

(No. 375.)

Stockholm, September 27, 1940.

My Lord,

IN the course of my conversation this afternoon with the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs I asked his Excellency about the German agreement with Finland for the transit of troops to North Norway.

2. M. Günther told me that it had come as a complete surprise to him and also to the Finnish Minister here. The German Government had made absolutely no demands of the Swedish Government in this connexion, and a report in the British press in the effect that the German troops were to cross from Vasa to Umeå in Sweden and travel thence over the Swedish railways was quite untrue. He agreed with me in thinking that the numbers which could travel from the Arctic highways would not be very great, and he could not see any great military advantage to the Germans in this new arrangement. He was inclined, therefore, to regard it rather as a political gesture with the object of warning Russia to keep her hands of Finland and as such he admitted that it was not without some indirect advantage to Sweden. He had no definite information, but he had certain reasons to believe that the German Government had recently warned the Soviet Government not to proceed any further in Finland, and this fresh gesture might be intended to add point to this warning. I asked what would happen when the Gulf of Bothnia froze up and ships could no longer go to Vasa. Would they not insist on entering a Swedish port instead. M. Günther thought they might just as well go to some other Finnish port. He then went on to give me the confidential figures regarding German troop transits through Sweden from the beginning up to last week, which I have reported in my telegram No. 1053 of the 27th September. I can not believe that he was in any way trying to mislead me, because he produced from a locked drawer the document from which he quoted, which appeared to me to be a report on the whole subject prepared probably by the Swedish State Railways. In spite of the fact that 10,000 more German troops had left for Germany through Sweden than had entered this country en route for Norway, the Swedish Government were, he said, convinced that the Germans were steadily increasing the number of their troops in Norway, evidently by sea. In this connection I may mention that M. Boheman told me yesterday that the Germans have two divisions, totalling about 25,000 men, in the Finmark district of Norway with headquarters at Kirkenes, and would possibly increase these troops by another brigade under the new transit arrangements with Finland. It was obvious that they were there more to watch Russia than anything else, and to be in a position if trouble came to seize the Petsamo harbour and nickel mines immediately. He thought they would have a very thin time in the Arctic winter and that they might wish to use the Finnish route for fairly frequent reliefs.

3. To return to my conversation with M. Günther, I asked his Excellency whether the rumour was true that it was hastily decided yesterday to send Swedish reinforcements to the north of Sweden. He denied this and said that the troops there already were quite sufficient.

4. Later this afternoon I had occasion to call upon my Soviet colleague in connexion with a small matter of certain visas. Mme. Kollontay at once asked me what I thought about the Vasa transit question. I said that it did not seem to me to be of great military importance because the numbers which could pass up the Arctic highway would not be very great. She replied that her military attaché had been discussing the question with her this morning and that they agreed with this view. Obviously the German demand was a gesture, but one which could not possibly be directed against Great Britain, nor against Sweden. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, and yet she could hardly believe that Germany would be so foolish as to wish to provoke a quarrel with the Soviet Union just now when her hands were so full elsewhere.

5. When later on Mme. Kollontay reverted to the Vasa transit, which evidently puzzled and rather worried her, I tried to find out whether the German Government had given Moscow prior notice of their intentions. She made it fairly clear that, if her Government had known, they had anyhow not informed her, and my impression was that, the Soviet Government had been kept in the dark. When, by way of drawing her out, I suggested that the Germans might consider this as a quid pro quo for the Soviet troop transits to Hangö, she was most emphatic in arguing that there was no real analogy.

6. I am sending copies of this despatch to the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office and to His Majesty's representatives at Moscow and Helsingfors.

I have, &c.
V. A. L. MALLET.

Source: British Documents on Foreign Affairs. Reports and papers from the Foreign Office confidential print. Part III. Series A (The Soviet Union and Finland.). Volume 1, document nr. 259. University publications of America, 1997.