

Fighting Genocide in the 'Model Protectorate': Resistance to the Final Solution in Occupied Denmark, 1940-1943

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On 9 April 1940, German Nazi forces invaded the neutral country of Denmark, placing the territory under occupation after just a few hours of armed combat.¹ Unlike nearby Norway, invaded the same day, the weak Danish forces offered almost no resistance to the German advance,² quietly capitulating with the Nazi's promise to respect Danish political independence.³ For the next five years – until the fall of the Third Reich in May of 1945 – Denmark would remain under Nazi occupation.⁴ In this respect, the Danish situation was not at all exceptional; the Nazis would occupy vast amounts of European territory over the course of the Second World War, finding little resistance and even willing collaborators in many European governments. What is unique to the experience of occupied Denmark is its remarkable success in ensuring the survival of its Jewish population at a time when European Jews were being decimated by the Nazis' agenda of genocide: historian Leni Yahil suggests that less than two percent of

¹ Hans Kirchoff, *Resistance in Western Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 94.

² Harold Flender, *Rescue in Denmark* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1963), 23.

³ Kirchoff, *Resistance*, 94.

⁴ Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 369.

Danish Jews perished in the Holocaust.⁵ Denmark is the only example of an entire nation, “from King to fisherman, [taking] an active role in rescuing the Jews” from systematic extermination at the hands of the Nazis.⁶ As such, it is one of the very few happy stories to emerge from the incomprehensible tragedy of the Final Solution. This essay will examine three aspects of Danish resistance to the Nazis’ anti-Semitic measures from the time of the nation’s occupation to the rescue of its Jews in October of 1943. First, the methods of resistance employed by the Danes will be discussed, followed by an examination of Nazi reaction to Danish resistance. Finally, this essay will consider the possible reasons for the unique resistance offered by Denmark as suggested by historians of the Holocaust.

In the decades following the war, a mythology of Danish resistance grew to occupy a prominent place in the collective memory of the nation. Reigning monarch Christian X, in rebuttal to a German official’s discussion of “the Jewish question”, was said to have replied “[t]here is no Jewish question in this country. There is only my people.”⁷ This and similar anecdotes of the monarch’s open defiance of Nazi policy were so widespread as to be accepted as fact in Hannah Arendt’s coverage of the Eichmann trial in 1963, though historians now generally attest to their fictitiousness.⁸ Nevertheless, these apocryphal tales speak to a general Danish support for resistance against the Nazi’s anti-Jewish policies throughout the period of occupation.

In point of fact, the first signs of Danish resistance were far

⁵ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁶ Flender, 255.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*

less sensational than these legends would suggest. During the first year of Denmark's occupation, no attempt was made for an organized resistance; instead, the Danes adopted a mode of 'symbolic resistance' which took the form of a revived sense of nationalism.⁹ By joining together in support of Danish history, culture and historical institutions, the Danes implicitly rejected the totalitarian ideals of their occupiers. Anti-Semitic newspapers, films and literature found so little support from the Danish people that most of these propagandist efforts were discontinued by early 1942, around the time that active resistance to Nazi policy in Denmark began in earnest.¹⁰

As early as 1941, Frode Jakobsen had been attempting to garner support for what he referred to as "the study circle": regional resistance cells organized according to profession, which would later form the backbone of a large-scale resistance movement throughout the nation.¹¹ By 1942 the organization boasted 10,000 members; by late 1943, when the safety of the Danish Jews had been reasonably secured, the number was double, and continued to grow throughout the duration of the war.¹² An astounding 75 per cent of doctors and 90 per cent of clergymen in Denmark belonged to the organization by 1945.¹³

Illegal radio broadcasts and acts of sabotage were chief amongst the strategies of the 'study circle,' and until August 1943 these were among the most prominent acts of resistance undertaken by the general population.¹⁴ Christopher Møller, an outspo-

⁹ Kirchoff, *Resistance*, 99.

¹⁰ Flender, *Rescue*, 32.

¹¹ Yahil, *The Rescue*, 226-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 227.

ken opponent of the German occupation, traveled to Britain in May 1942 “to urge active resistance and sabotage over the [British Broadcasting Corporation].”¹⁵ Throughout the war, broadcasts from the BBC would continue to reach Danish homes, in spite of German attempts at censorship, with the result that “occupied Denmark was better and more widely informed than at any time previously.”¹⁶ But the broadcasts from Britain offered more than mere news of the war; they were explicit in their call for active Danish resistance to its Nazi occupiers. “Every attempt from Britain until March 1943,” writes Jeremy Bennett, “was directed at making Denmark herself react positively against the Germans... whether by riots, strikes, marches or sabotage.”¹⁷ The sabotage of factories, ports and rail lines became a phenomenally widespread activity amongst Danish resistance fighters as a result of the efforts of Møller and Jakobsen; by the war’s end, nearly 5,000 individual acts of sabotage had been committed on targets vital to German interests.¹⁸

By early 1942, underground resistance efforts by Danish students also began to coalesce into organized resistance movements. A group of thirty students at Copenhagen University joined together to produce a self-financed news-sheet, *Studenternes Efterretningstjeneste*, featuring news items donated by conservative newspapers which were considered too risky for regular print.¹⁹ By the end of the year, the group had acquired a cheap duplicating machine and began a campaign to disperse censored literature

¹⁵ Jeremy Bennett, *British Broadcasting and the Danish Resistance Movement 1940-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xii

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

¹⁸ Flender, *Rescue*, 229.

¹⁹ John Oram Thomas, *The Giant Killers: The Story of the Danish Resistance Move-*

smuggled into the country; the circulation of the news-sheet had grown to fifty thousand copies by the time its creators were found by the Gestapo and forced to go into hiding or flee the country.²⁰

It was not only the Danish underground movement, but often the Danish institutions themselves, which offered resistance to German occupation and anti-Semitic proposals. In late 1942, the Reich plenipotentiary in Denmark, Dr. Werner Best, approached Danish Prime Minister Erik Scavenius regarding the introduction of anti-Semitic legislation, and was told simply that Scavenius and his entire cabinet would “resign in protest” if the matter were pressed further.²¹ An attempt to claim German Jewish refugees under asylum in Denmark was similarly repulsed by the Danish government, who claimed that “because the stateless refugees were no longer German citizens, the Nazis could not claim them without Danish assent.”²² Danish assent, it was clear, was not and would not be forthcoming. Making no headway, the Nazis for a time considered it prudent to postpone the implementation of the Final Solution in Denmark.

It was in August of 1943 a crisis finally erupted in Denmark, in the form of large-scale riots and strikes which would come to be known as the “August uprising.”²³ Kirchhoff contends that growing anti-collaborationist sentiment, coupled with a continental “atmosphere of crisis,” resulted in tremendous unrest amongst the Danish workers.²⁴ Suddenly, the Germans were faced with open resistance from the shipyards, where workers com-

²⁰ Ibid., 95-96.

²¹ Flender, *Rescue*, 32.

²² Hannah Arendt, *Eichman in Jerusalem: A Study in the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 172.

²³ Kirchhoff, *Resistance*, 105.

²⁴ Ibid.

menced to strike in protest of German presence in Danish ports. Riots and strikes quickly spread throughout Denmark; the upheaval was further exacerbated by the declaration of martial law and the establishment of the Gestapo in Denmark in the weeks following the initial uprising.²⁵ On September 8, 1943, Werner Best wrote to Berlin "suggesting that the present state of emergency afforded him the very opportunity he needed for the arrest and deportation of the Danish Jews to German concentration camps."²⁶ Over the next month, Best made plans for a German raid on Copenhagen to round up and arrest the Jewish population; the first in Denmark to be informed of Best's plan was his head of shipping operations, Georg Duckwitz.²⁷ It was Duckwitz who would prove to be the catalyst for the greatest and most significant achievement of the Danish resistance movement: the evacuation of nearly the entire Jewish population to nearby Sweden in October 1943.

Duckwitz himself claims that he "reacted sharply against the proposal", and on September 28 he met secretly with Danish leaders to inform them of the plan.²⁸ From them, news of the impending raid filtered down to a young woman named Inga Bardfeld, who in turn notified Rabbi Marcus Melchior.²⁹ The following day, Melchior informed his congregation of the raid scheduled to be carried out on the night of October 1, encouraging the Danish Jews to "pass on the information to friends and relatives."³⁰ So widely did the news spread throughout the Jewish community

²⁵ Arendt, *Eichman*, 172-3.

²⁶ Flender, *Rescue*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁸ Yahil, *The Rescue*, 150.

²⁹ Richard Petrow, *The Bitter Years* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1974), 206.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

that, by the time the Nazis began their raid on the evening of October 1, they found only 477 Jews who had remained in their homes; more than 7,300 Danish Jews had disappeared into hiding in a matter of two days.³¹ Those arrested were sent to Theresienstadt at the insistence of Werner Best himself, where they “enjoyed greater privileges than any other group because of the never-ending ‘fuss’ made about them by Danish institutions.”³² According to Arendt’s figures, only a small fraction of these Jews died as prisoners in the camp.

The Nazi raid on Copenhagen provided the impetus for the Danes’ decision to find their own immediate solution to the Jewish question in Denmark; such a solution was not long coming. In August, neighbouring Sweden had revoked a right-of-passage agreement with Germany which had been in place since 1940.³³ It had become clear that the Allies stood a very good chance of defeating the Nazis, and so in early October King Gustav of neutral Sweden announced that his nation would offer refuge for the Danish Jews in hiding.³⁴ According to the figures suggested by Arendt, over the course of October 1943 nearly 6,000 Jews were ferried across to Sweden in Danish fishing ships, the only Danish vessels still permitted to operate out of the Nazi-occupied ports.³⁵ Some, albeit a very few, Danish fishermen took advantage of the unusual state of affairs to extort ridiculous fares from the fleeing Jews. However, Harold Flender states that “There is not a single case on record of a refugee failing to reach Sweden because he lacked the fare...For every fisherman who overcharged the Jews, there were

³¹ Arendt, *Eichman*, 173.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁴ Flender, *Rescue*, 75-76.

a dozen who ferried them across out of a genuine desire to be of help.”³⁶ By the end of the year, it was clear that the Nazis’ efforts to implement the Final Solution in Denmark had been an unquestionable failure; the Danes’ resistance efforts had managed to save virtually all of Denmark’s Jews from deportation and almost certain death.

It is impossible, given the scope of this analysis, to examine the full breadth of Denmark’s resistance to Nazi occupation leading up to the rescue of the Jews in October 1943. Nevertheless, it is clear that Danish resistance – and particularly, resistance to Nazi anti-Semitism – took place on an enormous scale throughout the duration of the war, and that virtually every group of Danish citizens, “from the King down to simple citizens,” was represented in the resistance movement.³⁷ From passive resistance in the early stages of occupation to the united effort to evacuate Danish Jews to Sweden, the Danes’ resistance occupies a unique place in the Holocaust experience as the only genuinely successful nation-wide attempt to defy Nazi power during the course of the war.

Given Denmark’s exceptional experience under occupation – “the only case we know of in which the Nazis met with open native resistance”³⁸ – German reaction to the Danes’ defiance is a matter of particular interest to historians of the Holocaust. Indeed, nothing testified to the uniqueness of the Danish situation more clearly than the often “bizarre and uncharacteristic

³⁶ Flender, *Rescue*, 98.

³⁷ Arendt, *Eichman*, 174.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

behaviour of the Nazis" in the face of large-scale resistance efforts.³⁹

Until August 29, 1943, when the large-scale strikes of Danish workers forced the resignation of the government, Denmark had maintained a policy of "official state collaboration" with its German occupiers. The result of this active and willing collaboration was a relatively benign occupation by the Nazis until the fall of 1943; parliament and public institutions were permitted to remain under Danish control, and even free elections could be held as late as the spring of 1943.⁴⁰ This is not to suggest that the Danes enjoyed *carte blanche* to conduct their affairs without interference throughout the duration of Nazi occupation. Nazi toleration of political independence in Denmark relied "on the ability of the Danish authorities to uphold law and order," and thus any semblance of a resistance movement was fought, using legal means, by the Danish government itself until its collapse in 1943.⁴¹ Thereafter, the Wehrmacht took up the effort to contain Danish resisters, though "the fight...was comparatively moderate when contrasted with the excessively brutal methods employed by the Germans in other parts of occupied Europe."⁴² In fact, police terror in Denmark was only instituted as 'official' Reich policy in December 1943, after the Danish Jews had been safely evacuated to unoccupied Sweden.⁴³

³⁹ Gunnar S. Paulsson, "The 'Bridge over the Øresund': The Historiography on the Expulsion of the Jews from Nazi-Occupied Denmark," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995), 436.

⁴⁰ Bjorn Schreiber Pederson and Adam Holm, "Restraining Expresses: Resistance and Counter-Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Denmark 1940-1945," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10 (1998), 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 81.

The case of Dr. Werner Best, Reich plenipotentiary in Denmark beginning in November 1942, provides an intriguing study in German attitudes towards the situation in the occupied state. Best's time in Denmark is conspicuously marked by the plenipotentiary's seemingly contradictory actions, which would earn him the disfavour of Hitler himself after the events of August 1943. Throughout the period of occupation, Best argued against repressive measures for Denmark, believing "Germany's interests in Denmark were best served through a continued collaboration with Danish authorities."⁴⁴ He strongly contested proposals for the implementation of a hard-line policy towards the Danes, and his views were shared, rather curiously, by the head of German police in Denmark.⁴⁵ It was Best himself who had initiated plans for the raid on Copenhagen in a telegram to Berlin in September 1943, yet it was also he who deliberately let slip word of the impending Nazi raid – in a perverted sense ensuring the survival of the Danish Jews in hiding.⁴⁶ At the Nuremberg Trials, Best claimed to have "played a complicated double role" as plenipotentiary in Denmark, and his argument was apparently convincing enough to save his life.⁴⁷ Condemned to death by a Danish court after Nuremberg, Best successfully appealed the sentence and eventually served less than five years in prison before being released. Intriguingly, however, Best's case was not unique in occupied Denmark. Like Best, the German military commander General von Hannecken appeared loath to follow hard-line policies in Denmark, "refus[ing] even to issue a decree requiring all Jews to re-

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 80

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Arendt, *Eichman*, 173.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

port to work.”⁴⁸ Even the infamous *Einsatzkommandos*, the special S.S. units renowned for their brutality in the eastern occupied zones, became outspoken opponents of “the measures they were ordered to carry out by the central agencies” in Denmark.⁴⁹

Why is it that the behaviour of German authorities stationed in Denmark appears so often to have run counter to the express wishes of the Reich? It is evident that there was a sharp divide between the orders given by the central authorities and their execution by officials working within the occupied state; where Adolf Eichmann, viewing the situation from Germany, declared the “action against the Jews in Denmark...a failure”, Werner Best claimed it a success, as “the objective of the operation was not to seize a great number of Jews but to clean Denmark of Jews.”⁵⁰ Obviously, Best’s definition of success was a long way from the Reich’s notion of a Final Solution. Hannah Arendt provides a fascinating perspective on the dual nature of authority in occupied Denmark; she argues that it was not the pricking of conscience which compelled men like Best to “sabotage...orders from Berlin,” but rather that the resolve of German authorities in Denmark had been gradually worn down by the Danes’ “resistance based on principle.”⁵¹ In other words, extended exposure to a moral resistance against Nazi doctrine had compelled more than a few German authorities to relax their execution of orders in order to maintain a comfortable status quo – “a ruthless desire for conformity at any price,” as Arendt writes.⁵²

⁴⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Arendt's argument may seem a little simplistic to account for the sheer bizarreness of circumstance evident in Denmark until late 1943. It seems plausible to suggest that years of active collaboration coupled with non-violent methods of Danish resistance were also contributing factors in German attitudes of lenience and moderation in occupied Denmark leading up to the exodus of Danish Jews in October 1943. Whatever the reason for the unexpected behaviours adopted by the German authorities, it is clear that the resistance movement in Denmark was able to thrive as a result of this moderation. The circumventing of orders and the vocal opposition to strong-arm tactics seen in the cases of Best and von Hannecker clearly enabled the resistance fighters to continue their efforts without fear of harsh counter-measures, at least until the Danish Jews had been safely cleared out of the country. Moreover, Best's somewhat confusing "double role" as both persecutor and protector of the Danish Jews offered a singular opportunity for the nation to save its Jewish population from Nazi decimation. Denmark was uniquely fortunate in its ability to wage successful resistance efforts against the Nazis, and much of this good fortune appears to be due to the actions and attitudes of the Nazi authorities themselves from 1940 to 1943.

It should be clear based on this analysis that Danish resistance to anti-Semitism in the early years of occupation was not necessarily part of a greater anti-German sentiment. On the contrary, the Danish government continued to cooperate with the Nazis until mid-1943, believing the Third Reich to represent "a New Order in political and economic spheres under Germany's leadership."⁵³ Thus, the resistance to anti-Semitic measures in Denmark

⁵³ Petrow, *Bitter*, 161.

appears to have been borne of a sense of humanitarianism rather than ideology. It was the persecution of Danish citizens, Jews or otherwise, which was opposed by the majority of Danes under occupation. Historians identify a number of factors specific to the case of Denmark, which help to explain why and how this nation alone managed to successfully resist the deportation of its citizens to the concentration camps in occupied Europe.

Perhaps foremost amongst these explanations is the unique situation of Danish Jewry prior to World War II. Danish Jews had enjoyed a legal status of full equality since the drafting of the Danish constitution in 1851, though effectively they had been assimilated citizens for nearly forty years before this.⁵⁴ Unlike the Jewish experience in other parts of Europe, Danish Jews had always been permitted to live as un-ghettoized residents of Denmark's cities.⁵⁵ The result of this tolerance was twofold: Danish Jews were almost completely assimilated into larger Danish traditions, but often at the expense of their own uniquely Jewish heritage. Yahil argues that "the tiny Danish community lived its internal life in considerable isolation from world Jewry."⁵⁶ By 1940, it appears as though Danish Jews were primarily identified as Danes – certainly not the 'stateless' community so essential to the Nazis' ideological views. While this arrangement may not have suited the more orthodox members of the Jewish community, it is clear that Danish Jews were not looked upon as an entirely separate community by the rest of the nation. To paraphrase the alleged words of King Christian X, there was no Jewish problem in 1940s Denmark – there was only the Danish people. Thus, we see at least a partial rationale for

⁵⁴ Yahil, *The Rescue*, 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 10.

what Arendt calls Denmark's "immun[ity] to anti-Semitism."⁵⁷

Add to this the unique political climate of occupied Denmark, with its "pragmatic German mode of occupation and the collaborationist policy of the Danish government," and we begin to see not only the motivations for Danish resistance to anti-Semitism, but the capacity for its success.⁵⁸ Gunnar Paulsson suggests that it was "an open secret that the Germans abstained from interfering with the flight of Jews," and for this reason he argues that the planned raid on Copenhagen on October 1, 1940 was "essentially a charade...never seriously meant to succeed."⁵⁹ In other words, the high degree of moderateness exercised by the German occupiers enabled the Danes to evacuate their Jews with virtually no interference, right under the noses of the seemingly indifferent Nazi authorities. Arendt claims that, by October 1943, the Germans in Denmark "apparently no longer looked upon the extermination of a whole people as a matter of course."⁶⁰

It is also significant, as Yahil contends, that the Nazis' first organized attempt to implement the Final Solution in Denmark came just after what many consider the 'turning point' of the war. The Autumn uprising had roughly coincided with the Nazis' decisive defeats at El Alamein and Stalingrad, and by the time of the Copenhagen raid in October 1943 the German army was in some ways fighting a losing battle.⁶¹ Given the tumultuous state of affairs, it is likely that the deportation of Denmark's tiny Jewish population was considered a matter of secondary importance for

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Eichman*, 171.

⁵⁸ Pederson and Holm, "Restraining Expresses", 61.

⁵⁹ Paulsson, "The 'Bridge'", 435.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *Eichman*, 171.

⁶¹ Yahil, *The Rescue*, xviii.

the central Reich authorities. Somewhat ironically, it seems the Danish government's active collaboration with the Nazis had lasted just long enough for external circumstances to turn the focus of German attention away from the situation in Denmark, allowing resistance efforts to continue with relatively minimal interference.

Finally, the Danes were exceptionally fortunate in their geographical proximity to the neutral and unoccupied state of Sweden. Sweden, separated from Denmark by only a few miles of open water, "could not have been more cooperative toward the Danish refugees," offering financial aid, housing and food to the Jews evacuated from Denmark in October 1943.⁶² Obviously we must be careful not to ignore the traumatic effects of the displacement of Denmark's Jewish population in their flight to Sweden, yet the rescue effort made in October 1943 was a phenomenal piece of luck and good timing for those persecuted by the Nazis in Denmark. The willingness of nearby Sweden to accept the Danish refugees saved the lives of many thousands of Danish Jews at a time when one's Jewish identity spelled almost certain death in virtually every area under Nazi occupation. Sadly, this good fortune was shared by very few other Jewish communities during the Holocaust.

Thus, as Gunnar Paulsson argues in his study of the historiography of the events of October 1943, it was not simply a matter of a romanticized Danish heroism which saved the lives of the Jews in occupied Denmark, but a combination of a number of internal and external factors.⁶³ Certainly, had it not been for Den-

⁶² Flender, *Rescue*, 242.

⁶³ Paulsson, "The 'Bridge'", 433.

mark's unusual experience under a moderate German occupation, its geographical nearness to neutral Sweden, or the prevailing war-time conditions at the time of the Nazis' raid on Copenhagen, it is doubtful that Danish resistance could have proved as successful as it did. Furthermore, had Danish Jews not enjoyed almost complete assimilation into a greater Danish society, one might question whether the majority of resisters to anti-Semitism would have taken up the cause of saving the Jewish community from deportation at the hands of the Nazis. Fortunately, these factors did exist, and coalesced at an opportune time to ensure the success of Danish resistance under occupation until the rescue of the Jews in the fall of 1943.

Denmark was not the only nation to fight against German anti-Semitism during World War II, nor was it alone in its offer of resistance to Nazi occupation. What is unique is the overwhelming success of the Danes to collectively thwart the Nazi agenda of the Final Solution through active and large-scale resistance. The Danish resistance was favored by auspicious circumstances not evident in other occupied nations, certainly not least of which was the German authorities' relaxed rule over the 'model protectorate'. This, together with the persistence of the Danish resisters and a host of favorable social, political and geographic conditions, helped to bring about a comparatively happy conclusion to Denmark's role in the history of the Holocaust. Denmark's experience under occupation is a profound testament to humanitarian principles so often obscured by the devastating events of the Second World War, and as such is of tremendous interest and importance to scholars seeking to extract some meaning from the unfathomable barbarity of the Holocaust experience.