



Danish Reactions to German Occupation: History and Historiography

by Carsten Holbraad.

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Being conquered and occupied by the Germans was not a happy fate for the nations of Europe in World War II. France lost 85,000 men in the fighting in 1940, was occupied for four long years, lost twenty-five percent of its Jews, and was bombed by the Allies. Poland's fate, of course, was far worse. As for Denmark, when the Wehrmacht invaded in April 1940, fighting lasted a few hours with little loss of life. The Danish government capitulated and negotiated an accord with the Nazis, whereby the Danish police would maintain order, the parliament would continue to meet and run the country, and Germany would replace all prewar markets for Danish goods. The royal family remained, and King Christian X became a national hero for his solo rides around Copenhagen. Such comparatively lenient treatment has complicated Danish historians' interpretations of the occupation ever since.

In *Danish Reactions to German Occupation*,¹ intellectual historian Carsten Holbraad concentrates more on historiography than history. He is a Dane, but not a historian of Denmark. The first half of his short book merely sketches the events between April 1940, when the Wehrmacht invaded Denmark, and May 1945, when British forces liberated the country. Immediately after the German takeover, the four major parliamentary parties formed a coalition government to negotiate an accord with Germany that would satisfy both partners. The Danes wanted neither direct rule by the Germans nor a government run by the small Danish Nazi party. They also wished to resolve their country's economic problems.

Serious unemployment was relieved when tens of thousands of Danes went to work in Germany. Unlike so many French and Dutch workers, who were *forced* to work in the Reich, not to mention thousands of Polish and other slave laborers from Eastern Europe, Danish workers were treated and paid decently. Danish farmers sent their butter and bacon south to Germany in exchange for coal and industrial goods. Some historians estimate that Danish produce amounted to 12 percent of the food-stuffs consumed in Germany. Danish cooperation provided many other advantages to the Third Reich. Denmark could (till very late in the war) be garrisoned with a modest number of second-rate troops. Its construction companies built both airbases for the Luftwaffe and bunkers on the country's west coast as part of the Atlantic Wall.

One other aspect of Denmark's situation differed sharply from the experience of other nations conquered by the Reich. Both Danish politicians and German officials were concerned early on about what would happen after Hitler won the war—which seemed very likely well into 1942. The Danes were anxious to be incorporated into the envisioned National Socialist Europe under the most favorable terms possible, while the Germans hoped to smoothly absorb a very Nordic nation into their new Europe.

The mutually acceptable arrangement in Denmark lasted until spring 1943, by which time the British Special Operations Executive in London was taking a greater interest in gathering intelligence and

1. N.b.: the book is available free as a PDF – www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/danish-reactions-to-german-occupation.

promoting sabotage in Denmark. The Danes were by now weary of the humiliating circumstances of the occupation and increasingly aware that Germany would lose the war. Many could listen to Swedish radio instead of the German-controlled official media, and an underground press was growing. Tensions between Germans and Danes came to a head in August 1943, when German demands for a crackdown caused the parliamentary government to resign, though unelected bureaucrats continued to run Denmark until the end of the war. There were increasing strikes, demonstrations, and sabotage, especially of the rail lines linking Jutland with Germany. There was never any large-scale violence, however, and only about three thousand Danes died as a result of the occupation.

After the war, the debate over the history of the occupation began in earnest.

The historians writing in the first post-war decades concentrated on the Danish-German conflict and took less interest in divisions on the Danish side. Imbued with the anti-German feelings which had affected the overwhelming majority of the Danish people since the invasion in 1940 and impressed with the national solidarity that had emerged in the year of liberation, they were inclined to belittle the tensions and conflicts which had developed between official Denmark and those who were against the policy and practice of negotiating and cooperating with the German authorities. Acknowledging the historical coexistence of cooperation and resistance, such writers looked for some concord between the two kinds of reaction to German occupation. While some found an implicit compromise, others detected an underlying continuity between the earlier policy of cooperation and the later commitment to resistance. As presented, each notion implied a degree of complementarity between opposite reactions. The concept of complementarity helped historians and other writers to sustain the image of a nation united in opposition to the German enemy. (131)

Holbraad traces the evolution of Danish writing on the occupation as each new generation of historians analyzed the issue of cooperation with and resistance to the Germans. The first wave of historians, including Holbraad's own teacher, who had been in the resistance, wrote variants of "victors' history." Their successors, children during the war and so with no legacy to protect, were more skeptical and asked different questions. A particularly thorny issue was the killing by resistance members of hundreds of Danes accused of being informers. Histories written by former resistance members, perhaps including men who had condemned or executed alleged informants, naturally did not question the justice of those decisions, but subsequent generations criticized such arbitrary, extra-judicial actions.

Historians born since the war, with no personal wartime memories or vested interests, have raised other difficult issues. For example, thousands of Danish men served in German uniform, mostly in the SS, and were treated harshly after the war, as were the thousands of Danish women who had had relationships with German soldiers. Given the laws in force in Denmark at the time, neither joining the SS nor sleeping with Germans was illegal. That both actions came to be seen as violations of Denmark's "national honor" after 8 May 1945—when British troops flew in to liberate the country—is a matter that can now be discussed.

The 1990s brought a second revisionist wave, which took the scholarly debate beyond the conflict between resistance and cooperation. Addressing the conduct of relatively minor groups of people who during the war, in some way or other, had collaborated with the Germans, and who had been largely ignored by earlier writers, a new generation of historians highlighted the moral dimension of Danish conduct during the war. On the one hand, they distanced themselves from the standpoint of the resistance movement by condemning some of its practices, especially liquidation of informers and others. On the other hand, they went well beyond accepting the policy of cooperation when they dealt sympathetically with the parts played by marginal groups hitherto not only excluded from scholarly consideration but also broadly condemned by the public. Thus the younger historians introduced a new note of

discord both in scholarly and public debate about Danish behaviour during the German occupation. At both levels, that debate continued till well into the twenty-first century. (132)

Carsten Holbraad's scrupulously impartial survey of Denmark's history in the Second World War and of Danish historiography concerning the period is a great boon to Anglophone readers. Almost all of the hundreds of works he cites are available only in Danish, and most English-language studies of his topic are badly dated.