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Wartime and Post-war Societies (Denmark)

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The pivotal policy aspect for the Danish government during the First World War was to keep the country going and its people fed, while also maintaining Danish neutrality. Given that Denmark depended on foreign trade, not least with the two warring nations of Germany and Britain, the challenge was very real. The article below describes how the Danish government tackled the situation, how the emergency government was established, and the social consequences in cities and in rural areas.

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Introduction

In [Denmark](#) the war years and their aftermath were dominated by two opposing forces. On the one side, as in other countries, at the outbreak of war there was an idea that Denmark should stand united during the crisis.^[1] Politically, unity manifested itself as a tacit truce between political parties that enabled emergency legislation that turned out to be of crucial importance for Danish society during the war. Moreover, there were important long-term political reforms which had hitherto been blocked by political impasse: women and servants were granted suffrage and a reform of the judiciary finally separated the courts and the investigative authorities into an adversarial system.

However, on the other hand, the war was a polarising force that created a sudden and immense gap between the rich and the poor, despite the emergency government's intentions otherwise. This gap was also very visible because the newly rich flaunted their sudden financial success. This deep schism contributed to social unrest and ideological polarisation.

Constitution of the Emergency Administration

For Denmark, and Danish society more specifically, the decisive challenge of the war turned out to be not of military but of economic character. Denmark was heavily dependent on the import of [raw materials](#), [food](#), and energy. Therefore, it was crucial for Denmark that it was able to uphold [foreign trade relations](#). Even if this was possible (and it actually turned out to be so until the final year of the war), it was evident that the war would lead to shortages and price pressures, which would challenge living standards and maybe even threaten social peace in the country. To meet this challenge, the Social Liberal government, supported not just by their Social Democratic allies but also by the conservative and liberal opposition parties, introduced sweeping emergency legislation in early August 1914.

On 7 August, the Danish parliament (*Rigsdagen*) adopted an act authorising the minister of the interior to regulate prices and have the state take over important commodities and food. Purchase prices were to be set by commissions, which were also to be set up and constituted by the minister. A second law that had been enacted the day before made it possible to issue bans on exports of specific goods. Export bans became more comprehensive as the war progressed. Initially, the bans covered rye and wheat.

The legislation on price regulation and government expropriation not only transferred enormous power to the Minister of the Interior [Ove Rode \(1868-1933\)](#). On the following day, 8 August 1914, Rode set up the "Extraordinary Commission" (*Den Overordentlige Kommission*) to advise the minister on when goods were to be confiscated by the government and to set the government's purchase prices. The members of the twelve-man commission were appointed personally by Ove Rode and town and country, employers and employees were all represented, as well as all four

parties in the *Rigsdagen*. With the Social Democratic Party, the Social Liberal government party represented the interests of the consumer, and therefore they were also a part of the Extraordinary Commission. At the local level, three weeks later price regulation commissions were set up to monitor price levels and supplies. Here too, Ove Rode tried as much as possible to include members of the Social Liberal Party.^[2]

At the outbreak of the war, and not least as manifested in the August legislation, there was a widespread political resolve for coalition and cooperation. The political truce lasted throughout the war, but was increasingly eroded until it was little more than a facade. Despite endeavours by the Social-Liberal government – such as price caps, rationing, and cost of living allowances – the gap between the rich and the poor grew even wider. Furthermore, despite government wishes to safeguard consumers, “capital” was the greatest force and influence. Besides curbing the free play of market forces, the August legislation also gave sway to the influence of stakeholder organisations. A new road had been paved, as was later realised.^[3]

Employer organisations were better at treading this new road than employee and consumer organisations. An undergrowth of boards and committees was soon established under the Extraordinary Commission. However, in addition to these partially government-controlled and more or less balanced committees, a large number of apparently self-appointed boards grew up; the majority of which were composed exclusively of industry’s employers, directors, wholesalers, etc. In 1917, the secretariat of the Extraordinary Commission tried itself to get a full overview of its partners and concluded there were 34 commissions, boards, and committees. Looking at the composition of these 34 commissions, boards, and committees, representatives of the vast majority of the population, workers and smallholders, made up only 11 percent of members. In contrast, the smallest group, employers in urban businesses, were represented by 48 percent of members. Employers from rural areas, farm owners, accounted for 14 percent.^[4] The two employer segments together therefore represented a solid majority and had direct influence on the emergency government through the Extraordinary Commission. On the other hand, the workers’ organisations were restricted by five-year collective agreements established in 1911, which could clearly only take account of wartime price increases to a modest extent, and which, in accordance with the political truce, were also extended by two years in 1916, although with inflation adjustments and pay increases of 10-15 percent.

The result could only just offset the price increases, and the smouldering left wing in the Social Democratic union movement was not satisfied. This article will return to the “union opposition” and the situation in towns and cities. As the impact of the emergency government in [rural areas](#) impacted supplies of bread, milk, and pork for the [urban population](#), this article will start in the countryside.

Rural Areas

More than half of the population of Denmark still lived in the countryside during the First World War.^[5]

Most food production was also in the country. However, producers of food were divided into two main groups: first, owners of farms (and estates), who produced corn, meat, and milk for sale and processing (and export). Second, there were smallholders, who primarily produced for their own consumption.

The emergency administration was especially dependent on farm owners producing corn, milk, and meat. However, the emergency administration also depended on how farm owners organised their production; that they grew the “right” crops and that these crops were used in the “right” way. After the ban was issued on exports of rye and wheat, there were three options for using the two crops: first, crops could be transported to a miller, milled into flour, and then baked into bread. Second, they could be stored and sold in the following spring as seed corn, possibly at a far better price for the farm owner. Finally, they could be used as feed for pigs and livestock. Using bread corn as feed was a real threat to bread supplies because the feed increased in price so rapidly and imports of maize and press cake were uncertain. There were bans on using bread corn as animal feed for long periods. These bans were made more restrictive and specific as time passed and as farmers’ imaginations took flight! At one point a law actually stipulated that it was illegal to bake corn bread for animal feed.^[6] Production controls and inspection were doubtless perceived as a major restriction on the hitherto liberal agricultural sector.

Maximum Price, Ban on Animal Feed and Corn Purchases 1914/1915

Control instruments imposed on agriculture initially comprised the introduction of maximum prices on rye, a ban on using crops as animal feed, and pledges of government subsidised imports and resale of feed. When it turned out that the war was still raging around Christmas 1914/1915, the government began to buy up corn, which was then moved to government storage facilities. A cap on the price of rye but not on wheat caused an imbalance between the wheat-growing farmers on the clayey soil of Zealand in eastern Denmark and the farmers growing rye on the heathland in Jutland. Smallholders in Jutland were particularly affected because they usually had the worst of the poor soil.^[7]

Changing Corn Schemes up to 1920

In the year following the 1915 harvest, the government tried to balance this situation with municipal estimates of the amount of corn the municipality could contribute. The balancing scheme failed, partly because the rye harvest was again poorer than expected, and partly because there were large differences in municipalities’ optimism and willingness to cooperate. This was followed by a new government buy-up and a renewed ban on using crops for animal feed. The 1916 harvest was better, and the government buy-up was repeated. When [Germany](#) declared unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) at the end of January 1917, the government decided to take control of all domestic bread corn cultivation. At first, a number of municipal corn inspectors were appointed to ensure that farmers sowed bread corn in the agreed areas, and that no bread corn was used in animal feed. However, the inspectors acted as a sort of police force of their own community, and the scheme was a fiasco.

A municipal corn board was set up in the autumn to take over the task of ensuring that all farmers delivered at least 450 kg of bread corn for each DKK 1,000 of land. The municipal corn boards acted until 1920, and the model was implemented again in connection with the emergency government during the Second World War.

“Goulash Barons” in the Countryside

Social inequality was easily exacerbated by the genuine attempt by the Social Liberal government to reduce it, for example because the cap on rye prices affected the very poorest farmers most. The Social Democrat Danish director of the official factory inspectorate (*fabrikstilsynet*) and later director of the Danish central bank, Jacob Kristian Lindberg, wrote an article in 1921 about changes in incomes in the period 1908-1920, concluding that the clear winners from the war were self-employed businessmen, although the average figures for this group covered large inequalities. “As a rule those who already had the largest incomes were also those who gained the most in relative terms,” wrote Lindberg at the end of the article.^[8] This is confirmed if we look more closely at a random cross-section of taxpayers in a couple of rural parishes in western Jutland. One municipality in the area purchased 25 tonnes of coal in February 1917 for resale to residents in the municipality. This resale was organised through a major trader in the municipality with no great profit. However, these were not the only goods on which he earned commission, and the monopoly-like status he acquired for this important commodity naturally brought with it other business. The trader must also have had his eye on other opportunities, ones that were more attractive than what could ordinarily be expected for a rural trading business. In the 1915/1916 fiscal year, his tax return shows income of DKK 1,140 and assets of DKK 6,000. Four years later his income had risen to DKK 21,200: an increase of 1,760 percent. His assets had “only” grown five-fold to DKK 30,000.

The war years were a bonanza for traders and businessmen, although there were large variations. In Brørup in southern Jutland, increases in incomes for four businessmen in the period 1915/1916 to 1919/1920 varied from 483 percent to 1,760 percent. One farmer in the neighbouring parish of Jernved overtook even the Brørup businessmen. His income increased by 1,900 percent. In the same parish, an unlucky farmer saw a *drop* in his income by 233 percent.^[9] However, in general these were profitable times for businessmen (in particular) and farm owners, while they were definitely not good for smallholders, whose incomes either fell or did not increase enough to keep up with inflation. In general, real incomes for smallholders fell, while they were more or less stable for farm workers, probably because they were employed by farmers who were enjoying the bumper years.^[10] However, poverty and wealth are relative terms and when the rich become incredibly richer, the poor must feel even poorer, even though some of them, such as farm workers, maintained their incomes in real terms.

Manufacturers in towns and cities could earn a fortune, for example by producing (bad) tinned food for the soldiers fighting in the trenches. However, rural districts too had their “goulash barons”. As J.P. Sundbo (1860-1928), Social Democrat, said in the Danish parliament in 1919, many people

developed a sharp eye for a good business deal during the war. This also applied to farmers. Before, it was quite commonplace for a farmer's wife to give a little milk to working families in the neighbourhood. But now they took "the last penny for their milk to buy a piano with the proceeds - perhaps even two pianos to make things more symmetrical."

Towns

Agricultural production was crucial to supply urban populations with essentials like bread, milk, and potatoes. However, people also had to be able to access and pay for the food. Providing this access to the urban population was the second important aspect for the emergency administration. Price caps were the most common instrument, but from 1917, many commodities, such as bread, butter, and pork, were also rationed. The government also subsidised municipal measures to counter high prices. This could be aid to purchase coal or to set up public soup kitchens.

Towns were undergoing rapid growth. From 1911 to 1920, both Copenhagen and the provincial towns had an increase in population of 22 percent. Housing construction could not keep up, and the situation was not improved by the war, which made it difficult to procure building materials. War shortages led to a shortage of housing. A new Rent Act was passed in 1916 and Rent Boards were set up to monitor rents and protect tenants. The government-subsidised measures also made it possible to provide the poorest families with a little coal to warm their apartments and to give them a meal in communal soup kitchens. However, despite all these measures by the government, workers in towns suffered most during the war, with falls in real incomes and poorer diets.^[11] In general, a poorer diet meant less pork and more bread, and maybe this diet was healthier than the old. In fact, at the end of the war the Danes were as healthy as before. Government measures meant that distress and misery did not occur to the same extent as in the warring countries.

Trade Unionism and "the Danish Model"

The Danish union movement was very homogenous, with by far the majority of unions united under one umbrella organisation, *De Samvirkende Fagforbund*, and with almost 100 percent of male skilled workers organised in a union. The 1907 Act on government-approved unemployment insurance funds (*loven om statsanerkendte arbejdsløshedskasser*) was particularly instrumental in accelerating worker organisation in trade unions. The unions administered the unemployment insurance funds, which were subsidised in return for remaining neutral in the event of industrial disputes.^[12] "The Danish model," with its detailed rules, developed in the years leading up to the First World War. Strikes and lock-outs were recognised tools for industrial disputes, but only for establishing or expanding collective agreements. In 1910, the Danish system of labour courts was set up, with a standard for managing industrial disputes and a court of arbitration to hear cases on breaches of collective agreements, as well as an official conciliation service. The conciliation service could intervene when negotiations between employer and employee organisations broke down and, in the opinion of the conciliation service, there was a risk of a conflict with serious consequences for

society. The aim of all three of these measures was secure a peaceful labour market, to secure undisturbed production for employers, and to protect employees from high-handed employers.^[13]

Union Opposition

The Social Democratic union movement was not entirely without opposition. In 1910, Danish syndicalists founded *Fagoppositionens Sammenslutning*, an opposition union. The number of Danish syndicalists never approached the number of Social Democratic workers, and the movement was far from as influential as the Norwegian syndicalists, who in 1918 took over leadership of the Norwegian labour party. However, during and immediately after the First World War, Danish syndicalists also enjoyed their brief heyday.

The syndicalists' primary weapon was "direct action". The syndicalists had no time for the Social Democrats' approach of gaining influence via parliament. The entire apparatus of collective agreements and the new labour court system was in direct contravention of the philosophy of direct action. Furthermore, the five-year collective agreements established back in 1911 became a demonstration of the syndicalists' point: while prices were increasing and employers were reaping the profit, workers' pay was tied to a pre-war agreement, in principle with no possibility for change until the expiry of the agreement period in 1916.

The syndicalists were a nuisance for the Social Democrats. With around 30 percent of votes in parliamentary elections, and good cooperation with the Social Liberal government, the Social Democrats were on course for more influence and government positions within the established parliamentary system. The "do your duty, demand your rights" motto was not mere empty words, but permeated the entire labour movement. A sense of duty and honesty was the foundation of the Social Democrats' long struggle for acceptance and influence. The Syndicalists' direct action and illegal selective strikes were an attack on something at the core of the Social Democrats' policy, and while their parliamentary success and their constructive cooperation with the Social Liberal Party grew, the syndicalists and a new Left Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers' Party, became the enemy of the working classes. From the other perspective, the social democrats were considered traitors to their class.

Unemployment

Despite the new collective agreements in 1916, in real terms, workers' pay continued to fall to 78 percent of the 1908-1913 level by 1918. This meant that urban workers were financially hardest hit by the war.^[14] Much of the backdrop for the continuing fall in real wages was increasing unemployment from 1917 onwards. At the outbreak of war, unemployment rose from 4 percent in July to 10.7 percent in August 1914, but in the following year the number of jobless fell to the pre-war level, falling further to 2.2 percent in August 1916. However, the strong entrepreneurial spirit seen in both industry and construction in 1916 was staunch in 1917. The return of unrestricted submarine

warfare and the entry of the US into the war had a drastic impact on imports, with clear consequences for employment. Unemployment again exceeded the pre-war level in August 1917, reaching 5.7 percent.^[15] In winter 1917/1918, unemployment was around 25 percent, well above the winter of 1910/1911 when, at 18-19 percent, unemployment had been much of the reason behind the establishment of the *Fagoppositionens Sammenslutning* by the Danish syndicalists. Unemployment and falling pay in real terms could now also be seen in the context of the inequality between rich and poor caused by the war. This again put wind in the sails of the syndicalists. The unemployed gathered at demonstrations and looted shops.^[16]

Revolution in Denmark?

In February 1918, social indignation came to a head in the so-called storming of the Copenhagen Stock Exchange. It was here at the stock exchange that the newly rich met to make even more money from their easy earnings. Demonstrations, arrests, and disturbances continued throughout 1918. The unrest culminated with the Battles of Grønttorv in November 1918; the closest Denmark has ever come to revolution. The [German revolution](#) had already broken out, and the cry went out: Copenhagen is no distance from Berlin! The start was a 24-hour strike organised by the syndicalists and the Socialist Workers' Party, demanding the release of some of the movement's leaders. It began with a peaceful meeting, but when demonstrators saw trams operated by strikebreaking drivers, disturbances broke out between the demonstrators and the police. They lasted for three to four days. A hundred police were injured, and on the other side several hundred men, women, and children were hospitalised. Two more important leaders were among the approximately 50 arrests.^[17] The resulting lack of leadership was hard on both the Social Workers' Party and the Syndicalists. However, even though this was followed by divisions in the left wing, and the establishment of new parties, the illegal strikes continued through 1919 and 1920.

Danish Counterrevolution

Similar to the German *Technische Nothilfe*, in Denmark a group of members of employer associations (*en sluttet Kreds af Arbejdsgiverforeningens Medlemmer*^[18]) established *Samfundshjælpen*, an organisation for strike-breakers, in September 1919. The Danish Consul General to Moscow, C.F. Haxthausen, was invited to the founding. He had experienced the [Russian Revolution](#) first hand and, even though an illegal docks strike was the direct reason for setting up the organisation, the fear of revolution gave the movement momentum.^[19] The activities of *Samfundshjælpen* included supplying labour during a number of strikes, primarily in 1920. As with the left wing, new right-wing parties and organisations arose during the war; some with clear fascist characteristics like the *Foreningen til Fremmedelementers Begrænsning* (Association to Limit Foreign elements), which later became the Anti-Jewish League.

Conclusion

As the war progressed, polarisation took hold at the cost of unity, both economically and ideologically. Danish society had moved a long way from the society in which “few had too much and fewer too little”, as the Danish bard, N. F. S. Grundvig (1783-1872), had phrased his national goal for Danish society a century before. Now, suddenly, some had far too much and far too many had far, far too little, the political and ideological spectrum was as wide as ever, and social cohesion was under serious threat. The First World War left an indelible mark and played an important role in the development of the Danish welfare state. Even though the emergency legislation was disbanded, government regulation had come to stay.

Annette Østergaard Schultz, Danish National Archives

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Notes

1. ↑ Pedersen, K. Vedel: Københavns Kommune i årene 1914-1921 [The City of Copenhagen during the years 1914-1921], Copenhagen 1931, p. 9.
2. ↑ This process is described in: Schultz, Annette Østergaard: I én og samme båd. Lokal og regional kriseforvaltning under 1. verdenskrig. [In the same boat. Local and regional crisis management during World War I], Viborg 2007, pp. 36-37.
3. ↑ Professor Edvard Lehmann in 1919, here from Thomsen, Jørgen: Reguleringspolitikken i Danmark august 1914 til februar 1917 med særligt henblik på dens indenrigspolitiske aspekter [The regulation policy in Denmark, August 1914 to February 1917, with particular reference to the domestic policy aspects], Odense 1977, p. 33.
4. ↑ Schultz, I én og samme båd 2007, pp. 30-31 and annex 1, pp. 205.
5. ↑ Statistisk Årbog [Statistical Yearbook] 1918, table 8, population in 1911: 559,398 in Copenhagen, 550,328 in provincial towns and 1,647,350 in rural areas.
6. ↑ Insert by the Ministry of Interior of 6 January 1916 in a white paper, Extraordinary Commission of 8 August 1914.
7. ↑ Schultz, I én og samme båd 2007, p. 47.
8. ↑ Here from Sørensen, Nils Arne: Den store krig. Europæernes første verdenskrig [The Great War. Europeans' first World War], Gylling 2014, p. 304.
9. ↑ Schultz, I én og samme båd 2007, pp. 164-170.
10. ↑ Sørensen, Den store krig 2014, p. 305, based on Lindberg.
11. ↑ Christiansen, Niels Finn: Brød, brændsel og bolig [Bread, Fuel and Housing], in: Olsen, Olaf (ed.): i Gyldendals og Politikens Danmarkshistorie [Gyldendals and Politikens History of Denmark], 2002-2005, online: <http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=306218> (retrieved: 25 January 2017).

12. † Christensen, Lars K. / Kolstrup, Søren / Hansen, Anette Eklund: Arbejdernes historie i Danmark 1800-2000 [The Worker's History in Denmark 1800-2000] SFAH 46 (2007), p. 135.
13. † Christiansen, Niels Finn: Forligsmænd og arbejdsret [Official Conciliators and Labour Courts], in: Olsen, Olaf (ed.): i Gyldendals og Politikens Danmarkshistorie, 2002-2005, online: <http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=306187> retrieved: 27 January 2017).
14. † Sørensen, Den store Krig 2014, p. 305
15. † Statistisk Årbog. Årgangene 1918-1921. Table 99 shows unemployment at the end of the month broken down into skilled and unskilled workers in industry and in building trades.
16. † A film of the demonstration to the Danish Parliament here: http://danmarkshistorien.dk/leksikon-og-kilder/vis/materiale/slaget-paa-groenttorvet-13-november-1918/?no_cache=1&cHash=33d0ba3b2f3b40d2c6b2ca8b85fba338.
17. † Christiansen, Niels Finn: Fire dage i November [Four Days in November], in: Olsen, Olaf (ed.): i Gyldendals og Politikens Danmarkshistorie, 2002-2005, online: <http://denstoredanske.dk/index.php?sideId=306226> (retrieved: 1 February 2017).
18. † Samfundshjælpen ["Society Help"] Copenhagen 1921, p. 29.
19. † Schultz, Annette Østergaard: Arbejderens Pris. Kampen om sammenholdet 1884-1920 [The Worker's Price. The Struggle for Unity], unpublished prize assignment, University of Aarhus 1992, pp. 330-331.

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