

Sven Hedin and Russia —Mutual Trust with Obstacles¹

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The well-known Swedish explorer Sven Hedin (1865-1952) started his explorative work from the Southern Provinces of the Russian Empire when he in 1885 as a fresh student arrived in Baku to take up a temporary position as tutor of a Swedish schoolboy of a family in the service of the Nobel industrial conglomerate there.² During his time in Baku Hedin learnt the Russian language quite well and founded a sincere positive attitude toward Russia and things Russian. When in the next few years he organized his «one-man expeditions» to Inner Asia, mainly to the Taklamakan desert in Sinkiang and to Tibet, he received considerable help from the Russian authorities.³

As Hedin's international reputation grew, the Russian authorities seem to have become more and more interested in supporting the intrepid Swede and his adventurous undertakings in a huge area, which at the time was so hotly contested by the two imperialistic powers Russia and Great Britain. Hedin as a citizen of a small neutral Scandinavian state, from many points of view was the perfect person for them to support. Russian attention towards Hedin at times assumed very flattering forms. At the start of his second expedition (1899) Hedin even was received for the second time by the Czar Nicholas II himself, who promised his Swedish guest not only free transportation on the Russian railways but also an «escort» of four Cossacks, who were to follow Hedin all the way through Tibet down to British India.⁴ Hedin was duly flattered, and to the end of his life he seems to have been of the opinion that this extraordinary help only was a token of Russian good-will and general interest in geographical-scientific problems and nothing else. It obviously never occurred to him that Russian interest in 'Hedin the Explorer' also could have other, less idealistic, motives.

¹ A Russian version of this paper was first presented at the 12th Russo-Finnish Humanitarian Workshop (XII-e Rossiisko-Finlyandskie gumanitarnye chteniya), St. Petersburg, 24-25 October, 2002.

² Eric Wennerholm, *Sven Hedin—En biografi*, Stockholm 1980, pp. 34-38.

³ Wennerholm, *op.cit.*, pp. 60-241. For bibliographic information on Hedin's own extensive writings on his expeditions, see Willy Hess, *Die Werke Sven Hedins*, Stockholm 1962.

⁴ Sven Hedin, *Stormän och kungar*, Vol. II, pp. 234-249.

Already during his first visit to Kashgar in 1890, Hedin met the illustrious Russian Consul General Nikolai Fedorovich Petrovskii (1837-1908).⁵ Petrovskii immediately seems to have realized that Hedin could be of some service to Russian interests in Sinkiang, and we must assume that the later very positive attitude towards Hedin from the side of the Russian authorities to a large extent stems from the reports sent by Petrovskii to his superiors in St. Petersburg. Hedin himself appreciated Nikolai Fedorovich immensely and all his life talked about him as his 'dear old friend'. On the other hand, according to the testimony of some Swedish missionaries in Kashgar, the Russian consul in private sometimes made fun of the Swedish explorer and talked about him in a depreciating way. A good example of Consul Petrovskii's skilful manipulating of Hedin is the fact that the consul in 1894 talked Hedin into changing his travel plans from Tibet to Pamir—an area of more immediate interest to the Russian authorities at the time.

Hedin was well rewarded by Russia. He was received several times by the Czar, to whom he had been sending regular reports of his travels, and he was elected a foreign member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. However, Hedin's relations to his beloved Russia were destined to develop in a fairly turbulent way, with several ups and downs. The main reason for this is that Hedin was not only a geographer and scientist—he was also a very energetic conservative politician and patriotic nationalist. This second side of Hedin's personality not only created problems in his relations with Russia but also seriously damaged his reputation as one of the «great men of his time».

Already in 1890-91, Hedin personally had witnessed the Russian expansion in Central Asia and had come to realize the strength and determination of the Russian expansionist policy and Russia's active participation in *The Great Game*. Hedin had created a new geo-political concept in which Russia and Central Asia, with all its Russian and British political connotations, were called by the term *The Great East*. Hedin first brought forward this concept in a book called *Sweden and the Great East*, published in 1905.⁶ The gist of Hedin's geo-political analysis was the following. After the Russian defeat in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 Hedin had reached the conclusion that further Russian expansion towards the East was no longer possible, and that, as a result, Russia would be forced to seek further expansion in the North-West instead, i.e. in

⁵ Ronald Emmerick & Margarita Vorob'ëva-Desyatovskaya, *Saka Documents*, Text Volume III: *The St. Petersburg Collection*, London 1995, pp. 19-20 («The St. Petersburg Petrovsky Collection»).

⁶ Sven Hedin, *Sverige och den stora Östern*, Stockholm 1905, 269 pp. The book is dedicated to professor Harald Hjärne, but the page preceding the title page carries a portrait of the Russian Czar Nicholas II.

Scandinavia. In 1912 he published a small pamphlet titled «A Word of Warning»,⁷ in which he further argued for a strong Swedish armament in the face of an increasing military danger from Russia. The pamphlet was printed in almost one million copies and freely distributed to every newspaper subscriber in the country.

These anti-Russian ideas, widely propagated by Hedin both nationally and internationally at the same time as—and this is important to remember—he strongly attacked the British policy in Tibet—finally led to Hedin's expulsion from the Russian Geographical Society in 1912 and a total break-off with his official contacts with Russia. This process started with an unprecedented attack on Hedin in the Russian newspaper *Novoe Vremya* (27.II./11.III.1912). The article was written by Andrei Petrovich Semyonov-Tienshanskii, the son of the famous explorer and President of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, and clearly was politically motivated although Andrei Petrovich does his best also to reduce Hedin's scholarly and exploratory achievements to nothing. In the article Hedin was accused of ingratitude towards his Russian benefactors as well as of having attacked Russia in an ambush.

Hedin was furious over what he considered the unfairness of this official Russian criticism. In a long letter to Andrei Petrovich Semyonov-Tienshanskii, dated 6 April, 1912, Hedin vehemently defends his position and richly pays back the personal attacks found in Semyonov-Tienshanskii's article. Among other things, he says that the comparison made in the article between Roald Amundsen and Hedin is done in a way that is unworthy of the son of a President of a Geographical Society. He finishes his letter with a demand for an apology in the *Novoe Vremya* signed by Semyonov-Tienshanskii. Already on 11 April Semyonov-Tienshanskij replies with a very short letter, in which he dryly states that «Cela va sans dire que je n'accepte aucune de vos conditions». In the final phrase of the letter he gives an extra kick to Hedin by pointing out that he is writing *as a Russian*: «Agréez, Monsieur, l'assurance de la sincérité des sentiments d'un Russe, avec lesquels je sousigne, André Semenov Tien Shansky».⁸

In another article in *Novoe Vremya*, Artur A. Stolypin, brother of the murdered prime minister, delivers a personal attack on Hedin, accusing him of being a German spy, and he finishes his article with a flagrant expression of an anti-semitic nature. I am sorry to say that a large number of Swedish newspapers quoted these racist lines with

⁷ Sven Hedin, *Ett varningsord*, Stockholm 1912, 70 pp. This work was followed in 1913 by another pamphlet called *Tre Tal* [Three Speeches], 59 pp., and in 1914 by *Andra varningen* [The Second Warning], 80 pp., all of which were variants of the same political theme.

⁸ The correspondence is quoted from the original letters in Sven Hedin's archive, preserved in the Swedish National Archive (Riksarkivet), section «Ryssland».

great satisfaction, and even added more of the same kind, often in terms of cartoons and pictures of Hedin of an even more pronounced anti-Semitic nature.

From the Russian point of view there may have been several points where Hedin really deserved strong criticism. However, accusing him of attacking Russia in ambush certainly was unfair. Whatever we may accuse Hedin of—cowardice or a preference for ambush definitely is not among his characteristics. Instead, he always staunchly declared his views, often in the face of political or scholarly opposition and even ridicule. A good example of this is the fact that only days before the publication of his «A Word of Warning» he traveled in January, 1912, to St. Petersburg and asked for an audience with the Emperor. Czar Nicholas received him as usual very kindly, and during the interview Hedin frankly told the Czar about his forthcoming publication and asked him to understand that he was doing this as a Swedish patriot forced to write as he did by political realities. In no way was this to be understood as «anti-Russian» or as an expression of ingratitude from his side towards the Czar or his other Russian benefactors. He still loved Russia and wished to remain a friend of this great country.

The Czar took Hedin's declaration very calmly and thanked him in a friendly manner for speaking out so frankly with him. He added that he hoped that the dark clouds on the political sky eventually should go away and that the tension in the world should ease. A few days later, however, the Czar had changed his attitude. During the grand New Year's reception in the Winter Palace the Czar almost immediately walked up to the Swedish envoyé, Brändström and asked him to convey to King Gustaf of Sweden that he was very annoyed and sorry that Dr. Hedin, who had received so much good will in Russia, had been able to write so badly about Russia that the Swedish population now suspected Russia of hostile intentions towards Sweden. King Gustaf invited Hedin to a private dinner at the Royal Palace and informed him about the reaction of the Czar.⁹ Shortly after the ominous reception in the Winter Palace the article in the *Novoe Vremya* was published.

In the famous scholarly polemics between General Przhevalskii and Baron von Richthofen on the Lopnor issue, Hedin clearly sided with his German teacher and mentor. He did so on—what he considered—purely scientific and scholarly grounds.¹⁰ It is possible that his standpoint in this matter somewhat helped to lower his favor with some of his colleagues in the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, notably its vice-president Petr

⁹ Sven Hedin, *Kungar och Stormän*, Vol. II, pp. 249-252.,

¹⁰ Sven Hedin, *Scientific Results of a Journey in Central Asia 1899-1902*, Vol. 2, *Lop Nor*, Stockholm 1905, 717 pages; Sven Hedin, *Forskningar i Lop-nor området*, Stockholm 1902, 190 pp.

Petrovich Semyonov-Tienschanskii. A letter from Sven Hedin to the famous Arabist Baron Viktor Romanovich Rozen (1849-1908) in St. Petersburg dated 19 March, 1899, reveals that already at that time Hedin's works had been severely criticized by the Imperial Archaeological Society, but this time on purely scholarly grounds.¹¹ It is possible that one of his main critics in this case was Academician Oldenburg. In his letter to Baron Rozen Hedin asks that Rozen shall help defending Hedin's name against what he considered unfounded critique.

On the personal level, however, many of the leading Russian scientists, like Kozlov, Oldenburg and Obruchev, continued to keep in touch with Hedin by mail, expressing regrets that he had been expelled from the Geographical Society on purely political grounds. All these scholars seem to have defied the official policy of the Geographical Society and continued to keep up good personal relations with Hedin for the rest of their lives. In his Urga diary of 1923 Petr Kuzmich Kozlov remembers his meeting with Hedin back in 1912 «at my place in Stolyarnyi Lane on the day when Sven Hedin had presented his notorious pamphlet to the Imperial protector of the Russian Geographical Society at Tsarskoe, which led to his expulsion from both the Russian and the English Geographical Societies [...]».¹²

Hedin's annoying straightforwardness in political matters did not tally well with the other sides of his nature. His politeness, personal charm and natural friendliness in his contacts with other people made it easy for him to make new and many friends. To Hedin it was natural that personal relations should be strictly kept apart from political considerations. In this way he created for himself a somewhat naïve world where it was alright to have a close personal friend in a foreign country at the same time as he severely criticized the government and policies of that country. Unfortunately, not everybody around him shared this simplistic view of personal relations, and it was this very dichotomy in Hedin's character which eventually created so many problems for him, not only with the Russians but also with the British and with his own countrymen.

Contacts with Russia were resumed in 1924, when Hedin, on his way from Peking to Stockholm, officially was invited by the Soviet government to give lectures in both Moscow and Leningrad.¹³ Again, Hedin is given the red carpet treatment and is as always flattered by the attention

¹¹ Sven Hedin's archive in the Swedish National Archive (Riksarkivet), section «Ryssland».

¹² Sven Hedins archive in the Swedish National Archive (Riksarkivet), section «Ryssland».

¹³ Sven Hedin, *Från Peking till Moskva* [From Peking to Moscow], Stockholm 1924, 380 pp.

shown him by people such as Chicherin and Lunacharskii. Hedin promises his hosts that in Stockholm he shall speak in favor of resuming full diplomatic representation between Sweden and the Soviet Union. The fresh contacts between Hedin and the Soviet Union were of great importance for a successful carrying-through of the last big expedition organized by Hedin in Sinkiang between 1927-1935. As a matter of fact, the rumor of his forthcoming big expedition had preceded Hedin in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the Hedin archive in Stockholm we find several letters from Soviet citizens—both male and female of the most varying professions—asking Hedin to accept them as members of his new expedition. As a response to the warm reception given him in Russia, Hedin starts sending many copies of his printed scientific works to various scholarly institutions in Russia.

Towards the end of the 1930s Hedin's growing involvement with a Germany governed by the Nazi regime again made his star set in the Soviet Union as well as in most West European countries, including his homeland. When Sven Hedin died in Stockholm in 1952 he was almost forgotten. If he ever was remembered it was because of his disastrous and inopportune association with Germany. It is only during the last 20 years or so that Hedin's geographical and scientific contributions again have become the object of scholarly attention. Many of the positive sides of this remarkable and complex man are now again allowed to come forward: his personal charm, his energy and incredible productivity, his skilfulness in mapping a huge area of the world, his artistry, his respect for other peoples and races and his untiring efforts to increase our knowledge of Central Asia's history and geography.

It is therefore high time that we try to clarify the details of Hedin's relations with Russia through the years—a country which he always embraced with great sympathy no matter what government was in charge. Russian archives and Russian scholars have much to offer for further research into this remarkable chapter of Swedish-Russian relations.