

## Banal Nordism: Recomposing an Old Song of Peace

*Stuart Burch*

### Love and War in the North

It's 9 o'clock on Sunday March 6, 2011 and I've just been rudely awakened by my clock radio. Bright shafts of Nordic sunlight are trying to trick me into believing that spring has finally reached northern Europe. That season certainly seems to be in full swing elsewhere in the world: the consequences of the 'Arab spring' are the lead story for Sweden's state broadcaster, P1.<sup>1</sup> I must have dozed off during reports of the continuing violence in Libya because I only half-heard what sounded like a far more heart-warming story: a Swedish-designed product being successfully exported to five unnamed countries. In my stupor I thought I heard the phrase '*svensk granit*' and immediately associated this with *Granit* – a swish interior design store providing 'smart solutions for storage in cardboard, plastic and wicker.'<sup>2</sup>

But a single vowel can make a big difference: this was *granat* rather than *granit*. And the design product in question was an 84 mm multi-purpose, man-portable, reusable recoilless rifle – more generically known as a bazooka. Based on a design dating back over six decades, its manufacturer states proudly that this 'combat proven' weapon is 'in use in more than 40 countries, on every continent.'<sup>3</sup> Its success helped lift the company that produces it to number 31 in the list of the world's top 100 arms-producing companies for

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sveriges Radio, 'Arabisk vår?', *Konflikt*, January 22, 2011,

<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=1300&artikel=4306449>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Granit, 'About Granit', <http://www.granit.se/?id=1492>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Saab AB, 'Carl-Gustaf M3 weapon system', [http://www.saabgroup.com/en/Land/Weapon-Systems/support-weapons/Carl\\_Gustaf\\_M3\\_weapon\\_system/In-use](http://www.saabgroup.com/en/Land/Weapon-Systems/support-weapons/Carl_Gustaf_M3_weapon_system/In-use), accessed March 25, 2011.

2009.<sup>4</sup> A year later, *Defense News* placed it at number 28 based on revenue of \$3,397.1m, 85 per cent of which came from the sale of military equipment.<sup>5</sup> That company is Saab AB, the headquarters of which are in the heart of Stockholm. Hence *svensk granat* or ‘Swedish grenade’.

This prompted a thought to take shape in my sleep-addled brain that early March morning: *why does the notion of a ‘Swedish grenade’ sound so, well, wrong?* The chapter you are reading is a response to this rarely asked question. It was written in Stockholm during the first half of 2011. This is why Sweden and Swedish media constitute the main poles of this Nordic investigation. Drawing on current affairs and contemporary news stories plus a range of earlier scholarly work from a number of disciplines, this essay offers a reflection on the reasons why I find the existence of a ‘Swedish grenade’ to be remarkable and regrettable in equal measure. This personal enquiry gains wider significance when set against the prevalent image of Sweden and *Norden* as the very antithesis of war and conflict.

My thoughts are those of a non-Nordic observer; a status that undoubtedly skews my perspective on Sweden and its neighbours. Thus, as an Anglo-Saxon male in my late 30s, when I think of Swedish design my mind turns to the types of things on sale at stores such as Granit or IKEA. And when it comes to technology, a brand like Saab conjures up images of the iconic Saab 900 produced by Saab Automobile throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The above-mentioned grenade launcher, however, is made by a different company: Saab AB, the self-styled ‘Security and Defence Company’. The weapon it produces is, like the Saab 900,

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<sup>4</sup> SIPRI, ‘The SIPRI Top 100 arms-producing companies, 2009’, *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/production/Top100>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> ‘*Defense News* Top 100 for 2010’, [http://www.defensenews.com/static/features/top100/charts/rank\\_2010.php](http://www.defensenews.com/static/features/top100/charts/rank_2010.php), accessed October 12, 2011.

an aesthetic object *and* a market-leader of its type: it is ‘the best there is’.<sup>6</sup> Yet, even if it accords with Sweden’s reputation for high-quality design and technological know-how, there are no examples of this weapon on display in the art and design galleries of Sweden’s *Nationalmuseum*. It *can* be found among the artefacts of the National Swedish Museums of Military History, even if the model in question is a relic of the past, dating from the late 1940s.<sup>7</sup> Its inclusion in the nation’s public collections is entirely fitting given that Saab AB’s recoilless rifle is ultra-Swedish – right down to its name: the 84 mm Carl-Gustaf Multi-purpose weapon system.

The name ‘Carl Gustaf’ has attracted considerable attention in recent times, both in Sweden and abroad. But the potency in question has more to do with conquests of a sexual rather than a military nature. This is in relation to the past exploits of Carl XVI Gustaf, king of Sweden since 1973. He was born in 1946. So too was the rifle that shares his name. His ‘romps in seedy nightclubs owned by shadowy underworld figures’ were reported extensively in late 2010 due to the publication of a highly controversial biography.<sup>8</sup> Following the book’s release the king held a well-attended press conference. He chose to conduct it in a forest setting immediately after an elk hunt, still dressed in his hunting attire.<sup>9</sup> His appearance in front of the press was as brief as it was unenlightening. He had not read the book and took no questions. Even had he done so, it is most unlikely that any of the journalists would have

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<sup>6</sup> Saab AB, ‘The 84 mm Carl-Gustaf Multi-Purpose Weapon System’, product sheet 8 p – Carl-Gustaf – Eng – v.1, April 2009, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> DigitaltMuseum, ‘8,4 cm granatgevär m/1948’, accession no. AM.125476, <http://www.digitaltmuseum.se>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Alexander & Marcus Oscarsson, ‘Swedes in shock at King Carl Gustaf sex scandal’, *Daily Telegraph*, November 6, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/sweden/8114740/Swedes-in-shock-at-King-Carl-Gustaf-sex-scandal.html>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Susanna Vidlund et al, ‘Vi vänder blad och går vidare’, *Aftonbladet*, November 4, 2010, <http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/article8069975.ab>, accessed March 25, 2011.

asked Carl Gustaf if a Carl-Gustaf was deployed during the hunt. Very little of the elk would have remained if he had. This is because the rifle has been designed to penetrate armoured vehicles – as exemplified by hole-punched metal plates possessed by Armémuseum, Sweden’s national army museum.<sup>10</sup> Its effectiveness was recently affirmed by sergeant Alexander D. King of the United States Army. He recalled one particular occasion in Afghanistan when two marksmen loaded their Carl-Gustaf rifles with high-explosive anti-personnel ammunition, each containing several hundred steel pellets. Up to thirty enemy combatants were killed thanks to this Swedish designed, manufactured and exported ‘meat-grinder’.<sup>11</sup> In the first half of 2008 the United States government spent a reported \$48m on the Carl-Gustaf system including weapons and ammunition.<sup>12</sup>

Forests, elks, sex, design and technology – these all accord with general stereotypes about Sweden. The production and sale of lethal military equipment does not. Why is this so? The reason, as this chapter hopes to demonstrate, is because of *banal Nordism*: a series of commonplace suppositions and, by extension, disassociations about Sweden and its neighbours. It is this set of largely unconscious expectations that caused me to pay heed to a radio broadcast about a ‘Swedish grenade’. In what follows I will explore the banalities of the North and consider the consequences they have for all those entrepreneurs implicated in its construction and continuance. As will become clear, by ‘entrepreneurs’ I include people like me and all the other authors in this Nordic-themed series of books.

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<sup>10</sup> DigitaltMuseum, ‘Genomskjuten plåt, 5,56 mm Carl Gustaf AP’, accession no. AM.038951, <http://www.digitaltmuseum.se>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Holmbäck, ‘Svenska vapen är deras vardag’, *Fokus*, October 29, 2009, <http://www.fokus.se/2009/10/svenska-vapen-ar-deras-vardag>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> This is according to the *London Stock Exchange Aggregated Regulatory News Service* (ARNS) in a report dated August 1, 2008 entitled ‘BAE Systems plc Interim Results -6-’ (accessed via <http://www.lexisnexis.com>). BAE Systems had at the time a 20.5 per cent shareholding in Saab AB.

## Banal Nordism

Sweden and its northern European neighbours have been likened to a structure built of bricks.<sup>13</sup> The bricks represent the nations. They are connected by a diffuse ‘Nordic element’ which functions as a sort of ‘cohesive mortar’. Trying to identify the precise nature of this ‘mortar’ is, however, far from straightforward. This is because the formula of this binding agent varies over time and across disciplines. At one moment it is embodied in the figure of the ‘Nordic peasant’.<sup>14</sup> At another it is distilled on the canvas of a ‘Nordic painting’.<sup>15</sup> The ‘Nordic element’ can, in other words, be equated with a great variety of sometimes mutually exclusive things including ‘suicide, free sex, angst, darkness, stillness, inwardness, the eradication of poverty, utopian social democracy, etc.’<sup>16</sup>

Nordic is a contingent category. This means that one should be very wary of joining the misguided band of true believers intent on identifying some sort of Nordic Holy Grail. Instead, a far more fruitful endeavour would be to take up the train of thought prompted by Rogers Brubaker in his study of nationalism. To achieve this all we need do is to replace the words *nation* and *nationalism* with *Norden* (a term meaning ‘the North’):

We should not ask “what is *Norden*” but rather: how is *Nordenhood* as a political and cultural form institutionalised within and among states? How does *Norden* work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? What makes the use of that category by or against states more or less resonant or effective? What makes the *Norden*-evoking, *Norden*-

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<sup>13</sup> The brick and mortar metaphor is derived from Øystein Sørensen & Bo Stråth (eds), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), pp. 15, 19 & 22–23.

<sup>14</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Burch, ‘Norden, Reframed’, *Culture Unbound*, 2, 2010, pp. 571ff, <http://www.cultureunbound.ep.liu.se/v2/a33>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Jan-Erik Lundström, *Stranger Than Paradise: Contemporary Scandinavian Photography* (New York: The International Center of Photography, 1994), p. 13.

invoking efforts of political [plus cultural, financial and academic] entrepreneurs more or less likely to succeed?’<sup>17</sup>

As we shall see, adopting such an approach reveals that the ‘bricks’ of Northern Europe can be differently configured by diverse ‘entrepreneurs’ in their various attempts to construct their vision of ‘the North’ (*Norden*).

It is important to note, however, that one thing that these ‘bricks’ do *not* build is an imperial parliament at the heart of a Nordic empire.<sup>18</sup> This is because national concerns *always* take priority, even when a regional dimension is promoted.<sup>19</sup> What *Norden* does is provide a means for the nations of ‘the North’ to differentiate themselves from ‘Europe’.<sup>20</sup> It does *not* connote a pooling of sovereignty. The Kalmar Union might have unified the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway and Sweden under a common monarch from 1397 until 1523, but all subsequent attempts to bind the region into a political union have failed.<sup>21</sup> And even far more modest efforts at cooperation can be abortive – as demonstrated by the squabbles over how to share the Nordic Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.<sup>22</sup> It is striking how real-world

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<sup>17</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, p. 15. It is telling that the palatial *Nordiska museet* (literally ‘the Nordic museum’) in Stockholm is fundamentally a Swedish (i.e. national) institution (but see also Hillström’s chapter in this volume).

<sup>19</sup> Thorsten Olesen emphasized the priority of national over Nordic concerns in his contribution to the conference to launch the book *The Nordic Countries: From War to Cold War, 1944–1951*. Lancaster House, London, April 1, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, pp. 22–23.

<sup>21</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, p. 23; Björn Hettne, Sverker Sörlin & Uffe Østergård, *Den globala nationalismen: nationalstatens historia och framtid* (Stockholm: SNS, 1998), pp. 285–286.

<sup>22</sup> Designed by Sverre Fehn in 1962, it is shared by Finland, Norway and Sweden (Denmark’s pavilion, meanwhile, is right next door). Responsibility for curating the show rotates among the three nations. However, from 2011, the three countries will take it in turns to display their own artists. See Jersti Nipen, ‘Vil endre nordisk samarbeid om Venezia-biennalen’, *Aftenposten*, August 31, 2010, [http://www.aftenposten.no/kul\\_und/article3790347.ece](http://www.aftenposten.no/kul_und/article3790347.ece), accessed September 15, 2010.

setbacks such as these never seem to dampen enthusiasm for conjuring up Nordic castles in the air.

An instance of this arose in the wake of the so-called Arab spring of 2011. Sweden's response to the UN-backed NATO-led action against Libya was hesitant and ambiguous.<sup>23</sup> This was in part because Sweden, unlike Denmark and Norway, stands outside NATO. This is a concrete example of the stark national differences in policy and alignment evident across Europe, including *Norden*. Yet at exactly the same time that this schism re-emerged, the foreign ministers of the five Nordic states signed a 'Nordic declaration of solidarity'. Should one of their number come under attack 'the others will, upon request from that country, assist with relevant means.'<sup>24</sup>

This gulf between rhetoric and reality is characteristic of the myth of *Norden*. Despite the 'declaration of solidarity' it remains the case that the Nordic countries have no formal cooperation when it comes to foreign policy. One senses that the fine words of *Norden*'s foreign ministers would evaporate if they were put to the test. However, as the President of the Nordic Council, Henrik Dam Kristensen implied, their real import was symbolic rather than actual.<sup>25</sup>

*Norden* has long been a 'projection screen for fantasies'.<sup>26</sup> Another instance of this syndrome is an utterly improbable call to establish a 'United Nordic Federation' within the

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Wolodarski, 'Konsten att vara feg', *Dagens Nyheter*, April 10, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> The agreement was signed in Helsinki on April 5, 2011. See 'The Nordic declaration on solidarity', *Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland*, April 5, 2011, <http://www.formin.fi/Public/default.aspx?contentid=217312>, accessed April 11, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> 'Henrik Dam Kristensen... welcomes the foreign ministers' declaration of solidarity, describing it as a major and important decision for the Nordic countries, not least symbolically.' See 'All for one, one for all', *Norden*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.norden.org/en/news-and-events/news/all-for-one-one-for-all>, accessed April 11, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Lundström, 1994, p. 13.

next twenty years.<sup>27</sup> This will no doubt prove to be as implausible as earlier attempts to unite the region.<sup>28</sup> But that doesn't matter. What motivates such pronouncements is not the likelihood of their success: their simple utterance and dissemination are sufficient. Thus the impetus for propounding a United States of *Norden* is threefold: to enliven debate; to attract attention to 'the North'; and to add more of that 'cohesive mortar' to the Nordic idea.

Normally *Norden* remains humming along unremarkably in the background like a muzak soundtrack to 'the North'. Its divergence from flag-waving 'hot' nationalism means that it bears some similarity to Michael Billig's exploration of the banal, day-to-day manifestations of *Banal Nationalism*. For Billig, 'the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being constantly waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.'<sup>29</sup> That this captures perfectly the notion of *Norden* is clear from a crossword puzzle that appeared in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* on Wednesday March 23, 2011. Its first clue was accompanied by a photograph of flags fluttering in the breeze and a text that read: 'Today is *Norden*'s day! It was founded in a cooperation agreement signed on March 23, 1962 in this city.'<sup>30</sup> An impromptu questionnaire sent to fellow authors of this Nordic book series would suggest that many people would have struggled to identify the city in question. Of those who responded, very few had even heard of *Norden*'s day.<sup>31</sup> This is hardly surprising given that the *only* mention of it in *Dagens*

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<sup>27</sup> Gunnar Wetterberg, *Förbundsstaten Norden*, TemaNord 582, Copenhagen, Nordic Council, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Anon, 'Kalmarunion inte på nordisk tapet', *Dagens Nyheter*, undated, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/kalmarunion-inte-pa-nordisk-tapet>, accessed March 25, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Dagens Nyheter*, 'Kultur', March 23, 2011, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> I sent an email to approximately 60 people. The only person to respond with any real knowledge of the day was Peter Stadius, lecturer in Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki. He participated in a number of media-reported events, proving that Norden's day of 2011 did have a presence, at least in Finland.



*Nyheter* was the first clue of its daily crossword. Despite this lack of coverage the compiler of the crossword was clearly sufficiently confident to set it as one of the questions.

That it was mentioned in this way is revealing. *Norden* is typically not the main news story but instead a banal backdrop, utilized whenever the media is in need of a convenient international contextual framing. Examples of *Norden* being banally flagged include comparisons of property markets; the cost of duty-free alcohol; and the price of opera tickets.<sup>32</sup>

*Norden* is, then, a banal, commonplace and unexceptional ‘truth’ that is unconsciously assimilated, largely ignored and only very occasionally questioned. This can be explained further if we return to Billig’s *Banal Nationalism*. He argues that we live in a world where the nation is so pervasive that it frequently goes unnoticed. It determines our place in a nationally mediated world. Weather forecasts are excellent instances of banal nationalism. The Norwegian state broadcaster NRK, for example, is much more likely to inform the people of Oslo about the temperatures facing polar bears on the far-off Norwegian island of Svalbard than it is to report on sunshine in nearby Karlstad on the other side of the Swedish border. A weather forecast is thus a banal flagging of the state (which is incidentally why Great Britain’s BBC includes sunshine and showers in the north of Ireland but not the south).

Sport is a further instance of this. In addition to the achievements of the national team, the success or failure of our fellow citizens are dissected from sporting contests the world over. The exploits of various foreign soccer teams thus become worthy of the nation’s attention if they happen to be the home club of Sweden’s Zlatan Ibrahimovic or Norway’s

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<sup>32</sup> Sara Rimpì, ‘Arlanda dyrt så in i Norden’, *Dagens Nyheter*, March 21, 2011, ‘Näringsliv’, p. 6; Johan Hellekant, ‘Svensk operabiljett billigast i Norden’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, May 3, 2011, ‘Kultur’, p. 6; Sara L. Bränström, Jeanette Björkqvist, Björn Lindahl, ‘Bostad Norden’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, January 14, 2011, ‘Näringsliv’, pp. 8–9; January 17, 2011, pp. 8–9; January 18, 2011, p. 11.

Jon Arne Riise. And followers of soccer will know that the idea of a ‘United Nordic Federation’ is a non-starter: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are bitter rivals in the sporting arena. The idea of ‘*Norden* FC’ is utterly preposterous.

This is not to say that *Norden* is without genuine marketing potential. Coincident with *Norden*’s day 2011, the telecommunications company Telenor ran a series of advertisements featuring a variety of Nordic flags beneath headings written in a range of Nordic languages. These announced that customers of ‘Telenor Borderless’ could call numbers in ‘Sweden from the whole of *Norden* for the same price as at home’.<sup>33</sup> Telenor’s customers could rest assured that, whether they were in Nuuk, Norrköping, Naantali, Narvik, Næstved, Neskaupstaður, Näfsby or Norðragöta, they could feel at home in ‘the North’.

Messages such as these represent but one instance of the banal ‘flagging’ of *Norden* in everyday life. A further example is the Nordic Ecolabel that can be found on a range of ‘environmentally-sound products’.<sup>34</sup> This label can be understood as a double flagging of ‘the North’ given that a concern for ‘sustainable consumption’ and an awareness of the need to safeguard the environment is automatically associated with *Norden*.

The Nordic Ecolabel takes the form of a swan. This was inspired by Hans Hartvig Pedersen’s poem ‘The Nordic Swans’ (1936). The same motif – this time coloured blue – also provides the logo for the Nordic Council. Founded in 1952 this unelected body is made up of 87 members drawn from the five states and three semi-autonomous areas that habitually constitute ‘the North’. This octet is banally flagged whenever the swan motif is used: it features eight stripes, each of which stands for one of the eight ‘nations’ that make up the

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, ‘Huippu-uutinen sinulle, joka matkustat Pohjoismaissa’, *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 22, 2011,

‘Näringsliv’, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Nordic Ecolabel – the official Ecolabel in the Nordic countries’, undated, <http://www.nordic-ecolabel.org/about>, accessed April 4, 2011.

primary designation of *Norden*. These are respectively Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden plus the territories of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Åland Islands. Of the latter category, Greenland and the Faroes form part of the Danish realm whilst the Åland Islands is an autonomous region of Finland. The flagging of *Norden* in Mariehamn – the capital of Åland – is particularly noteworthy. Its parliament building – *Självstyrelsegården* – was inaugurated in 1978. In a ceremonial space outside the main entrance are a series of plaques describing ‘landmark years’ in Åland’s independence story. They commence in 1809 when Åland and Finland shifted from Swedish to Russian control; and culminate in the Nordic Council’s recognition of the Åland Islands in 1970. This provides a concrete example of the ‘Nordic element’ being flagged for reasons of an operable national identity, that is, the Åland ‘nation’ within the Finnish state.

Åland’s flag and that of the other Nordic ‘nations’ appeared in the *Norden*’s day 2011 issue of *Dagens Nyheter*’s crossword. The answer to the clue was *HELSINGFORS* (Helsinki). The agreement signed there on March 23, 1962 is supposed to be marked on an annual basis by local authorities within *Norden*. They are encouraged to fly the flags of the region. Meanwhile an organization such as the *Norden Association* arranges Nordic banquets (*gästabad*).<sup>35</sup> This association (*Föreningen Norden*) was established in 1919. It is an NGO that seeks ‘to stimulate and improve Nordic cooperation at all levels, especially in the fields of education, culture, the labour market, industry, mass media, international aid and environmental care.’<sup>36</sup> The association promotes itself as a parallel organization to the ‘official’ Nordic Council and the Nordic Council of Ministers (established in 1971),

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<sup>35</sup> ‘Nordens dag’, undated, <http://www.norden.se/Mot-Norden/Nordens-dag>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> “‘Norden’ and the Norden Association’, undated, <http://www.norden.se/Om-oss/Foreningen-Nordens-verksamhet/In-English>, accessed April 4, 2011.

respectively the fora for inter-parliamentary and inter-governmental cooperation. The logotype of the *Norden Association* is described as

a symbol for Nordic cooperation. The eight dots represent the five Nordic countries and the three autonomous regions. The globe represents the fact that the cooperation not only serves the Nordic countries, but also serves the interest of peace and justice throughout the whole world.<sup>37</sup>

Every action sponsored by the *Norden Association* or the Nordic Council leads to a reiteration and reframing of the ‘Nordic element’.<sup>38</sup> This is a regional ‘meso-layer’ which, just like the nations of which it is composed, is ‘continually being re-written, and the re-writing reflects current balances of hegemony.’<sup>39</sup> The book you are holding is part of that re-writing. The date of its publication is propitious. *Norden’s* vital statistics – and with it its viability as a going concern – will come under particular scrutiny in 2012. This is because it signals the sixtieth anniversary of the Nordic Council. Moreover, March 23, 2012 will be the fiftieth ‘*Norden’s* day’.

### **Bridges to Peace**

This readymade schedule of secular feast days and anniversaries provides *Norden* with a canonical calendar. Previous ‘re-writings’ of the North include *Norden’s* day 1991. On March 23 of that year the governments of Denmark and Sweden signed an agreement for a fixed link across Øresund, the strait separating the Danish island of Zealand (Sjælland) from the province of Scania (Skåne) in southern Sweden.<sup>40</sup> The resulting bridge was inaugurated on July 1, 2000 with speeches given by King Carl Gustaf of Sweden and his Danish counterpart, Queen Margrethe of Denmark. Its official name is Øresundsbron, a suitably Nordic mix of the two Scandinavian languages.

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<sup>37</sup> “‘Norden’ and the Norden Association’.

<sup>38</sup> Burch, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Billig, 1995, p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Øresund Bridge: our history’, undated, <http://uk.oresundsbron.com/page/373>, accessed April 4, 2011.

Similar use of pomp and pageantry was used to herald the opening of another regional link some five years later, this time at the southern end of the Norway–Sweden border at Svinesund, a sound east of Oslo. This transnational region encapsulates the shared past of the two nations, in both peace and war. With its crossings and citadels, Svinesund reveals as much a tale of conflict and mistrust as it does one of peace and reconciliation. The shared pasts and yet very different fates of Norway and Sweden are played out in their contrasting attitudes towards their parallel national histories. This became evident in 2005 during the centennial marking of the peaceful dissolution of the Swedish–Norwegian union (1814–1905). In Norway this anniversary prompted an extensive and well-funded series of events under the mantra of ‘A Voice of Our Own’.<sup>41</sup> This reflects the fact that 1905 is perceived as marking a crucial hiatus in Norwegian history. In contrast it represents a minor year in the Swedish annals.<sup>42</sup> This had implications for the manner in which the events of 1905 were commemorated or forgotten a hundred years later. In Norway, June 7 became the key focus. This was the day in 1905 when the *Storting* (the Norwegian parliament) unilaterally voted to sever the union. However, it is notable that, in Sweden, the focal point was September 23, the moment when the peace negotiations reached their successful conclusion, the union was legally annulled and the Swedish king abdicated from the Norwegian throne.

Sweden and Norway, superficially at least, have much in common. Yet, as the anniversary of 1905 revealed, important factors differentiate the two. They are both Scandinavian countries with mutually comprehensible languages (a situation which facilitates lots of jokes at each other’s expense). They share one of the longest land borders in Europe. Both are ancient nations, but Norway is a comparatively new state. This fact, plus its

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<sup>41</sup> This phrase alluded to the fact that Norwegian foreign affairs were directed from Stockholm during the union period.

Norway achieved ‘a voice of its own’ on the international stage following the events of 1905.

<sup>42</sup> Torbjörn Nilsson, ‘Sverige och 1905 – glömska eller förträngning?’ *Historiska Tidsskrift*, 84, 2005, pp. 217–228.

gruelling experiences in the Second World War and its now bountiful natural resources, helps explain why Norway is a member of NATO but not of the European Union. Sweden on the other hand *is* a member of the EU (but does not use the Euro) and continues to maintain an official policy of military non-alignment.

Despite such anomalies, the centenary of the dissolution of the union was deployed to underpin the cordiality of present-day Swedish-Norwegian relations. Nowhere was this more apparent than during the inauguration by the two royal families of the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo, completed in 2005 at a cost of some 107m Norwegian kroner. All the annual Nobel prizes are conferred by Sweden, with the exception of the Nobel Peace Prize, which is administered and awarded in Norway. This contributes a great deal to the branding of Norway as ‘a peace nation’ and a self-declared world leader in international conflict resolution.<sup>43</sup> This ‘living legacy’ has been given additional performative impetus with the establishment of the Nobel Peace Center. The director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, Geir Lundestad envisioned it as ‘a living center for communicating the ideals of the Nobel Peace Prize and focusing attention on current conflicts.’<sup>44</sup> The centenary of the dissolution of the Swedish–Norwegian union provided a further opportunity to bolster this peace-loving image of ‘the North’: in an open letter of February 2005 the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan referred to the peaceful separation of 1905 as ‘an example to aspire to in... a world still riven by conflict’, adding that the ‘centennial is an inspiring occasion for all of us working in the cause of peace.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Øystein Haga Skånland, “‘Norway is a peace nation’”: A discourse analytic reading of the Norwegian peace engagement’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45, 2010, pp. 34–54; Ivar Libæk & Øivind Stenersen, *The History of Norway: From the Ice Age to Today*, trans. James Anderson (Lysaker: Dinamo, 2003), p. 177.

<sup>44</sup> ‘The Nobel Peace Center – A Place of Peace’, undated, [www.norway.org/policy/peace/center/center.htm](http://www.norway.org/policy/peace/center/center.htm), accessed April 29, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Kofi Annan, ‘Message on the Centennial of the Peaceful Dissolution of the Union Between Norway and Sweden’ (press

This instrumentalism is a particularly unambiguous example of how historical narratives are never the simple conveyance of ‘facts’. The ‘cohesive mortar’ of *Norden* is literally used to build bridges *and* girder rhetorical arguments about *Norden* and peace. The 1905–2005 centennial marked a highpoint of this. Yet it can only be understood against a continuous backdrop of banal Nordism, insisting as it does that *Norden* ‘serves the interest of peace and justice throughout the whole world’ (to recall the exhortations of the *Norden Association*).

One can equate this attempt to take ownership of ‘peace’ with a delicious slice of ham. In Europe the ‘link between the characteristics of certain products and their geographical origin’ can lead to the placing of protected geographical status on specific foodstuffs associated with particular places within the European Union.<sup>46</sup> Adopting the same logic one can conclude the following: peace promotion is to *Norden* what prosciutto ham is to Italy.

This helps explain why certain representatives of the Republic of Estonia would like to bury their country’s Soviet past by branding itself as a Nordic rather than a Baltic nation. Its current president, Toomas Hendrik Ilves has argued that the Baltic States were united only in the shared memory of military occupation by hostile powers.<sup>47</sup> In so doing he conveniently forgot that the same can be said of *Norden*. However, the rosy hue that the passing centuries have accorded Sweden’s seventeenth-century ‘occupation’ of Estonia has led it to become

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release), February 2005.

<sup>46</sup> These are termed ‘protected geographical indication’ (PGI) or ‘protected designation of origin’ (PDO). See ‘Protection of Geographical Indications and Designations of Origin’, September 14, 2010, [http://europa.eu/legislation\\_summaries/agriculture/food/l66044\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/agriculture/food/l66044_en.htm), accessed March 31, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> Burch, ‘Norden, Reframed’, pp. 576–577.

known as the ‘happy Swedish time’.<sup>48</sup> This cheerful imperialism is eased further by the fact that the ‘neutral’ Sweden of today is so banally associated with peace.

The brief war of 1814 that Sweden waged to force Norway into an unequal union is used as the basis of an oft-repeated boast: ‘Sweden has not been at war for nearly 200 years.’<sup>49</sup> Its capital is therefore the fitting home to an organization such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, ‘an independent international institute dedicated to research into conflict, armaments, arms control and disarmament.’<sup>50</sup> Stockholm was also the originating city for the Non-Violence Project established in 1993. This was triggered by a weapon that is incapable of firing, namely Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd’s sculpture *Non-Violence*, which is probably the best known artwork by a Swedish sculptor. This symbol of a gun with a knotted barrel was first sketched by Reuterswärd in 1980 in response to the murder of John Lennon. Its three-dimensional form is replicated across the world, including most famously outside the United Nations building in New York (1988). In 2002 the Nordic Council’s head office in central Copenhagen provided the venue for an exhibition examining the work.<sup>51</sup> In the accompanying catalogue Kofi Annan described this potent symbol as encapsulating ‘in a few simple curves, the greatest prayer of man; that which asks not for victory, but for peace’.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Burch, ‘Norden, Reframed’, pp. 576–577.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Lena Holger (ed.), *Fredssoldater* (Stockholm: Armémuseum, 2009), p. 192; Peter Aronsson, ‘Introduction: Uses of the past – Nordic Historical Cultures in a Comparative Perspective’, *Culture Unbound*, 2, 2010, p. 558.

<sup>50</sup> SIPRI, ‘Stockholm International Peace Research Institute – A Top Global Think Tank’, undated, <http://www.sipri.org/about>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd: *Non-Violence*, 1980 – 2002’, press release, January 10, 2002, <http://www.kopenhagen.dk/fileadmin/oldsite/presse/CFRsvenskpress.htm>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> ‘The symbol *Non-Violence*’, <http://www.nonviolence.com/about#thesymbol>, accessed April 4, 2011.



This high-flown oratory, like Annan's open letter in association with the centennial anniversary of the peaceful dissolution of the Swedish–Norwegian union, provides the ballast for banal Nordism. *Norden* is elevated as the acme of peace and reconciliation. Mr Annan's Swedish wife would probably approve of this entirely positive spin placed on her home country.<sup>53</sup> She is Nane Maria Annan (née Lagergren, born 1944), a lawyer and the niece of Raoul Wallenberg – an individual who has a claim to be the very embodiment of non-violence and human rights. Wallenberg's selflessness and daring during the Second World War enabled a great many Jews in Hungary to survive the Shoah. Memorials to Wallenberg are even more numerous and widespread than are copies of Reuterswärd's sculpture *Non-Violence*.<sup>54</sup> This commemoration is destined to increase in 2012, which will mark the centenary of Wallenberg's birth. The commemorative events that are certain to ensue will help ensure that 'there will be no end to the Wallenberg story.'<sup>55</sup>

### **The Mythical North**

The centenary of Raoul Wallenberg's birth coincides conveniently with the diamond anniversary of the Nordic Council. It will (to recall Rogers Brubaker) be possible to gauge *Norden's* 'balances of hegemony' by scrutinizing the manner in which various 'entrepreneurs' evoke and invoke 'the North' during this doubly commemorative year. Each initiative will mark a further development in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*. This, the title of a multi-authored book published in 1997, provided the brick-and-mortar metaphor cited above. It was in part financed by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond). The same organization has served as the principal supporter

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<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to Nikolas Glover for drawing my attention to the nationality of Kofi Annan's wife.

<sup>54</sup> Tanja Schult, 'Whose Raoul Wallenberg is it? The Man and the Myth: Between Memory, History and Popularity', *Culture Unbound*, 2, 2010, pp. 769–796.

<sup>55</sup> Schult, 2010, p. 792.

for ‘Nordic Spaces’, the initiative that culminated in Ashgate’s Nordic-themed series of publications. The book that you are holding does not simply mirror a Nordic reality: it constitutes in a literal sense part of the ‘cohesive mortar’ that makes up that elusive ‘Nordic element’.

The implications of this are rarely acknowledged or explored. *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, for example, begins by very effectively showing that *Norden* is an ongoing political construct based on myth.<sup>56</sup> It ends with a ‘Nordic chronology’.<sup>57</sup> This timeline gives credence to the construction of *Norden*, providing it with a heritage and an ongoing lineage. Rather than an innocent statement of facts it is a furtherance of the myth of ‘the North’.

All such investigations run the risk of contributing to this myth-making – and of ‘creating new ones’.<sup>58</sup> This is true even of a publication with the grand title *Scandinavian Design Beyond the Myth: Fifty Years of Design from the Nordic Countries*. It begins with a foreword by Per Unckel, the then secretary general of the Nordic Council of Ministers which commissioned and funded the publication and associated exhibition. Unckel concedes that the notion of ‘Scandinavian design’ was a ‘fiction’ which ‘developed from a set of myths about the region, its countries, nature and the people who lived there then.’<sup>59</sup>

The use of ‘Scandinavian’ rather than ‘Nordic’ in Unckel’s foreword confirms *Norden* to be a series of overlapping and contradictory myths and fictions about multiple Norths that come under a variety of headings (‘the North’, ‘the high north’, *Norden*,

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<sup>56</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, pp. 21–23.

<sup>57</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, pp. 286–296.

<sup>58</sup> Widar Halén & Kerstin Wickman (eds), *Scandinavian Design Beyond the Myth: Fifty Years of Design from the Nordic Countries* (Stockholm: Arvinius Förlag, 2006), p. 151.

<sup>59</sup> Halén & Wickman, 2006, p. 5.

Scandinavia and so forth).<sup>60</sup> And Unckel really had no need to phrase his observations in the past tense: the book that he was introducing confirms that fictions of ‘the North’ are still rampant. This is evident in an essay in *Scandinavian Design Beyond the Myth* entitled ‘Unpredictable Sweden’ written by the design historian, Kerstin Wickman. On first reading her short text gives the impression of challenging stereotypes, problematizing categories of identity and undermining interpretative certainties by concluding that ‘nothing is what it seems to be.’<sup>61</sup> This empty rhetoric provides a cover for the churning out of trite clichés about ‘the light of the Swedish countryside and the magic of a summer night.’ The ceramics of Mia E. Göransson are held up as encapsulating ‘the delicate, pregnant elusiveness of Swedish nature.’ Swedish design, we are told, possesses ‘tactile characteristics... [and] aims to please in an almost invisible manner.’ Glass – that ‘seductive but elusive material’ – is identified as the substance that best expresses design from ‘this orderly and cautious country with its obsession with everyday life’.<sup>62</sup>

The images illustrating Wickman’s text include a number of functional objects of industrial design such as telephones and even a welder’s mask. These are, however, presented in pristine isolation as artistic rather than utilitarian objects. This is typical of conventional accounts of design history which tend to focus on aesthetically pleasing objects for the home to the exclusion of items from other spheres. This point is well made by Kjetil Fallan in his recent book on design history. The image he uses to visualize this missing aspect is a torpedo boat from Norway called, interestingly enough, ‘Nasty’.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> See my review of *Place Reinvention: Northern Perspectives* (Torill Nyseth & Arvid Viken, eds, Ashgate, 2009) in *Landscape Review*, 36:6, 2011, pp. 703–704.

<sup>61</sup> Halén & Wickman, 2006, p. 213.

<sup>62</sup> Halén & Wickman, 2006, p. 213.

<sup>63</sup> Kjetil Fallan, *Design History: Understanding Theory and Method* (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2010), p. 9.

For Kerstin Wickman to have fulfilled the promise of both her chapter title and that of the book as a whole it would have been necessary to adopt the sort of approach advocated by a designer such as Zandra Ahl.<sup>64</sup> ‘Unpredictable Sweden: Beyond the Myth’ could have been summed-up in one painstakingly designed, ultra-Swedish object which ‘aims to please in an almost invisible manner’: the Carl-Gustaf 84 mm multi-purpose, man-portable, reusable recoilless rifle.

However, including this weapon among the canon of Swedish cultural objects and as an archetype of all things Nordic is highly problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, the nations that make up *Norden* are self-obsessed and prone to narcissism, meaning that they are highly sensitive to criticism, especially if it should come from an ‘outsider’ like me.<sup>65</sup> Secondly, on a regional level, introducing a discordant note into *Norden*’s musak soundtrack would threaten to undermine a barely disguised sense of ‘moral supremacy’ that is intrinsic to promotions of all things Nordic.<sup>66</sup> Even those so-called Nordic traits that are ostensibly negative can be turned into badges of pride. Thus the angst that supposedly blights ‘the North’ gives birth to an artistic icon in the shape of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, the name of the man who pioneered dynamite is synonymous with peace rather than war.<sup>68</sup> *Norden*’s unremittingly positive message means that even those who wish to do away with the myth of *Norden* share a sense of pride about the region’s contribution to

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<sup>64</sup> Stuart Burch, ‘Taking Part: Performance, Participation and National Art Museums’ in Simon Knell et al (ed.) *National Museums: New Studies From Around the World* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 235–236, 241.

<sup>65</sup> Stuart Burch, ‘Nationell narcissism’, *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 95 (1), 2010, pp. 204–211.

<sup>66</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, pp. 29, 92–93.

<sup>67</sup> Stuart Burch, ‘Låt det nordiska komma in’ in *Ett nordiskt rum: Historiska och framtida gemenskaper från Baltikum till Barents hav* (Jenny Björkman, Björn Fjæstad & Jonas Harvard, eds, Makadam, 2011), pp. 60–71.

<sup>68</sup> The Swede, Alfred Nobel (1833–96). The terms of his will instituted the prizes given in his name. These, as has already been noted, are conferred in Stockholm, with the exception of the prize for peace which is administered and awarded in Oslo.

peace.<sup>69</sup> This is unsurprising given that traditions and stereotypes ‘provide enticing and comforting maps.’<sup>70</sup> Such uses of myth fill at least one further and highly significant function: they provide a very necessary antidote to a far more sinister reading of *Norden*. This is apparent to all those who, at the time of writing, are searching Wikipedia for information on ‘Nordism’.<sup>71</sup> They are redirected automatically to ‘Scandinavism’. In a warning footnote inserted at the outset of this entry it is stated: ‘The political movement of Nordism should not be confused with the racial ideology of Nordicism, which latter [sic] considers the Nordic people a master race.’ Clicking on ‘Nordicism’ leads to a far from banal account of its longstanding and persistent links with race and racism.

The Norwegian anthropologist, Thomas Hylland Eriksen warned about the threat posed by ‘zealous patriots’ at least as early as 1993.<sup>72</sup> His words have a terrible poignancy following the massacre perpetrated by Anders Behring Breivik on July 22, 2011. The extent to which banal Nordism hindered the exposure of the likes of Breivik remains an open question.<sup>73</sup> However, with such objectionable facets festering beneath the surface it is hardly surprising that ‘the North’ is incapable of standing up to too much scrutiny. *Norden* invokes

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<sup>69</sup> See Fredrik Svedjetun’s comments to this effect in Peter Fällmar Andersson, ‘Vem i hela Norden bryr sig?’, *Nordvästra Skånes Tidningar*, March 23, 2011, A12.

<sup>70</sup> Lundström, 1994, p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> The following information was accessed on April 15, 2011 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordism> (redirects to ‘Scandinavism’); <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordicism> (redirects to ‘Nordic race’).

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Hylland Eriksen, ‘Being Norwegian in a shrinking world: Reflections on Norwegian identity’, in Anne Cohen Kiel, ed., 1993, *Continuity and Change: Aspects of Modern Norway*, Scandinavian University Press, <http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/Norwegian.html>, accessed November 6, 2011.

<sup>73</sup> Breivik posted his far right views ‘on several Scandinavian websites, including *Nordisk* – a site frequented by neo-Nazis, far right radicals and Islamophobes since 2009.’ Mark Townsend et al, ‘Norway attacks: Utøya gunman boasted of links to UK far right’, *The Guardian*, July 23, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/23/norway-attacks-utoya-gunman>, accessed July 23, 2011.

‘a prohibition of questions. The dream is the reality, the wish is the politics... analysis is untrue and reality is a lie.’<sup>74</sup> This places an embargo on a too-critical critique of *Norden*. The risk is, therefore, that the same old myths get repeated. At its worst *Norden* is the last bastion of the lazy journalist. To take but one example: Iceland’s financial woes, economic meltdown and impending referendum over whether to settle the foreign debts of the investment bank, Icesave. This led one commentator to muse about neo-Vikings marauding in the financial world, aggressive non-Nordic superpowers threatening the plucky little nations of *Norden*, and vacuous words about Nordic neighbourliness.<sup>75</sup>

This is all pretty innocuous stuff. Banal in the most boring sense of the word. A harmless way for a Swedish newspaper-reader to liven up his breakfast by experiencing a frisson of pride and Nordic fellowship. There is nothing wrong with this. What *is* troubling is that it tends to throw a veil over less savoury aspects of *Norden*. This brings us back to that wrong-sounding ‘Swedish grenade’.

### **Cry ‘Norden!’ and Let Slip the Dogs of War**

There is evidence that, locally at least, a debate about Sweden’s weapons industry is gaining momentum. This is clear from the radio report that woke me on that bright Sunday morning in the spring of 2011. A few weeks later another programme on Sweden’s national radio dealt with the issue of the arms industry in greater depth. The feature was introduced as follows: ‘Sweden is the country that exports the most defence equipment per capita in the world whilst we wish to be ambassadors for human rights and the fight against global poverty.’<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Sørensen & Stråth, 1997, p. 120.

<sup>75</sup> Erik Helmersson, ‘Island: De nya vikingarna plundrade sitt eget folk’, *Dagens Nyheter*, April 9, 2011, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Sverige är det land i världen som exporterar mest försvarsmateriel per capita samtidigt som vi vill vara ambassadörer för fattigdomsbekämpning och mänskliga rättigheter.’ *Människor och tro*, March 25, 2011, Sveriges Radio, P1.

It is not only the scale of Sweden's arms sales that is of note here. So too is the terminology. The use of the word 'we' implies that *all* Swedes agree with the state's ambassadorial role. This human association with the nation is a warning reminder that any condemnation of Sweden's actions risks being interpreted as a personal affront. This is compounded by the image used to accompany the online version of the programme. It featured Princess Victoria, the heir to the Swedish throne, standing alongside her recently married husband, Daniel. In an excruciatingly embarrassing pastiche of the Hollywood film, *Top Gun*, we see the happy couple as they stand awkwardly in front of the ultimate symbol of Sweden's military ambitions: the JAS 39 Gripen fighter airplane.<sup>77</sup>

The JAS Gripen is manufactured by Saab AB, the firm responsible for the Carl-Gustaf rifle. Its development – which has been heavily subsidized by the Swedish state – has so far cost an estimated 120 billion Swedish kronor.<sup>78</sup> The attempted sale of this aircraft to foreign nations has led to claims of bribery and corruption. The most damning criticism relates to Sweden's dealings with South Africa in the late 1990s. In May 2011, documents came to light suggesting that a subsidiary of Saab AB was involved in paying large bribes in a bid to secure the sale.<sup>79</sup> This would appear to confirm the claims set out by Nils Resare in his 2010 book charting this murky story. It is scathing in its condemnation of the arms industry as well as the highest echelons of Swedish civil society.<sup>80</sup> Resare presents evidence to show that Swedish state funds earmarked for development aid (*bistånd*) were used to facilitate the sale of arms. To this end, Swedish cultural activities functioned as a stratagem to mask an ulterior motive: the sale of the JAS Gripen.

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<sup>77</sup> I am grateful to Jonas Harvard for drawing this visual association to my attention.

<sup>78</sup> Olle Nygårds, 'Gripens rykte hänger i luften', *Svenska Dagbladet*, April 1, 2011, Näringsliv, pp. 4–5.

<sup>79</sup> Josefine Hökerberg, 'Nya dokument kan avslöja Jas-mutor', *Dagens Nyheter*, May 18, 2011, p. 8.

<sup>80</sup> Nils Resare, *Mutor, makt och bistånd: JAS och Sydafrikaaffären* (Stockholm: Natur & Kultur, 2010).

Under such circumstances it becomes possible to argue that banal Nordism was deployed here as a cynical tool of manipulation. This is a point of view shared by one of the most vocal critics of the JAS Gripen affair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This Nobel Peace Prize laureate has argued that Sweden ‘coerced’ South Africa into the purchase of the JAS 39 Gripen, an action that Tutu and others believe led to corruption in the fledgling democracy.<sup>81</sup> The Swedish archbishop, K.G. Hammar, opposed the sale by the then Social Democratic government under Prime Minister Göran Persson. Hammar was of the opinion that ‘Sweden exploited... the goodwill it accrued from the fight against apartheid and used it as a reason why the newly democratic South Africa should trade with Sweden.’<sup>82</sup>

These events show the dark side of banal Nordism. They also beg the question: is banal Nordism a deliberate ruse; a ploy consciously fabricated in order to deceive and conceal? In the case of the sale of JAS Gripen to South Africa the answer is almost certainly, yes it is. However, on a day-to-day basis, the production of banal Nordism is probably as banal as its reception. The ‘constant image’ of *Norden* is so entrenched that entrepreneurs must find themselves repeating stereotypical images of ‘the North’ even if they are ‘neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.’<sup>83</sup> A case in point occurred during the final, abortive attempt to co-curate the Nordic Pavilion in Venice: the traditional mantra of ‘peace, harmony and new ideas’ was dutifully spouted at its

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<sup>81</sup> Resare 2010; Anon, ‘Misstänkta mutor i Jas-affär med Sydafrika’, Sveriges Radio, August 16, 2010,

<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=3922269> and

<http://sverigesradio.se/topsy/ljudfil/2539930.mp3>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Cited in ‘Korruption i spåren av JAS’, *Godmorgon, världen!* Sveriges Radio, August 15, 2010,

<http://sverigesradio.se/topsy/ljudfil/2539930.mp3>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 6.



inauguration, even if the process that led to this ill-fated act of Nordic (un)fellowship was clearly anything but harmonious.<sup>84</sup>

A frank appraisal of *Norden's* entanglement with contemporary conflict faces additional challenges. This is intimated in a diorama which, at the time of writing, is on show at the Armémuseum in Stockholm. It features two mannequins seated on a living room sofa. They watch impassively as an unceasing diet of war 'in a flood that does not cease' is fed to them via their television.<sup>85</sup> Behind them looms a huge military vehicle surmounted by a soldier armed with what looks suspiciously like a Carl-Gustaf rifle. The TV-viewing couple seems entirely oblivious to the reality of what is going on behind them, captivated as they are by the war-as-entertainment that they see on the screen. These 'normal folk'<sup>86</sup> need to be turned around and brought face-to-face with a combat-proven Carl-Gustaf. This would help allay the lie that 'Swedes have difficulty understanding how people from other countries look upon wars and those that fight in them.'<sup>87</sup>

If this asinine statement is really true, how can unworldly Sweden sanction the sale of weapons of mass destruction such as the Carl-Gustaf or the JAS Gripen? It is precisely this disparity between banal self-delusion and bloody reality that urgently needs to be addressed by an institution such as Sweden's Armémuseum. Saab AB's intrigues in South Africa as well as other countries – including Sweden's embarrassingly unsuccessful attempt to sell the

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<sup>84</sup> Julie Sjøwall Oftedal, 'Misnøye i Venezia: – Vi vurderer egen norsk utstilling', August 28, 2010, <http://www.arkitektnytt.no/-vi-vurderer-egen-norsk-utstilling>, accessed September 15, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> The reference to 'a flood that does not cease' is taken from an intriguing song entitled '18.29-4' written by Joakim Berg of the Swedish rock group Kent. It appears on their album *Röd* (2009). See <http://kent.nu/latar/18-29-4> and also the comments I make later on in this section and in the conclusion of the chapter.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Holger, 2009, p. 192.

JAS Gripen aircraft to Norway in 2008<sup>88</sup> – would make fascinating topics for exhibitions at the Nobel Peace Center in Oslo or the Nobel Museum in Stockholm. In so doing the unifying ‘Nordic element’ would take on a very different hue.

Because the ‘cohesive mortar’ that binds the nations of ‘the North’ might be just that – mortar in the sense of ‘various devices for firing a projectile with a high trajectory’.<sup>89</sup> A case in point is the so-called Nordic Standard Helicopter Programme of the late 1990s. Sweden’s former defence minister, Björn von Sydow, was so enamoured with the notion of collaborating with his Nordic neighbours that he went against the guidance of his expert advisers. A decade on, this has proven to be a costly and largely abortive decision.<sup>90</sup>

Knowledge of an incident such as this provides the potential to tell a rarely-told counter narrative to *Norden*’s ‘old song of peace’.<sup>91</sup> For instance, during the joyful centenary of the peaceful dissolution of the Swedish–Norwegian union, little mention was made of the fact that, in 2005, the Norwegian state bought a half-share in the arms manufacturer Nammo.<sup>92</sup> This is a pity because Nammo is an exceedingly Nordic company. It was established in 1998 following ‘a merger of ammunition activities of three major Nordic

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<sup>88</sup> Revelations that the Swedish authorities had been duped by their Norwegian counterparts led one newspaper to ask: ‘Can Norwegians be trusted?’ Oisín Cantwell, ‘Kan man lita på norrmän?’, *Aftonbladet*, December 4, 2010, pp. 12–13. See also Jessica Balksjö et al, ‘Jas-blåsningen’, *Aftonbladet*, December 4, 2010, pp. 10–11.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Mortar, noun’, *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., December 2002, <http://oed.com/view/Entry/122447>, accessed April 4, 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Ekot, ‘Minister struntade i expertråd vid helikopterköp’, *Sveriges Radio*, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=4648820>, accessed August 17, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> The origins of this phrase (which also features in the title of this chapter) is derived from the aforementioned song, ‘18.29-4’ by the Swedish rock group Kent (see the penultimate paragraph of this chapter).

<sup>92</sup> Asle Skredderberget, ‘Staten kjøper seg opp i omstridt våpenprodusent’, *Aftenposten*, November 24, 2005, <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/okonomi/article1163801.ece>, accessed November 24, 2005.

defence companies', namely Celsius AB, Raufoss ASA and Patria Industries Oyj.<sup>93</sup> The last named firm currently shares equal ownership of Nammo with the Norwegian state. With a workforce of just under two thousand people and an annual turnover of roughly 3 billion Norwegian kroner, Nammo specializes in 'ammunition systems' as well as 'missile and space propulsion products' and considers itself to be 'a world leader within environmentally friendly demilitarisation services'.<sup>94</sup>

Another player in this sector is Kongsberg Gruppen, the headquarters of which are in Norway and the majority shareholder is the Norwegian state. Its annual report for 2010 revealed operating revenues of 15,497 billion Norwegian kroner, 36.7 per cent of which was accounted for by Kongsberg Protech Systems. Kongsberg states excitedly that this is an area of business that has grown 'exceptionally quickly'.<sup>95</sup> Its top seller is the Protector Remote Weapon Station (RWS). This is promoted as a market-leader in offering protection to the occupants of armoured vehicles. More than 10,000 such systems have been sold to seventeen countries, only one of which is named: the United States Army. This customer 'has announced plans to procure up to 18,000 systems over the next five years'.<sup>96</sup>

The Kongsberg group has a corporate code of ethics and seeks 'to comply insofar as possible with the "Norwegian Code of Practice for Corporate Governance."' <sup>97</sup> In 2010 it placed a particular focus on anti-corruption measures; even so, it admits to 'shortcomings' when it comes 'to internal control and the other areas defined as parts of corporate social responsibility'.<sup>98</sup> For its part, Nammo stresses that the development, sale and marketing of all

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<sup>93</sup> Nammo, 'Nammo in brief', <http://www.nammo.com/Nammo-Group>, accessed November 12, 2011.

<sup>94</sup> 'Nammo in brief'.

<sup>95</sup> Kongsberg Gruppen, *Annual Report 2010*, Kongsberg, p.12.

<sup>96</sup> Kongsberg Gruppen, 2010, pp. 8-9 & 28.

<sup>97</sup> Kongsberg Gruppen, 2010, p. 15.

<sup>98</sup> Kongsberg Gruppen, 2010, pp. 14 & 63.

its products ‘is strictly in accordance with laws and regulations [laid down] by the national authorities of our respective domestic customers’.<sup>99</sup> An opportunity to test not only this assertion but Norway’s wider credentials as ‘a peace nation’ was denied in 2006 when the Norwegian state broadcaster NRK refused to transmit a documentary examining Norway’s role in the arms industry.<sup>100</sup>

*Norden*’s museums should break this silence by facilitating a much-needed discussion of the ethics of the arms trade. Sweden’s Armémuseum, for example, could juxtapose its Carl-Gustaf from the 1940s with Saab AB’s latest model. The Non-Violence Project might be asked to write a thought-provoking exhibition booklet and education guide. Reuterswäld’s knotted pistol displayed alongside a Carl-Gustaf would provide a trigger for debate. So too would the inclusion of a Carl-Gustaf in the design galleries of Sweden’s Nationalmuseum. The display could be entitled, ‘Unpredictable Sweden: Beyond the Myth’. It would, moreover, be interesting to use this novel insertion as an opportunity to compare the marketing of artefacts designed for the home with the promotion of military equipment. The sleek and seductive presentation of Saab AB’s products on its website suggests that these spheres of advertising have much in common.

The question is, of course, whether such *Norden*-evoking, *Norden*-invoking efforts would be acceptable to the region’s cultural, financial and academic entrepreneurs, organizations and funders. They might well lodge objections on the grounds of taste and propriety. These protests could be countered by referring to other, far more extreme precedents. The juxtapositions and provocations suggested in the preceding paragraphs are mild in comparison to the sights on show at *Body Armour*, a temporary exhibition mounted

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<sup>99</sup> Nammo, ‘Nammo in brief’, <http://www.nammo.com/Nammo-Group>, accessed November 12, 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Skånland, “‘Norway is a peace nation’”, 2010; Arve Henriksen, ‘NRK rejects film that debunks Norway’s peaceful image’, *Aftenposten*, March 31, 2006, <http://www.aftenposten.no/english/local/article1264501.ece>, accessed March 31, 2006.

by Sweden's Armémuseum in 2011. This was devoted to Morten Traavik, the first artist in residence at Norway's Defence Museum. His exhibition featured the latest in an ongoing series of works under the general title 'HÆRWERK'. This very old word, variations of which feature in many languages, is familiar from the phrase 'cry havoc', the order issued to an army to signal the seizure of spoil – as in the famous Shakespearian line: 'Cry "Havoc!" and let slip the dogs of war' (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3.1: 273).<sup>101</sup> In Traavik's case such 'spoils' include the morphing of weapons and body parts to produce disturbing and surrealistic objects that prompt reflection on the link between sex and violence. These and other initiatives by Traavik led to much debate in Norway, in part because the leadership of Norway's defence forces apparently attempted to censor certain works.<sup>102</sup>

Whilst Armémuseum in Stockholm was brave enough to host a contentious Norwegian artist, would it be so willing to 'cry havoc!' on Sweden's arms industry? Could it, for instance, metamorphose the barrel of a Carl-Gustaf into an engorged penis *à la* Morten Traavik? Consideration would first have to be given to the fact that Saab AB sponsored the National Swedish Museums of Military History (SFHM) to the tune of 2.2m Swedish kronor in 2009.<sup>103</sup> This funded the rebuilding of the Swedish Air Force Museum, which was awarded the accolade of Swedish Museum of the Year for 2011. In 2007 Saab AB helped pay for the redisplay of Armémuseum's trophy collection featuring some 4,500 colours and standards seized during Swedish military campaigns dating from the seventeenth-century until 1814. These and other spoils of war would have been gathered once the order 'havoc!' had been

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<sup>101</sup> 'Havoc, n.', *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1989, <http://oed.com/view/Entry/84740>, accessed April 15, 2011;

*The Oxford Shakespeare: Julius Caesar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 173.

<sup>102</sup> Information derived from the introductory panel to the exhibition, *Body Armour* (Armémuseum, April 12 – September 11, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> *Årsredovisning 2009*, Statens Försvarshistoriska Museer,

[http://www.sfhm.se/upload/SFHM\\_NY/Årsredovisningar/Årsredovisning\\_2009.pdf](http://www.sfhm.se/upload/SFHM_NY/Årsredovisningar/Årsredovisning_2009.pdf), p. 34, accessed April 11, 2011.

issued. Such items were taken triumphantly back to Sweden as evidence of the nation's prowess on the field of battle. Their continual display is, in other words, the antithesis of Kofi Annan's prayer 'which asks not for victory, but for peace'. Nostalgia and a pride in Sweden's past military endeavours clearly resonate with the production and sale of weapons today – as testified by Saab AB's sponsorship.

Saab AB's generous financial support helped put the Swedish State Trophy Collection 'in [a] new light'.<sup>104</sup> Such illumination needs to be shed on more contemporary aspects of war. The moral and ethical implications of Sweden's involvement in the arms trade is mentioned, albeit briefly, in the guidebook accompanying Armémuseum's permanent collection.<sup>105</sup> The text is accompanied by a photograph of the museum's 1948 Carl-Gustaf. This, as we have seen, is no historical relic but the antecedent of its even more lethal current model. Its manufacture and sale merits far greater emphasis and scrutiny. This is particularly necessary given that in March 2011 Saab AB announced that it had clinched a deal to sell 1,155 billion Swedish kronors' worth of Carl-Gustaf rifles and ammunition to an unnamed purchaser. This will commence in September 2011 and continue throughout the following year.<sup>106</sup> The money and weapons will exchange hands at the same time that the Nordic Council marks its sixtieth anniversary.

The lack of transparency regarding the destination of this lethal equipment flies in the face of Sweden's reputation for openness and democracy. It so happens that Sweden is one of the very few countries in Europe that allows large-scale donations to political parties to

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<sup>104</sup> 'Statens trofésamling i nytt ljus', <http://www.sfhm.se/templates/pages/ArmeStandardPage.aspx?id=5135>, accessed April 11, 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Anna Maria Forsberg (ed.) *Armémuseum: om krig och människor* (Stockholm: Armémuseum, 2009), p. 67.

<sup>106</sup> 'Carl-Gustaf system' press release, Saab AB, March 11, 2011.

remain anonymous.<sup>107</sup> This has led to stinging criticism from the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).<sup>108</sup> This state of affairs is as anomalous to banal Nordism as is the knowledge that Sweden is, per capita, the world's leading exporter of arms.

Is it ethical for the National Swedish Museums of Military History to accept sponsorship from Saab AB? Does it have an impact on curatorial decisions? Would it matter if Saab AB had given anonymous financial backing to the Alliance parties of the ruling centre-right coalition or the preceding Social Democratic government? Would such support influence the political representatives that sit on the panel that advises on the export of military and other strategic equipment?<sup>109</sup> Similar questions concern the 'Swedishness' of Saab AB. The name Wallenberg might well be synonymous with peace, but this does not prevent the 'Wallenberg foundations' from being listed as an 8.7 per cent shareholder in Saab AB as of December 2010.<sup>110</sup>

A public discussion and debate about these and other such issues is hindered by banal Nordism. The unreflected blind spots that it induces will only be rectified through a thorough-going analysis of *Norden's* involvement in peace *and* conflict. One of the most

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<sup>107</sup> Ewa Stenberg, 'Sverige inte alls så öppet', *Dagens Nyheter*, November 24, 2010,

<http://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/sverige-inte-alls-sa-oppet-1.1214816>, accessed April 11, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> *Compliance Report on Sweden*, Greco RC-III (2011) 4E, Strasbourg, April 1, 2011,

[http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/greco/evaluations/round3/GrecoRC3%282011%294\\_Sweden\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/greco/evaluations/round3/GrecoRC3%282011%294_Sweden_EN.pdf), accessed April 26, 2011.

<sup>109</sup> This is the Export Control Council (*Exportkontrollrådet*), a cross-party parliamentary body that advises the Swedish Agency for Non-Proliferation and Export Controls (*Inspektionen för strategiska produkter*).

<sup>110</sup> The full list of the largest shareholders (as of December 31, 2010) was as follows: Investor AB (30%); BAE Systems (10.2%); Wallenberg foundations (8.7%); Nordea Funds (5.4%); Swedbank Robur Funds (4.3%); 4th AP Fund (1.9%); Länsförsäkringar Funds (1.8%); SEB Funds (1.7%). See 'Key facts', <http://www.saabgroup.com/en/About-Saab/Company-profile/Saab-in-brief/Key-facts/>, accessed April 11, 2011.

dramatic examinations of this ilk is the documentary film *Armadillo*.<sup>111</sup> It deals with the activities of Danish soldiers in Afghanistan, including intimations that they revelled in the killing of Taliban fighters – to the extent that they allegedly ‘liquidated’ wounded combatants. The victorious soldiers are seen gathering up the weapons of their bullet-ridden opponents. They transport what they proudly call their ‘loot of war’ back to base. This cache of war booty is an updated version of the Saab AB-sponsored trophy collection at Sweden’s Armémuseum: proof positive that the men of the North are capable of matching their Viking forebears.

The response of one English-language movie critic to this documentary film is noteworthy: ‘*Armadillo* doesn’t offer conclusive proof that the Danish soldiers broke the rules of engagement. Nonetheless, the very possibility that they might have done is startling in itself.’<sup>112</sup> This can be interpreted as one final instance of banal Nordism: *the very possibility* that Danish soldiers could be as inhuman or depraved as soldiers from Britain, the United States or any other nation is shocking precisely because we are banally conditioned to expect that *Norden* ‘serves the interest of peace and justice throughout the whole world’.<sup>113</sup>

### **Combat Proven Conclusions**

The origins of this chapter coincided with the so-called ‘Arab spring’ of 2011. I began writing shortly after British Prime Minister David Cameron became the first foreign statesman to visit Egypt following the uprising that would see the ousting of Hosni Mubarak. Cameron stopped off in Cairo on his way to a three-day tour of the Gulf States. In his entourage were representatives of ‘eight of Britain’s leading defence [sic] manufacturers.’<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> *Armadillo*, directed by Janus Metz, released May 27, 2010, 100 minutes, Fridthjof Film A/S.

<sup>112</sup> Geoffrey Macnab, ‘*Armadillo*: the Afghanistan war documentary that shocked Denmark’, *The Guardian*, June 3, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/jun/03/armadillo-danish-documentary-afghanistan>, accessed April 11, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> This, it may be recalled, is the maxim of the Norden Association.

<sup>114</sup> Nicholas Watt & Robert Booth, ‘David Cameron’s Cairo visit overshadowed by defence tour’, *The Guardian*, February



Cameron's decision to tour the region in the company of weapons exporters was to prove both controversial and premature. The spring of 2011 has long since passed, but the turmoil in the Arab world looks set to continue for the foreseeable future. Even at an early stage it was clear that the consequences will be momentous and far-reaching.

Take Libya, for example. On March 17, 2011, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 authorized member states to take all necessary measures short of 'a foreign occupation' to protect the people of Libya. This led to the implementation of a 'no-fly zone' which remained in place until October 31, 2011. By that date Muammar Gaddafi was dead and the country's National Transitional Council had issued a 'Declaration of Liberation'.<sup>115</sup>

Management of the 'no-fly zone' came under the command of NATO. Although not a member of this organization, Sweden opted to participate – but on a highly constrained basis. The eight JAS Gripen that were initially sent were not allowed to take part in bombing sorties.<sup>116</sup> Instead, their role was confined to reconnaissance. Even this was restricted: the pilots were instructed to avoid actively following Gaddafi's forces.<sup>117</sup> Such constraints were not set by Norway and Denmark, both of which took part as members of NATO.<sup>118</sup> The Libya operation thus underlined clear differences between the Nordic countries. Indeed, the Nordic region was no more united than the rest of the world over the course of action mandated by UN Resolution 1973.

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21, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/feb/21/cameron-cairo-visit-defence-trade>, accessed November 20, 2011.

<sup>115</sup> United Nations Security Council S/RES/2016 (2011), October 27, 2011, §6.

<sup>116</sup> 'Vi säger att planen inte ska få angripa markmål.' Urban Ahlin cited in 'Svenskt deltagande i den internationella militära insatsen i Libyen', Riksdagens protokoll 2010/11:81, April 1, 2011,

<http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=101&bet=2010/11:81>, §2, accessed November 22, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Mikael Holmström, 'Bara spaning för svenskar', *Svenska Dagbladet*, April 23, 2011, p. 17.

<sup>118</sup> A fact pointed out by Carl B Hamilton (FP) in an address to parliament. See 'Svenskt deltagande i den internationella militära insatsen i Libyen', Riksdagens protokoll 2010/11:81, April 1, 2011,

<http://www.riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=101&bet=2010/11:81>, §14, accessed November 22, 2011.

Staffan Danielsson of the Centre Party, speaking in the Swedish parliament, described the nature of his country's involvement in the Libya campaign as 'a little odd' given that, in the final analysis, it left the actual task of defending the Libyan people to others.<sup>119</sup> Yet this abrogation of responsibility makes perfect sense when looked at through the prism of banal Nordism. Sweden's behaviour safeguarded its reputation for a tradition of peace – the value of which was emphasized by its Foreign Minister, Carl Bildt, when the issue of the war in Libya was debated in parliament.<sup>120</sup>

The name JAS Gripen refers to the aircraft's three principal functions, namely: pursuit (*Jakt*), attack (*Attack*) and reconnaissance (*Spaning*). In Libya only the 'S' of its name was utilized. This decision enabled Sweden to take part in a war but in such a way as to avoid risking its reputation for enjoying 'peace for nearly 200 years'. It fought in a battle without resorting to violence. It helped win the war by enabling others to wage it. This is akin to manufacturing 'defence' equipment like the Carl-Gustaf and selling it to belligerent powers.

The wages of war are plentiful. The JAS Gripen has many qualities, but it had not been tested in battle. Unlike the Carl-Gustaf it was not 'combat proven'. Now, thanks to the war in Libya it can claim this highly desirable accolade.

Sweden's ostensible involvement in Libya was to help topple a hated and much-feared dictator. There were, however, other concerns (or happy consequences, depending on your point of view). The high profile the aircraft received during the conflict will help those who wish to fund and develop a new generation JAS Gripen.<sup>121</sup> Crucially, Libya's war was Sweden's export opportunity. The marketing of Saab AB's JAS Gripen has been enhanced

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<sup>119</sup> See Riksdagens protokoll 2010/11:81, §13 (as note above).

<sup>120</sup> As above, §10.

<sup>121</sup> Ewa Stenberg, 'Tolgfors vill ha super-Jas', *Dagens Nyheter*, March 1, 2011, p.10.

considerably. This was a skilful manoeuvre: Sweden's reputation for peace was secured whilst its potential as an exporter of weapons was enhanced.

And so it is that *Norden's* 'old song of peace' can continue to be sung in Stockholm – the capital city of a country that has only known peace for two hundred years. This phrase – an 'old song of peace' – has been inspired by the cryptically titled song, '18.29-4'. This forms the first track on the album *Röd* ('Red') by the Swedish rock group, 'Kent'. An amateur choir of church-goers sings the band's lyrics. To the accompaniment of tolling bells and a church organ they refer to the shooting of soldiers. Yet no-one can be bothered to ask why. Instead, the soldiers die to a soundtrack of popular peace songs sung by the masses. However, to paraphrase this pseudo-hymn, 'even a hundred thousand voices can be wrong'.

Only time will tell if the blissful ignorance inspired by the workings of banal Nordism will prevail. One thing is clear: the singers of those old songs of peace will be obliged to raise their voices ever louder in an effort to drown out the explosive impact of Saab AB's Carl-Gustaf and the deafening roar of its JAS Gripen.

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