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# Narrating the Second World

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## War in Denmark since 1945

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### Abstract

*After the liberation in 1945, two conflicting narratives of the war experience were formulated. A consensus narrative presented the Danish nation as being united in resistance while a competing narrative, which also stressed the resistance of most Danes, depicted the collaborating Danish establishment as an enemy alongside the Germans. This latter narrative, formulated by members of the resistance movement, was marginalised after the war and the consensus narrative became dominant. The resistance narrative survived, however, and, from the 1960s, it was successfully retold by the left, both to criticise the Danish alliance with the 'imperialist' United States, and as an argument against Danish membership of the EC. From the 1980s, the right also used the framework of the resistance narrative in its criticism of Danish asylum legislation. Finally, liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen started using it as his basic narrative of the war years (partly in order to legitimise his government's decision to join the war against Iraq in 2003). The war years have thus played a central role in Danish political culture since 1945, and in this process the role of historians has been utterly marginal.*

In Denmark, as elsewhere in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War occasioned numerous publications on the war experience. Among the more interesting assessments was that of the historian Henning Poulsen who had, since the 1960s, studied various aspects of Danish history during the war. Summing up the Danish war experience, Poulsen stated:

We collaborated politically with the occupation power and achieved conditions that, in comparison with other occupied countries were good and relatively free. We then got a resistance movement at half price, and, finally, we became an allied power without entering the war.<sup>1</sup>

Poulsen's assessment is a far cry from what was said at most of the commemorative events staged that year when speakers focused on sacrifice and heroism as the essence of the war experience. And that is also the narrative that most Danes accept. Although it is generally acknowledged that there was little Danish resistance to the occupying German troops on 9 April 1940 and there is some unease about the fact that the Danish

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1 Henning Poulsen, 'Dansk modstand og tysk politik', in *Den jyske Historiker*, 71 (1995), 17.

government continued to function until August 1943, the dominant understanding of the war is that of a nation united against the ‘oppressors’ throughout the war.

Within this dominant narrative there are important variants and at least two distinct narratives, although they overlap in crucial areas. This article will analyse the origins of the two narratives in the immediate postwar period. Soon after the end of the war, one of the narratives – the ‘official’ narrative – gained dominance while the other ‘resistance’ narrative was marginalised. But it did not disappear altogether and was resurrected from the 1960s as a counter narrative to the hegemonic official one. Since the 1970s, the two narratives have co-existed uneasily with the counter narrative playing an increasingly important role as an argument in Danish politics. Therefore, the war experience has in Denmark, as elsewhere, become a contested *lieu de mémoire* – to use Pierre Nora’s refined definition of this concept formulated in his preface to the US edition of *Les lieux de mémoire*.<sup>2</sup>

### The war experience: between collaboration and resistance

When German forces invaded Denmark on the morning of 9 April 1940, the country had been governed by a coalition of Social Democrats and Social Liberals since 1929. Central to the policy of this government had been the understanding that it would be impossible to defend Denmark militarily against an attack from a great power (i.e. Germany). From their perspective, high military spending would waste funds better spent on social reforms which would enhance social cohesion in the country and thus strengthen the support for liberal democracy. As a corollary to this policy, the government did its utmost not to provoke the Nazi rulers in Berlin, hoping to keep Denmark out of the Nazi expansionist orbit. The German attack demonstrated conclusively that this tactic had failed but the government stuck to its long held notion that military defence would be futile. As a consequence of this, although the Danish government protested against the German attack, it chose to accept the German offer to consider Denmark a sovereign state if its government offered no resistance to occupation. This meant that, technically speaking, Denmark was not at war with Germany and the Danish government could go on functioning. As a consequence, the Danish experience of occupation differed dramatically from those of other occupied countries in western Europe that were governed either by puppet Quisling governments or the German military.

On 10 April, the government was restructured as a government of national unity, including representatives from the main opposition parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives. For more than three years, this government tried to protect the country from the havoc of war by keeping as much decision-making as possible in Danish hands. This ‘policy of negotiation’ – as it was presented by its proponents – was at best an uneasy one. In formal terms, the German authorities lived up to

2 Cf. Pierre Nora, ‘From *Lieux de mémoire* to Realms of Memory’, in *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past*, vol. I (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xviii–xix.

their offer to respect the sovereignty of Denmark (and consequently negotiated all matters relating to the occupation with the Danish Foreign Ministry). However, the power relationship between Danish authorities and Germany was obviously asymmetrical. The history of Danish-German relations 1940–43 is ripe with examples that demonstrate this, the most telling being Denmark joining the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1941. The Danish government only did this after very strong German pressure, and insisted on crucial Danish reservations to the pact, although these were not made public but referred to a secret protocol. That many foreign observers thought that Denmark was much closer to being a German ally than a victim of German aggression, is hardly surprising.

Although there is no reason to doubt that the vast majority of the population detested the occupation, organised resistance only developed slowly. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, members of the small Communist Party started creating resistance groups. On the far right, members of the tiny right-wing party Dansk Samling (Danish Unity) did the same, as did students with a background in the Conservative Party's youth organisation. Throughout the war, these groups from the far left and the far right were strongly over-represented in the resistance movement.

However, the vast majority of the population seems to have supported the official line of co-operation. This was demonstrated in the general elections held in March 1943 which achieved a turnout of 89.5% – the largest ever registered in Denmark. Although the parties of government obtained 94.5% of the vote, the resistance gathered momentum during 1943, in Denmark as elsewhere in occupied Europe, and in August 1943 the government chose to step down after a wave of strikes and popular protests. In the last twenty months of the war, the resistance gathered more and more strength under the aegis of Danmarks Frihedsråd (The Freedom Council of Denmark), established in September 1943 as an alliance of various resistance groups. The resistance movement printed an illegal press with a widespread circulation, gathered intelligence for the Allies, began to build up a secret army, and engaged in an increasing number of sabotage acts. However, by far the most impressive act of resistance was the rescue of the Danish Jews in the autumn of 1943 when almost all of Denmark's 7,000 Jews were taken across the sea to Sweden. The Freedom Council never produced an ambitious social and political programme for postwar Denmark. In its programmatic statement from late 1943, *Naar Danmark atter er frit* (When Denmark is once again free), it merely demanded the re-establishment of democratic government and the trial of traitors and collaborators.

The official policy of collaboration before August 1943 naturally created a divide between members of the resistance movement and the political establishment. Danish politicians followed the lead of the prime minister, Vilhelm Buhl, who characterised resistance fighters as 'criminals' in a radio speech in August 1942. This was, of course, strongly resented in the resistance movement. To many resistance fighters, the government and other establishment groups were outright traitors. To the right-wingers, the major villain was the coalition government of the 1930s who had left Denmark's military in a far too weak a position to defend the country against the

German invasion of 1940. To the Communists, the enemies on the home front were the economic and political establishment from Conservatives to Social Democrats, who not only collaborated with Nazi Germany but also unconstitutionally banned the Communist Party and sent its leaders to a Danish concentration camp in 1941.

These divisions were, at least at top level, healed in the spring of 1945 when the leadership of the resistance movement, the Freedom Council, and the established political parties agreed to form a coalition government after the liberation. A clear corollary to this was the joining of the experience of ‘official’ and ‘resistance’ Denmark into one narrative focusing on the ‘people’s war’.

### The construction of the two national narratives

The key actors in this process were representatives of ‘official’ or ‘establishment’ Denmark. From May 1945 political speeches, newspaper articles and a wide variety of celebratory publications stressed the fundamental unity of the vast majority of the Danes from the royal family to paupers in their resistance to the German occupation. To mention just one example, the journalist Knud Meister’s introduction to a commemorative album on the week of the Liberation, published in the summer of 1945, used the pronouns ‘we’, ‘our’, and ‘us’ no fewer than 31 times in 425 words. All 31 times, the pronouns referred exclusively to the Danish people or the Danish nation.<sup>3</sup> Such an interpretation was supported by the Allied liberators. Thus, the commanding officer of the Allied forces in Denmark, British Major-General R. H. Dewing, in an official note from June 1945, wrote that the joy of liberation ‘had been well and thoroughly earned by all those gallant Danes who, directly or indirectly, had worked for so long against the German forces of occupation’.<sup>4</sup>

In his note, Dewing made a distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ resistance to the Germans, stressing that both were ‘gallant’. A similar distinction is found in statements from prominent Danish politicians. On 4 May 1945, the evening of liberation, the leader of the Social Democrats, Hans Hedtoft-Hansen, told the party’s newspaper that there was a ‘unity between what we can call legal and illegal Denmark. What the world perceived as opponents have in reality been co-operating partners for a long time united in the ambition to create a free Denmark’.<sup>5</sup> Later in the 1945 ‘summer of liberation’, the minister for the interior, the Liberal Knud Kristensen, also hailed two types of resistance movements, one political and the other armed, ‘that supplemented each other and demonstrated the unity [of the nation]’.<sup>6</sup> For a classic statement of this understanding, we can turn to the prominent Social-Democrat, Hartvig Frisch. In an article, published in 1948 in an impressive three-volume study

3 Knud Meister, ‘Forord’, in *Danmarks lykkeligste Uge* (Et mindealbum, Copenhagen: Aller, 1945), pages are unnumbered.

4 Dewing’s note is reprinted in Meister, *Danmarks lykkeligste Uge*.

5 *Social-Demokraten*, 5 May 1945.

6 Quoted from Joachim Lund, ‘Mellem fædreland og flæskepriser: partiet Venstre under besættelsen’, in Joachim Lund, ed., *Partier under pres – demokratiet under besættelsen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2003), 159.

of the history of Denmark during the war, he wrote on 'the relationship between the legal and illegal resistance':

It is often stated, and rightly so, that the two forms of resistance supplemented each other in a way that was highly beneficial for our country. Statements have been put forward that strongly overstate the importance of the illegal struggle for the actual liberation of the country. The importance lies elsewhere. It was in its *virility* that the illegal struggle added to the Danish resistance to the Germans. The national unity, the national song movement (*alsangen*), Denmark of a thousand years, the feeling of cultural and spiritual bonding, the tacit and quiet solidarity between all social groups and classes, all of these were wonderful experiences in a time when the power of Hitlerism reached its zenith. It was a gentle and quiet power, the result of a highly developed culture, but, in the final analysis, it was not enough. Here the clandestine struggle for freedom supplied the consummation, the virility.

This theme where the merits of the peaceful culture and the power of virile nature are measured against each other is an ancient one . . .

What needs to be done now is, based on the experiences of the occupation years, to find the perfect balance of both qualities, *sober-mindedness* and *courage*, that will be most beneficial for our country and create the most healthy youth for the coming tempestuous times.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, the history of Denmark during the war was organised in a clear 'us' versus 'them' narrative. The 'us' of the narrative was the Danish nation, united across all divisions in opposition to the German occupation. This opposition had various expressions: indirect or legal and direct or illegal. In the opposition to the Germans, the active resistance movement was seen as the finest members of the nation. Against this united popular front stood, first and foremost, the occupation power – or 'the Germans', as they were normally referred to – but also some corrupted Danes: local Nazis, Eastern Front volunteers, war profiteers, informers and women who had sexual relationships with German soldiers. These groups who had placed themselves outside the family of the nation were a tiny minority of the population. Tellingly, only some 13,500 – that is 0.3% of the total population – were convicted of acts of treason or collaboration in postwar trials.<sup>8</sup> This narrative of a nation united in resistance but also of a nation where the majority of 'passive resisters' owed a lot to the heroic 'active resisters' was probably dominant before the last German soldiers left Denmark in summer 1945.

However, this attempt to establish a national consensus was not unchallenged. Groups linked to the radical sections of the resistance movement, both to the right and to the left, were unwilling to accept their former opponents in the Danish

7 Hartvig Frisch, *Danmark Besat og Befriet*, vol. 3 (Copenhagen: Fremad 1948, pp. 355–356).

8 After the Liberation, almost 40,000 people were arrested for collaboration with the Germans but most of those detained were released without trial. Altogether, some 15,000 were tried for either treason or economic collaboration: approximately 13,500 were found guilty, 78 persons were sentenced to death, and 46 were actually executed. As in other occupied countries, the judicial aftermath of the war became contentious. Many on the left thought that those tried for economic collaboration were treated far too leniently. Even more problematic for former members of the resistance was that fact that the investigations into the actions of the government and prominent civil servants during the occupation were undertaken by a parliamentary commission. Based on the reports of the commission, parliament concluded in 1955 that there was no foundation for charging anyone with constitutional 'crimes against the state'. Thus, according to the critics, the political class absolved itself completely from any major wrongdoing.

establishment as ‘passive resisters’. Instead, they held on to an alternative narrative, constructed during the war. This was also an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative, and in many ways it resembled the official narrative. But there was one decisive difference. Just as in the official narrative, the Danish nation was united in resisting the Germans, and the resistance movement was seen as the vanguard of the people. But the resistance was facing a stronger opposition. They had to fight not only the German occupation forces and the Danes later tried for active collaboration but also most of the Danish establishment and the Danish elites during the first phase of the war. According to this narrative, the government, civil servants, political parties, business interests, and the trade union leadership all collaborated eagerly with the Germans until August 1943, and many continued to do so even after the government stepped down. What the political elite characterised as a ‘policy of negotiation’ (*forhandlingspolitik*) and even ‘legal resistance’, was seen in this narrative as a policy of ‘co-operation’ or even ‘collaboration’ (*samarbejdspolitik*).

In the immediate postwar period, the most impressive statement of this resistance narrative was the feature-length documentary film, *Det gælder din Frihed* (Your Freedom Is at Stake), that was premiered on the first anniversary of the Liberation, 4 May 1946. The film was directed by the prominent Danish film-director, Theodor Christensen, but most importantly in this context, it was ‘released by the *Danmarks Frihedsraad*’ as the advertisements in the newspapers stated. Thus the film was presented as the authoritative cinematic account of the war years from the perspective of the resistance movement.

In *Det gælder din Frihed*, criticism of ‘official Denmark’ is the dominant theme in the first half of the film. ‘Official Denmark’ means first and foremost the government and the parties supporting it but also includes civil servants, business interests and the trade unions. In the spoken commentary, the integrative ‘we’ is used both for the resistance movement (‘the Freedom Council’, ‘the fighting Denmark’) and ‘the People’, while the Danish people is portrayed as being solidly anti-German from the beginning of the occupation. It is explicitly stated that the vast majority of the Danes supported the resistance and thus created the sea where the resistance movement’s ‘fish’ could swim – to paraphrase Mao Zedong’s well-known statement on popular support as the necessary prerequisite for a guerrilla movement.

The opposition between resistance and government is highlighted in what is the central part of the film, where a montage of sabotage scenes combined with quotations from the government’s appeals against sabotage actions concludes with the statement: ‘It is Us that the Government sees as its main task to fight against’. Yet while the government was the main target of criticism, it was not the only one. Other groups stand accused, among them economic collaborators (‘who say “Auf Wiedersehen” – and actually mean it!’), women forming liaisons with the Germans (‘Far too many are making the stay comfortable for the German troops’); big business (‘Danish industries are building ships for the German navy’) and trade unions who, in August 1943, asked the workers to end the strikes. However, the workers did not follow the call of their elected leaders, and in the narrative of the film, 29 August is seen as the day of redemption, when ‘the population stands united and decided’.

We, the Danish people, have tired of the official policy ... [There are] two currents. It is the Government and its declarations. And it is the people and its actions ... The night of August 29 [is] the night of Denmark's Freedom ... The people demand the active struggle! The Freedom Council is formed to fight the Germans ... with all the means at the disposal of the people.<sup>9</sup>

In his review of the film, the editor of the newspaper *Information*, Børge Outze, was generally positive. 'In almost any respect, *Det gælder din Frihed* is a fine film', he wrote, and noted that the film was 'a harsher indictment of our own side than that of the Germans and thus in harmony with the origins of the Freedom Movement'.<sup>10</sup> This assessment is hardly surprising as *Information* was founded in 1945 based on an illegal news agency and therefore in 1946 acted as a mouthpiece for large sections of the Resistance.

However, far from everyone agreed with this assessment. On the contrary, the film unleashed a flood of debate and criticism in the media, at public meetings and even in parliament. Far more representative of this debate than Børge Outze's praise was the harsh criticism expressed by the influential Social Liberal newspaper *Politiken*. In an editorial, the film's narrative of the events leading up to the German occupation was characterised as 'a falsification of history'. More generally, the editorial lamented that 'the chance to make a historically important film [on the Resistance] has been in part forfeited by turning half of the film into a piece of chauvinistic-communist propaganda'.<sup>11</sup> In the parliamentary debate on the film on 7 May 1946, the Conservative Christmas Møller who had been one of the most prominent leaders of the Resistance stated bluntly:

The film that by now has received an official stamp twice, first by being exempted from taxation, second by getting the authorisation of the Freedom Movement, does not for the time before August 29 [1943] represent what will become established historical truth in Denmark.<sup>12</sup>

The avalanche of criticism precipitated by *Det gælder din Frihed* highlights the marginalised status of the counter-narrative a year from the end of the war. This is not surprising if we look at the political development of the first postwar year. When the jubilations occasioned by the Liberation started dying down, it was very much business as usual. If the Communists did well in the general election of October 1945 with 12.8% of the vote, the parties who had supported the 'policy of negotiation' did much better. Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Conservatives and the Liberal Party took 82.5% between them. The Liberals formed a minority government while the Social Democrats dedicated much energy to the struggle against the Communists in the labour movement. In this, they were successful. In

9 All quotations are from the spoken commentary in *Det gælder din Frihed*, written by Karl Roos.

10 *Information*, 4 May 1946.

11 *Politiken*, 9 May 1946. For highly critical reviews of the film, see *Social-Demokraten*, 4 May 1946, and *Politiken*, 4 May 1946. The criticism in the conservative *Nationaltidende* was more muted. However, the reviewer underlined that 'the Freedom Film does not represent history writing in its exact and unbiased form' (4 May 1946).

12 *Rigsdagens Forhandlinger i Folketinget*. 97de ordentlige Samling 1945, 1945–46, vol. II (Copenhagen: Schultz, 1946), col. 4885. The exemption from taxation refers to an 'entertainment tax' on cinema-tickets. Films with an 'educational content' could be exempted from this tax, and on this basis an exemption was given for *Det gælder din Frihed*.

the 1947 elections, the Communists lost almost half of the votes they had gained in 1945. In the new climate of the looming Cold War there was little room for a narrative that portrayed Communists as heroes, and the democratic political parties as villains.

### The ascendancy of the official narrative

The development of commemorative rituals and events in the postwar years demonstrates the rapid dominance of the official narrative of the war years. The Danish war experience offered three evident candidates for a memorial day, all of which served as a setting for commemorative rituals in the immediate postwar years: 9 April, the day of the German invasion, 29 August, the day when the Danish government stepped down in 1943 and 4 and 5 May, the eve and day of the Liberation. Even in 1944, a two minutes silence was observed in Danish cities on 9 April. This initiative was launched by the resistance movement and continued into the first postwar years. In 1945, 29 August witnessed important commemorative events. The government declared the day a national holiday, a two-minute silence was observed, and, in Copenhagen, the national monument for the martyrs of the resistance movement was inaugurated. However, both 9 April and 29 August were problematic as memorial days from the perspective of the official narrative. 9 April connoted the failure of Danish foreign policy and the timid resistance of official Denmark to the German occupation. 29 August, on the other hand, could be celebrated as the turning point when (almost) all of Denmark was finally openly united against the Germans but it commemorated the resistance movement at the expense of the political establishment – as was demonstrated in *Det gælder din Frihed*. It is quite telling that, five years after the war, the government demoted 29 August as an official flag-flying day.

That left Liberation Day – the evening of 4 May when the news of the German surrender was announced by the BBC and 5 May, the official date of the Liberation – as the prime candidate for commemorative events. That was the most obvious candidate, anyway, as the Liberation had become a spontaneous celebration in the streets of Danish cities in 1945, thus creating a narrative of national jubilation and unity that commemorative rituals could build upon.

In spring 1946 a plethora of initiatives to commemorate the Liberation came into being, both at national and local level. 5 May was seen as the day for solemn rituals commemorating the victims of the occupation. At local level, however, there were many initiatives to celebrate the anniversary of the Liberation by organising events that echoed the spontaneous celebrations of 1945. In April 1946 these initiatives were elevated to a national level when the Freedom Foundation, established by members of the Freedom Council, started to co-ordinate and develop local plans. During the following months, up to 100,000 people helped organise celebrations all over the country, joyous events with concerts, singing, dancing and drinking as central elements.



The celebrations were an astounding success. In the main square of Copenhagen, people were packed so tightly that they could not even clap their hands, according to one newspaper report, and similar reports are found in local newspapers all over the country. If press reports are reliable, it must have been a very hungover country that participated in the solemn official commemoration rituals on 5 May.

Analysing the commemoration of 1946, it is clear that the celebrations were structured according to the official narrative of the war years. The dominant theme in the arrangements was that all of Denmark celebrated the liberation of the Danish people. 'All the country's artists were available for the freedom-fighters', and 'mayors, prefects, clergymen and members of parliament gave important speeches', to quote a provincial, conservative newspaper. Even if the celebrations were organised by groups rooted in the resistance movements, it is clear that voices from the political establishment were prominent.<sup>13</sup>

The successful anniversary arrangements of 1946 established the basis for turning Liberation Eve and Liberation Day into a fixture in the national calendar. Although 5 May was never turned into an official holiday, 4 and 5 May became the key times for commemorating the occupation, the Resistance and the Liberation through the media and public ceremonies. The narrative repeated again and again was that of national resistance to the Germans, active and passive, which lasted throughout the war with the 'freedom-fighters' as the heroic elite of that resistance. The commemorative rituals were seen as chance to forget the political conflicts of day-to-day politics and to rekindle national unity. In 1950, under the rhetoric of the Cold War, the Conservative newspaper, *Berlingske Tidende*, characterised the 4 May celebrations as 'a manifestation of democratic Denmark. Here the student walked side by side with the worker, the soldier side by side with the office clerk'.<sup>14</sup> In his speech at the tenth anniversary celebrations in Copenhagen, the Social Democratic Prime Minister, H. C. Hansen, after praising the work of the resistance movement, stated:

The Danish people were a unity. On difficult posts in official Denmark and subjected to suspicions as to their motives, many good people performed important services for the country and the population. Therefore, the rupture of August 29 could occur in harmony between those working clandestinely, and those who had until then manned the official Danish positions.<sup>15</sup>

His interpretation was echoed by his successor, Viggo Kampmann, who stressed in 1960:

We learned to stand united – in spite of everything. The Struggle for Freedom established a trusting and unselfish cooperation involving women and men, young people and old ones from the most different backgrounds. Freedom was won.<sup>16</sup>

13 Cf. the analysis of the 1946 anniversary in Nils Arne Sørensen, 'Befrielsen fejret. En traditions etablering og forfald, 1946–85', in *Den jyske Historiker*, 71 (1995), 113–16. A detailed analysis of the commemorative rituals from 1945 to 1995 is offered by Claus Bryld and Anette Warring, *Besættelsen som kollektiv erindring* (Roskilde University Press, 1998).

14 *Berlingske Tidende*, 5 May 1950.

15 *Social-Demokraten*, 5 May 1955.

16 *Berlingske Tidende*, 5 May 1960.

If the anniversary of the Liberation was the key focus for this commemoration, it was far from the only one. The first two decades after the war saw the publication of an impressive number of books dealing with the period: memoirs, biographies, histories of various resistance groups, and novels. The Resistance also offered subject matter for feature films such as *Der kommer en dag* (A Day Will Come), released to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the Liberation in 1955. That year also saw the release of a new documentary film on the war years, directed by Theodor Christensen. Interestingly, this film, *De fem år* (The Five Years), was to a high degree based on the materials Christensen had used in his earlier *Det gælder din Frihed*. He had, however, learned the lesson from the 1946 debate. In the new film, he fully subscribed to the dominant, official narrative, and an abridged version, released in 1960, soon became a staple in Danish classrooms. Parallel to this, in 1966 the historian Frantz Wendt structured his treatment of the war years in the final volume of the publishing house, *Politikens Forlag's* extremely popular multi-volume *Danmarks Historie* (The History of Denmark),<sup>17</sup> completely in accordance with the official narrative. The war experience was divided into four distinct phases under the headings: 'The Attack', 'Passive Resistance', 'Active Resistance', and 'Liberation and Purges'. Wendt also accepted the official Danish policy as being one of 'negotiation', and if this policy at times seemed closer to outright 'collaboration', he placed the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of Erik Scavenius, minister of foreign affairs from July 1940 and prime minister from November 1942 to August 1943. Even if Wendt acknowledged that the rationale for the rather active, pro-German line of Scavenius was to safeguard as many Danish democratic institutions as possible, he painted a highly critical picture of the 'arrogant' and 'wilful' aristocratic diplomat 'who lacked all understanding of the value and importance of the popular and national forces' and was, in reality, 'a relic from the days of unrestrained *raison d'état*'. In short, Scavenius was not a democrat and therefore not a proper representative of the Danish people.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the official narrative was remastered by sacrificing a single prominent member of the establishment.

Turning back to the public rituals of commemorations, some commentators lamented the low turnout for the ceremonies of 4 May 1960. While maybe as many as 200,000 had attended the meeting in front of the City Hall in Copenhagen in 1946, by 1960 the numbers had dwindled to 'a few thousands'.<sup>19</sup> Five years later, attendance was even lower.<sup>20</sup> However, there is no reason to interpret this as a sign that the war had faded from popular memory or that the official master narrative of the war experience had been seriously challenged. Instead, the majority of the population now followed the massive coverage of the events on television. A challenge did come, however, in the following decade, in Denmark as elsewhere in Europe.

17 Original print run was 80,000 copies. By the early 1980s, the series had sold some 110,000 copies. Information from *Politikens Forlag* in a letter to the author, 25 May 2004.

18 Frantz Wendt, *Danmarks Historie. Bind 14: Besættelse og Atomtid 1939–1965* (Copenhagen: Politikens Forlag, 1966), 11–351 (on Scavenius, see esp. 88–91).

19 *Politiken*, 5 May 1960.

20 *Politiken*, 5 May 1965.

### The comeback of the resistance narrative

If the resistance narrative had already been marginalised in 1946, it had not entirely disappeared. This was indirectly acknowledged in H. C. Hansen's 1955 speech in which he felt the need to stress the accomplishments of 'good people' in 'official positions' before August 1943. It was, however, primarily in groups with strong links to the resistance movement that the narrative was kept alive. The most important of these were the Communists. To them, resisting the Germans was their 'finest hour' where they had played a dominant role in the heroic struggle and presented themselves, in true Leninist fashion, as the vanguard not only of the working class but also of the people as a whole.

The Communists' high hopes for their role in the rebuilding of Denmark soon faded. In the 1945 elections, the Communist Party gained more than 250,000 votes. Two years later, they had lost more than 100,000 voters, and by 1950, another 50,000 had turned their back on the party. The decline of the Communist Party continued throughout the 1950s. In the 1960 elections, they gained only 27,000 votes and lost representation in parliament.<sup>21</sup> In this situation, the Communists looked longingly back to the war years. The experience of resistance became a central element in Communist identity, and Communist rhetoric was full of references to the war. For instance, it became a Communist staple to compare the new enemy in the Cold War, the United States, to Nazi Germany. In the early 1950s, the Communist newspaper, *Land og Folk*, compared the FBI to the Gestapo, and claimed that the Truman administration was 'Fascist'.<sup>22</sup> The reference to the war experience occurred at a more general level in a party manifesto from 1962:

Official Denmark's political collaboration during the war years with the occupying power has been continued. With negotiations on all essential issues kept at a strict top level behind the back of the people ... it [i.e. official Denmark] takes on, now as before, the form of a conspiracy of a reactionary and unnational faction against the national and democratic freedom of our people.<sup>23</sup>

However, such statements were directed to an ever smaller congregation of true Communist believers. This did, however, include artists with a much broader appeal, most importantly the writers Hans Kirk and Hans Scherfig whose novels from the interwar years had entered the national canon. In 1952, Hans Kirk published *Djævelens Penge* (The Devil's Money) – set during the war years – that followed the resistance narrative closely. 1962 saw the publication of Hans Scherfig's massive novel on the war, *Frydenholm*. In this, the heroes are Communist workers and intellectuals. In accordance with both the official narrative and the resistance narrative, the Danes are portrayed as passive resisters to the German occupation forces. However, the villains of the novel are remarkably Danish, being representatives of the Danish economic and political elites. Scherfig reserved special venom for the police who in

21 Danish election results are reprinted in Hanne Rasmussen and Mogens Rüdiger, *Danmarks Historie. Bind 8: Tiden efter 1945* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990), 475–8.

22 *Land og Folk*, 21 June and 25 June 1951.

23 Quoted from Søren Hein Rasmussen, 'Modstanden og det nationale', in *Den jyske Historiker*, 93 (2001), 102.

the novel collaborate enthusiastically with the Germans when it comes to rounding up Communists. The novel ends with a scathing criticism of the representatives of the policy of collaboration who, thanks to political scheming and the raw power of capitalism, could remain in power after the Liberation.

*Frydenholm* never became the most popular of Scherfig's novels, though it was widely read. The novel was published in a cheap paperback edition in 1966 and reprinted five times over the next twelve years. In 1968, the Communist lawyer Carl Madsen published *Vi skrev Loven* (We Made the Law) which can be seen as a sort of companion volume to Scherfig's novel. Fundamentally, Madsen told the same version of the history of the war years but without fictionalising either heroes or villains. In the book – which ran to an impressive 26,000 copies within a year – Madsen strongly stressed the relevance of the war years for the present:

It will never be forgotten, and it must never be forgotten, especially by young people who did not witness these barbaric times, that the German army had hardly put their Prussian boots on Danish soil before there were Danes who eagerly licked them. Among the most eager of these Danes we find the top echelons of the police force, the Government, the politicians.

Already in the first summer of the occupation . . . they sold us as hostages, the men who are still part of the ruling elites. The men who are now more than willing to commit treason once again in order to please the new power of occupation . . .

Next time, they will be better prepared . . . Already today, during the invisible occupation, Danish police are supplying English, American and West German police authorities with detailed lists of Communists. Yes, not only of Communists, but of everyone who raises his voice in protest against American Imperialism and its ugly policy of war.<sup>24</sup>

Both Scherfig and Madsen managed to reach many of the young people to whom Madsen pointed as a key target group. To many Danish young people, pictures from the war in Vietnam resulted in a harsh rupture with the idolisation of the idealist and youthful United States of John F. Kennedy in the early 1960s. In their eyes, parallels between the United States and Nazi-Germany did not seem as far-fetched as they do today. As the Cold War gave way to a international climate of détente, many thought it reasonable to write the Communists back into the history of the Resistance against the Germans. Given this background, it is hardly surprising that many young people could subscribe to the resistance narrative of the war years. It was not only young radicals who linked the war experience with the Vietnam War, however. On 4 May 1970, the newspaper *Politiken* printed a cartoon entitled 'A Memorable Year'. The cartoon showed 25 lit candles referring to the tradition of marking the eve of Liberation by putting candles in the windows. However, in the cartoon the candles were formed into crosses, and the caption read, 'Today, it is 25 years since the outbreak of the war in Vietnam.'<sup>25</sup>

Linking the experience of Nazi occupation to the Vietnam War was a potent anti-establishment cocktail. The resistance narrative was, however, only able to come back fully when this clearly left-wing interpretation coincided with a truly national

24 Carl Madsen, *Vi skrev Loven. Fire og tredive fortællinger af fædrelandets historie* (Copenhagen: Stig Vendelkær, 1968), 192–4.

25 *Politiken*, 4 May 1970.

political agenda. This was exactly what happened when the Danes started discussing the pros and cons of joining the European Community. In Denmark, entry was favoured by the four dominant parties from Social Democrats to Conservatives, who all argued in exclusively economic terms. Most important interest groups also supported the Danish bid for membership, also for economic reasons.

Denmark's entry into and later membership of the Community turned out, however, to be anything but consensual. Even before 1961, when the Danish government followed the lead of the United Kingdom and applied for membership of the EEC, critical voices made themselves heard. Already in 1959, the leader of the newly founded Socialistisk Folkeparti (Popular Socialist Party), Aksel Larsen warned that Danish membership of 'the Six' 'would bring Denmark under German hegemony'<sup>26</sup> In 1961, *Komitéen til bevarelse af Danmarks frihed* (The Committee for Saving Danish Freedom) was founded by a group of people with strong links to the Resistance. In a telling comment, the editor of *Frit Danmark*, Kate Fleron informed her readers:

Based on the model of the resistance movement, the committee is to take on a cross-party character. Just as during the occupation, when people from all walks of life and all political parties worked together with one single purpose: the Liberation of Denmark, now the common goal will be to stop Denmark from being incorporated in the Union of Rome.<sup>27</sup>

*Frit Danmark* was originally founded as an illegal magazine in 1942. Typical of the political alliances in the Resistance, the initiative came from Aksel Larsen, then chairman of the Communist Party, and the Conservative leader, John Christmas Møller. After the Liberation, the magazine continued and was committed to uphold the ideals of the resistance movement. However, the Cold War led to a split in the wartime alliance. In the late 1940s the moderates and Conservatives abandoned the magazine, which was a clearly left-wing publication, in fact a Communist front, where current political issues were addressed within the framework of a popular front mentality with references to the experiences of the war years. The EEC was portrayed as 'the aggressive Neuropa'.<sup>28</sup> In 1972, Kate Fleron even told readers that 'there are experienced persons who think that we are at the brink of returning to the days of Hitler at a higher historical level'.<sup>29</sup>

As the debate on the issue became increasingly heated in the period leading up to the referendum on membership in October 1972, many, very different, reasons for opposing Danish membership crystallised. Some feared for their jobs, some for the welfare state. Many argued that Denmark was a Nordic rather than a European country. But the key issue was that of sovereignty. Joining the EEC would jeopardise Danish sovereignty. It would be only the first step on the slippery slope that ended

26 Quoted from Søren Hein Rasmussen, 'Modstanden og det nationale', in *Den jyske Historiker*, 93 (2001), 103. The same argument is found in Aksel Larsen's pamphlet, *Hvad er fællesmarkedet?*, published by the party in 1961.

27 Kate Fleron, 'Med kniven på struben', in *Frit Danmark*, 1961–2, issue 11, 2.

28 H. P. Kjær Jensen, 'En Siegfried-medalje til de knælende', in *Frit Danmark* (1966–7), issue 5–6, 5.

29 Kate Fleron, 'Som et kid i løvens hule', in *Frit Danmark* (1971–2), issue 6, 1.

with the dissolution of Denmark as a sovereign nation-state. Not only the state but also the nation, the people, would be in mortal danger, was the argument. It was within this context that the resistance narrative became an important part of the argument. This took different forms. One was direct references, like the ones quoted above from *Frit Danmark*. A telling indicator for how widespread this kind of argument was is a discussion in the board of *Danmarks Radio*, the politically controlled monopoly broadcasting service, on what to do when parallels between the war, Nazism and the EEC were put forward in directly transmitted programmes on radio and television.<sup>30</sup>

More interesting, however, is how opponents of Danish membership presented the question of membership as a re-enactment of the war experience. The key issue was the same: sovereignty. So were the actors. On the one hand, there were those who posed a threat to Danish independence. That is, the European Community, but also the vast majority of the Danish establishment who supported membership. 'They are now selling the Fatherland again', as the Communist Villy Fuglsang put it in 1970, where 'again' of course referred to role played by the same establishment groups in 1940–45 according to the resistance narrative.<sup>31</sup> The heroes of the anti-EEC narrative, the 'us', were also the same ones, i.e. the people and their vanguard, the active opponents to a Danish membership. It was no coincidence that these groups sometimes called themselves 'resistance movements'.<sup>32</sup> When a number of groups, opposing membership, formed the cross-party *Folkebevægelsen mod EF* (The Popular Movement against the EC) in the spring of 1972, the parallel to the Freedom Council was evident. For those who missed it, the prominent Communist and EEC-opponent Ib Nørlund hammered out this message when he gave the following comment on the flat leadership structure of the movement: 'There was no chairman in the Freedom Council either.'<sup>33</sup>

The parallels drawn to the resistance movement were not without substance. The protagonists of both movements were, politically speaking, a motley crew with a strong overrepresentation of the political extremes. At the time of the debate in 1972, the contribution of the far left greatly overshadowed that of the far right. But, as is evident today, in the longer perspective the anti-EC movement offered a political space for the nationalist far right that had been utterly marginalised since 1945. This is no longer the case.

On the contrary, the far right became far more vocal from the 1980s, although coalition governments, led first by the Conservatives until 1993, then by the Social Democrats until 2001, distanced themselves clearly from these groups who gained parliamentary representation with *Fremskridtspartiet* (Progress Party, 1973–2001) and *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish Popular Party from 1995). A key person on the far right

30 Mads Bundesen, *Besat af besetelsen*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Southern Denmark at Odense (2003), 75, n. 170.

31 Quoted from Rasmussen, 'Modstandeu og det nationale', 101.

32 Kristine Corneliussen, *National identitet og den danske EU-debat i årene 1972–2000*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Southern Denmark at Odense (2003), 35–6.

33 Quoted from Hans Martens, *Danmarks ja, Norges nej* (Odense University Press, 1979), 62.

was Søren Krarup, a minister in the Lutheran state church. He established himself as a rightwing intellectual from the 1960s combining criticism of ‘the ideas of 1789’ (human rights, socialism, secularism, etc.) with an outspoken nationalism. His main platform was the journal *Tidehverv* (New Era), but he was also a diligent producer of books and newspaper comments. In the debate on the EEC in 1972, Krarup had been one of the most prominent voices of the right. He continued his criticism of Danish EC membership but, from the mid-1980s, he focused more and more on a criticism of the liberal Danish asylum policy. Thus, in September 1986 he ran an advertisement in the conservative newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* warning of an ‘uncontrolled and unlimited migration of Muslim and Oriental refugees’ and called for a boycott of a national fundraising campaign on behalf of refugees, organised by the NGO *Dansk Flygtningehjælp* (The Danish Refugee Council). ‘Every krone given to *Dansk Flygtningehjælp* is a krone given to the ruin of the Fatherland’, Krarup claimed, and argued that the inflow of refugees threatened the existence of the Danish nation. ‘Can the Danes continue to be a *people* if we do not share a common language, history and religion?’ According to Krarup, *Dansk Flygtningehjælp* terrorised public opinion and ‘acted as an occupation power in a foreign country’.<sup>34</sup>

There are many references to the war experience in Krarup’s writings. In 1987, he published a book on the struggle against the Danish asylum policy that he had organised in *Komitéen imod Flygtningeloven* (Committee against the Asylum Law). Here the parallels between the war years and the 1980s are made explicit:

We soon felt that it was as if the ‘Freedom Council’ held a meeting. The persecution we were subjected to from official Denmark forced us into a feeling of illegality that reminded us of life during the occupation.<sup>35</sup>

In their criticism of the Danish policies on asylum and immigration, rightwing politicians and intellectuals made good use of the resistance narrative of the war experience. In the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ story, the enemies are again foreigners (immigrants, Muslims, Orientals) but even more so are the Danes who ‘collaborate’ with the foreigners, i.e. ‘official Denmark’. To Krarup, ‘official Denmark’ is the progressive political and intellectual elites with their ideals of secularism, social democracy and human rights (as opposed to Krarup’s own ideals of Lutheran Christianity, nationalism and strong, traditional family values). According to Krarup, these elites, the *kulturradikale* (cultural radicals), had run – and ruined – Denmark since the late nineteenth century. In 2002, Krarup told the delegates at the party congress of *Dansk Folkeparti* (a party that Krarup had represented in parliament since the elections of 2001):

Of course, the German occupation, the darkest and most despicable chapter in the history of Denmark, was a consequence of *kulturradikalismen* (cultural radicalism). And of course the policy of collaboration with the Germans, when Denmark lay down like a dog and wagged its tail at the occupation power, was another example of *kulturradikalismen* . . . . And the policy of immigration, this terrible threat against the Danes’ birthright to Denmark where we simply are giving the

34 Søren Krarup, ‘Nej, ikke en krone!’, in *Jyllands-Posten*, 21 September 1986.

35 Søren Krarup, *En måned i efteråret. Rapport fra en borgerkeri*, *Tidehverv*, 1987, 59.

country away to foreigners – this is in the final analysis the ripe fruit of a philosophy that systematically wants to make sacrifices for humanity by sacrificing the human beings, the living and real ones.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the parallels to the experience of the Second World War are evident to Søren Krarup and his allies. In the struggle against the EU and against immigration, they see themselves as the vanguard of the people who rose and resisted threats to the nation posed by foreigners and their Danish allies. By 2002, the tone of Søren Krarup's argument had become triumphant. In the 2001 general election, the coalition of Social Democrats and Social Liberals – the key protagonists of *kulturradikalismen* – suffered defeat. Instead, a coalition of Liberals and Conservatives took office based on the support of *Dansk Folkeparti* that with 12% of the vote was the real winner of the election. To Krarup, the election marked a momentous divide in Danish history when the Danish people had, once again, risen against its oppressors. Thus, the election result could be seen as another 29 August 1943.

This was evidently the parallel the Liberal Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen wanted to draw in a speech given on the sixtieth anniversary of 29 August 1943. Here the Prime Minister put forward a very strong criticism of the policy of the Danish government up to August 1943. 'On 29 August . . . the honour of Denmark was saved. Finally, the Danish Government stopped collaborating with the German forces of occupation and resigned'. Fogh Rasmussen stressed, however, that:

It was not due to the Government, the Parliament, and the Danish establishment that collaboration with the Germans came to an end. On the contrary, official Denmark had from the first day of the occupation on 9 April 1940 obediently followed the German lead, co-operated at all levels and told the population to do the same.

In Fogh Rasmussen's interpretation of Danish history of the war years, the heroes were the population and the resistance movement:

In the final end, it was the population's growing dissatisfaction with the policy of collaboration, and the efforts of brave resistance fighters that forced the Government to give up collaborating with the Germans. We owe much to those people of the resistance movement . . . who stood up to the collaborating politicians and secured, in the final end, Denmark's position on the right side in the struggle against the Nazis.

The government policy up to August 1943 was characterised as a 'political and moral failure', and, according to the prime minister, the experience of the war years was still highly relevant:

The lesson of 29 August 1943, is that if we are serious about our ideals of freedom, democracy and human rights, we must also actively defend them. Even against hard odds. And even though this means taking unpopular and difficult decisions.<sup>37</sup>

36 Søren Krarup, 'Årsmødetale. Dansk Folkepartis 7. årsmøde' (2002). Quoted from the party's website, [www.dansk.folkeparti.dk](http://www.dansk.folkeparti.dk).

37 Anders Fogh Rasmussen, '60 år efter: Samarbejdspolitikken var et moralsk svigt', in *Politiken*, 29 August 2003.



The speech met with a storm of criticism. Fogh Rasmussen was accused of not only the fallacy of hindsight but also of abusing history. The underlying motive for the speech was clearly to counter the criticism of the government's decision to join the US 'Coalition of the Willing' in the war in Iraq, as some commentators pointed out. All the same, the general outcry caused by the speech is somewhat puzzling, as members of Fogh Rasmussen's Liberal Party pointed out.<sup>38</sup> Strong criticism of the policies of the 1940–43 government was not a novelty, even in high places. In 1993, Queen Margrethe in her New Year's speech to the nation hailed the break with 'the policy of collaboration' in 1943, and two years later in her Liberation Day speech she stated:

In 1940, we were occupied by a foreign power. The assault took place a dark morning in April and was successfully over, almost before it had begun. We had only resisted little and were saved from large scale bombardments and actions of war. Could we be anything but grateful?

But then a feeling of shame set in . . .<sup>39</sup>

The rhetoric of Fogh Rasmussen was, however, much stronger than that of the queen. The policy of the government was 'despicable', authorities were 'obedient' to the Germans. To the prime minister, the villains were 'the Danish elite', 'official Denmark' and 'politicians, civil servants, and the interest groups and organisations'. His heroes were the resistance movement and the Danish people.

Altogether, this is a very clear statement of the resistance narrative. Widespread criticism of this narrative made no impact, as became evident when he repeated this position in a speech given on the occasion of the fifty-ninth anniversary of the Liberation in 2004. Again, he held that the line followed by the national government until 1943 was a 'political and moral failure'. Furthermore, it was naïve, 'even seen from the perspective of the war years'.<sup>40</sup>

By 2004, the resistance narrative had arrived at the centre of political power. It had travelled far since it was criticised as being 'chauvinistic-Communist propaganda' in 1946. The road it had travelled was also intriguing. From the shrinking congregation of die-hard Communists to the left-wing radicals of the 1960s and 1970s and then on to the resurrected radical right before finally being taken over by a prime minister who, at least in his former incarnation as the leader of the opposition, claimed to be a true liberal in the tradition of Adam Smith and F. A. von Hayek.<sup>41</sup> However, as the criticism of Fogh Rasmussen's speeches signals, it had not yet become a hegemonic narrative.

### **The historians and the national narratives**

In western Europe, the 1960s was the decade when the traumatic experiences of 1919–45 were for the first time reduced to history, that is they became the subject matter

38 See, e.g., Jette Elbæk Maressa, 'Ellemann forsvarer Fogh', in *Jyllands-Posten*, 31 August 2003.

39 The 1993 speech is quoted from *Aktuelt* (3 January 1993); the one from 1995 from *Politiken*, 6 May 1995.

40 The speech is reproduced at the official government website, [www.stm.dk](http://www.stm.dk).

41 Anders Fogh Rasmussen, *Fra socialstat til minimalstat: en liberal strategi* (Copenhagen: Samleren, 1993).

for systematic research undertaken by historians whose ambitions were to rise above the biased interpretations of the historical actors and to construct solidly documented narratives of the past. In Denmark, historians focused almost exclusively on the war years. As the Danish legislation on public archives was extremely restrictive, analyses of the war years based on state archives required special permissions. However, interest in the 'Five Evil Years' was intense and, in 1960, an officially sponsored project for the history of the war years was launched, and historians linked to the project were granted access to state archives. The project was directed by Jørgen Hæstrup who in the 1950s had published two path-breaking studies of the resistance movement with a strong focus on the links to Britain.

The studies of the historians linked to this project were published from the 1960s to the 1980s. They did not paint a clear picture of the period. While some works supported the official narrative, in one of the most important contributions, Hans Kirchhoff demonstrated that the risings of August 1943 were not only against the Germans but also against the collaborationist government. Aage Trommer documented that the Resistance, far from being the catch-all movement depicted in the official narrative, originated in political circles on the Nationalist far right on the one hand and the Communists on the other. Trommer also questioned the resistance narrative by arguing that the sabotage actions of the resistance movement had little, if any, impact on the German war effort. Addressing the political economy of the war years, Henning Poulsen argued that it was difficult to uphold the idea of a systematic German economic exploitation of Denmark during the years of occupation. One could just as easily argue that the occupation created a demand that helped solve the unemployment crisis that had ridden Danish society since the 1920s.<sup>42</sup> However, taken as a whole, it was the resistance narrative that suffered most in the hands of the historians. If Hans Kirchhoff labelled the policy of the government and political system in general as one of collaboration, he also stressed that it was collaboration under duress. Major works fundamentally dismantled myths that were central to the resistance narratives (such as those of a police force that was an enthusiastic puppet of the Germans or of a legal purge that was far too lenient on the economic and political establishment).<sup>43</sup> By the 1980s, the consensus of the historians was that the official policy towards the Germans was the only realistic political strategy to pursue, and furthermore, that this strategy was supported by the vast majority of the population until the last phase of the war. The active resistance movement was tiny until the final months of 1945, and dominated by the political fringes. The contribution of the Resistance should be measured in political rather than military terms, and after

42 See Hans Kirchhoff, *August oprøret 1943* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1979); Aage Trommer, *Jernbanesabotagen i Danmark under den anden verdenskrig* (Odense University Press, 1971); Aage Trommer, *Modstandsarbejde i nærbylde* (Odense University Press, 1973); and Henning Poulsen, 'Danmark i tysk krigsøkonomi', in *Den jyske Historiker*, 31–32 (1985), 121–32. For works clearly supportive of the official narrative, see Jørgen Hæstrup, . . . *til landets bedste. Hovedtræk af departementschefstyreets virke 1943–45*, vol. 1–2 (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1966–71), and Henrik Nissen, *1940. Studier i forhandlingspolitikken og samarbejdspolitikken* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1973).

43 See Ditlev Tamm, *Retsopgøret efter besættelsen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1984); Henrik Stevnsborg, *Politiet 1938–47* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1992).

the Liberation, the political forces that dominated the resistance movement quickly became marginalised. Thus, the war experience was, even in a perspective far shorter than Fernand Braudel's famous *longue durée*, a parenthesis.

From the 1990s, a new generation of historians went even further in questioning the understanding of Danish history of the Second World War. Unlike the old school, whose dominant representatives had been educated in the 1950s and early 1960s and who were methodologically and theoretically conservative, by the 1990s young historians finally brought insights and methods from social and cultural history into the study of Danish history of the war years. They also asked new and troubling questions. Closer investigations of the liquidations of Danes who worked as informers for the German police showed that not all of these were above board and that the leaders of the resistance movements had repressed wishes for unbiased investigations into these killings in 1945.<sup>44</sup> Also the Danes' finest hour, the rescue of the Jews in October 1943, was put under critical scrutiny. New research resulted in a far less rosy picture than the one that dominated perceptions of Denmark during the war especially in Israel and the United States, which had been highly influenced by the seminal study of Israeli historian, Leni Yahil, who had concluded that the rescue operation could be seen as a highly successful test of Danish democracy.<sup>45</sup> In the new interpretation, the fundamental precondition for the successful rescue was that many Germans turned a blind eye to what was going on. It was also pointed out many of the Danish fishermen who sailed the refugees to safe haven in Sweden requested high payments for services rendered (and that the risks they undertook were quite negligible). The image of Denmark was further dented when it was documented that Danish authorities had handed a number of German Jews over to the Germans.<sup>46</sup>

Such results are hardly surprising, but they are a telling indicator for the kind of questions the generations born in the 1950s and 1960s started posing. Another pronounced trend has been the attempt to give agency to groups who were written out of the national community as a consequence of their actions during the war. Thus Anette Warring gave voices to the women who had been persecuted and ostracised for their romantic relations with German soldiers, while a group of young male historians wrote the history of Danish volunteers on the Eastern Front. Even the Danish Nazis, usually seen as a bunch of losers and misfits, got a full and detailed

44 Stefan Emkjær, *Stikkerdrab* (Odense: University of Southern Denmark Press, 2000); Peter Øvig Knudsen, *Efter drabet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2001).

45 Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry. Test of a Democracy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969). Yahil's study was originally published in Hebrew in 1966 and was translated into Danish in 1967. Interestingly, the rescue of the Danish Jews did not figure prominently in either the dominant or the resistance narrative until the 1980s and 1990s, Therkel Stræde, 'Die schwierige Erinnerung an Kollaboration und Widerstand, in Monika Flacke, ed., *Mythen der Nationen. 1945 – Arena der Erinnerung* (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2004).

46 See Rasmus Kreth and Michael Mogensen, *Flugten til Sverige. Aktionen mod de danske jøder oktober 1943* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1995); Mette B. Jensen and Steven L. B. Jensen, eds., *Denmark and the Holocaust* (Copenhagen: Institute for International Studies, 2003). It is worth stressing, however, that these reinterpretations and new findings should not be allowed to overshadow the fundamental fact that 95% of Danish Jews escaped the Nazi persecution.

treatment by John Lauridsen.<sup>47</sup> While none of these historians tried to whitewash their subject, they all pointed to the harsh and often unfair treatment these groups had suffered after 1945. The new generation thus often sought provocative topics, and many of them got not only academic degrees (and positions) for their work but also the attention of the media.

A closer look indicates, however, that the media fame of the historians was Warholesque. They were allotted their fifteen minutes in the spotlight rather than the chance to rewrite generally held interpretations of the war. The same goes for the older generation. While the historians in the 1970s documented the narrow social and political basis of the resistance, most of the Danish nation was glued to their television screens following the drama series, *Matador*, depicting the daily lives of the population of a small provincial town from the Depression years of the 1930s to the reconstruction in the late 1940s.<sup>48</sup> The war years were prominently featured and told according to the accepted, official narrative. Thus, the local resistance group was run by nice, middle-aged members of the middle classes: a doctor, a banker, and a female music teacher, who, if in need, could turn to (almost all of) the rest of the inhabitants in fictional Korsbæk for support.

### The past between history and politics

One has to conclude that the increasingly complex interpretation of the war years produced by historians has had little impact on popularly held understandings of the period. When the official narrative has been questioned in recent years, this is not due to the work of historians. In this, the Danish case differs from what we find in other European countries where the war experience also became contested *lieux de mémoire*. Evident examples are Italy, where Renzo de Felice's reinterpretation of the Fascist regime and Cladio Pavone's reading of the 'Resistance period' as one of civil war have become more or less mainstream, after initial polemics, and in France, where historians have played a crucial role in reopening the debates over the Vichy regime.<sup>49</sup> In Denmark, it is the politicians, not the historians, who have been the prime movers in the ongoing attempt to establish the resistance narrative as the new master story of Denmark during the Second World War.

47 See Anette Warring, *Tyskerpiger* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1994); Claus Bundgård-Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen and Peter Scharff Smith, *Under hagekors og Dannebrog. Danskere i Waffen SS 1940–45* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 1998); John T. Lauridsen, *Dansk nazisme – 1930–45 og derefter* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2002).

48 *Matador* was produced for *Danmarks Radio* by *Nordisk Film*, 1978–81. The series was primarily written by Lise Nørgaard and directed by Erik Balling.

49 Cf. Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il Duce*, 1–2 (Torino: Einaudi, 1974–80); Cladio Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della resistenza* (Roma: Boringhieri, 1991); Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (New York: Knopf, 1972); Henri Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987). A fascinating comparative analysis of the intricate relations between politics and the historiography of the Second World War is offered by R. J. B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz & Hiroshima. History Writing and the Second World War 1945–1990* (London: Routledge, 1993).

The statements of Rasmussen have been subjected to a harsh critique from historians for misrepresenting or even abusing the past. From inside Rasmussen's own cabinet, the foreign minister, the Conservative Per Stig Møller, warned against the fallacies of hindsight when judging historical actors.<sup>50</sup> This is, of course, a warning that all historians would subscribe to. However, neither Rasmussen nor the right-wingers in *Dansk Folkeparti* are in the business of writing balanced history. They are simply using 'lessons from history' to support policies of the present. We might dislike these policies but this should not blind historians and other analysts to the obvious fact that this is neither the first, nor the last time references to the past have been part of the rhetorical arsenal of politics for the present and the future. Quite the contrary, outside the comfortable world of academia this has always been one of the main uses of the past. Our job as historians is not to condemn this but rather to explain it, and maybe even ponder why this is still the case in a world where political buzz-words for decades have focused on change.

50 Møller put forward his implicit criticism of his prime minister in an interview in the respected news programme, *Deadline*, aired on 4 May 2004, on channel DR2.