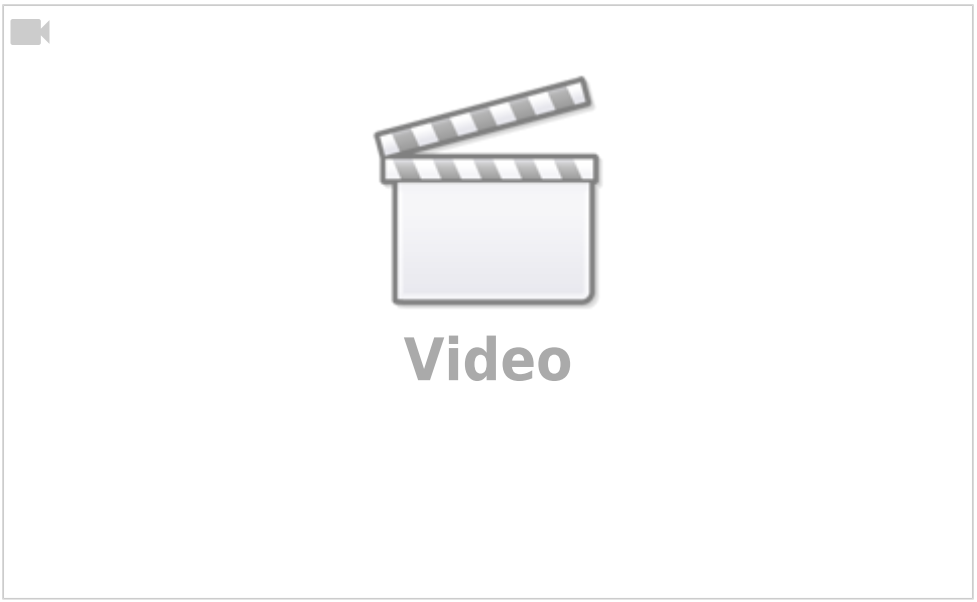
Whiskey on the Rocks

Whiskey on the Rocks is a brilliant Swedish-made political satire and miniseries.

The story is set in October 1981, when a Soviet U-137 (Whiskey-class) nuclear submarine runs aground off the coast of neutral Sweden. The situation is extremely delicate, as the incident occurred just a stone's throw from the top-secret Swedish naval base at Karlskrona.

Whilst the world teeters on the brink of a Third World War and a nuclear catastrophe, the series reveals that the tense situation is in fact the result of the Soviet crew's drunken revelry and a series of unfortunate mistakes. Resolving the crisis and maintaining global peace (between Ronald Reagan and Leonid Brezhnev) rests on the shoulders of a single man: the level-headed Swedish Prime Minister, Thorbjörn Fälldin.



The series

(At last) A series in which not everyone speaks English, but uses their own native language. Its creators (*who were also behind *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared**) didn't pull any punches: the series is a full-blooded, at times utterly absurd political burlesque. Essentially, the series shows that it was not a brilliant strategy but sheer human stupidity and well-meaning translators that prevented a nuclear apocalypse.

One of the series' most brilliant and scathing sequences is the direct *'hotline'* communication between the two global superpowers. In reality, the presidents who dictated a terrifying arms race are portrayed in the series more as two parodies detached from reality:

Ronald Reagan, the American president, wearing a cowboy hat and chewing gum, shoots at clay pigeons, which, incidentally, have Brezhnev's face stuck on them. When he picks up the phone, he greets his Soviet counterpart in a casual and vulgar manner: *'Leonid, you son of a motherless goat, it's Ronald!'*

Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet General Secretary, on the other hand, is teetering on the brink of dementia and severe alcoholism. He regularly downs a bottle of vodka and, in the middle of

conversations, actually forgets who he is talking to.

The only thing preventing a nuclear holocaust is the pair of interpreters sitting on either side of him, who are on the verge of death. Whilst Reagan and Brezhnev bombard each other with a barrage of carefully chosen insults and vulgar obscenities, the interpreters lightning-fast transform the sentences into high-level, refined and conciliatory diplomatic protocol. Were it not for them, the Third World War might have broken out over a mere slight.



The Soviet submarine S-363 near Karlskrona in late October 1981
photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Pressensbild

Another Scandinavian irony in this story lies in Swedish domestic politics. The Prime Minister of Sweden, **Thorbjörn Fälldin**, was – in real life as well as in the series – originally a peaceful sheep farmer by trade. Whilst the Soviet Navy and the Pentagon are chasing each other off the Swedish coast with nuclear submarines and warships, the Prime Minister's main concern is that his wife cannot cope with the sheep on her own at home.

The series also holds up a distorting mirror to foreign intelligence services; analysts at the CIA and the KGB simply cannot believe that a country is led by a simple, down-to-earth ex-sheepherder with common sense. They become convinced that behind Fälldin's gruff and slow-paced country manner lies a cunning, meticulously planned *'sheep-breeder's conspiracy'* , through which Sweden is keeping the world's two greatest nuclear powers in check.

And yes, the film (series) is based on real events. And it almost led to the Third World War.

In reality,

on the night of 27 October 1981, a Swedish fisherman spotted something enormous on the rocks near the Karlskrona naval base. A Soviet **Whiskey-class diesel-electric submarine, S–363 (dubbed U–137 by the Swedes)** had penetrated the military zone within Swedish territorial waters. What's more, to do so it had to navigate through a minefield and rocky outcrops, which would have required knowledge of the area accurate to the centimetre (or so one might think, but as we know, vodka also enhances navigational skills)

“Sorry, our compass was out of order. We thought we were in Poland.”

According to Captain Pyotr Gushchin, the navigation equipment (the compass and the direction finder) had both failed simultaneously, and they believed they were off the coast of Poland. This was completely absurd: the submarine had strayed 130 kilometres from its open-sea route, deep into the Swedish archipelago. In reality, there was a good chance that espionage was taking place (the Swedes were testing new Swedish anti-submarine technologies at the base).



The Soviet submarine near the Swedish coast
photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Torbjörn Andersson

The Swedish Navy secretly examined the hull from the water’s surface using gamma-ray detectors. Swedish Prime Minister Thorbjörn Fälldin held a shocking press conference: the submarine was almost certainly carrying torpedoes fitted with nuclear warheads. A Soviet vessel armed with nuclear weapons had, quite literally, run aground on the rocks off neutral Sweden.

The Swedish fleet surrounded the submarine, whilst a Soviet naval armada (destroyers, tugs) appeared in international waters, ready to carry out a forced rescue of the vessel. The Swedish Air Force and coastal artillery were on high alert, and for days the world teetered on the brink of a Third World War. Eventually, the Swedes questioned the captain, the Soviets paid the bill for the rescue operation, and the ship was towed out into international waters.

Parallels

Although the series, **written by Jonas Jonasson**, guarantees a dose of black humour, reality was often even more absurd than the script. The series jokes that the crew were dead drunk. Although according to the locals, the captain reeked of alcohol when they first stepped on board, the Soviets flatly (but with bloodshot eyes) denied this.

There are hints of drama in the series too, but it was only years later, from the political officer's memoirs, that the most terrifying fact came to light: the crew had been ordered to blow up the submarine if the Swedes attempted to storm and capture it. Due to the nuclear torpedoes, this would have caused such extensive radioactive contamination that all wildlife along the Swedish coast would have been completely wiped out.

Sweden's *was "tested"* by the Soviets was a daily occurrence, and the neutral Scandinavian state lived under constant Cold War tension. The Soviet Navy not only tested the Swedes' defensive capabilities, but their presence in the Baltic Sea also spilt over into a military-scientific farce at several points.

As we know

The Swedes were so terrified of secret Soviet underwater commandos and mini-submarines that, for decades, the navy dropped depth charges at every suspicious scraping sound coming from beneath the water. It was only after the Cold War, in 1995, that the shocking truth came to light: the *'Soviet saboteurs'* detected in the vicinity of top-secret bases were in fact swimming minks (mustelids).

Swimming amongst the rocks along the shoreline, the animals produced acoustic signals on the hydrophones that were identical to those of frogmen. **Ingvar Carlsson**, the Swedish Prime Minister, was forced to admit to this international embarrassment at an official press conference.



Captain Pyotr Gushchin's submarine, the S-363, in the conning tower
photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Pressensbild

Operation ‘heringfart’

Following the Whiskey incident, the Swedes developed a case of clinical paranoia. At the slightest suspicious noise underwater, they mobilised the fleet and dropped tonnes of depth charges into the sea.

In the 1980s and 1990s, operators of Swedish hydrophones (underwater microphones) repeatedly recorded a very strange, distinctive, high-frequency, clicking and popping sound. Military intelligence analysed the sound samples at the highest level and issued the official verdict: this was the sound of a new, secret Soviet mini-submarine's propeller.

As Swedish sonars (underwater microphones) had been picking up the suspicious hissing sound for years, **Carl Bildt** was so certain that the Russians were brazenly spying in Swedish territorial waters that he personally wrote an angry, table-pounding diplomatic note to the then Russian President, **Boris Yeltsin**. In the letter, Sweden officially expressed its deep indignation and demanded that Russia immediately withdraw its secret mini-submarines from Swedish bays, warning that failure to do so would cause an international scandal.

When the navy had had enough of the fruitless manhunts, they secretly hired **Magnus Wahlberg**, a biologist, to determine the source of the sound. When the researcher discovered the truth, he was summoned to the Prime Minister’s Office and presented to the military leadership. In a locked room, the biologist played the top-secret military audio recordings to the Prime Minister and the generals. When Bildt asked what on earth the sound was – which most closely resembled the “sizzling of frying bacon” – Wahlberg replied dryly: *“Prime Minister, these are herrings. And they’re farting.”*

The biologist had even brought a dead herring with him, which he squeezed in a bucket of water in front of the generals, proving that the escaping air bubbles produced exactly the same acoustic frequency as the alleged Soviet nuclear wonder-weapons.

Magnus Wahlberg and **Håkan Westerberg**, Swedish biologists (who were awarded the **an Ig Nobel Prize**), discovered that the sound is produced by huge shoals of herring when they are startled and release bubbles from their swim bladders through their anuses. Swedish taxpayers have spent more than 1.2 billion dollars (at today’s value) on military mobilisations and submarine hunts that were in fact triggered by farting herring.

The most entertaining aspect of the whole affair is Carl Bildt’s subsequent career. It would have amounted to political suicide to admit to the electorate that the army had waged a billion-dollar war against herring. So Bildt – even years later, whilst serving as Foreign Minister – continued to deny the biological facts.



The submarine is surrounded by vessels of the Swedish Navy
photo: picture-alliance/dpa/Pressensbild

The Hårsfjärden incident (1982) – When the provocation was real

Barely a year after the ‘Whiskey on the Rocks’ incident, in the autumn of 1982, a fleet of unidentified (almost certainly Soviet) submarines actually penetrated the restricted waters of Sweden’s most important naval base, located near the capital, Stockholm. The Swedish navy set a trap: they detonated magnetic mines, dropped dozens of depth charges and sealed off the sea exits. The chase was followed live from the shore by 400 international journalists. Although the damaged intruder eventually managed to escape, this brazen operation permanently changed Swedish defence policy and proved that Moscow had no respect for neutrality.

> If you’re curious to find out how the CIA hunted down another Soviet submarine, also loaded with nuclear weapons, in the depths of the Pacific Ocean with the help of Howard Hughes, read a my previous article on the Jennifer Project at!

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2026/07/16 13:11 · vamsan

Dear reader! If you’ve got this far in your reading, I think I’m fair in assuming that you haven’t found this post entirely uninteresting. Oh, please don’t close the tab just yet; I’m not trying to squeeze any money out of you.

All I’m asking is that if you know anyone with whom you could have a good discussion about what’s written here, or if you’d simply like to share it with them, please don’t hesitate!

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Sources

- **TV series:** The Whiskey on the Rocks (IMDb) ’s profile and the miniseries’ official background materials.
- **Historical Incident (1981):** A detailed historical and technical account of the grounding of the infamous Soviet submarine S-363 (Wikipedia): a detailed historical and technical account of its grounding.
- **The background to the herring crisis:** A detailed account of the events by Improbable Research on the A ‘A vivid new telling of the herring farts / Soviet sub history’ (Improbable Research).
- **Scientific recognition:** The researchers who investigated the acoustic communication of herrings and exposed a diplomatic scandal can be found on the List list of Ig Nobel Prize winners

(Wikipedia), in the 2004 biology category.
- **Military expenditure and analyses:** A summary of the economic and defence implications of ‘herring paranoia’ can be found in the Sweden ‘Spent $1.2 Billion Hunting Submarines That Were Actually Fish Farts’ (Medium).
- **Photo credits:** dpa / picture-alliance / Pressensbild / Torbjörn Andersson.
- **Technical assistant:** I also used Gemini AI to help write this post.

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