



# The Danish Population Between Adaptation and Resistance During the German Occupation 1940-45

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## **The Occupation of Denmark**

In the early morning April 9, 1940, German bombers circled over Copenhagen ready to bomb the city at a sign from the ground. At the same time German troops were unloaded in several ports and entered the south of Jutland. The Danish military mobilized the defense only for a few hours while the King and the government discussed and accepted the German ultimatum. The occupation came as a surprise to most Danes. In Copenhagen people woke up, looked out of the window, saw the airplanes and didn't understand what they signified. Next they opened the radio but for several hours there was no information, just solemn music. The phone was used three times more than usual and gradually the population realized that Denmark had been occupied by a sudden military strike. Some Danes felt anger or despair others were just surprised. In Copenhagen many hundred people gathered at Langelinje close to the Little Mermaid, where the German soldiers went ashore and here curiosity more than anger marked the atmosphere. The resistance leader Frode Jakobsen also went to Langelinje and in his diary he wrote afterwards: "I saw German sentries surrounded by a crowd of eager spectators. Several tried to speak German and sought contact with the soldiers [...] A young man offered a German soldier a cigarette." Frode Jakobsen was outraged. Later it was claimed that Danes immediately met the Germans with a "cold shoulder" but this was obviously something constructed afterwards.



On April 9, 1940, German troops entered Aabenraa in Southern Jutland. Fighting took place near the center of the town. The Danes were taken by surprise and local spectators were merely curious.



Frode Jakobsen speaks on the Danish Constitution Day, June 5, 1945. Jakobsen was a prominent member of the Danish Freedom Council, one of the most important anti-Nazi resistance organizations during the Second World War. (When this photo was taken he was minister in the coalition government set up after the end of the war.)

## **German Occupation Politics and the Danish Government**

The political arrangement between the German authorities and the Danish government involved German responsibility for the military defense of Denmark, and against a British attack. At the same time the Germans promised to respect Danish sovereignty. This was of course fictitious as the occupation force at any time could overrule their promises. But the Germans saw advantages in respecting their promises as Denmark could be ruled with a modest amount of soldiers and administrators. The Danish government continued as a coalition of all major parties under the Social Democratic Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning and the Germans initially interfered in very few political areas connected to the



daily life of the Danes. The Danish export – and especially the agricultural export – was sent almost exclusively to Germany. It was important for the German ability to conduct the war.

## Nationalism and Democracy

During the first couple of years most Danes saw few changes in their daily life except higher unemployment. Many, especially in the countryside did not see the German military, which had taken possession of Danish army barracks and was mostly kept there. At this stage Danes feared that Danish Nazis would take over power as had happened in Norway and that Germany gradually would incorporate Denmark in the new German empire. The fear was not connected with present conditions but what was going to happen in the future. A strong nationalism arose in the population and the King became a symbol of national unity for many Danes. The largest public demonstration which has taken place in Denmark happened as an acclaim to the King at his 70th birthday in September 1940. In Copenhagen close to 250 000 people gathered at open places and streets where the royal car was passing. Afterwards the nurse Edle Beyer wrote in her diary "... that the atmosphere was today still more anti-German than usual. Germans who came out openly in public were booed at". The tribute to the King was not only a traditional national manifestation but also a mark of support for democracy and dissociation from Nazism.

## Danish Adaptation

A large majority of the population supported the adaptation of the Danish government to German policies and demands, but there were some exceptions: The population was not ready to accept Danish Nazis in the government or German style legislation against Jews. Nor did they accept the participation of conscripted soldiers at the front in Russia (but a participation of voluntary soldiers was a different case). Few Danes protested against the general Danish adaptive politics on production for the German war machine. During 1942 smaller groups of Danes turned against this policy and thus also against the German occupation forces. They included Danish members of the communist party, which had been prohibited after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 and several right wing national parties and groups, which saw the acceptance of the occupation of the Danish government as a national disgrace.



German troops parade in Fælledparken, Copenhagen August 1940. They tried to impress the Danish population by showing off their military strength. They also arranged concerts, exhibitions and meetings, but the Danes were not particularly interested.



On September 26, 1940, King Christian X celebrated his 70th birthday. Here the King is passing Ryesgade, in a working class area of the city, normally decorated with socialist or communist red banners during demonstrations.



Two German soldiers in Denmark going back home on leave of absence. The Germans had set their currency at a very favorable exchange rate for Danish kroner, and many of the items sold in Denmark were not available in Germany. So soldiers often returned home heavily loaded with parcels they had bought in Danish shops. In Denmark this was a source of irritation and anti-German feelings.

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At the end of 1942 the first acts of sabotage against the Danish production for Germany took place. The Danish police was ordered to prevent such deeds as the Government had to demonstrate its ability to stop anti-German acts, so that the Germans should accept the existence of a democratic elected Danish government.

The Germans (but not the Danish Nazis) were cautious in their anti-Jewish propaganda until August 1943. Most of the Danish population responded critically to outright Antisemitism and they saw Antisemitism as an adaptation and support to Nazism, but many Danes did not realize the serious intentions of the occupation power.

## Adaptation and Resistance

A majority of the population developed a dualistic attitude during 1943: They admired the resistance groups and saboteurs that committed acts against the occupation power, but they also supported the government because it created a feeling of at least some safety. Most Danes arrested for anti-German acts were arrested by Danish police and were convicted by Danish courts, not by German military courts. The dualistic attitude of the Danes was stressed as many Danes listened both to Danish radio news, which were controlled by the occupation power, and to BBC news in Danish.

Gradually people felt more insecure. A young girl from the vicinity of Copenhagen, Gerda Bekker wrote a diary from 1940, when she was 14 years old, to the end of the war. She wrote several times that she got “goose pimples”, when she listened to the speeches of Adolf Hitler in the Danish radio and that she was nervous when there was an air-raid alert.

Copenhagen was only bombed a few times. In January 1943 a Danish shipyard in Copenhagen was bombed by planes from RAF (Royal Air Force), but several apartments in the neighborhood were also hit and eight people were killed. The worst consequences by an air raid happened when the Gestapo headquarter was attacked in Copenhagen in March 1945. A nearby school was also seriously hit and 93 pupils were killed. Still the population did not direct their anger towards the British pilots. Many boys and girls applauded RAF and their mothers knitted caps with the RAF colors for them.

## German Direct Rule from August 1943

During spring and summer 1943 resistance groups became better organized and acts of sabotage against production for Germany increased. When the rule of fascists and Mussolini in Italy was overruled in July the belief that an Allied victory was close grew and triggered extensive strikes, which the Germans met with sanctions. They demanded that the Danish government should accept death penalty for sabotage acts. The Government declined to accept the German demands especially because they feared to lose their support from the population. At that stage the Germans took over direct power. The Danish King, Government and Parliament resigned their powers and the Germans implemented death penalty and military rule. Many Danes were deeply worried by the consequences of the German direct rule but initially the differences were not significant for the majority of the population. The Danish administration and civil servants were still collecting taxes and public expenditures were met.



Ruins after the misdirected bombing of the “French school” in Frederiksberg, Copenhagen March 21, 1945.

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The German authorities in Denmark used the establishment of martial law in Denmark to implement an action against the Danish Jews. In most other occupied countries the deportation and extinction of Jews had already been completed at this time. German police was therefore brought to Denmark, but Danish politicians and an employee on the German Legation, Georg F. Duckwitz, warned the Jewish community in Copenhagen a few days before the action. Most Jews fled their homes and found temporary hiding places. The resistance movement was now so strong that it was able to organize that 7000 Jews were brought across Øresund on small vessels, as the Swedish government had promised to accept them and this was published in the Swedish radio. Less than 500 Jews were taken by German police and deported to the kz-camp Theresienstadt.

The German action against the Jews, the deportation of Jews and the death penalties for sabotage changed the attitudes of the population to outright condemnation. At the same time fear of an Allied invasion of Jutland became dominant.

## Last Minute Support for Resistance and Liberation

Resistance and sabotage increased during 1944 and the German occupation policy became more violent and was now dominated by SS and the German police with help from corps of Danes supporting the Nazi policy. The Danish resistance groups killed more than 400 Danes (but very few Germans) who were accused of supporting German police. The German police answered by killing groups of people and individuals at random. In September 1944 the Danish police in Copenhagen and in other major cities were deported directly to German concentration camps. Generally Gestapo was efficient and many resistance groups were arrested while the Danish resistance council asked for bombardment of the three main Gestapo headquarters. The majority of arrested members of the Danish resistant movement were at this stage sent to a concentration camp in Southern Jutland, Frøslev, which was organized and financed by the Danish administration. Conditions were not comparable with the Nazi concentration camps. The conditions in Frøslev saved the life of several thousand Danes, but at the same time groups of prisoners were frequently sent from Frøslev to Nazi concentration camps.

At the same time a fear of a military “Schlusskampf” (end fight) in Denmark was present. Many weapons were secretly transferred from England and Sweden to Denmark and a clandestine resistance military force of 40 000 men was created. But the German capitulation in May 1945 happened before a bloody encounter. A few weeks before the German collapse Danes and Norwegians in Nazi concentration camps were transported to Sweden by the Swedish Bernadotte action thus saving many lives. The Bernadotte action also included Danish Jews in the Theresienstadt concentration camp outside Prague, where most of them had survived. This was not the fate of the Jews from Norway, who were sent directly to extinction in Auschwitz-Birkenau.



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This photo was taken in early July 1944 during a general strike in Copenhagen. A barricade was built in Noerrebrogade in Copenhagen and a department store owned by Danish Nazis was plundered and burnt down. The atmosphere was aggressive and jolly at the same time. The word “Best” refers to the surname of the German lawyer and SS general in Denmark, Werner Best. Almost 100 people died during the strike, but Best made sure that Copenhagen was not bombarded.

## The Danish Population Between Adaptation and Resistance During the German Occupation 1940-45

When British soldiers arrived in Denmark most of the population was on the streets to applaud them. National unity was created for a while. The divisions on adaptation and resistance were set aside while the majority was celebrating liberation and everybody claimed that they had supported resistance and denounced adaptation from the outset of the occupation.



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Haderslev, Southern Jutland May 1945. The population welcomes the British soldiers and military vehicles.

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