

Glorifications and Simplifications in Case Studies of Danish WWII Nonviolent Resistance

By Majken Jul Sørensen

Danish resistance to Nazi occupation during WWII is frequently used in literature on civil resistance as an example of how nonviolent resistance has been improvised. But history is always interpreted and re-interpreted through the eyes of people living later, and it can never be completely objective. This must be taken into consideration when it comes to the way certain historic events are used as cases for the study of nonviolent resistance, and raises several questions in relation to the Danish case: How does literature written from the perspective of nonviolent resistance frame the Danish resistance to German occupation? What is emphasized or omitted? What are the consequences of the emphasis and omissions when it comes to improving understandings of the potential of nonviolent resistance in other places and contexts?

The study has analysed six English language book chapters, database and encyclopaedia entries in light of the newest Danish research on the occupation and resistance to it. Although some of the texts are relatively accurate, others include mistakes and myths, and there is a tendency to glorify the Danes.

In the book *Besættelsestiden som kollektiv erindring* (The Period of Occupation as Collective Memory), Claus Bryld and Anette Warring analyse how the occupation has been presented, understood and used politically in Denmark during the 50 years following the liberation. They have identified the “basic narrative” as it has existed almost unchanged and unchallenged in Denmark since 1945. The story

begins with the shocking and surprising German assault on small, neutral Denmark on April 9, 1940. Unable to defend itself with military means, the Danish government sets out to negotiate the best possible arrangement which will spare the Danish people from the war. With time, the government is forced to give in to new and more far-reaching German demands. Sabotage against the Germans starts in 1942. Danish support for the resistance movement grows; with weapons and explosives smuggled in from Sweden and even more from England, the sabotage becomes more organized and effective. In August 1943 the cooperation policy with the occupiers comes to an end when the Germans demand that the Danish authorities introduce the death penalty for sabotage. Afterwards a unified Danish society stands up against the Germans before the country is eventually liberated on May 5th 1945.

This basic narrative has been almost completely hegemonic in Denmark, but it reflects a compromise reached between the established political parties and the resistance movement during the particular political situation that existed in the summer of 1945. The narrative ignores internal Danish divisions, especially when it comes to how the end of the cooperation policy was reached in August 1943. It is based on a myth which both the resistance movement representatives and the politicians had an interest in upholding. Danish historian Hans Kirchhoff has documented the developments in August in detail in his PhD thesis. His most important finding for revising history-writing in Denmark was his documentation of how the collapse of the cooperation policy was a result of pressure from below. The pressure consisted of a combination of widespread strikes, civil unrest in the streets and industrial sabotage. Contrary to what had been claimed in the consensus myth, the government had not sought this break, but tried to find solutions to continue to govern.

The six texts that use the Danish resistance as a case study of non-violent resistance are highly varied, both in terms of length, date of origin, and the purpose with which they were produced. There is a

considerable variation both in terms of how they treat historical facts and how they frame the narrative of Danish resistance, but all the accounts fit well within the basic narrative, with the variation being the explicit focus on nonviolent and civilian forms of resistance.

When comparing with the latest historical research, the different texts have different problems. For instance, one text exaggerates the importance of railway- and industrial sabotage, while another is neglecting it. The majority of the texts are found to simplify a complex reality, especially when it comes to the interactions between sabotage and nonviolence, as well as internal Danish differences. The craving to tell the story of the good Danes against the evil Nazis apparently makes it difficult for the authors to find room for the contradictions, internal power struggles and less flattering aspects of the resistances. These findings are problematic for the applied field of civil resistance which aspires to provide research that can be useful for present and future struggles.

Some degree of simplification and black/white narratives with heroes and villains might be justified when the purpose is to raise interest in the neglected topic of nonviolent resistance or in a comparison of many cases. However, such simplifications must accurately and faithfully capture the features relevant to the purpose involved. Thus, stories about Danish resistance which omitted the crucial element of internal differences do not contribute anything for more advanced understandings of the dynamics of nonviolent struggles and have no place in a research context. If scholars of nonviolent resistance ignore internal differences in their attempt to create a coherent narrative, there is a high risk of ending up with simplified conclusions, which result in simplified models and theories. The consequences for the field as such might not be too far reaching if this happens with one case, but if this is a recurring trend, it will impact the whole field of study of civil resistance.

Mistakes and inaccurate simplifications are a shortcoming in all academic fields, but for an applied field such as civil resistance, flaws in theories and models can have consequences for ongoing and future struggles. Thus, buying into myths about national unity and the evil nature of the enemy which was a systematic problem in all texts covering the Danish case will not make it easier for future generations of nonviolent organisers to navigate in their own struggles. Accepting complexity about actors, motives and events is the only way to increase our understanding of nonviolent resistance. We need studies that fully acknowledge internal differences, distrust, and power struggles within resistance movements. Only then will we have scholarship on nonviolent resistance which can truly bring new insights and contribute to developing both the practice and research on nonviolent action.