

Denmark

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Summary

With its economy highly reliant on Great Britain, Germany and other European nations, Denmark had to navigate between the two belligerent blocks during the war. This combined with shortages and inflationary pressures lead to a massive growth in state intervention in the economic and social spheres. During the war, class divisions widened but government policies kept destitution (and left-wing radicalism) at bay. After outlining the cultural impact of the war in Denmark, this article goes on to conclude that the dominant interpretation of the war years as a parenthesis in Danish history must be questioned in certain areas.

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Introduction

In the dominant understanding of Danish history, Word War II is the only world war that matters. The German occupation beginning on 9 April 1940, the Danish government's pragmatic reaction and the slow growth of popular resistance have formed the basis for historical narratives that have strongly impacted Danish culture and politics. For historians specializing in 20th century Danish history, the history of "the Occupation Years" (*Besættelsestiden*) was *the* favorite topic well into the 1990s when interest in the Cold War

began to increase slowly. Tellingly, a systematic bibliography published in 2002 on writings (and films) addressing “the Occupation Years” lists no less than 8,600 titles.¹

Interest in World War I has been comparably negligible. It is not an accident that the two most recent multi-volume histories of Denmark written for the general reader do not consider the First World War as a dividing chronological marker. The relevant volume of *Politikens Danmarks Historie* (*Politiken's History of Denmark*), published in 1965, covers the period 1913-1939, while twenty-five years later, the editor of *Politiken og Gyldendals Danmarkshistorie* (*Politiken and Gyldendal's History of Denmark*) chose the years 1900 and 1925 as the significant bounds for the history of the early 20th century.

With the exception of those studying the wartime experience of soldiers from the Danish minority serving in the German military and the issue of the Danish-German border revision, historians interested in the impact of the First World War on Denmark will have to search for relevant chapters in studies of agricultural history, diplomatic history, media history and so forth, or in the biographies of key historical actors. They will also have to go back to the Danish contribution to the Carnegie series on the economic and social history of the war which was written by [Einar Cohn \(1885-1969\)](#) who, as a civil servant, was engaged in government regulations during the war and whose book is still the only in-depth study of the Danish economy during the war.² Although both academic and general interest in the war has been growing recently, this new interest has focused primarily on the Danish minority in [Germany](#). There is still a widespread understanding that World War One was a war that Denmark and the Danes “missed,” that the war remained a rather distant “southern thunder.”

The phrase “southern thunder” comes from the title of the first volume of [Jacob Paludan's \(1896-1975\)](#) *Bildungsroman Jørgen Stein* published in 1932-1933 and generally considered one of the most important works of Danish literature from the interwar years. For Jørgen Stein the war is anything but distant. Due to the economic, social and cultural impact of the war and its aftermath, both the social world and the *Weltbild* of the protagonist collapse. Unsurprisingly, the economic depression of the early 1930s which, at the end of the novel, threatens Jørgen's final attempt to find secure footing in a dramatically changed world is presented as “yet another wave originating in Sarajevo, and it was huge.”³

One does not have to accept Paludan's highly pessimistic (and conservative) interpretation of the impact of the war on Danish society. It is, however, not difficult to argue that the war had a massive impact on Danish society. It is the aim of this article to demonstrate this by looking into some of the key elements of Denmark's wartime experience. The article will focus on the

war years but will also briefly outline some of the longer term consequences of the war on Denmark. Our point of departure will be a brief sketch of Danish society before the outbreak of the war.

Denmark 1914

In 1912, one of Denmark's most prominent industrialists, [Alexander Foss \(1858-1925\)](#), outlined a vision of a not too distant future in which manufacturing would be the country's dominant economic sector. Unsurprisingly, his widely published future scenario met with strong opposition from representatives of agriculture. Although Denmark had witnessed an impressive industrialization and urbanization since the 1870s, on the eve of World War I Denmark was still a predominantly agricultural country. In 1911, 60 percent of its 2.8 million inhabitants were living in [rural districts](#) (the capital Copenhagen housed 20 percent of the population). 37 percent of the population was engaged in agriculture and a substantial part of the industrial workforce made their living by processing agricultural products. Agriculture contributed to 32 percent of the national income. However, the importance of agriculture is most striking when we turn to Denmark's external economy. In 1913, 90 percent of Danish exports derived from agriculture and were to a high degree processed products.

Denmark's was an open economy deeply integrated in European and global markets and highly dependent on both imports and exports. A strong shipping sector with a merchant fleet earning 70 percent of its income (1912) from sailing between foreign ports also signaled the strong internationalization of the economy. This meant that a major European war was bound to pose massive challenges to Danish society, especially because the two main trading partners of Denmark were [Great Britain](#) and Germany.

Economic considerations thus offered strong arguments for a neutralist Danish foreign policy. The strict neutralist policy pursued by Danish governments since 1870 was, however, based primarily on security concerns. The humiliating defeat and loss of the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein in the Schleswig War of 1864 against Prussia and Austria resulted in a collective national trauma that dominated politics and culture in Denmark for the next fifty years (and beyond). In foreign and security politics realism soon came to overrule romantic revanchist notions. After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 a consensus formed in the political establishment that even though a return of Northern Schleswig where the Danish speaking population formed a majority was a key goal, Denmark was not in a position to force this issue. Instead, Denmark had to accept the geopolitical realities of having continental Europe's strongest power as her neighbour, making a policy of neutralism the only feasible option for the weak Danish state.

The political consensus on neutralism did not include defense policy. Whereas conservatives

argued in favor of a strong defense centered on Copenhagen, liberals were highly skeptical. Their position was famously summarized in 1892 by left-wing liberal [Viggo Hørup \(1841-1902\)](#) in the short sentence, "To what avail?" pointing to the improbability of Denmark being able to wage a successful defensive war against Germany. This deep disagreement on defense was a key issue in the long political struggle between conservatives and liberals from 1870 to the early 20th century.

The essential issue dividing the dominant political forces in Denmark ran much deeper. After the defeat in the Schleswig War of 1864, the liberal Danish constitution of 1849 which introduced a system of government based on almost full male franchise had been revised in order to secure a strong privileged position for the social elites. The liberals and their reformist social democratic allies originally fought for a return to the 1849 constitution but later added the introduction of universal suffrage to their agenda. The constitutional struggle had its ebbs and flows. In the mid-1880s, it brought Denmark close to the brink of a civil war while the 1890s and 1900s were characterized by compromises between conservatives and moderate liberals. From 1910 on, the demand for democratic, constitutional reform again became the all-important political issue and the Social Liberal government that took office in 1913 had the passing of a new constitution as its sole political ambition. In 1914, Danish politics were characterized by well-established divisions but at the same time more or less continuous negotiations on constitutional reform. This also meant that key players knew each other very well, which might in part explain why an informal [Burgfrieden](#) was easily established when the war broke out.

Securing Danish Neutrality

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, [Christian X, King of Denmark \(1870-1947\)](#) issued a message on Denmark's position on 1 August 1914:

Our country has friendly relations with all nations. We are confident that the strict and unbiased neutrality that has always been the foreign policy of our country and that will still be followed without hesitation will be appreciated by everyone.⁴

The message was penned by Minister of Finance, [Edvard Brandes \(1847-1931\)](#), but the government was, of course, well aware that solemn statements could not shield Denmark from the war. Therefore, the most urgent task of the government was to implement policies that would persuade the warring countries that it would be in their own best interest if Denmark remained neutral in order to secure the material and security interests of the Danish population. These policies fell into two groups, one concerning economic matters and the other focused on security and defense. At first glance the social liberal government was

not the best equipped when it came to dealing with defense matters in a world that had suddenly become acutely dangerous. The party line was close to outright anti-militarist (and well-established before the party seceded from the liberal party in 1905). Relations between the military establishment and the government were far from cordial, but when the war broke out, the government ordered the mobilization of a substantial part of the armed forces as a neutrality guard.

To the government, the diplomatic arena was of much greater importance, though, and for evident reasons diplomatic activity focused primarily on Germany. For all official talk of an “unbiased” [neutrality](#), for geopolitical reasons Danish policy had to favour Germany. From a purely military perspective, the importance of Denmark in a European [total war](#) hinged on the fact that Denmark could control access to the Baltic Sea.

Danish diplomats worked to assure the Germans of Denmark’s ability to remain neutral but verbal assurances did not suffice. On 5 August, Germany demanded that Denmark lay mine fields in the Belts, the straits between Jutland and the island of Funen, the strait between Funen and the island of Sealand, and finally the sound between Sealand and Sweden, in order to establish strict control over traffic to the Baltic Sea. In a neutrality proclamation of 1912 Denmark had promised not to take such a measure and to do so would be a political act against Britain. However, after lengthy discussions which included the leaders of the opposition parties, the armed forces and the King, and the government gave in to German demands and decided to lay the mine fields.

The Danish navy became heavily engaged in mining the Belts from early August 1914. For the rest of the war, laying, maintaining, and guarding the minefields was the navy’s most important assignment. It was also engaged in clearing drifting mines in order to protect ship movements, fisheries, and coastal communities. Altogether the navy destroyed some 10,000 mines during the war.

The Danish army had a much less eventful time. In 1914, some 58,000 men were mobilized to guard Danish neutrality. More than 80 percent were positioned on the island of Sealand, close to Copenhagen, since it was realized that it would be impossible to defend most of Denmark from attack by a major military power. As time passed and the danger of Denmark being involved in the war seemed increasingly unlikely, a power struggle between military leadership and the Secretary of Defence followed. Officers wanted to maintain the mobilized force, while the government found it both useless and too expensive to continue the level of mobilization reached in the early phase of the war. Furthermore, discipline in the army units was a growing problem as many of the conscripts found the task of defending the capital against a seemingly non-existent enemy pointless. The number of complaints to the Ministry

of Defence grew. So did the number of reported [venereal diseases](#) in Copenhagen, a fact that health authorities explicitly linked to the large number of soldiers stationed in and around the capital. In the end, the number of conscripts was limited, first in late 1915 to 34,000 and by the fall of 1917 to 24,500. For the military leaders this bitter pill was sweetened by the construction of a series of fortifications around the perimeter of Copenhagen.

The Interventionist State

The outbreak of the war was met with widespread anxiety in Denmark. Insecurity about the future immediately led to a run on the gold deposit of the National Bank and already on 2 August government suspended the gold convertibility of the *krone*. This decision can be seen as a harbinger of the very active role the state came to play in both economic and social affairs during the war.

Due to negotiations regarding constitutional reforms, the Danish parliament was in session in the summer of 1914. In early August it passed sweeping emergency legislation supported by all political parties empowering the government to ban exports, regulate prices, and confiscate food and "other goods of social importance" (against full compensation). The stated goal of the legislation was to secure supplies for the population, but the ban on exports could also be used as a crucial instrument in negotiations with the warring countries.

The legislation envisioned the establishment of "government commissions" to control prices and the dynamic Minister of the Interior [Ove Rode \(1868-1933\)](#) oversaw the establishment of numerous commissions. By far the most important of these was The Extraordinary Commission (*Den overordentlige Kommission*) which monitored supplies and prices and advised on policies. During the war the commission mushroomed to contain about forty specialized boards and committees as well as local commissions in all municipalities. The members of the Extraordinary Commission itself were highly profiled representatives from key sectors of economic life. They were handpicked by Rode who reasoned that this would help secure support for governmental interventions and also help bridge the inevitable conflicts between the interests of producers and consumers.

The State and the Economy

The main economic problems facing Denmark were evident from the very beginning of the war. Even though Denmark had a strong and highly efficient agricultural sector it was also extremely export-oriented. This meant that Denmark relied on imports, not only for fuel and for [raw materials](#) for industries but also for food and animal feed. In 1913, about a third of the grain (wheat and rye) consumed in Denmark was imported. Therefore it was of crucial importance for Denmark to secure access to foreign supplies, to monitor the availability of

supplies at any given time and, if necessary, to control both the use and prices of limited resources.

As was mentioned above, Danish business men, as well as diplomats under the direction of Foreign Minister [Erik Scavenius \(1877-1962\)](#), worked hard to persuade Britain and Germany that a continuation of the pre-war trade patterns was in their own best interests. The Germans proved to be the most cooperative as Danish exports to Germany depended on Danish imports from overseas. The British were much more skeptical. While they acknowledged that Danish exports formed an important part of food supplies in Britain, they feared that imports to Denmark would be redirected to the Central Powers, either directly or indirectly in the form of growing Danish agricultural exports to Germany. Although the British government eventually accepted the Danish position, Danish negotiators had to guarantee against re-exports to Germany. Over the war years the British drove a continuously harder bargain in negotiations with Denmark. In general, Danish efforts to keep up trade with both parties of the war and securing supplies for both the consumption and production of the Danish economy was successful until early 1917. It was, however, as Einar Cohn summarized in his detailed study of the Danish war-time economy, “an act of balancing on a knife’s edge.”⁵

With the German declaration of unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) on 1 February 1917 and the subsequent entry of the [USA](#) into the war, the balancing act collapsed. Denmark was hit hard by American export bans and beginning in October 1917 Britain stopped all exports to Denmark except for coal. Until a Danish-American trade agreement was finally concluded in September 1918, imports from the West came almost to a complete standstill. As a consequence, efforts to develop intra-Scandinavian trade were launched with some substantial success. Nevertheless, in the final phase of the war, Denmark grew more and more dependent on imports from Germany.

Even though supplies kept on coming to Denmark at levels not far from the pre-war years until well into 1917, it was evident almost immediately that the Extraordinary Commission was going to be very busy. The outbreak of the war brought imports to Denmark to close to a standstill and even though international trade reopened relatively quickly, prices rose steadily. In part, this was due to higher shipping rates due to the risks of war. The very first substantial initiative of the Extraordinary Commission was negotiating agreements with insurance companies in shipping where the state accepted 3/4 of the risk (the first Danish merchant ship was sunk by mines on 21 August 1914; altogether 324 ships and 702 Danish seamen were lost during the war). Rising prices were also due to an exceptionally poor Danish harvest in 1914. By mid-September, the price of one of the very key ingredients of the Danish menu, rye bread, had risen by a third. The Extraordinary Commission discussed

the introduction of a maximum price for rye from the middle of August.

In these discussions, the members presented polarized interests. While the representatives of the trade unions supported a maximum price, representatives of agriculture (and to a lesser degree commerce) were against arguing in favor of government-sponsored subsidies of bread and flour. From the outset it was clear that the government in principle favored a consumers' rather than producers' perspective, but at the same time the government was also hoping that the interests groups would be able to work out agreements that would control prices in the interest of the common good. Only when this approach failed did the government follow the recommendation of a majority of the Extraordinary Commission and introduced a maximum price for rye in December 1914. This resulted in a heated debate in parliament, but in the end the informal *Burgfrieden* established among the political parties in August 1914 was not challenged.

The maximum price for rye was to set an important precedent for government intervention in the market. Already in January 1915, a maximum price for wheat followed and by the end 1917, the list of government-controlled maximum prices, published by the Statistical Office in its yearbook, ran into fifteen pages. Maximum prices for imports such as coal and maize were financed by government subsidies and the government also subsidized pork and butter produced for the home market to compensate producers for the loss of the much higher prices available on the export markets, especially in Germany. Government also controlled the distribution and consumption of key food stuffs and raw materials. With the announcement of the German unrestricted submarine warfare and the dramatic decline in imports from the West, even stronger measures had to be taken. In the summer of 1917 the government established a Nutrition Board that was to control the distribution of food and animal feed. By then sugar and bread had already been rationed in a situation when grain supplies were expected to fall 40 percent short of normal consumption. The price of potatoes – a key staple in the Danish diet – was also subsidized and local authorities authorized to enter the market to secure supplies. According to the Nutrition Board the basic goal was to balance “the lack of grain with the lack of fats.”⁶ While bread and sugar rations were substantial (e.g. eight kilos of rye bread per capita per month – with four extra kilos available for men doing hard physical labor), pork rations were originally set at approximately 50 percent of the normal consumption and reduced to even half of that in the summer of 1918.

War and Welfare

While the members of the Extraordinary Commission discussed the pros and cons of maximum prices from the middle of August, consumers saw massive price increases on essential goods such as bread and coal. While employment improved from late 1914 (well

into 1917 unemployment remained exceptionally low), the ever growing state regulation of the economy did not stop prices from rising. According to the retail price index calculated by the Statistical Office, retail prices rose by 16-18 percent annually during the war and, while food prices followed the general trend, fuel prices almost trebled.

In Denmark, social policy was generally legislated at the national level but administered and financed locally (albeit with financial support from the state). The government quickly acknowledged that the income of the poorer segments of the population would come under severe pressure. Therefore, legislation granting extra funding for poverty relief, unemployment benefits and the families of mobilized soldiers were passed in the autumn of 1914.

From 1915, more sweeping initiatives were launched. A law directed against rising prices (*Dyrtidsloven*) enabled local authorities to give income support to "poor citizens" with 2/3 of their expenses refunded by the state. The law, originally passed in December 1915, was revised a year later and the definition of recipients broadened into "those put in a difficult position by the rising prices." The law also gave local authorities the right to subsidize essential foodstuffs and fuel, albeit only with a 1/3 state refund of expenses incurred. When unemployment started to grow from mid-late 1917, reforms were introduced to compensate for rising prices and to grant easier access to social benefits.

In the cities, housing also became a problem. [Migration](#) from the countryside to cities continued – the population of Copenhagen grew from 498,000 to 552,000 between 1915 and 1919 – while the building of new housing came close to a standstill from 1915 on, as investors shied away from real estate because much larger profits could be made elsewhere. Housing shortages lead landlords to announce raises in rent from the spring of 1916. To counter this, local authorities were granted the right to establish housing boards to control and regulate rents from June 1916. In 1917, new legislation further protected the positions of tenants. As a result, rents increased only by 8 percent between 1914 and 1918. The government also sought to stimulate the building of new housing units with tax exemptions and government loans to both building societies and local authorities who launched council housing projects. Despite these initiatives, both overcrowding and the number of homeless kept growing.

During the war years the state became much more active in the social policy arena, but the key actor was still the local authorities and legislation left ample space for local decision-making. Thus only one-third of Danish cities created a general subsidy on essential food stuffs which new laws made possible.⁷ On the other hand, the country's largest municipality by far, Copenhagen, was highly energetic when it came to relieving the pressures on living

conditions. Here, local authorities were engaged in the supply of both food and fuel, and from 1916 Copenhagen pioneered council housing projects in Denmark. The city council sponsored campaigns for energy efficiency and also launched soup kitchens that served 6 million meals by 1918.

As these examples demonstrate, one should be very cautious about making generalizations about the development of social policy and much research in this area is still needed. There is no doubt, however, that the war years witnessed a dramatic expansion of government intervention to ameliorate the social consequences of the war. While public expenditures in 1916-1917 on extraordinary social relief (including subsidies of food and fuel) stood at 43 million Kroner, by 1918-1919 it had risen almost eightfold to 335 million Kroner.

Financing the Interventionist State

Even for neutral states like Denmark, the war became expensive. The mobilization of Denmark's neutrality guard meant that defense expenditure more than doubled from 1913-1914 to 1914-1915, and subsidies and, especially from 1916 on, various social relief initiatives lead to a massive drain on public finances. Between 1914-1915 and 1918-1919, government expenditures quadrupled. The government countered this trend by raising existing taxes and duties and introducing a number of new ones. Early in the war, special taxes on shipping and on stock exchange trading were introduced, but the most important novelty was a war profit tax introduced in 1915. By 1918-1919 this tax generated more than half of government income.

Of minor fiscal importance (but to remain well established in popular memory after the war) was a massive hike in the tax on spirits during 1917. From 1916 to 1918 government income from the spirits taxation more than doubled – while consumption per capita fell by 78 percent. This was seen as a “poor man’s tax” but as such it was an exception to the rule of the new tax regime introduced during the war years. The new taxes were clearly progressive and served to counter, at least to some degree, the very strong trend of growing gaps between rich and poor in Denmark during the war years. Overall, budget deficits were held at reasonable levels and Denmark faced the post-war years with a manageable public debt.

A Class Society during Wartime

In February 1915 Copenhagen business associations sent a representative to the United States to study American industries and especially “the preparations they had undertaken to exploit the chances that the war situation has created for businesses of all neutral countries.”⁸ As this initiative demonstrates, the war was not just perceived as a series of challenges to Denmark but also as an opening of new opportunities. When anxieties about

the war spilling over into Denmark faded away and foreign trade was reestablished, it soon became clear that the war created extremely favorable market conditions for Danish businesses, be it in agriculture, industry or shipping. From late 1914, unemployment fell, and by New Year 1915-1916 the stockbroker [Alfred Horwitz \(1877-1946\)](#) wrote of "A Golden Age... that brought the economy to its current heights."⁹ Later Horwitz became increasingly worried that much economic activity was based on aggressive speculation and, more generally speaking, the economic situation in Denmark became more and more difficult during the last years of the war. Until mid-late 1917, however, the Danish economy as a whole prospered, and by the time of the armistices many Danes were substantially better off than in August 1914. The average real income per capita (of the active population) rose by 9 percent from 1913 to 1918. For the majority of the population, though, the war years brought about a decline in standard of living.

Winners and Losers: Social Classes in Wartime

In 1921, the director of the official factory inspectorate (and later director of the Danish National Bank), [Jakob K. Lindberg \(1873-1932\)](#), published an article on "The changes in incomes in Denmark 1908-1920." The article was based on information published by the Statistical Office, tax authorities and the Employers' Association (*Arbejdsgiverforeningen*) and still offers the most thorough analysis available on the developments in incomes across social classes during the war years. As one would expect, Lindberg compared the prewar income of social groups with that of the war years. However, he was especially interested in the changes in the groups' relative shares of the national income as "this would give us the result of the class struggle [during the war]".¹⁰ Using this analytical prism, independent business men came out the clear winners. Compared to the prewar years (1908-1913), during the war (1914-1918) the average share of national income commanded by business men in finance rose 76 percent, in commerce 58 percent, in transport 52 percent, and in industry 43 percent. Lindberg was acutely aware that for these social groups, the average figures covered massive differences ("the millionaires of great industry are lumped together with humble artisans") and stressed that "as a rule those who already had the largest incomes were also those who gained the most."¹¹

The rest of the social groups in Lindberg's analysis were more well-defined. Large landowners as a group enhanced their share of national income by 33 percent while the 70,000 farmers with middle-size holdings who formed the backbone of Danish agriculture witnessed a gain of 9 percent. Compared to this, the small farmers who often had to supplement their income from farming with work for wages saw their collective share of national income drop 14 percent. In general, however, it was the salaried and wage earners as well as pensioners

living on fixed incomes who were the losers of the war years. The only group of employees who witnessed a rise in their share of national income over the period was white collar workers in the financial sector (and only barely with a gain of 2 percent). The biggest losers were civil servants (-22 percent) and the urban working classes (-21 percent), while pensioners were placed in the group of "passive capitalists" that as a whole suffered a loss of 18 percent. It should be stressed that these figures are relative. Although the part of national income commanded by agricultural laborers and servants "only" declined by 10 percent, at the end of the war they were still at the very bottom of the income scale as they had been five years previously, and while civil servants were the greatest losers in relative terms, by 1918 they were still on average earning 2.4 times as much as members of the urban working classes.

Lindberg's findings confirm evidence from other sources on growing social divides during the war. That great fortunes were made during the war was evident to all. "Goulash Baron" became the Danish word for war profiteers, referring to unscrupulous business men who were selling tinned food of questionable quality to the Central Powers. The seemingly ever rising prices of stocks resulted in massive speculations, and Alfred Horwitz coined the term *Minut-Millionær* (Millionaire-in-a-Minute) for a new (and to his eyes dominant) creed of businessmen who were only interested in short term profits. Cartoonists made fun of the *nouveau riches* who were trying to gain access to high society by conspicuous consumption, buying palaces and acquiring cultural artifacts in bulk.

Another favorite trope was to present the farmers as a group ruled by greed. A famous cartoon in the 1916 volume of the satirical yearbook *Blæksprutten* showed a fat farmer and his equally robust wife offering everything from pigs to the farm dog for sale at ridiculously high prices. The cartoon was entitled "Agriculture under duress." This depiction was probably partly based on the recurrent and often very vocal protests about regulation, controls and maximum prices voiced by agricultural interests. It was, however, also a very urban perspective: according to Lindberg's enquiry, the average farmers did well but were far from having the wonderful war claimed by their critics. It is also clear from his findings that the real economic winners of the war years were well-established business interests in banking, shipping, commerce and industry.

At the same time it is not hard to see why images of goulash barons and greedy farmers became popular. For the vast majority of the urban population the war years signaled a clear decline in real income. This is probably also true for the rural population where small farmers and agricultural laborers outnumbered the self-confident and well-organized middle class of farmers who did relatively well during 1914-1918.

[Urbanization](#) and industrialization had led to a strong growth in the number of urban workers in the pre-war decades and this trend continued during the war: the urban working classes grew by 22 percent from 1913 to 1919. A socialist working class movement gained ground from the 1870s. Already in 1899, employers accepted right of trade unions to represent workers and negotiate contracts. By 1914, the Social Democrats were the second largest party in parliament and had gained the majority in local councils in several cities, most importantly that of Copenhagen.

Unemployment rose substantially at the outbreak of war but started to fall from late 1914 and, by 1916, had all but disappeared. This positive trend, however, was more than off-set by rising prices. In 1911, long-term contracts running for five years had been agreed upon by employers and trade unions but these contracts offered no compensations for the drastic inflationary pressures that began in August 1914. From 1914 to 1916, the average real income of urban workers fell by no less than 24 percent. Negotiations lead to wage increases from 1916 on but they were not large enough to compensate for inflation. In the summer of 1917 unemployment started rising dramatically, reaching 18 percent in the year 1918.

This situation provided the background for the social policy initiatives as well as price subsidies and [rationing](#) discussed above. These were clearly not enough to secure the living standards of the working classes but it does seem that they kept destitution from spreading. Thus, the number of people receiving benefits under the draconian “poor law” (where recipients lost crucial civil rights) remained stable at around 80,000 during the war years. Information from the health authorities of Copenhagen (containing the largest concentration of workers in Denmark) also point to the limited effects of the war years. By 1918 when the wear of the war could have been expected to take its toll, they reported that “except for the intense flu epidemic that haunted the city in the second half of the year, the general health conditions in Copenhagen in 1918 were uncommonly good and especially infant mortality was exceptionally low.”¹²

Does this mean that we can extend the conclusions of Deborah Dwork and [Jay Winter](#) that “war is good for babies” and lead to better living conditions for the poorest parts of the working class from Britain to Denmark?¹³ A cautious conclusion would be that the war years did not see an interruption in the general trend of falling mortality rates that was already established in around 1890. Contemporary experts suggested that the trend in mortality figures could be linked to “the special nutritional conditions and especially the temporary ban on alcohol.”¹⁴ (The latter refers to a four week ban on sale of spirits in February 1917.) It is hardly credible that this impacted health conditions in the longer term. However, the massive increases in tax on spirits introduced during 1917 – the price of a bottle of schnapps rose

almost tenfold – that resulted in a dramatic reduction of alcohol consumption must have had a positive impact not just on health but on living conditions in general. (In 1911, 19 percent of men receiving relief under the poor law were alcoholics.) The rationing of basic food stuffs (“the special nutritional conditions”) probably also improved health conditions. From very early in the war, consumers were forced to eat bread much richer in dietary fibres as millers were ordered to mill grain more coarsely and the rationing of pork, butter and sugar also forced a healthier diet on the Danes, especially those who could not afford to buy non-rationed food such as beef. The crucial bottom line was, however, that the size of the rations from a calorific perspective was more than adequate.

This is, however, is the perspective of contemporary experts (and later historians). For working class consumers at the time things probably looked very different. Even though the war years probably forced a healthier diet on the Danes in general and the poorer classes in particular, to all but health gurus and experts in nutrition it must have been felt like a sharp decline in living standards.

The Revolution that never came

Anti-[militarism](#) and [pacifism](#) was deeply ingrained in the tradition of the Danish Social Democratic Party. Soon after the outbreak of the war the party contacted sister parties in the warring countries with appeals to work for mutual understanding, and, in January 1915, it organized a conference where representatives of the Scandinavian and the Dutch socialist parties “united around the broken standard of peace.”¹⁵ The party congress in 1915 confirmed the commitment to anti-militarism and in 1917 the party (in close, but highly confidential cahoots with German [SPD](#) leadership) was one of the prime movers in trying to convene at socialist peace conference in Stockholm. When the party press hailed the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917, it was tellingly described as a “peace revolution” though the Social Democrats’ position shifted completely in January 1918 when they understood that the Bolsheviks preferred dictatorship to democracy.

The party leadership’s commitment to anti-militarism was questioned by a vocal minority, primarily from the party’s youth organization. This criticism had, however, a domestic focus as it was directed against the party’s support of the neutrality guard and increased military budgets. Despite these criticisms, the party leadership worried more about the growing support for syndicalism. Although card-carrying syndicalists were a small minority, they capitalized on the deepening of class divides in the last phase of the war. In Copenhagen, syndicalists organized a spectacular “storm of the stock exchange” in February 1918 and on 10 November a meeting was organized to protest the arrest of several syndicalist leaders. News of the German revolution had reached Denmark and when a speaker told the

assembled thousands that “there is not a great distance between Berlin and Copenhagen, and even a shorter one between Kiel and here” the meaning was evident.¹⁶ The meeting ended in violent clashes between demonstrators and the police. The general strike announced by the syndicalists a few days later nevertheless fell totally flat.

The [revolution](#) had passed Denmark by. Moreover, the war years also saw an impressive strengthening of the reformist social democratic movement. From 1913 to 1919 the membership of both the party and trade unions doubled (by 1919, 85 percent of workers in commerce, manufacturing and transport were unionized) and the party did well in both local and national elections in 1917-1918. This development stands in contrast to the situation in neighboring [Sweden](#) and [Norway](#) where social and political unrest was much more serious; in Norway radicals even gained control over the Labor Party. How do we explain the (relative) lack of radicalization in Denmark?

The simplest and best explanation is that the majority of the workers considered the policy of the Social Democrats successful and perceived the government to be worker-friendly. For the Social Democrats, the two key policy goals were to keep Denmark out of the war and to lighten the material consequences of the war for the working classes as much as possible. Even if social divides widened during the war, it was evident that the Social Liberal government did much to alleviate the economic consequences of the war through its policies of subsidies, rationing and social relief measures. In public debates, the government also clearly defended the interest of consumers against the vested interests of agriculture and commerce. With respect to taxation, the government also followed a clearly retributionist economic policy: taxation of the wealthiest rose from 5 to 20 percent during the war. It was also crucial that the social democratic local government of Copenhagen – the key potential hothouse for radicalism – pursued a very active welfare policy. Finally, the passing of a new and far more democratic constitution in 1915 also aided the continued support of the Social Democrats. There was no causal link between the war and constitutional reform in Denmark. Still, by granting the vote to women and servants, it was easy to see the new constitution as a crucial step supporting the advance of the social democrats and thus bringing a socialist reform regime within reach.

War and Culture: Making Sense of the War

In the weeks following the outbreak of the war, war coverage dominated the Danish press. As time passed, interest waned, though more than two years into the war, in October 1916, 15-23 percent of all editorials were still dedicated to the war according to a recent analysis.¹⁷ Most of the reporting was based on telegrams primarily from official sources in the warring countries. Major newspapers also sent reporters to the war zones and several of these later

collected their articles in books. These journalistic collections were far from the only war-related books published. According to the official register of books published in Denmark, the period 1915-1919 saw the publication of 380 titles on “the world war.”¹⁸ According to the meticulous research of Bjarne Bendtsen, even this figure offers far from the full picture because works of fiction were not registered as “war books.” A more precise figure is offered by the “war collection” that the Royal Library started building in 1915. Today, this collection houses more than 1,400 titles with almost two thirds of these stemming from the years 1914-1919 (70 percent of the total collection consists of works printed in Danish).¹⁹

The variety of the contemporary publications is great, ranging from propaganda materials from the warring countries to surveys of the development of the war to popular novels. The publication of memoirs and collections of soldiers’ letters are a testament to a vivid interest in eyewitness accounts. Most of the books were translations (primarily from German, English and French), but Danish authors also addressed the war. War news could be followed in the special magazines *Krig og Fred!* (“War and Peace”) and *Verdenskrigen* (“The World War”) but also in well-established magazines such as the popular *Illustreret Familie-Journal*. A recurrent feature in these publications was to present the war as entertainment, e.g. in the form of board games and models of war ships. The first war films were shown in Danish movie theatres in late 1914 and the thriving Danish film industry started producing war-related films such as *Pro Patria* and *Pax Aeterna*, although these were also clearly made with a keen eye for their export potential. Newspapers and magazines witnessed a breakthrough in photo-journalism and war [photographs](#) were prominent. In advertising, products were also linked to the war and toy shops reported in late 1914 that war toys were a hit for Christmas presents.

These trends generally resemble the development in warring countries but there were also distinctive elements deriving from Denmark’s neutral status. One was the free access to war narratives from all participants. Another was that we find Danish voices supporting both sides in the war. Finally, we can also find a very clear neutralist position. The most prominent voice for neutrality was that of [Georg Brandes \(1842-1927\)](#), one of the few Danish intellectuals with a claim to international fame by 1914. To Brandes, who was not only a liberal democrat but also strongly committed to anti-militarism, the contemporary dominant concept of “The Great War” was a misnomer. Rather, for him, the war was “the *little war*, a miserable piece of the Middle Ages, a remnant of the past, stupid, malignant and despicable.”²⁰ Brandes was highly critical of the Entente’s claim to be fighting German militarism and ferocious in his criticism of the widespread enthusiasm for the war among his fellow intellectuals.

Far from all Danish writers and intellectuals shared Brandes’ views. Numerous editorials in the press, pamphlets and books echoed war propaganda from both sides of the conflict.

Measured in impact, the most successful by far was the harsh indictment of the German atrocities in Belgium offered by [Johannes Jørgensen \(1866-1956\)](#) in his book *Klokke Roland* (1915). In Denmark *Klokke Roland* went into 21 printings and the book was published in both French and English in 1916 (*La Cloche Roland, False Witness*).

While intellectuals polemicized the war, the number of war novels available for Danish readers grew steadily. Most were translations framing the war in (romantic) heroic narratives. However, the war as seen from a specifically Danish perspective was also dealt with in a number of popular genres. The novels *Spioner* (*Spies* 1916) and *Det elskelige København* (*The Lovable Copenhagen*, 1917) use Copenhagen as the scene for dramatic spy stories while the children's book *I Krigens Kølvand* (*In the Wake of the War*, 1917) is a heroic tale of Danish seamen. A much grimmer tone characterizes the novels *Sporløst!* (*Without a Trace*, 1917) and *Hvorfor?* (*Why?*, 1918) on the suffering of seamen and their families in the period of unrestricted submarine war. The economic boom and stock exchange speculation set the background for rural romance *Kongemøllen* (*The King Mill*, 1918) by the extremely popular novelist [Morten Korch \(1876-1954\)](#), and the comedy *Gulaschbaronerne* (*The Goulash Barons*, 1916) by the Copenhagen-based Swedish writer, [Henning Berger \(1872-1924\)](#). The dominant mode of representations of the Danish "home front experience" was clearly comical or satirical. The life of the soldiers of the neutrality guard and that of merchant seamen were presented as light comedy in several novels. As already mentioned, the *nouveaux riches* and the well-off farmers were favorite topics in satirical magazines. The "Goulash Barons" were also targeted in sketches and songs in music hall entertainments as were rising prices and the ever growing number of government regulations and restrictions on both business and consumption. The light tones of these performances probably were agreeable a middle-class audience whose lifestyle was pressured but not fundamentally threatened by the war.

A special feature of the Danish interest in the war was the concern for the Danish minority in German Schleswig and the 30,000 Danish men who were mobilized by the German armed forces. In the 1916 novel *Den tavse Dansker. En Bog om dem, der gjorde deres Pligt* (*The Silent Dane. A Book about those who did their duty*), the Copenhagen journalist and author [Erich Erichsen \(1870-1941\)](#) discussed the war from the perspective of a soldier "forced to fight" (the title of the 1917 English translation). The book was enormously successful running into twenty-one printings in 1916 alone. However, various editions of soldiers' letters were the dominant mode of representing the war experience of the Danes from Schleswig. The volume of *Sønderjyske Soldaterbreve* (*Soldiers' Letters from Southern Jutland*), edited by [Harald Nielsen \(1879-1957\)](#) in 1915, was the first and commercially most successful in a substantial body of publications. In the Danish public sphere, the letters were generally understood within a framework of a war in which the Danish minority soldiers had to suffer because they were actually fighting for the archenemy of Denmark but also of a war which

they took upon them with a sense of duty towards their families and the Danish minority in general, securing their status and interests within a German state.

Conclusion: Longer-Term Consequences of the War?

In the summer of 1934, Denmark got its national war memorial: a large monument of French limestone situated in a memorial park on the southern outskirts of Aarhus, the country's second-largest city. Both the reliefs and the inscriptions on the monument represent the war as fratricide, commemorating Danes who had fought on both sides of the war. The vast majority of the 4,140 men whose names are inscribed were Northern Schleswigers who had fought in the German military. In the Danish cultural imaginary, the war became primarily linked to the fate of the Danish minority in Schleswig who were "forced to fight for a cause that was not their own" (to quote a recurrent formula in memoirs published during the interwar years). But this was soon overshadowed by the most important result of the war from a narrow Danish perspective: the incorporation of Northern Schleswig into Denmark in 1920. The "Reunification" as it is called in Denmark, was originally strongly linked to the war: "the lives of 6,000 young sons was your ransom" as [Henrik Pontoppidan \(1857-1943\)](#) put it in a poem that hailed this process with the metaphor of the safe return of a "stolen daughter."²¹ The focus, however, soon shifted to a narrative that interpreted the "return" as part of the fulfilment of national history and the completion of the Danish nation state. This narrow national perspective was appropriated by academic historians who have interpreted the process and its repercussions primarily in a national framework.

In this tradition, the war has generally been seen as a parenthesis with negligible impact on Danish history in the long-term. There is quite a lot of evidence to support this interpretation. In politics, the *Burgfrieden* broke down in early 1918. Although the social liberals and their social democratic partners won the April 1918 elections and remained in power, the liberal and conservative parties became more vocal in their criticism of the regime of controls and regulations.

This criticism evolved into a passive pressure for the lifting of all special wartime measures after the armistices. The government gave in to the pressure, and started rolling back the regulations from 1919. This process was completed when the Extraordinary Commission was dissolved in early 1921. The Danish merchant fleet had recuperated its pre-war size by 1920, and by the mid-1920s the foreign trade patterns of the pre-war years were firmly re-established. The pressures of the war years did not change the balance between the main economic sectors in Denmark. Furthermore, when analysing demographic data, it is not difficult to fit the war years into longer-term patterns in both mortality and fertility that were well-established before 1900. From a political system perspective, the new Danish

constitution of 1915 was not a product of the war and not influenced by war time experiences and the four political parties that dominated Danish politics in 1914 continued to do so for more than fifty years. If Denmark witnessed a left-wing radicalisation of part of the working class from 1918 and saw the foundation of the Danish Communist Party in 1919, this radicalization remained a marginal phenomenon which was successfully contained by the Social Democrats. Turning to the other end of the political spectrum, Denmark saw no far right radicalism to speak of before the depression years of the 1930s.

This traditional interpretation must, however, be challenged in several respects. First, the organised economy of the war years created much stronger economic interest groups. I have already pointed to the growth of trade unions during the war. In 1918-1920, the unions successfully mobilised their new strength to secure the eight hour work day and substantial wage increases (by 1919, the real income for a fulltime worker was 25 percent above the 1914 level and 45 percent above the nadir of 1917). The war years saw a similar strengthening of various employers' organisations as they used their representation on boards and commissions as well as the pivotal role they played in negotiating trade agreements not just to secure their vested interests but also to also strengthen their positions as *the* representatives of all employers in their sector.²² It is no accident that agricultural interest groups who felt underrepresented in the organs of the regulated war economy established the Agricultural Council (*Landbrugsraadet*) in the wake of the war to secure their position both vis-à-vis the state and other organised business interests.

Second, the war years gave Danish social democrats their first taste of governing and allowed their opponents to see how well social democrats could function at top levels of political power. The key political legacy of the war was, however, the cementing of the alliance between the social liberals and the social democrats which dominated Danish politics from the late 1920s to the early 1960s and led to the creation of the modern Danish welfare state.

Third, the war had important consequences for Danish foreign and security policy. During the war there was an acute awareness that Danish neutrality was often balancing on the edge of a knife. The balancing act proved successful. In what soon became the dominant interpretation, this success was to a very high degree based on the efforts of Danish diplomacy under the leadership of the equally capable and arrogant foreign minister Erik Scavenius who had managed to persuade both belligerents in the war that Danish neutrality was in their own self-interest. The lesson of the war years was therefore a confirmation of neutrality as the fundamental foreign policy but also an understanding of neutrality as resting almost exclusively on diplomacy.

This analysis had severe shortcomings. It overlooked the fact that the war had changed Denmark's position from a military or strategic perspective. The importance of Denmark no longer hinged exclusively on the fact that the access to the Baltic Sea could be controlled from Danish territory. The British [naval blockade](#) meant that the German military started to see Denmark as an integral part of a potential Norwegian campaign to break the blockade. This line of thinking materialised in the second half of the war and naturally made Denmark's neutral position much more precarious. Just how precarious became evident in April 1940 with the German attack on Denmark and Norway.

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however, appointed to this post by Denmark's first Social Democratic government in 1924. [↑](#)

11. Lindberg, Indtægtsforskydningen [The changes in income in Denmark] 1921, p. 306. [↑](#)
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[Genforeningen 1920 skildret af samtidige, soldater og civile, journalister, forfattere, digtere, malere, tegnere og fotografer \(Eyewitnesses. Denmark under World War I 1914-1918 and the Reunification as reported by contemporaries, soldiers and civilians, journalists, novelists, poets, artists and photographers\)](#), Copenhagen, 1966: Skrifola.

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Citation

Nils Arne Sørensen: Denmark, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10276](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10276)

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Author Keywords

Denmark; neutrality; economic policy; social relations; culture

GND Subject Headings

[Dänemark ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Denmark](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Danemark](#)

Key Person(s)

[Rode, Ove](#); [Erichsen, Erich](#); [Scavenius, Erik](#); [Christian X, King of Denmark](#); [Berger, Henning](#); [Foss, Alexander](#); [Cohn, Einar](#); [Paludan, Jacob](#); [Hørup, Viggo](#); [Brandes, Edvard](#); [Horwitz, Alfred](#); [Lindberg, Jakob K.](#); [Brandes, Georg](#); [Jørgensen, Johannes](#); [Korch, Morten](#); [Nielsen, Harald](#); [Pontoppidan, Henrik](#)

Key Location(s)

[Copenhagen](#); [Strait between Sealand and Funen](#)

Title

Denmark

Author(s)

[Nils Arne Sørensen](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Regional)

Articles That Link Here

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