Classic Book Review:

Jaques Semelin; Unarmed Against Hitler

Growing up in Denmark I remember soaking up the impression purported by books, movies and school, the dominant narrative that it was a national embarrassment that the country did not militarily resist the Nazi Germany's invasion, which led to an occupation of Denmark by Germany from 1940 to 1945. Also, we were informed that it was only because of the armed underground resistance that Denmark was not considered an ally of Nazi Germany when the war ended.

As an adult I became interested in nonviolent struggles, reading about what was going on in other parts of the world. To my great surprise I also discovered that Denmark's path through WWII was sometimes used as an example of how a small country could nonviolently stand up to a large and aggressive neighboring state. According to the official German memorandum which were presented to the Danish government, early in the morning on April 9, 1940, German troops were in the country as friends to prevent neutral Denmark from being invaded by Britain. Although no one believed this, the Danish government decided to exploit this official statement as best as it could and remained in place pursuing a "policy of cooperation" until August 1943.

One of the books that was important in opening my eyes on how different history could be told was Jaques Semelin's "Unarmed Against Hitler". Semelin does not dispute the facts about what I had previously learned, but focuses on a part of the story and presents it in a perspective which is completely new to me. Denmark is only one among many occupied countries that is treated in the book, but because of my background this part fascinated me the most. The cooperation policy, which I had understood to be a great shame, in this context turned out to be considered a reasonable choice given the circumstances. Even if it had been armed to the teeth, small Denmark would have had no military chance against the invading German troops. Armed struggle would only

have resulted in many dead soldiers and civilians, and a much harsher occupation time.

"Unarmed Against Hitler" might not have the status as a "real" classic, but it deserves to be read. Everyone interested in civilian resistance and nonviolent struggles have probably been met with the question "but what would you have done about Hitler?". Just the fact that Semelin deals with this difficult question makes the book worth reading. Semelin is a historian, who uses comparative history to discuss factors that facilitate or hinder non-cooperation, protests, strikes, civil disobedience, and rescue operations.

Semelin finds that in the documentation of WWII, civilian resistance is often considered a supplement to the armed guerrilla war, where the focus is the military goals and how civilians play assisting roles. The consequence is that the type of goals that is not important from a military point of view, but where the goal is to maintain the integrity of civil society, has been neglected. Semelin fully acknowledges that civilian resistance often assists in pursuing military goals, but has chosen to focus only on the autonomous resistance which were completely civilian and not overlapping with armed struggle. These forms of resistances aimed at preserving institutions outside of the occupiers control and protecting people who were prosecuted. A consequence of this choice is that Semelin has investigated the years between 1939 and 1943, since armed and unarmed resistance was more closely interlinked during the last two years of the war. The majority of Semelin's examples took place before the Nazis were defeated at Stalingrad in February of 1943. Before then, the German army appeared to be invincible, and as Semelin says: "Before 1943, realism was not on the side of those who opposed Hitler. Europe seemed to have become German for a long time to come. The future seemed Nazi" (p. 33).

The forms of civilian resistance which was possible to undertake in the occupied countries depended on the purposes of the occupations. In the East, Hitler wanted *lebensraum* for people of German origin. These areas were destined to be "emptied" of the people who lived there, to provide space for the "master race". In western Europe and Scandinavia, the occupation had a different orientation. The people were not considered subhuman and only had to be reeducated, a task which was gener-

ally perceived to have to wait until after the war was won, thus, not an immediate priority. Meanwhile, these societies were to be exploited for their skilled labors, manufactured goods, natural resources, food production, and strategic positions. Such a situation provided very different opportunities for civilian resistance than what was possible in the East. An aspect that Semelin emphasizes is that the majority of occupied Europe had no recent experiences with foreign invasions and resistance to occupations, no "resistance knowledge". No one had made plans about what should happen in case of an occupation. Thus, all forms of resistance had to be improvised and strategies on how to respond developed along the way.

It is not unusual to be met with the perception that when military defeat is a fact, there is really not much that can be done. However, the experiences from occupied Europe during WWII shows that there were a range of different options for governments. As Semelin says, "After the battle of the armed forces comes the battle to control civil society" (p. 49), the question of how to obtain and maintain legitimacy. As mentioned above, the Danish government remained in place and cooperated for the first three years, something that Germany exploited by setting Denmark as its model protectorate. Other governments and royal families fled abroad, like in Norway and the Netherlands. In France, the north of the country was under German administration, while the south was under the control of General Petain who was willing to cooperate with Germany. Yet, another option, chosen by for instance Romania and Bulgaria, was to become a German ally, which made it possible to maintain a fragile political autonomy for some time.

Semelin finds that usually national collaboration leads to legitimization of the occupier (he is very critical of his native France), although he considers Denmark as an exception. However, resistance was likely to start earlier in countries where there were no legitimate government in place, as his comparison between Denmark and Norway shows. Semelin also uses a Norwegian example to discuss the role of social cohesion when it comes to resistance. Societies and groups with more cohesion might be more likely to resist. Norway was a society with strong internal cohesion, and the most famous case of Norwegian civilian resistance was when the bishops, priests, and teachers early in 1942 strongly resisted the attempts to Nazify churches and schools. A Dutch case of how the

doctors resisted nazification in a similar way is also discussed. In addition to the societies generally being socially coherent, professions such as clergy, doctors, and teachers are also often characterised by strong ethical values. In contrast, in places with weaker social cohesion like France and Belgium, civilian resistance was more limited. Nevertheless, these countries did experience some short term strikes and public demonstrations early in the war as expressions of national sentiments and resistance.

In addition to the internal factors, Semelin also investigates how "external factors" influenced resistance. These factors were the German repression and introduction of unpopular decisions such as forced labour. This discussion is spread across chapters 5 and 7, and early in the section about this topic, Semelin says that "We are accustomed to thinking of repression as the supreme means that a tyrant uses to spread terror (…) [b]ut we have not adequately noted the other side of the phenomenon – namely that beyond a certain threshold, repression becomes counter-productive with respects to its own objectives." (p. 77). It would have been an interesting improvement if Semelin had discussed Gene Sharp's book "The Politics of Nonviolent Action" (1973) in this context, since Sharp has a much more developed theory of how this counter-productivity can be brought about through what he calls "political jiu-jitsu". Semelin only has a paragraph about Sharp in chapter 7, but it would have been nice to see him engaging in a conversation with Sharp's work. Instead, Semelin proceeds by discussing how the severe repression of Polish culture and language also created a counter-reaction in the form of a more united population and civilian resistance. Underground high schools and universities became widespread forms of resistance, and Semelin asserts that people were willing to take the risk of participating as teachers and students because the Nazi terror was so indiscriminate. There were no rewards for those who tried to cooperate. This lead many to resist, because it was only slightly riskier to participate in schools and universities than to try to live a quiet life out of the way of the occupier. Thus, one could just as well join in the attempt to preserve Polish culture and language since there was much to gain and no more to lose than if not taking part. Semelin also emphasises another element of civilian resistance that Sharp had already written extensively about 20 years earlier – that for the opponent, it is much harder to find an adequate response

to civilian resistance than to violent resistance. This is supported by Basil Liddell Hart's interviews with German officers right after the war where they stated that violent resistance they were trained to deal with, but that other forms of resistance "baffled" them. (p. 120)

Chapter 6 deals with the role of "public" opinion and how it might change considerably over time. The word "public" is in quotation marks because Semelin emphasises that many opinions could *not* be expressed publicly during the Nazi occupations. The opinion among the general population was important for the development of resistances, although disapproval of the occupier did not result in participation in organised resistance activities for most people. However, the general mood was important when it came to how risky it was to resist. For this argument, Semelin uses the resistance to the compulsory labour in Germany introduced in France as an example. Early during the occupation, the Germans and the French collaborationists tried to persuade and blackmail people to go to work in Germany, but when this did not work, the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO) was introduced. In the beginning, the resistance was limited, and by the end of 1942, 250,000 people had been sent to work in Germany. At this time the conscription was mainly affecting working class people, and someone considering to refuse would not have found any sympathy expressed in public. On the contrary, institutions like the Catholic church and the boy scouts were demanding obedience to the state. However, already in the spring of 1943 the opinion was changing. Semelin thinks that it both played a role that people now believed that Germany would lose the war, and that the revised STO law now required *all* young people to work in Germany for two years. Young refusers could now find support within the French administration to get false papers and places to hide in the countryside. Although the majority of these refusers did not become part of the organised resistance movement, they were an important expression of French dissatisfaction with the occupation. Likewise, Semelin also shows how the termination of the programme to kill the mentally ill within Germany itself (known as T4) was a direct result of some clergy publicly expressing their condemnation.

Semelin has also dedicated a chapter to civilian resistance to the genocide of the Jews, and identifies three potential layers of protection –

the state, the opinion, and social networks. Here Semelin returns to a story I know well from my childhood – how more than 95 % of the Danish Jews were rescued from the Nazi extermination camps because of the massive support from the general population which helped them escape to neutral Sweden. Many factors have been suggested as important when considering the fate of the Jews in the different European countries, such as proximity to a safe place, the level of anti-semitism, the size of the Jewish community, and the level of Jewish integration in that society. Semelin does not buy into these usual explanations when it comes to the Danish success story for civilian resistance. As a comparison he argues that the Norwegian Jewish community was even smaller than the Danish one (Norway had 2000 and Denmark 7500 Jews). Norway also had an even closer geographical proximity to Sweden, nevertheless, half of the Jews were captured in October of 1942 without the Norwegian resistance being able to prevent it. Instead, Semelin argues that the Danish Jews were saved because all three potential protective screens were in place at the same time. Until August 1943, the Jews were protected by the Danish government's policy of cooperation. Danish authorities categorially refused to introduce any form of discrimination that would violate the constitution. In addition, public opinion was against persecution and social networks were in place to assist the Jews when the round up started a month after the resignation of the the government in late August 1943. Indeed, helping the Jews was the entry point into organised resistance for many people. Although, I don't want to downplay the achievements of this rescue operation in any way, it was also a considerable help that the German occupation administration and army in Denmark were internally divided regarding whether it was a smart move to capture the Danish Jews. An attaché at the German embassy, George-Ferdinand Duckwitz had warned the leaders of the Danish resistance movement several days in advance about what was being planned.

Other countries did not have all these three protective screens in place at the same time, but each of them could play a considerable role in protecting the Jews. Many were saved in Belgium, thanks to social networks. In Romania, the state played an important role in saving almost everyone because it became a way for the government to show its independence vis a vis Germany when the dynamics of the war was changing

in 1943. This was not an outcome one would have expected when taking into consideration that anti-Semitism was strong in Romania; a fascist government came to power in 1937, and massacres and pogroms occurred early in the war. In Bulgaria, there were also an anti-Jewish policy, but here the orthodox church publicly expressed its disapproval, and the King was determined to prevent the deportations after the Nazi's loss at Stalingrad.

When evaluating the impact of civilian resistance in occupied Europe, Semelin distinguishes between the direct and the indirect, the immediate and the long term results. When thousands of people refused the forced labour, it had a direct an immediate impact on Germany's access to manpower. The protection of the Jews also directly prevented the Nazi extermination machine from running smoothly. Strikes and demonstrations seldom resulted in changed policies directly, but had a longer term and more indirect effect when they showed that the populations were not submissive. In this context Semelin reminds us that "domination" might be "a fact", but that "submission" is "a state of mind" (p. 172). As the case with the Norwegian teachers showed, military conquest does not automatically mean political conquest. Semelin suggests that where violent resistance tended to unite the Nazis, civilian resistance had a greater possibility to create splits. One has to remember that the local German officials and their collaborators feared the anger and dissatisfaction of their superiors. They had a personal interest in keeping the societies they were administrating calm, something that often made them argue in favour of a softer line than the "hawks" within their own ranks.

One of the things I really like about the book is the "sober" tone. There are no unnecessary glorifications, no exaggerations in order to make civilian resistance larger or more widespread or more successful than what it is. Simply by focusing on this aspect of European history, Semelin has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of civilian resistance. One of the most important questions generated by the book is that if this could be achieved without any prior planning and training, how much more effective could it not have been if civilian resistance had been a strategy planned in advance. However, towards the end of the book, Semelin reminds us that civilian resistance during WWII was about protecting what was possible to protect, and not about

liberating the countries from occupation, as the latter is a completely different matter.

In the final chapter, Semelin positions his book within the debate and research about civilian based defence as it was in the early 1990's. This part is a bit outdated now, but many of the reflections regarding what is possible and what is not with this form of defence are still relevant. Civilian based defence cannot prevent an aggressor from military invasion, but it has the potential for making the people within the conquered territory very difficult and expensive to govern. Depending on the purpose of the occupation, well developed civilian based defence might mean that the gains will not stand in reasonable relation to the cost and effort of occupation. One of the findings from Semelin's work is how important social cohesion is for developing resistance capacities. Thus, struggles for social justice and inclusion of minorities are not just about internal politics, they might also be important in the perspective of how to develop a civilian based defence.

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