At the end of June 1918 a lowly ranked official with the British legation in Stockholm, vice consul Robert Marshall, composed a five-page memorandum seemingly on the “Public Opinion in Sweden with Regard to the War”. Already the opening sentences betray the author’s intention and psychological state:

The Swede is by nature psychologically fitted to take the same point of view on things in general as the German. There is a very common impression in England that the Swede is the most honest and straight-forward person on earth. This is not so. I have been resident in this country for over eight years, most of the time under circumstances which have given me a very good opportunity to form a reliable opinion with regard to the average Swede and I have found that the Swedes as a whole have no regard whatever for the truth as such. They will tell a most bare-faced lie on the slightest provocation if they think that they will not be found out. In business, one should always insist on a written contract. I have had a large experience of cases which would in England be called sharp practices or dishonesty. In Sweden they are accounted “good business”.

A tangibly frustrated Marshall goes on to portray Swedish politics and foreign policy, society and the military against the backdrop of the country’s increasingly intimate association with Britain’s main adversary in the war, the German Empire. While at the same time rich in substance, but analytically crude and highly opinionated, Marshall’s memorandum provides a fine entrée into the attitudes of British diplomats and politicians towards Sweden and the Scandinavian neutrals in general.

British impressions and opinions on Sweden’s position in the war are mirrored by German diplomatic reporting and media opinion. Marshall’s

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counterpart, one of the more extreme voices in relation to Germany’s policy towards Sweden, was the German minister to Stockholm in 1914, Franz von Reichenau, a national-conservative Wilhelmine monarchist with strong reservations vis-à-vis parliamentary government.² Reichenau hailed the Swedish position during the July Crisis, which he misconstrued as almost unconditionally pro-German, and repeatedly encouraged Berlin to think of Sweden as a likely ally in an increasingly probable war. For the minister, Sweden’s future unequivocally rested with the German Empire. All Sweden needed was a push towards its allegedly natural political preference, to bring about the desired Swedish involvement in the war. Ultimately, the minister even imagined the country as a federal province under Germany’s imperial umbrella, just like the kingdoms of Baden and Württemberg.³ Obviously, none of his projections ever materialised. When it became clear by the autumn of 1914 that Stockholm was settling for neutrality and abstention from the conflict, Reichenau found himself at a dead end and resorted to rather undiplomatic forms of bullying, not least in his dealings with government ministers. This eventually forced the otherwise vehemently pro-German king of Sweden, Gustav V, to request the minister’s removal from Stockholm. At the turn of the year 1914/15, the tactless diplomat was replaced with a much more astute observer of Swedish realities, the liberal and upper-bourgeois career diplomat Hellmuth Lucius von Stoedten.⁴

With Marshall and Reichenau as admittedly peculiar figures to begin with, this study explores central perceptions and expectations in British and German policy-making and diplomacy vis-à-vis Scandinavian neutrality during the First World War from a comparative historical angle. For reasons of brevity, the geostrategic, diplomatic and military preoccupations of Britain and Germany towards Sweden, Norway and Denmark are only touched upon. At heart, the subsequent comparison is focused instead on the great powers’ conflicting perceptions of Scandinavian neutrality during the First World War. The highly complex Swedish case is at the centre of the analysis, whilst Denmark and Norway are – for reasons of space – dealt with less systematically. The study is

⁴ Carlgren, Neutralität oder Allianz, 72–75; Schuberth, Schweden und das Deutsche Reich, 24–30.