were particularly concerned with a telephone conversation between an Italian military attaché in Stockholm and his counterpart assigned to Oslo. The voice recording of the phone call proved to be absolutely impenetrable to their study, and the Swedes became alarmed that the Italians had fielded a new type of scrambler telephone. Technical analysis, however, revealed that the call had been in the clear -- making the garbled words all the more puzzling.

(U) Try as they would, Swedish analysts could identify only a few words on the wax recording, not enough to make any sense of it. In desperation, they quietly engaged the services of language experts at the University of Uppsala. The academics there, after poring over the problem for hours, discovered that the attaché in Oslo was actually speaking in a Sicilian dialect. His speech was made even more unintelligible because he was angrily shouting at the man on the other end of the line ... and because he interspersed every other word with one obscenity or another. That the attaché on the Stockholm end had a slight speech impediment further confounded the Swedes.

(U) Patience is a virtue, and in this case it proved especially so.

(U) The Swedes, as they slowly unraveled the conversation, were able to discern that the long-suffering attaché in Stockholm was trying to explain to his colleague in Oslo how to use a newly arrived code system. The other man was incensed by the "idiots" in Rome who would foist on them such a convoluted means of securing their information and gave his friend a rich earful of Sicilian profanity. Time and again, the calmer of the two explained how to use the new code and even offered some of the code words as examples.

(U) In the end, the conversation proved to be a veritable treasure trove of information that permitted the Swedes to make inroads into the Italians' code system and gain the ability to read Italian diplomatic traffic to and from Rome.

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(U) Have a question or comment on "History Today"? Contact us at DL cch or cch@nsa.

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