

# Making Sense of the War (Denmark)

By [Bjarne Søndergaard Bendtsen](#)

Denmark was declared neutral at the outbreak of the war in 1914, and in a message issued in the name of the Danish king on 1 August, the Danes were urged to refrain from commenting on or demonstrating for or against any of the warring nations. This was especially meant to reassure Germany that Denmark did not pose a threat. As the war progressed, Danish authors and intellectuals did, nonetheless, engage in all kinds of fierce debates about the war, not least about the role of the country's southern neighbour and principal enemy since the Schleswig Wars, Germany, the atrocities in Belgium, as well as the responsibility for starting the war.

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Expected Great War in Danish Invasion Novels](#)
- [3 The Ink War in the Danish Newspapers](#)
- [4 Neutrality, the Pen and the Sword](#)
- [5 Making Sense of the War in Fiction](#)
- [6 War amongst the Intellectuals](#)
  - [6.1 Pro-German Voices](#)
  - [6.2 Pro-Entente Voices](#)
- [7 War as a Revitalising Factor and the Psychology of War](#)
- [8 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

Seen through the eyes of the public opinion in a [neutral country](#), war is either other people's business, or possibly a menace threatening to involve the country against the will of its citizens and rulers. The latter was clearly the case for [Denmark](#) when the war broke out in August 1914, and especially when [Great Britain](#) declared war on [Germany](#) and Denmark's position, both geopolitically and commercially, became intensely critical since Britain and Germany were not only the country's neighbours, but also its major trading partners. In military terms, Denmark's borders were fundamentally indefensible, and hence, the country would obviously have to do its utmost to stay out of the war.

Trade, on the other hand, points towards another way neutral countries traditionally had approached war, and a way that became highly relevant for the Danish approach as the initial fear of getting involved in the actual fighting ceased: trading with both sides and taking advantage of the upward tendency of wartime prices. This resulted in an economy where several sectors were booming, at least as long as the supply of [raw materials](#) was not interrupted by the Allied [blockade](#), and the booming economy led to criticism of the willingness among some Danes cynically to take advantage of the situation while the warring nations suffered from the war. This especially applies to the so-called goulash barons: the *nouveaux riche* class, which according to the cliché made fortunes on exporting poor quality tinned food for the German army, and which soon became the laughing stock and moral scapegoat of [neutral Denmark](#).

Yet, and despite Denmark's neutrality during the First World War, many Danish intellectuals and writers acted in all but neutral ways in the numerous articles, pamphlets and debates about the war that were written and ignited during the war years. Obvious topics such as who started the war, who was in the right and who was in the wrong, who was on the side of culture or civilisation etc., were discussed with a bloodthirsty mercilessness and intensity even in neutral Denmark. Or perhaps even more so in this neutral country since it was possible to take more diverse stands in a country not directly involved in the fighting – even if the government actively tried to avoid debates about especially trade and the war, i.e. the lucrative import/export business with the belligerents, and the possibly not quite unbiased approach to the country's neutrality, which critics saw as highly pro-German. The article will give a brief overview of the situation before and right after the outbreak of war, and of some of the different opinions articulated about the warring nations during the war.

The literature on this topic is extensive – even in a small neutral country with a tradition of neglecting the First World War. Numerous books have been written about the most important Danish intellectual at the time, [Georg Brandes \(1842-1927\)](#): Jørgen Knudsen's five-volume *Georg Brandes*, published from 1985 to 2004 is the major work, but other literary scholars such as Hans Hertel has also written intensively about him. Jesper Düring Jørgensen has written several important articles about Denmark and the cultural war including articles on Brandes and [Johannes Jørgensen \(1866-1956\)](#), for example *Tyske forsøg på kulturpropaganda i Danmark under den første verdenskrig* (1982) and the monograph about the pro-German [Karl Larsen \(1860-1931\)](#), *Den smilende kamæleon. Karl*

Larsen 1860-1931. *Digter, journalist, militarist* (2013). But, as it appears, most of this literature is in Danish. That is also the case with [Nils Arne Sørensen's](#) *Den store Krig. Europæernes Første Verdenskrig* (2005), whose 2014 edition includes a chapter on Denmark and the war. In English, I have written about Brandes and the war in the article "Colour-blind or Clear-sighted Neutrality?" (2011), on which the following is partly based, and which also discusses some of the other Danish authors and intellectuals writing about the war. And as a final example, there are several interesting articles about the topic in *Scandinavia in the First World War* (2012), edited by Claes Ahlund.

## The Expected Great War in Danish Invasion Novels

Since the beginning of the [naval arms race](#) between Germany and Great Britain, a war between the great powers was regarded as almost inevitable throughout European public opinion. This expected war was treated as a theme in numerous invasion novels across Europe; a genre that flourished especially after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), but obviously not least after and influenced by the German attempt to rival the British naval supremacy.

In Denmark, some of these novels speculated in a heroic defence of the country and regaining Schleswig and thus reuniting the large Danish population there with the mother country. Some of these books begin with rather fantastic attacks on the Kiel Canal, to restrict the operative opportunities of the German navy, as in the pseudonym Kaptajn Nemo's *Mod Verdensfreden. Gennem Krigen 1910* (*Towards world peace through the war of 1910*, 1907) or the teacher [Vilhelm Hansen's](#) (1874-1947) *Det fjerde Vaaben. En Fremtids-Roman* (*The fourth weapon. A future novel*, 1913); others deal with a heroic and completely unrealistic defence against a German naval and army attack on Denmark, as is also the case in Nemo's book or for instance in [Harald Raage's](#) (1883-1951) *Delfinen. Syner fra vor næste Krig* (*The dolphin. Visions from our next war*, 1912).

Finally, some of the Danish invasion novels had a much gloomier and more realistic approach to the future war, as in the most successful Danish invasion novel, the anonymously published *Dommens Dag* (*The Day of Judgement*, 1908), written, as it was soon revealed, by the author Karl Larsen and the army officer [Victor Dalhoff-Nielsen](#) (1853-1923), which sold out twelve printings within a couple of months after its publication. Here, the authors warn against a German surprise attack on the unprepared forts at Copenhagen – very much as it eventually happened 9 April 1940. The book was part of the fierce debate about the organisation of the [Danish defence](#), which had taken place since 1902 and which resulted in a focus on the fortification of Copenhagen with the National Defence Act of 1909, though rather half-heartedly in the eyes of the critics.

## The Ink War in the Danish Newspapers

During the dramatic and tense days around the outbreak of the war, there was no doubt among Danish politicians, military leaders or the press, as to the country's position in the war. Neutrality was declared 31 July and a message to all Danes to act responsibly at this moment of national peril was

issued 1 August in the name of Christian X, King of Denmark (1870-1947), stressing the responsibility of every citizen to refrain from ill-timed remarks or reckless demonstrations of sympathy for any of the warring nations. This warning was not least aimed at the press, and therefore, the Social Liberal government represented by Foreign Minister Erik Scavenius (1877-1962), Minister of Defence Peter Munch (1870-1948) and Minister of Trade and Transportation Jens Hassing-Jørgensen (1872-1952) along with the military leaders convened the editors of the Copenhagen newspapers and telegram agencies at the Ministry of Naval Affairs on 2 August to inform them about the government's policies and to urge them to approach the war and the warring countries with extreme caution.

The press agreed to avoid mentioning the movements of Danish forces and foreign naval vessels in Danish waters, demanding additional military measures, and covering the warring countries in a biased way – i.e. speaking out against Germany and in favour of a revanchist approach to the loss of Schleswig in the 1864 war. Only the independent, national, Christian newspaper *Hovedstaden* (The Capital) called for full mobilisation – as opposed to the partial mobilisation of the so-called defence force, which was preferred by the antimilitarist Social Liberal government and backed by the likewise antimilitarist Social Democrats. The latter position was preferred by the government and its supporting party to avoid appearing a potential threat to the relatively weak northern borders of Germany. In the following days, the Social Democratic press indignantly accused *Hovedstaden's* editor, the Reverend Nordentoft (1873-1942), of breaking his promise to act neutrally and instead demanding that the highest number of human beings be led to the slaughter.<sup>[1]</sup>

Aside from *Hovedstaden*, the rest of the press followed the government's request – for a while at least – and everybody, even at *Hovedstaden*, agreed that Denmark had to stay out of the war to survive as an independent nation; the disagreement concerned *how* the neutrality was best defended: by a strong military force or by not appearing a threat to the Germans. Unsurprisingly, the right wing preferred the former, and the governing party and the socialists, the latter option. The situation became even tenser for Denmark after Great Britain entered the war and the government received what was perceived as a German ultimatum about laying mines in the Danish straits on the morning of 5 August. After an intense debate among the ministers, opposition leaders, the king and military leaders, the laying of the minefields was decided. It was, however, strongly criticised in some parts of the Danish public, most fiercely by the conservative economist K.A. Wieth-Knudsen (1878-1962), who was eventually charged under the high treason clause of the Danish penal code by the government for his articles and talks about the minefields breaching international law and being to the advantage of Germany.

This would, however, not be the last example of the fierce ink war in neutral Denmark, which had also raged before the meeting on 2 August. After the initial truce on this front, the confrontation between especially independent right wing newspapers and the Social Liberal government and its loyal organ, *Politiken* (*The Politics*), violently erupted in January 1915. This time, the right-wing newspaper *Vort Land* (*Our Country*) was charged for publishing three articles, which criticised or hinted that, e.g., Danish imports of copper were passed on to Germany. Again, Wieth-Knudsen was

involved, and these articles led to the passing of a war press law in the summer of 1915 – a law that the opposition saw as an attempt to censure their constitutional right of free speech and thus curtail their ability to criticise the government's actions. The law was, however, not used much, whereas the rift between the government and opposition press deepened as the war dragged on and Danish involvement in it seemed less and less likely, and especially after the armistices had been signed and the issue of a new border between Denmark and Germany came up.

## Neutrality, the Pen and the Sword

Likewise, swords soon were crossed over the approach to the war and the warring countries among the Danish authors and intellectuals. This debate often took place in feature articles in the [newspapers](#), which were often subsequently collected and published in books. Some of these debates even resonated beyond the Danish borders and involved international notables like [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#), and were typically used by the warring nations for propagandistic means.

A fundamental question faced by Danish authors and intellectuals was this: should a neutral writer observe a strict neutrality when it came to opinions about the war or was he – it was a highly male-dominated field – allowed to speak his mind as an individual? The king's message of 1 August clearly stated that the Danish citizens should refrain from expressing any opinion about the war raging outside the country's borders and off its coasts. But how did the writers act as the war progressed?

Two Danish books that treated the war in different ways – *war books*, as was the broad definition of the genre in Denmark – were particularly successful and in that respect influential: the poet Johannes Jørgensen's polemic debate book *Klokke Roland* (1915) and the author [Erich Erichsen's \(1870-1941\)](#) *Den tavse Dansker* (1916, *Forced to Fight*, 1917). Jørgensen's book and other polemic war books I shall return to below, after a brief look at some examples of Danish war fiction.

## Making Sense of the War in Fiction

In Erichsen's *Forced to Fight*, the war is perceived as a brutal tragedy, seen through the eyes of a Schleswig Dane who fights against his will and interests. Erichsen claimed that the narrative was based on an anonymous participant in the war, who, however, does not seem to have existed.<sup>[2]</sup> The tragic understanding of the war as utterly meaningless should become *the* Danish understanding of the conflict, especially after the 1920 "Reunification" and especially the war of the "Danes" forced to fight in the German army, which viewpoint was emphasised by the English title of Erichsen's book. Or similarly, with another *pathos formula*, the inscription on the plaque at the entrance of the official Danish First World War monument in Aarhus states that, "They fought for a cause that was not theirs."<sup>[3]</sup>

A related interpretation of the war as tragic and meaningless can be found in other Danish fiction

books written already during the conflict. In Marius Møller's (1869-1928) *Han gjorde sin Pligt. En Beretning om en sønderjydsk Soldat* (He did his duty. The narrative of a Schleswig Dane, 1916), two brothers are forced to fight in the war for the Germans; one is killed and the other returns home heavily traumatised, struggling to get back to life among the civilians and with his girlfriend. And in Anton Thorsen's (1885-1963) *Under Krigens Aag* (Under the yoke of the war, 1917), which contains no descriptions from the trenches but tells the story of the home front in a village near the Danish border on the west coast of Schleswig. Here, a soldier returns from the front, traumatised and ruined by the war to a degree that he cannot be regarded as human any more, but rather as an animal, which is the way he is described. In these novels, the war is perceived as a boundless tragedy, which should become the dominant way of understanding the conflict in neutral Denmark.

## War amongst the Intellectuals

Some of the authors and intellectuals actually tried to maintain a neutral approach to the ink war, as contemporary newspapers sometimes called this side of the conflict, most markedly the world-famous critic Georg Brandes. He initially wanted to avoid writing about the war, but this resolve, however, only lasted for a couple of months. After this, he got involved in several fierce debates at home and abroad about the war – or “involved as in a barbed wire net of absurdities”, as he described his experience of the international debates in a prolonged exchange of open letters with the Scottish author William Archer (1856-1924).<sup>[4]</sup> The year before, Brandes took part in a sharper and more prominent debate with the future French *Père la Victoire*, Georges Clemenceau, who eventually broke off his and Brandes' long friendship on this occasion. It has been suggested that Clemenceau primarily wanted to silence the influence of Brandes, especially in the yet neutral countries, defaming his attempt to seeing things from both sides as pro-German.

Brandes often complained about his articles not reaching the publics of the warring nations, whereas deliberately misleading or tendentious quotations were lifted from his writings to impose upon him biased or untrue opinions. Still, his collection of articles *Verdenskrigen* (1916) was translated into English, though only published in the [USA](#) (*The World at War*, 1917), where it appeared in June 1917 when critical voices stood little chance in the patriotic fever that followed the American entry into the war. Already in the autumn 1914, Brandes scolded other Danish and Scandinavian authors and artists for supporting the German cause, and hinted that they had been bought by the Germans. This was, it has later been revealed, clearly the case for especially Karl Larsen.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Pro-German Voices

Two prominent authors were outspokenly pro-German: the future Nobel Laureate Johannes V. Jensen (1873-1950) and the aforementioned Karl Larsen. Jensen was, however, basically against the war, which he regarded as a kind of civil war between the obvious racial allies: Germany and Great Britain. In the article *Det nordiske Forspring. Evropa før og efter Krigen* (*The Nordic Lead. Europe before and after the war*, December 1914), he admits that he sympathises with Germany as the



leading Germanic nation. But still, he regarded the war as a stupid tragedy, not least because the wrong nations were fighting each other.

Karl Larsen, on the other hand, was outright pro-German. He wrote several articles about the war, often praising German militarism as the positive outcome of the war. In 1916, he accepted a German invitation to visit the front and wrote enthusiastic articles, published in *Politiken* during the autumn of 1916 and collected in the book *Fronten* (*The Front*, 1916), about what he experienced here. These articles – and other of his writings – led to attacks from the conservative critic Harald Nielsen (1879-1957) in his periodical *Ugens Tilskuer* (*The Weekly Spectator*). Nielsen collected his war articles in the book *Jøden, Filisteren og Holsteneren* (*The Jew, the Philistine, and the Holsteiner*, 1917), criticising Georg Brandes as the Jew in strongly [antisemitic](#) terms, Kristoffer Nyrop (1858-1931) as the Philistine (see below), and Karl Larsen as the Holsteiner because of his stand in the Schleswig question and his support of Germany.

Finally, a rare, though not singular, female perspective from the Danish debate on this issue should be mentioned. Karin Michaëlis (1872-1950), had a large readership in the German-speaking parts of Europe, especially in Austria, where she was granted permission to travel freely and write about, for example, [prisoner of war](#) camps and the Skoda munitions factories. These articles were published in the book *Krigens Ofre* (*The Victims Of War*, 1916), which was published in German the following year as *Opfer. Kriegs- und Friedenswerke an der Donau*. The title points towards her pacifist approach to the conflict – quite contrary to Jensen and Larsen’s perspectives, and not least to the pro-Entente Johannes Jørgensen.

## Pro-Entente Voices

Like Larsen’s books, that were published in Germany, the Catholic convert Johannes Jørgensen’s books were used by the allied [propaganda](#) and translated into French and English. Most important was, as mentioned, his bestseller *Klokke Roland* (1915) published in English as *False Witness* in 1916 – a title that points towards the book’s fierce critique of the German *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt* (1914), which Jørgensen, among other things, mercilessly dissects point for point. *Klokke Roland* went through twenty-one editions in Denmark and led to fierce debate there and abroad. It was aggressively anti-German, and Jørgensen was criticised for losing his sound judgement of the situation when retailing hateful rumours about the behaviour of the (Protestant) German soldiers in Catholic Belgium, and for reducing the conflict to a battle between a female, barbaric and heathen Germania and the masculine Christian culture of Rome.

A similarly aggressive approach to the religious aspects of the war and who was responsible for causing the conflict can be found in Professor of Theology, J.P. Bang’s (1865-1936) *Hurra og Halleluja. Prøver af ny-tysk Aand* (1916), translated as *Hurrah and Hallelujah! The spirit of new Germanism* (1916). His argumentation, though, is not quite as emotional as Jørgensen’s. Among other things, he quotes from different German sermons, and criticises, for instance, German claims that there is a direct line from Christ to Martin Luther (1483-1546) to Wilhelm II, German Emperor

(1859-1941). Bang and Jørgensen were both used by allied propaganda, and according to the Danish church historian Carsten Bach-Nielsen, their books influenced the opinion in the USA against Germany.<sup>[6]</sup>

Likewise translated into English and French, but otherwise completely different from Bang and Jørgensen's approach, were some books by the Professor of Roman Languages at the University of Copenhagen, Kristoffer Nyrop, most importantly his discussion of war and civilisation in *Er Krig Kultur?* (1916, *Is War Civilisation?*, 1917) – clearly a rhetorical question from Nyrop. In the preface to the English translation of the book, he writes:

This book, which deals with war and matters connected with war, is written by a friend of peace. It therefore wages war against war and might well bear as its motto the words of Bertha von Suttner: "Lay down your arms."

The responsibility of the war is, however, not shared equally, and even though his book "aims first and foremost at waging war against war," there is an exception: it does "of course not" wage war "against defensive war, which protects hearth and home, but against aggressive war, which destroys, plunders, extorts, and annexes".<sup>[7]</sup> So, it is obviously the Germans who are to blame, and that is what his book does – although in much more civil terms than Jørgensen's did. He ends the short preface by simply stating that: "*Qui ne proteste pas est complice*" (anyone who does not protest is an accomplice).

## War as a Revitalising Factor and the Psychology of War

Finally, a brief look at some of the most interesting and curious books about the war in Danish: the poet Helge Rode's (1870-1937) *Krig og Aand* (*War and Spirit*, 1917) and the author, playwright and critic Svend Borberg's (1888-1947) *Krigen bag Krigen* (*The War Behind the War*, 1917), *Smilet fra Rheims* (*The Smile from Rheims*, 1917) and *Krig og Køn*. *Bidrag til en erotisk Ny-Orientering* (*War and Sex. A Contribution to an Erotic Re-Orientation*, 1918). *Rode's book is based on a lecture about the war, which dates to the autumn 1914 but which had been elaborated on in the meantime. His ideas include seeing the war as a revitalising power – like the crisis during a disease, which paradoxically can lead to both healing and death.*

In Borberg's *Krig og Køn*, which is the most important of his war books, he introduced Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) to the Danish public. The book particularly deals with the war as the result of suppressed erotic drives, instincts of self-preservation, overpopulation and Malthusianism, and discusses what the imbalance in the warring nations' male and female populations will lead to in relation to gender roles, polygamy etc. – an imbalance that by 1918 had become a pressing matter due to the millions of young men killed on the battlefields. Borberg furthermore translated the German physiologist and pacifist Georg Friedrich Nicolai's (1874-1964) *Die Biologie des Krieges* (first published in Switzerland in 1917, Danish translation as *Krigens Biologi*, 1918) – for which Georg Brandes wrote a long foreword that was deemed pro-German because he for instance regarded the



sinking of the *Lusitania* as cruel but not any more unfair or inhuman than the rest of the bloodshed.

## Conclusion

From an initial *Burgfrieden* among the Danish opinion makers, fierce debates about the warring nations, war guilt and the nature of the Danish neutrality soon came to the fore of the Danish public debate during the war years. Generally, everybody in Denmark agreed about the country's neutrality being the only feasible way of surviving the war between the great powers, but the way the neutrality ought to be defended and carried out was much debated. Most of the Danish population, along with the majority of the intellectuals and authors, politicians and the royal family were not on the side of Germany because of the 1864 war and the situation for the "Danes" in Schleswig. Only a few pens supported the German cause, most prominently Karl Larsen. Nevertheless, outspoken support of the Allies was not found initially, primarily to avoid provoking the Germans. As direct involvement in the war soon seemed less likely, strongly anti-German articles and books appeared, most prominently Jørgensen's *False Witness*, which was widely read in Denmark.

Most Danes saw the war as an incomprehensible crash down the ladder of development, an atavistic impulse suddenly catching the civilised Europeans. This enabled some Danes and Scandinavians to regard themselves as standing on a more developed level of true and peaceful civilisation. Others saw Denmark as a nation of cynical shopkeepers due to the combination of neutrality and trading with the warring nations. When the war ended and a revision of the border with Germany became realistic, new agendas came to dominate the debate, which do not belong within the limits of this article.

Bjarne Søndergaard Bendtsen, Independent Scholar

Section Editor: [Nils Arne Sørensen](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ See the Social Democratic satire magazine, *Ravnen*, 13 August 1914, p. 521.
2. ↑ The book was incorrectly categorised under "Memoirs – Personal Experiences", in George W. Prothero's: *A Select Analytical List of Books Concerning the Great War*. London 1923.
3. ↑ The texts on the plaques were changed in 2011, so that they now mention the Danish-Americans and other "Danes" who fought and died in the war and whose names are included on the monument wall. See Bendtsen, B.S.: *Changing Narratives of War. The World War I Monument in Aarhus*, in: Böss, Michael (ed.): *Conflicted Pasts and National Identities. Narratives of War and Conflict*, Aarhus 2014, pp. 138-150.
4. ↑ See Brandes, Georg: *The World at War*. New York 1917, p. 242.

5. † See Düring Jørgensen, Jesper: Den smilende kamæleon. Karl Larsen – digter, journalist, militarist [The smiling chameleon. Karl Larsen - poet, journalist, militarist], Copenhagen 2013.
6. † See Bach-Nielsen, Carsten: Danish Christian and theological responses to the World War and post-war reconciliation, in: Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte 28/1 (2015), pp. 63-79. Bang is briefly mentioned in Harold D. Lasswell's, Propaganda Technique in the World War (1938), p. 74, though not as a major contributor to influencing the decision of the US entry into the war.
7. † Nyrop, Kristoffer: Is War Civilisation? London 1917, pp. v-vi.

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