

DENMARK BETWEEN THE WARS: THE REASONS FOR DEFENCELESS NEUTRALITY

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Abstract

The concept of neutrality is one of the most disputed concepts in historical research and modern politics and continues to attract the attention of political scientists. Despite continually growing interest in the questions of responsibilities in international conflicts and war politics, there has been little research on the historical origins of neutrality within the European context. Having been transforming throughout its history, Danish neutrality, with its specific background and ideological foundation, represents an interesting topic for analysis. This article addresses the problem of Danish neutrality in the period between the two World Wars. The objective of the study is to investigate why, after having been an important player in European politics and a militarily well-equipped country throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the interwar period Denmark refrained from any active participation in world politics and adopted the principle of defenceless neutrality.

INTRODUCTION

The foreign policy of any state can be divided into two main categories: unilateral actions of “self-help” and multilateral actions (Møller 2005). Multilateral actions refer to alignment with other states and collective actions on a regional or global scale, while unilateral actions include the exercising of a country’s military strength or using such non-military means as neutrality, diplomacy, and accommodation.

Neutrality can be defined as: “a status of a nation that refrains from participation in war between other states and maintains an impartial attitude toward the belligerents.”¹ Moreover, it is essential that this attitude and status of impartiality

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¹ *Neutrality* in Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition.

should not only be announced by the neutrals, but should also be recognised by the parties in conflict. This recognition creates rights and duties between the belligerents and the neutral state.

Research into the phenomenon of neutrality in general, as both a concept and an instrument of international law, and the history of Danish neutrality in particular, has a long history. Interest in the topic of neutrality in the interwar period appeared rather early. Already in March 1941, a Professor of International Law at the University of Vienna, Josef L. Kunz, published an article in *Michigan Law Review*, “Neutrality and the European War 1939-1940,” which addressed the concepts of European neutrality and analysed how it had changed from the First World War up to his time. Kunz discussed the confusions connected with defining neutrality in the sphere of international law as well as in the scientific research. In addition, he posed the question, “What was neutrality?” and asked if it had actually existed (Kunz 1941:720).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of neutrality already had a long history in European international rhetoric as well as in international law practise. Neutral duties and rights were codified by various treaties and conferences including *The Declaration of Paris* (1856), the *Declaration of London* (1909), and the *Second Hague Conference* (1907), and neutrality became an integral part of international law. However, the First World War brought the subject of neutrality into question. The neutrality of small neutral states, such as Luxemburg, Belgium, and Greece, was violated during the war by both parties of the conflict. Although protesting, these states had no power to protect their rights and thus became arenas for military actions. The end of the First World War signified, according to the Kunz, the crisis of neutrality and the appearance of a new ideology: “that neutrality is only a consequence of international anarchy, no longer fit for a world of international solidarity” (Ibid.:720). The allies propagandised the idea that, in the new post world war order, there is no place for neutrality and that neutrality itself was an immoral concept.

DENMARK: FROM “A POWER OF THE THIRD RANK” TO “SIMPLY A SMALL STATE”

Danish foreign policy changed drastically during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite having been an important player in international relations in the eighteenth century, after the Napoleonic wars, Denmark moved away from active participation in any international alliances and, in general, from any active role in European international politics. This shift in foreign policy originated from various reasons and changes in both Danish domestic and international politics.

Beginning with the victory in the Napoleonic wars, the four members of the coalition – Russia, Prussia, Great Britain and Austria – along with France, gained great importance on the European international scene. The new world order, offered by the Russian tsar, Alexander the First, and established after the Congress of Vienna, gave these five states the status of super powers while correspondingly weakening the positions of the smaller European countries including Denmark. The tradition of congresses that continued after the first one in Vienna (1814-1815) made international politics the sphere for the great powers and their economic, political and military interests. As a result of this it “curtailed the diplomatic scope for the lesser states” (Holbraad 1991:21). Although the relations between the super powers remained controversial and rivalrous – they resulted later in the two world wars – it gave the smaller states new opportunities by “playing on these tensions.” However, it also brought new dangers. Being dependant on the interests of the great powers, the smaller European states often became the objects of the rivalry between the former and, as a result, had little choice for remaining independent and conducting an independent policy.

The changes in European politics and relations among the great European powers, in particular the decline of Russian power on a European scale, had a big affect on Denmark. Due to the traditional royal family and diplomatic ties, Denmark could often rely on Russian support in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, after Russia was defeated first in the Crimean war and then in the war with Japan, and consequently lost its international status and influence, Denmark became diplomatically isolated. The situation was worsened with the rise of German influence after the Franco-Prussian war and Bismarck’s reforms. For a long time Denmark and its foreign policy became very dependant on Germany and its interests.

Other reasons for the weakening positions of Denmark and its adoption of a policy of isolation are to be found in the sphere of Danish domestic policy. According to Carsten Holbraad, “if in the eighteenth century Denmark had been a power of the third rank, in the course of the nineteenth century it became, through the succession of losses, simply a small state” (Ibid.:23). First of all, this was connected with the territorial losses. During the nineteenth century Denmark had lost Norway, Swedish Pomerania, the island of Heligoland, Launburg, Holstein and Schleswig, although in 1920 the northern part of Schleswig was brought back to Denmark after plebiscites were conducted there. Holbraad analyses these territorial changes as the reasons why “Denmark ...remained of some importance to the great powers...not so much because of the resources it commanded as because of the strategic location it enjoyed, particularly in relation to traffic to and from the Baltic” (Ibid.:23).

Territorial losses, although regarded to be a misfortune in Danish mentality, were announced to be compensated by the Danish internal prosperity. Consequently, the most popular slogan of the foreign policy propaganda of this period was “*Hvad udad tabtes skal indad vindes*” - What we lost externally, we shall gain internally (Hedetoft 1993:291).

Having been gradually losing its role in European politics, by the beginning of the twentieth century Denmark started to revive the priorities of its foreign policy. The new principles introduced, to become the underlying principles for Danish foreign policy, were formulated in the triad: *Neutrality – Scandinavism – Arbitration*.

NEUTRALITY – SCANDINAVISM – ARBITRATION

Scandinavism was an ideology which first emerged in Danish as well as Norwegian and Swedish political and literary circles in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was aimed at promoting the idea of Scandinavian (later Nordic) solidarity (see, for example, Carl Ploug), and later developed into the foreign policy ideology which was used to safeguard the interests of these countries and establish a certain common ideology that would give an ideological explanation for cooperative actions. Danish Scandinavism originated from different political movements that appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and were promoting the ideas of the Nordic solidarity and Nordic historical and cultural ties. One of the concepts that was popular among these movements was the so-called “Ejder programme.” Originally, the main idea of this programme was to unite Denmark with the territory of Schleswig stretching up to the river Ejder

which separates it from Holstein. This was later broadened to include the rhetoric of creating the Scandinavian Union up to the river Ejder. Although the ideas of creating a territorial unit of all the Scandinavian countries were soon forgotten, cooperation among the three countries on different levels, including foreign policy, remained important and appeals for deepening this cooperation were brought up from time to time.

The idea of *arbitration* was first introduced to Danish public and parliamentary discussions in the end of the nineteenth century by the Danish peace movement. It was later upheld in discussions between the parliament and Liberal government, and subsequently also supported by the Social Democrats and radical Liberals. In 1891 the Danish Institute of Arbitration was founded with the mandate to assist in the settlement of any types of both national and international disputes.² In the years following the Hague Conference of 1899, where the principle of arbitration was announced as the underlying principle of the Danish concept of foreign policy, Denmark signed a number of permanent treaties of arbitration.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Denmark announced its *neutrality*. However, this neutrality was often accused of being ambiguous since Erik Scavenius, the Foreign Minister of Denmark between 1913-1920 and 1940-1941, at the very outbreak of the war announced that Denmark would “show favourable neutrality” towards Germany, adding, however, “as far as this is consistent with the notion of neutrality” (quoted in Bludnikow 1989:683). This became obvious during the situation of August 2, 1914 when Germany asked Denmark what the Danish reaction would be in case of German violation of Danish territorial waters. Scavenius, perhaps hoping that such a violation would not take place, stated that “in no case would Denmark ally itself with the enemy of Germany” (quoted in Holbraad 1991:50)

The neutrality of Denmark during the First World War was much more sympathetic to Germany. Maintaining friendly relations with Germany, which was not only a powerful neighbour but also an important trade and business partner, even with the unresolved problems of Schleswig and Holstein, was a question of priority for Denmark in the beginning of the century. Moreover, Denmark also tried to maintain good relations with Britain. So the motive behind Denmark’s efforts to be recognised by both Britain and Germany as neutral was not only to keep the country out of military conflict but also to preserve its traditional trade

² For details consult The Danish Institute of Arbitration <http://www.denarbitra.dk>

and economic interests while gaining new advantages through shipping and trade in case of military conflicts. Denmark was also very important for the belligerents as a significant producer of food products. For the parties in conflict, the invasion of Denmark by the enemy could pose some economic and shipping difficulties. On the other hand, the threat for Denmark was that either Germany or Britain could break trade relations with Denmark in order to hurt the other belligerent.

Neutrality was also the preferred option of Danish foreign policy for Danish business not only in order to keep the country out of wars but also as a policy to ensure the protection of their economic interests while increasing profits. Maintaining good relations with Germany and Britain, which purchased almost all Danish export products, had a great influence on Danish foreign policy. As put by Seymour (1982:13): "...the Danish Foreign ministry was often called upon by farmers to put short term gain before long term interests, for example by selling, opportunistically, to the highest bidder rather than building up a reputation in Britain or Germany as reliable suppliers."

The farmers were an especially powerful influence in Denmark before 1936 when the coalition of the largest party, the Social Democrats, lacked a majority in the Landsting.³ As a result, the government often had to rely on the support from the *Landbrugernes Sammenslutning* or Farmers' Union. Danish neutrality and Danish foreign policy in general have traditionally had very strong links with Danish domestic affairs, and one of its priorities has been to protect Danish economic interests and assure stable trade relations with Britain and Germany.

Neutrality in the First World War was also a way for the Danish government to gain political prestige and support from its citizens. It was even more important due to the fact that, with the clearly "pro-German" orientation of the Danish government's view on Danish neutrality, the Danish population, the press and the army were siding predominantly with the British-French alliance. The official rhetoric during the war described Denmark as a country striving for peace. By participating in the various humanitarian programmes, Denmark tried to appear as if its neutrality was unselfish. Thus a set of initiatives were organised through organizations such as the Danish Red Cross, Danish Ambulance Committee, and Nurses' Aid programme.

³ The upper house of the Danish parliament between 1849 and 1953.

INTERWAR PERIOD

Denmark's neutrality in the First World War, the reasons for it and its main postulates, constituted the concept of neutrality that Denmark followed during the inter-war period. After settling the North Schleswig question, Denmark no longer had territorial or revisionist aims. Its interests in foreign policy became much more self-directed and aimed at the protection of its territorial integrity, independence, national security, and economic interests. As a consequence, the policy of neutrality gained its continuation and development. However, as Denmark continued to abstain from taking any active part in European international politics, Danish neutrality became *defenceless* compared with the previous period.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Denmark was very well-equipped, in particular, with a well-prepared and modernised navy. During the First World War a large defence force was mobilised with the Waterways Squadrons stationed around Copenhagen, in the Great and Little Belts, at the Skaw, the West Coast of Jutland (Esbjerg), the Faroe Islands, Iceland and the Danish West Indies. Danish military forces, although scarce, allowed Denmark to sustain itself against a possible military attack until help arrived.

However, in the interwar period the Danish government repeatedly reduced spending on the military (in 1922, 1932, and 1937). As a result, the Danish armed forces finally became only nominal and were unable to represent any serious force to defend the country in case of foreign aggression. The disarmament started in 1922 with the first agreement which reduced the number of battalions from fifty-two to thirty-five. This agreement was introduced by the Liberals, who were in power at that time, and was supported by the Conservatives. The Radical Liberals and the Social Democrats, on the other hand, wanted a bigger reduction of military forces or even disarmament. The next legislation, introduced in 1932, reduced the number of battalions from thirty-five to twenty-four with additional cuts to the size of the Danish navy (Holbraad 1991:66). Another reduction of military forces followed in 1937 despite the fact that the international situation had changed significantly and become very dangerous by the end of 1930s. This final legislation granted some additional funds for financing the army and navy, but their numbers were reduced yet again.

Denmark's consistent reduction of its military forces, even in the face of a new armed conflict in Europe, is explained not only by their need to save expenses or

by the relative calmness of the political situation in Europe in the 1920s. The defenceless character of Danish neutrality in the interwar period was also justified by a new ideological approach toward Danish foreign policy offered by the Foreign Minister of Denmark between 1929-1940, the radical leader and famous Danish pacifist, Peter Munch. Munch formulated the defence policy for Denmark, the main assumption of which was that it was better for Denmark to be disarmed since, in such a case, Denmark would neither be obliged to become aligned with another country nor take part in any military conflict. Munch argued that Denmark was a small country not only in terms of its territory but also in terms of its population, and would simply not be able to defend itself. An aggressor would easily have enough army or other military resources to defeat Denmark. Furthermore, he argued that it was “pointless even to be able to hold on for a few days since foreign assistance is unlikely to be forthcoming” (cited in Seymour 1982:13).

This notion of the futility of any resistance was rather widespread in Danish political and social circles in the interwar and following period. Many politicians at that time supported the idea that the protection of Danish citizens, rather than useless resistance, took a higher priority. Hiffemay, a military critic, wrote in a *Politiken* guest commentary on March 17, 1949: “All experts are united in holding that Denmark cannot be defended” (cited in Zartman 1954:132).

Although the idea of disarmament was rather widespread in Denmark as well as the rest of Europe at that time, it was not supported unanimously. With the revival of German power in the mid-1930s, the problem of defence gained a lot of attention in Denmark and more and more appeals to “defend a fine Danish house” were announced (Seymor 1982:53). It was clearly understood that Danish military forces, despite being modern and prepared for actions, were too little to act on their own. Nevertheless, it was recognized that Denmark could play a role in the conflict between the opposing blocks.

In the late 1930s, at a number of political conferences, the new Danish Minister of Defence, Thorvald Stauning, tried to persuade the Danish government to increase financing to the military sector and improve the Danish defence position. His ideas were supported by the Conservatives who believed that Danish defencelessness would make the country look weak and thus more likely to be attacked. Appeals for revising Danish neutrality were also supported from abroad. In November 1938, the British Minister in Copenhagen, Patrick Ramsay, expressed the opinion that “Denmark’s defence, in size and equipment, should give expression to her

will to defend herself, both Zealand, Jutland and her territorial waters, to the best of her ability” (cited in Seymor 1982:54).

Discussions on whether to start rearmament or remain defenceless were ongoing in Danish political quarters throughout the 1930s, but supporters for rearmament never gained any serious influence. The defenceless character of Danish neutrality in the interwar period, although disputed, was preserved even in the face of a German threat. The reason for why this occurred must be further examined from the question of whether Denmark could have relied on any outside help in the case of invasion.

The idea of Scandinavism and attempts to create a certain Nordic defence union were still contained in Danish foreign policy during the interwar period. Right after the end of the First World War the geopolitical situation was very favourable for Denmark. Germany, the dangerous neighbour to the south, had been defeated, while the Tsarist government in Russia had collapsed as a result of the Russian revolution and ensuing civil war, greatly reducing the Russian factor in the Baltic and Nordic regions. The ideas and movements for Nordic solidarity were again brought on the stage.⁴ However, after the end of the First World War and the establishment of peace in international relations, cooperation between the Scandinavian countries began to shrink. During the 1920s, there were no official meetings of the Scandinavian foreign ministers. Munch made an attempt to revive the meetings of Scandinavian countries in 1932 and 1934, and the meetings did take place twice a year until April 1940 with Finland also attending them. However, commerce, trade and economic cooperation remained the main concerns of these meetings with military matters and defence discussed only seldom. In Denmark there was also no unanimity about the possibility of Nordic or Scandinavian defence.

While Munch never believed that there was any real possibility for any practicable alliance, Stauning kept looking to Scandinavian neighbours for support. In October 1933, in one of his speeches, Stauning once again drew attention to the necessity of Nordic solidarity saying that the Schleswig border represented “the frontier of the North and that an attack here would be a matter which concerned all the Nordic countries” (cited in Seymor 1982:59). However no favourable replies towards it were received from Norway and Sweden. By 1937 Stauning had to admit that “a military alliance between the Scandinavian countries was a Utopia

⁴ For details see Østergård (2002).

which could not be realised” (Ibid.:59) Although Denmark, Sweden, Iceland and Norway signed the *Declaration Regarding Similar Rules of Neutrality* in Stockholm on May 27, 1938,⁵ it remained mostly nominal and the Scandinavian countries failed to reach cooperation. When, in April 1939, Munch again raised the question about support for Denmark in case of military attack, he received no positive responses from his Scandinavian colleagues apart from an off-the-record assurance from Rudolf Holsti, the Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs (Ibid.:60).

Another source of outside help that Denmark could rely on was Britain. By the mid-1930s, with Germany reviving its power, Denmark became anxious about whether they could rely on British help, both diplomatic and military, in case of a Danish-German conflict. The event that significantly increased Danish worries was the signing of the Anglo-German naval agreement on June 18, 1935. Officially, according to this agreement, Germany could increase the size of its navy to one-third the size of the British Royal Navy while Britain would withdraw its navy from the Baltic Sea. In practice this agreement gave complete control over the Kattegat⁶ and the Baltic to Germany, making Denmark once again dependant on its relations with its southern militant neighbour.

In April 1937 after realising that a Scandinavian alliance was far from reality, Stauning visited London aiming once again to revive Danish-British cooperation and clarify the British position on the question of possible military help for Denmark. During the series of negotiations the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, repeatedly stated that Britain would not make any commitment for military support and, in short, could not promise much.⁷ The failure of the Danish interwar search for security and alliances made Danish defence rather useless because, as previously mentioned, Danish military forces could only resist an aggression with the knowledge that outside help would be arriving.

Along with the futility of rearmament due to Danish diplomatic misfortunes, additional spending on the army appeared to be problematic for Danish finances in the end of 1930s. A very big threat to the Danish economy that almost brought it

⁵ See “Denmark-Finland-Iceland-Norway-Sweden: Declaration Regarding Similar Rules of Neutrality,” *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 32, No.4, Supplement: Official Documents (Oct., 1938) 141-163.

⁶ The Kattegat, or *Kattegatt*, is a bay of the North Sea and a continuation of the Skagerrak, bounded by Denmark and Sweden. The Baltic Sea drains into the Kattegat through the Öresund and the Danish Straits.

⁷ On the negotiations, see Seymor, p. 64.

to the brink of collapse occurred in 1931, when both Britain and Germany reduced their imports of Danish agricultural products. At that time, these two countries accounted for about eighty percent of total Danish exports (Holbraad 1991:63). The consequences of this, including increased unemployment and balance-of-payment problems, revealed Denmark's dependence on its economic relations with both Germany and Britain, and once again demonstrated the necessity of political balancing between these two powers.

The remaining feature of Danish neutrality in the interwar period was its growing *social support*. As previously mentioned, even before the First World War Danish neutrality was very much supported and encouraged by the Danish middle class and business elite. During the interwar period, the policy of neutrality gained even more active support as it was regarded as the policy that had not only kept the country out of military actions in the First World War, but also brought sound economic benefits.

CONCLUSION

Danish neutrality in the interwar period, although ideologically having inherited most of the features of Danish foreign policy in the previous ages, differed in respect to its military capability. Amidst much discussion, both in Denmark and abroad, concerning the role of small countries' military power in the case of a European conflict, Denmark chose to be disarmed with the result that Danish neutrality in the interwar period became defenceless.

The factors which influenced this decisions are to be observed mainly in the failure of Danish policy to obtain any guarantees for its security and military help in the face of an invasion. Attempts to form a Scandinavian alliance never succeeded and the British refused to promise any help to Denmark in case of German aggression. In addition, as Denmark became less and less militarily equipped, the Danish policy of neutrality and neutralism as an ideology gained more and more support in Danish society. As the only real option for the country's foreign policy, Danish defenceless neutrality became highly encouraged by the Danish public, creating a favourable image of Denmark as a country striving for peace.

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