

EUROPEAN NEUTRALS AND
NON-BELLIGERENTS
DURING THE SECOND
WORLD WAR

EDITED BY
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

European neutrals and non-belligerents during the Second World War/
Neville Wylie (editor).

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 64358 9

1. World War, 1939-1945 - Diplomatic history. 2. Neutrality - Europe - History -
20th century. I. Wylie, Neville, 1966-

D749 .E87 2001

940.53'2 - dc21 2001035694

ISBN 0 521 64358 9 hardback

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CHAPTER I

Denmark, September 1939–April 1940

Hans Kirchhoff

Denmark's policy of neutrality from September 1939 to April 1940 was rooted in a centuries-old tradition of alliance-free neutrality, which was conditioned by the country's geo-strategic position, its role as a small country and historical experience. The Danish government tried to maintain its position of neutrality even during the German occupation, and continued this policy after 1945, until the Cold War compelled Denmark to join NATO in 1949.

HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

In 1864, Denmark tried to resolve the Schleswig-Holstein question by means of a war against Austria and Prussia. This decision was the result of a foolhardy, unrealistic foreign policy that counted on help from outside, but which led to defeat and the loss of North Schleswig. The loss of two-fifths of its territory and of a million inhabitants led to a profound national crisis and intense heart-searching. It placed a question mark against whether Denmark could maintain its existence as an independent state and created a small-country neurosis that affected several generations of foreign policy makers. The 1870–1 Franco-German War briefly rekindled the hope that North Schleswig could be regained via an alliance with France, but Prussia's victory crushed any hopes in this direction and made a policy of neutrality a *sine qua non*. Fear of the increasing military might of Germany became the dominant element of Danish defence policy and acknowledgement of Denmark's extremely limited freedom to manoeuvre became a maxim in defence policy circles. It was not so much a question of whether to adapt to the powerful southern neighbour as of how best to do it. Successive governments, both conservative and liberal, attempted to adjust the defence policy in order to make it acceptable to Berlin, in other words to convince Germany that under no circumstances would Denmark become an opponent in any future war.

During the First World War, the small social-liberal party, the Radical Liberals, had been the governing party and consequently responsible for safeguarding neutrality and preventing Denmark from being dragged into a conflict between the Great Powers. They did succeed in keeping the country out of the war, in spite of its vulnerable position between Germany and Great Britain. This was primarily because neither London nor Berlin had any wish to occupy Denmark, as long as the other side kept out as well; a precondition that was not present in the next war in 1940. This successful policy was assisted by a cleverly executed balancing act that did not observe the classical requirement in international law for impartiality, but which made adroit adjustments to changing situations and changing pressures from the Great Powers. Thus the foreign trade that was so vital to the foodstuff and manufacturing sectors was successfully maintained, not only with Germany and Britain but also with overseas territories. This created an economic boom in the shelter of neutrality. Foreign policy was skilfully conducted by the diplomat Erik Scavenius, in times of crisis often via secret talks with the German ambassador in Copenhagen. The neutrality, therefore, had an obvious bias towards Germany, but this was accepted by London, which had written off the Baltic as an operational field and regarded Denmark as within the German sphere of influence. Several of the leading politicians held government posts again during the Second World War and were profoundly influenced by their experiences from the previous war. This was the case with the Radical politician, Peter Munch, the undisputed leader of foreign policy in the 1930s, and with the Social Democrat, Thorvald Stauning, who became prime minister when the Radical Liberals and Social Democrats formed a coalition government in 1929.

Hopes that pro-Danish North Schleswig might one day return to the kingdom had never died out, and they were realised after the defeat of Germany and the Versailles Treaty of 1920. In a referendum, the North Schleswigers voted to come home and a new border was drawn which was as ethnically fair as possible. But it brought Denmark a German minority of about ten thousand people who demanded to come *heim ins Reich* after the Nazi take-over in 1933. The German government had never recognised the 1920 border and in the 1930s fear that Hitler might insist on its being moved further north became a permanent source of anxiety to the Danish government and was a factor in the policy of appeasement towards Germany.

In 1920, however, the border problem seemed to have been resolved and the great bone of contention that for decades had divided Denmark

and Germany had thus been removed. With Germany's fall as a Great Power and the Soviet Union in splendid isolation with its own internal problems, the Baltic was an area of low tension and Denmark faced no threats to its national security. It joined the League of Nations and its system of sanctions, albeit with some reservations concerning military and economic sanctions. Denmark had no wish to be forced to take action against a future Greater Germany, for example. The decision to join provoked an internal debate about whether membership was compatible with the classical definition of neutrality (which it was not) and whether the duty to undertake sanctions committed Denmark to a higher level of defence (which the Right and the Liberal Party insisted it did, but which the Social Democrats and the Radical Liberals denied). This conflict reveals the strong desire to continue a balanced policy of neutrality regardless of the security system and it shows the intimate relationship between domestic and foreign policy.

THE CONCEPT OF DEFENCE

During the First World War, Denmark had possessed a relatively strong defence force, with a conscripted army of about 50,000 men. The aim was to reassure Germany that Denmark could and would defend its neutrality (against Britain) and might have been a factor in keeping the German Supreme Command quiet. But with the disappearance of the military threat after the German defeat in 1918, the defence force was drastically reduced, reaching its nadir with the defence agreement of 1932 during the world Depression. This led to a reduction of the army and the navy to what from a military point of view was a weakly underpinned defence force for a neutral state. Its primary duty was to prevent accidental breaches of neutrality, such as overflying, enemy action in Danish territorial waters, or accidental crossings of the border by, for example, SA (*Sturm Abteilung*) bands, but not to engage in a battle for the country's existence. In the event of an attack by a Great Power – that is, Germany – the defence force would merely record, not oppose, the breach of neutrality. The two governing parties, the Radical Liberals and the Social Democrats, had strong pacifist traditions and saw no ideological, economic or strategic grounds for believing that the use of military power would be a solution to Denmark's security problem. They did not believe that it would ever be possible to build a defence force strong enough to prevent a German attack. On the contrary, a strong army in weak hands would act as a magnet to the Great Powers. They

believed that the Danish nation would endure, independently of state and territory, as long as the people could survive as a social, political, and cultural unit. Instead of wasting money on a military force that would not be of much use anyway, they aimed at building a welfare, consensus state, with enough cohesion to withstand a foreign occupation – if it should come to that. So the overriding aim was to keep Denmark out of the war, a war in which the small state had no vested interest, since it would be the egoistic work of the Great Powers. The Foreign Secretary Peter Munch even developed a theory, called neo-neutrality, whereby a small country preserves the right of non-involvement in a war, even if it is physically occupied; a scenario that arose in April 1940.¹

Nor did the Opposition, the Liberals and the Conservatives, operate with the idea of an army capable of withstanding an attack from Germany. But they wanted a military force which was sufficiently strong to prevent Denmark from forming a vacuum that the Great Powers could occupy at no cost and which, in case of an attack, could demonstrate through its fighting power the nation's will to preserve its independence. Again, there was a split between the army and the navy, both in the competition for the meagre funds available and on the question of the right strategy to adopt. The army operated with the concept of a marginal force, on the assumption that Germany would never be able to use its full power against Denmark in a war because it would be engaged elsewhere – a prediction that came true in 1940. Plans were therefore made for a bridgehead defence, in direct contradiction of the government's ideas. Unlike the army, the navy thought that Germany could force her will upon Denmark at any time, for example via a blockade, and that the primary aim, as in the First World War, must be to convince Germany of the country's ability to protect its neutrality (against Britain). They therefore planned a peripheral defence that came close to the government's guarding and marking strategy. The bad atmosphere between the government and the generals, in particular, created problems of coordination and weakened the management of the crisis when war actually came. It is symptomatic that the operational orders from the First World War, in which troops were instructed to fight to the last man, were not updated until after the Munich crisis of 1938.

In 1937 the defence regulations were revised. This involved some modernisation of the forces but no expansion. On the contrary: the

¹ P. Munch and his neo-neutrality are analysed from a political science point of view in Ole Karup Pedersen, *Udenrigsminister P. Munchs opfattelse af Danmarks stilling i international politik* (Copenhagen, 1970).

army was reduced from eight to seven regiments and the yearly number of recruits from 8,900 to 7,840. During the parliamentary debate the government agreed that breaches of neutrality other than accidental ones should be repulsed, to the extent that it was considered feasible. This did not change the underlying idea that the forces should not be used against a major attack, but it strengthened public expectation of an actual fight for existence. Because of the need to maintain the credibility of the military with the Great Powers and to avoid internal unrest, the government had no wish to clarify the situation. The great majority of the electorate supported the government's defence policy without realising what the consequences would be in a war. This created a backlash of public opinion when the uncontested occupation took place on 9 April 1940.

APPEASEMENT TOWARDS GERMANY IN THE 1930S

The international crisis in the 1930s resulting from the aggressive foreign policies of dictatorships pushed Denmark into an increasingly isolated position. Foreign Secretary Munch was a strong supporter of the League of Nations. He hoped that it could promote disarmament and international law – one of the strongest cards for a small country at a time of international anarchy – and he was not prepared to rule out the possibility of the League coming to the aid of Denmark in a border dispute with Germany. Munch's efforts were often dismissed as naive, but he had no illusions about the role of the League of Nations in a conflict involving the Great Powers. Denmark still supported sanctions against Italy in 1935, because of the war in Abyssinia, but with the breakdown of this policy and heightened international tension Denmark gradually distanced itself from its League of Nations commitment to sanctions, notably in 1936 and 1938, and returned to isolated neutrality.²

² The study of the period of neutrality from September 1939 until April 1940 has been hampered by the highly political nature of the subject. The debate about blame for the war started immediately in 1940 and really took off after the occupation, when it was bound up with the political struggle and the action against collaboration. The parliamentary Commission of Inquiry set up in 1945 investigated complaints against the government of incompetence and collusion, but found them to be groundless (*Bilag til Beretning til Folketinget afgivet af den af Tinget under 15. juni 1945. nedsatte Kommission, I–III* (1945–51)). The Commission performed a thorough clearing-up operation and obtained important source materials. However, for many years the strong focus of the report and the public on the events immediately before the German invasion helped deflect attention away from the determining influences behind the security and defence policy decisions in the 1930s. A comprehensive scholarly study that sees the subject in its widest context is still to be written. We have to make do with partial studies. The standard work on Danish foreign policy in the

The break with the international security system took place together with the other six ex-neutral, so-called 'Oslo States', which also included Norway and Sweden. It has often been debated whether a Nordic defence league might have been able to keep Denmark and Norway out of the Second World War in 1940. Feelers had been put out by the Danish Prime Minister in 1933, but the response from Oslo and Stockholm had been negative and later on Stauning firmly rejected the idea. The Nordic foreign ministers met at regular intervals to coordinate their policies, but the geo-strategic interests were too divergent for real cooperation on defence: Sweden's defence policy was focused on the east, Norway's on the west and Denmark's on the south. This can also be seen in Denmark's acceptance of a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939, which the other Nordic countries declined, and in the failed Nordic defence negotiations after the war, in 1948–9. On the whole, Nordic cooperation was kept on a back burner during these years. In spite of the many points of similarity in their political and democratic cultures, their respective economic interests, including policies on trade, were too dissimilar. Thus the three countries never succeeded in building up a joint economic state of preparedness for the war.

In his search for an alternative to isolated neutrality, Stauning contacted the British government during a visit to London in 1937. This took place without the knowledge of Munch, who represented a more passive line and preferred not to make any moves that might disturb the Great Powers. It is difficult to gauge how serious his approach was, but there was nothing ambiguous about Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's response: Britain would be unable to give military aid to Denmark in the event of an armed conflict with Germany. The reply was confirmed as late as February 1940 to a group of Scandinavian journalists when Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, expressed understanding for Denmark's total dependence on Germany. There has been some discussion as to whether with a stronger defence force Denmark could have been brought under the umbrella of a British guarantee in 1939. There is evidence of reflections of this kind in British archive materials, but a guarantee would hardly have prevented the occupation, in view of what happened in Poland and later in Greece. The Danish prime minister

1930s is still, despite criticism for its traditionalism and lack of a theoretical framework, Viggo Sjøqvist, *Danmarks udenrigspolitik 1939–1940* (Copenhagen, 1966). This investigation is based on comprehensive unpublished source materials from the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and from the Auswärtiges Amt, and was the first work to raise the discussion of foreign policy in the 1930s above the polemical level.

was no doubt told what he wanted to hear in London, but this does not alter the fact that the British neither could nor would give any military guarantees to Denmark. As Chamberlain said in the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy in June 1939, 'German domination of Denmark would increase Germany's military strength and this therefore was not a case in which we should be bound to intervene forcibly to restore the *status quo*.' In fact, British diplomats could see some benefits in a German occupation, partly because of the strains in supply it would cause the Germans if Denmark was cut off from its trade connections to the West. This assessment proved to be wrong, but was shared by Berlin in 1940.

With its extensive foreign trade, Denmark was very dependent on international trade conditions for its prosperity and social stability. This was especially true of agriculture, which accounted for 73 % of all exports in 1939 and which obtained 40 % of its foodstuffs from abroad. Industry's share of exports was only 22 %, but it was expanding rapidly and 30 % of all imported raw materials were for industrial purposes. It added to Denmark's vulnerability that trade was mainly centred on two countries, Britain and Germany. Thus 90 % of exports went to these two countries in 1939 and 60 % of all imports came from them. In the 1930s Britain and Germany were engaged in a trade war for the Scandinavian market. This also influenced relations with Denmark and resulted in a minor victory for Britain. In 1929, 57 % of exports went to Britain and 20 % to Germany, but by 1939 the figures had changed to 51 % to Britain and 23 % to Germany. As for imports, in 1929 15 % came from Britain and 33 % from Germany, in 1939 33 % from Britain and 27 % from Germany. At the outbreak of war, therefore, Britain was easily the dominant trading partner, but Germany was no less indispensable, not least as a counter-balance to Britain. In a world that hid itself behind protectionism and bilateral agreements, most of the efforts of Munch and the Danish Ministry for Foreign Affairs went into securing the interests of foreign trade. This happened in negotiations that were often very difficult, and for which the Danish diplomats have since been highly praised by historians. In order to avoid dependency on one market, a balance had to be maintained between the two Great Powers and the policy of neutrality was an essential precondition for the achievement of this. The extent to which trade policy thereby also became an instrument for defence policy is less clear, for Denmark increased its trade with Britain at the same time as it stepped up its appeasement of Germany. It must be said, however, that when the war at sea broke out in September 1939 the economic

threat to Denmark's existence seemed to be just as great as a possible military threat.

Viewed from a Danish perspective, there appeared to be two kinds of threat after Hitler came to power, one applicable in peacetime, the other in a time of war. The first, as mentioned above, related to the 'open wound' of the southern border. This threat was particularly evident during the so-called 'Eastern storm' of the Schleswig-Holstein Nazis in March and April 1933. But fears were assuaged when it looked as though Berlin did not support the irredentist demands of the German minority. It was Danish policy to avoid all disturbances in or near the border area. In 1938, the *Anschluß* and the Sudeten crisis brought the danger of a revision of the border, in which Hitler could use the now completely Nazified German minority as a battering ram, back into focus. But once the war broke out in 1939, this threat slid once more into the background. It never disappeared completely, however, and during the occupation, one of the most important arguments of those supporting the policy of collaboration against a break with Germany was that it could lead to a border revision that might force Danes into active service for Germany.

The second perceived threat involved an attack on – or some other form of aggression against – Danish territory during an Anglo-German war. Scenarios sprang to mind in different combinations and with varying degrees of probability. There might be accidental hostilities in or over some area of Denmark, there could be a war at sea or a blockade; or there might be demands for air bases in Jutland or naval bases in the Kattegat. The army command, extrapolating from its own concept of defence, focused especially on Jutland. The naval command shared the government view that the Germans would have no wish to occupy Denmark, which already lay within their sphere of interest. The government was aware of the German navy's plans for an offensive in the Atlantic and its demand for free passage through the Belts, which it was ready to grant. But it calculated, erroneously as it turned out, that this strategy would not become a reality until the rearmament of the German navy (the so-called Z-plan) had been completed.³

Whatever scenario the government chose, Denmark's isolated position meant that the primary aim must be to inspire German confidence in Danish neutrality. Government and Opposition were in agreement about

³ National and international developments leading up to the occupation were presented in a series of lectures at the University of Copenhagen in 1990; see Hans Kirchhoff (ed.), *1940 – Da Danmark blev besat* (Copenhagen, 1990), which includes a contribution by Carsten Due-Nielsen, who argues that Denmark's isolation was not quite the foregone conclusion that it has been claimed to be.

this pro-German line. Its most prominent spokesman and executor was Foreign Secretary Munch. His policy was to avoid all questions that might offend or provoke Germany and to take as few initiatives as possible that could embroil Denmark in the rivalries between the Great Powers, but if a choice between the parties became unavoidable to support the German side and, finally, to curb and moderate anti-German sentiments in the population at large. It was a foreign policy characterised by passivity and defeatism.

Accommodation to Germany occurred across a broad front. In 1935, Denmark failed to condemn German rearmament at the League of Nations. As we have seen, once the policy of sanctions broke down, Denmark withdrew from the League of Nations's system of sanctions, which Berlin had always regarded as being aimed at Germany. In 1938, the regulations governing neutrality were modified to comply with German requests for free passage through Denmark for its planes and warships, a move that prompted criticism from an otherwise generally understanding Britain. German warships were permitted to hold manoeuvres in Danish territorial waters; German emigrants were subjected to a restrictive, discriminatory refugee policy, and the Danish police cooperated with the Gestapo in the fight against international Communism.

At the same time, the ministry for foreign affairs attempted to muzzle the press. 'Having tea with Dr Munch' became a euphemism for the meetings at which the foreign secretary asked the editors to curb their criticism of Nazi atrocities and Nazi leaders. The German ambassador constantly registered disapproval of anti-Nazi articles, and in some cases succeeded in getting particularly exposed journalists removed. Indirect censorship acted as a restraint on theatre and publishing ventures. By and large, the media and institutions loyally complied with the government's requests, but a left-wing minority protested against the appeasement, embraced the causes of republican Spain and the fugitives from Hitler, and demanded a popular alliance against the forces of Fascism, which was unrealistic in the late 1930s. Foreign critics depicted Denmark as an economic and political vassal state of Hitler, which, though not correct in every sense, was not without an element of truth.

The high-water mark of the policy of appeasement came in May 1939, when Denmark alone of the Nordic countries accepted the offer of a pact of non-aggression with Germany. In 1937, behind the back of his foreign secretary, Prime Minister Stauning had sounded out the possibility of a non-aggression pact to prevent a German attack on Denmark, but had

been rebuffed by the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Now the situation had changed because the offer was part of Hitler's propaganda offensive to mollify American criticism of his policy of aggression in Europe. However, the government did not think it could refuse, hoping that the pact would constitute some kind of guarantee of protection for the border, and negotiated an agreement that Denmark would be able to continue trading with Britain in the event of an Anglo-German conflict. The pact was signed on 31 May. But nobody in Copenhagen really believed that the agreement would be observed in a war involving the Great Powers.⁴

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR AND THE THREAT TO THE DANISH ECONOMY

When war broke out in Europe, Denmark proclaimed its neutrality on 3 September 1939. Despite the catastrophe, the government viewed the situation with a certain amount of optimism. The German–Soviet pact of non-aggression seemed to guarantee peace in the Baltic area and the swift defeat of Poland turned the German thrust westwards, towards France. The ministry for foreign affairs regarded the war as a purely imperialist struggle between the Great Powers; the ideological overtones came much later, and they hoped for a peace compromise that would safeguard the balance of power in Europe and prevent a weakened Germany drawing in the Soviet Union. By contrast, public opinion was strongly pro-British. When British planes accidentally bombed Esbjerg, the largest town on the North Sea coast, most of the population, to the great dismay of the government, were firmly convinced that they were German bombs! The overflights led to the government setting up anti-aircraft guns in North Schleswig to quash German suspicions that the country might not defend itself against British breaches of its neutrality. For the same reason, a battalion of soldiers was stationed in North Jutland.

The extent to which the defence strategy was geared to complying with German security interests was also demonstrated by an incident in November. The German navy asked for the Belts to be mined on

⁴ For Denmark's position between the Great Powers see Susan Seymour, *Anglo-Danish Relations and Germany 1933–1945* (Odense, 1982), which is based on documents from the Foreign Office and articles by Patrick Salmon, the latest in *Scandinavia and the Great Powers* (Cambridge, 1997). To these should be added Harm Schröter, *Aussenpolitik und Wirtschaftsinteresse – Skandinavien im ausseiwirtschaftlichen Kalkül Deutschlands und Grossbritanniens 1918–1939* (Frankfurt am Main, 1983). Scandinavia in the struggle between the Great Powers in 1939–40 was the subject of a seminar in Oslo in 1976, but with Denmark naturally allocated only a minor role. See 'The Great Powers and the Nordic Countries 1939–1940', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2 (1977).

the grounds that enemy submarines had been detected in the Baltic. The government did not believe the reason but fears that the Germans would lay the mines themselves, thereby committing a breach of neutrality, made Copenhagen comply with the request. The situation closely resembled that of a similar German offensive in 1914. Munch was then minister of defence and was strongly in favour of complying with German demands even though the mining was aimed against Britain. In response to the political opposition, he had declared that the alternative would involve not only allowing the Germans to lay the mines themselves, but allowing them to establish bases on Danish territory without this being regarded by Denmark as a cause of war. As in 1914, the laying of mines in November 1939 was merely noted in London and Paris. The handling of the situation in 1914 was a historic lesson that proved a heavy burden to bear in April 1940.

In general, Munch regarded the military threat against Denmark as negligible because, in accordance with the strategic concept outlined above, he assumed that none of the belligerent parties had any interest in occupying Danish territory. By far the most important issue in the first and longest period of neutrality, therefore, was foreign trade and the problem of supplies that was bound up with it. But even here it was possible to find bright spots, since large stockpiles of goods had been accumulated so that right from the start it was possible to refer back to experiences from the First World War and put the necessary control and regulatory mechanisms in place. In this connection, it seemed crucial that the belligerent parties had reaffirmed their consent to Denmark maintaining its full level of trade with the other side. Nevertheless, this was to prove the source of major foreign policy problems and a threat to the welfare of the people and the nation's existence.

In the inter-war years, Scandinavia had been a secondary arena for the rivalry between Britain and Germany. But on the outbreak of war the Nordic scene moved more into focus. This was due to Britain's economic warfare, which was aimed at forcing the neutral countries to join the blockade against German rearmament and the German economy. The Western Powers thus emerged as the most aggressive side who ultimately wanted to bring the Nordic countries into the war, while Germany, partly because of its dependence on important strategic raw materials from Norway, Sweden, and Finland and foodstuffs from Denmark, wished Scandinavia to remain neutral, and therefore behaved reactively.

The British started their economic warfare where it had successfully left off, at Germany's defeat in 1918. They drew up lists of contraband,

demanded control of exports and a ban on the re-export of certain goods to Germany, and imposed a comprehensive system of supervision on all neutral shipping. The Germans retaliated by drawing up their own lists of contraband, the primary aim of which was presumably to spread propaganda, but which in the case of Denmark involved broken promises and threatened all trade with Britain. At the beginning of September, the German warships, on the order of the Seekriegsleitung, began to torpedo and seize Nordic ships on their way to and from Britain. The Danes had argued, in defence of their continuing to export to England, that a German attack would make the British stop their import of foodstuffs, which would cause such a drastic drop in Danish agricultural production that it would harm exports to Germany. This argument proved to be wrong after 9 April, but it was accepted by *Auswärtiges Amt*, and the diplomats succeeded in stopping the warships. This resulted in the so-called 'Maltese Cross Arrangement', which allowed the export of Danish food products to England in special ships and under strict supervision, and only on condition that trade with Germany was maintained. It was a secret agreement and it is a good illustration of the difficult balancing act between the belligerent parties. It continued right up to the German invasion, but did not prevent further torpedoing when the war at sea was renewed in the winter of 1940.

The bilateral trade agreements were another instrument in the economic warfare. These, too, reflect the conflicting aims of Britain and Germany. The Germans were interested in importing as much as possible from Denmark, but had to accept that the Danish government, in order to maintain a balance with Britain, could not exceed the 1939 level, and an agreement was hammered out within a month, without any major problems. In contrast, trade negotiations with the British were exceptionally long and difficult, and were not completed until just before 9 April 1940. Partly as a result of its policy of self-sufficiency, Britain was less dependent on Danish food imports than earlier and was thus able to push a hard line, the primary aim of which was to reduce Danish agricultural exports to Germany. One method would be to limit the import of foodstuffs to a quantity sufficient only to produce goods for Britain. Another would be to lower prices to avoid a large balance of payments surplus being imparted to Germany in its trade with Denmark as payment for the Danish import surplus there. Both methods were adopted and promised very bad consequences for Denmark. The invasion prevented the agreement from being implemented, but it is doubtful whether exports to England could have been maintained at the low prices dictated

by the British. The agreement caused great bitterness in the agricultural sector and made the farmers more favourably disposed towards the occupation, when it turned out that the occupying power could buy up everything that was produced, and at high prices.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE WINTER WAR

On 30 November 1939, peace in Scandinavia was shattered by the Soviet Union's attack on Finland. The Winter War created a huge wave of sympathy for little Finland in its fight against the Great Power. In Norway and Sweden, there was widespread support for military intervention on behalf of Finland and the governments refrained from issuing any declarations of neutrality. The Danish government also held back, but consideration for Germany as the ally of the Soviet Union weighed more heavily in the end than Nordic solidarity.

Although the Winter War was primarily a problem for the other Scandinavian countries, it caused concern in Copenhagen. There were fears that Norway and Sweden might be drawn in if, as was rumoured, the real target of the Red Army was ice-free harbours on the west coast of Norway. There were also reports that the Non-Aggression pact had divided Scandinavia into spheres of interest, with Denmark and southern Sweden in the German one, and that Germany would strike if the war spread westwards. On 14 December, the League of Nations, at the instigation of the Western Powers, expelled the Soviet Union and asked the member states to send material and humanitarian aid to Finland. Munch objected to the League of Nations setting itself up as a court of law and all three Nordic countries abstained from voting. But fears that Britain and France would send weapons and soldiers to Finland via the Northern Cap, under cover of the League's action, and that Germany would retaliate, placed increasing pressure on Copenhagen.

This pessimistic mood was highlighted when Prime Minister Stauning, in his New Year speech to the nation, denied that Denmark was capable of conducting a war. This merely spelt out what was inherent in the defence strategy, but it triggered a storm of protest from the Conservative Party and the officers who formed part of its hinterland. It resulted in a parliamentary declaration supported by the Social Democrat Party and the Radical Party, which could be interpreted as acquiescence to a strategy that committed the country to fight for its existence. The declaration of 19 January 1940 was later to play an important part in the debate about culpability for the war at the time of the capitulation

on 9 April, because the Opposition maintained that the government had deliberately misled the public. It does look as though the government's desire to put a damper on the defence question had led it further than was justified. At any rate, the declaration had no effect on the state of preparedness.

Throughout the winter, the Western Powers increased pressure on Scandinavia, and thereby also indirectly on Copenhagen. This occurred in connection with both the 'minor' plan, aimed at halting German ore traffic by the mining of Norwegian territorial waters, and the 'major' plan, which involved preparations to send an expeditionary force of 100,000 men to the Finnish front via Narvik, but whose main purpose was to occupy the ore beds of Swedish Lapland. As part of their overall strategy, Britain and France cynically calculated on a military retaliation from Germany, which would drag Scandinavia into the war, create a second front, and thus ease the pressure on France. For the same reason, Oslo and Stockholm opposed the allied initiatives with every possible diplomatic means. The aid to Finland was common enough knowledge to be written about openly in the Western press. On the BBC, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, pugnaciously called on the neutral countries to make common cause with the Allies. At the same time the war at sea escalated. In January and February twelve Danish ships, including two 'Maltese ships', were torpedoed and 143 sailors lost their lives. Other ships carrying agricultural products to Britain were attacked from the air. Nordic shipping magnates asked for the ships to sail in British convoys, but the Danes rejected this idea for fear of provoking Germany. The situation became so tense that Munch, in defiance of his own character and his lie-low policy, took several initiatives to promote peace and negotiations, which did not come to anything. The so-called '*Altmark*-affair' took place on 16 February 1940 when a British ship cornered a German prison ship in Norwegian territorial waters and set the British sailors free, without the Norwegian navy taking any action. We know that this incident was a turning-point for German planning because it convinced Hitler that the British had no scruples about breaching Norwegian neutrality and that the Norwegians had neither the will nor the ability to defend it. The '*Altmark* affair' sent shivers down spines in Copenhagen, because Denmark might well be next on the list. Characteristically, Munch showed complete understanding of the Norwegian passivity, whereas his strategic sparring partner, the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, from his own military standpoint thought that the Norwegian navy should have offered some resistance.

It is easy to understand why the peace treaty between Finland and the Soviet Union, in the night between 12 and 13 March, was greeted with the utmost relief in the Nordic capitals. It removed the pretext for intervention from both the Allies and Germany.

THE MILITARY THREAT AGAINST DENMARK, APRIL 1940

It turned out that the peace in Moscow only marked a slowing down in the race between the Great Powers for the ore and Norway. On 28 March, the Supreme War Council decided to implement the 'minor plan' (Operation Wilfred), and in the early hours of 8 April Norwegian territorial waters outside Narvik were mined, without the British being aware that a German attack was imminent. On 2 April, nervous about his 'soft' Northern flank and calculating that Britain would retaliate against an attack on France with a counterattack against Norway, Hitler decided to initiate Operation Weserübung at 4.15 a.m. on 9 April, and the next day the first transport ships set off on the long voyage to northern Norway. With the main force tied down on the western front, the Wehrmacht could spare few resources for the Scandinavian campaign. This meant that risks had to be reduced to a minimum which, in turn, required minimal opposition and maximum exploitation of the surprise element. It proved 100 per cent effective, for both the Scandinavian governments and the Western Powers were taken completely by surprise. Nobody had believed the Germans would dare to attempt such an ambitious naval operation while the Royal Navy had command of the seas.⁵

It is important to remember that Denmark was only a minor player in the wider plan. Denmark did not enter into German calculations until a relatively late stage, and even then only via the use of Jutland as a

⁵ There is a comprehensive literature on government policy in 1940, but it is often of a rather polemical nature. The best overview is Hans Branner, *9. april – et politisk lærestykke? En udenrigspolitisk krises baggrund, indhold og perspektiver* (Copenhagen, 1987). The book is written from a political science viewpoint and does not pretend to include unpublished materials. For a penetrating analysis of, among other things, the warnings from Berlin see Bjørn Svensson, *Derfor gik det sådan den 9. april* (Copenhagen, 1965). For the decision-making process during April see also Viggo Sjøqvist, *Besættelsen 1940. De danske forudsætninger for den 9. april* (Copenhagen, 1978) and Hans Kirchhoff, 'Foreign Policy and Rationality – The Danish Capitulation of 9 April 1940. An Outline of a Pattern of Action', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 16 (1991), which, using partially new diplomatic materials, views the capitulation as the rational response to the German invasion, from the standpoint of the defence and security strategy. The periodical *Vandkunsten*, vol. 3 (Copenhagen, 1990), contains a number of articles about the experience of 9 April in the post-war period and the way it has influenced the debate on defence policy.

transit area and of North Jutland as a port of embarkation for Norway, the whole venture being conducted as a purely political arrangement. It was not until the Luftwaffe demanded permission to touch down in Ålborg that the whole country became involved, the idea being, perhaps, that Germany would have a bigger hold on the government if Copenhagen was occupied as well. However, we can see that when the Danish government thought that a German action could be confined to demands for bases and transit rights, they were reflecting the actual role allocated to Denmark in the preliminary plans.

When the war broke out in September, five year-groups of the army were called up, bringing its strength up to 36,000 men. Three year-groups were sent home after a brief inspection, the remaining two after government decisions in December 1939 and January 1940. In other words, in April 1940 the army consisted of about 15,000 men, compared with the approximately 58,000 men in the period of minimal defence during the First World War. Half the force was stationed in Jutland, the other half on the islands. Without mobilisation it would not be an effective fighting force, nor was it intended to be, according to the accepted defence plan. Most of the navy was deployed in northern waters, to afford protection against British breaches of neutrality. This meant that Copenhagen was virtually devoid of military personnel, in keeping with the government view that the capital was of no strategic importance to the belligerent parties.

With our present knowledge that it was Germany which invaded and occupied Denmark for five years, it may be difficult to understand that Munch and the government envisaged a threat coming from the north and the west, that is, from Britain. This perception and the defence strategies that evolved from it were mainly due to the general belief that Germany would not use resources to occupy Denmark, as long as the Danes showed themselves willing to uphold the neutrality against Britain. In Munch's view, it was London, with its aggressive line towards Norway (and Sweden), that held the key to whether Germany would retaliate or not. This explains why the usually so dispassionate foreign secretary blamed Britain on 9 April, the day Denmark was invaded, for the occupation of Denmark!

This perception of the potential threat also coloured the Danish attitude towards the defence problem that seemed to overshadow all others in 1940: the war at sea. It cast doubts on whether Danish foreign trade could be maintained at all, between the Scylla of increasingly rigorous controls on contraband by the British and the Charybdis of German

torpedoes and mines. For if Britain attacked Norway, Germany might be expected to halt all Danish agricultural exports to Britain and this would put a bomb under the country's economy and welfare that seemed to pose no less of a threat than an actual occupation. So it was with some trepidation that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs processed information from the Embassy in London about Allied war policy in Northern Scandinavia and similar briefings from Oslo (and Stockholm) about concrete allied initiatives, culminating in the laying of mines on the morning of 8 April.

In contrast, information from the Embassy in Berlin painted a much calmer picture in the winter and spring of 1940. The reports focused exclusively on the Western Offensive which, after several cancellations throughout the winter, now seemed imminent. Reports of German troop movements south of the border had provoked the Army Supreme Command on their own initiative to alert the garrisons in North Schleswig in January. The panic annoyed the government and the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, who feared any provocation of Germany, but it fitted in perfectly with the generals' overall strategy, which regarded a German advance into Jutland to acquire aircraft and naval bases for use against Britain as the main danger to Denmark. As we have seen, this view was not shared by the government or the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy. On the contrary, the narrow focus of information from the Berlin Embassy on the Western Offensive seemed to confirm their view that Germany's military attention was fully concentrated on the land war against France.

The first dispatch of direct relevance to Denmark came from Berlin on 4 April. It referred to an 'aggression' in the coming week and linked it to an invasion of Holland and Belgium. After that it mentioned the probability of operations continuing towards southern Norway. The dispatch originated in disaffected officers of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – we know now that it came from Colonel Oster in Abwehr – so it was from an incredibly reliable source, but as it stands it is by no means as clear and unambiguous as it was made out to be during the debate about who was to blame for the war. A joint campaign against Denmark and Holland/Belgium seemed to have no military coherence, and would also be quite irrelevant to Operation Weserübung, whose strategic centre of gravity lay in northern Norway. Moreover, the term 'aggression' could mean various things, not necessarily a military action. The same distorted picture reached the Norwegian and Swedish ambassadors, the Norwegian ambassador not even being aware of the

fact that Norway was also included! So when a worried Danish government asked Oslo and Stockholm the following day whether there was any danger, it received a categorical denial. The Embassy staff too played safe in the days that followed by warning that it might be a German bluff and went completely along with the government line that Germany had nothing to gain from obtaining air bases in Denmark. Simultaneous reports of concentrations of troops and ships in the German Baltic were dismissed with the explanation that these were aimed at Norway rather than Denmark, and would only be used in the event of a British attack. The warning on 4 April caused a great deal of alarm in Copenhagen and precipitated a frenzy of government activity. But the obscure picture of the enemy and counter-reports in the next few days strengthened the belief, or at any rate the hope, that any escalation of the war would take place outside Denmark. The Army Supreme Command wanted to mobilise, but this was refused on the grounds that it might send out the wrong signals to Germany and lead to counter-measures. The watchword was to avoid any move that could cause provocation.

It was not until 8 April, the day before the invasion, that further news brought things seriously to a head. During the morning, it became known that the British had mined Norwegian territorial waters and throughout the day reports were received of German fleet movements through the Belts. At the same time, the Germans moved a division up south of the border. In the eyes of a critical later age, the government must have known on 8 April that an attack, in the form of an invasion, would materialise the following day. Charges against Munch for having overlooked or deliberately disregarded the many warning signs came to play an important part in the debate over culpability for the capitulation and war. But too much weight is being given to hindsight here. The signals were not as clear as they appear to us today, and a number of scenarios would have been possible. For example, the German fleet movements could have indicated an outbreak of hostilities in the North Atlantic. This was certainly the view in Oslo and London; an intelligence lapse which sent the Royal Navy on the wrong tack and gave the German navy a free run to the fjords of western Norway. The ships could also be seen as a response to the British mining operation of that morning, directed at Norway or specific parts of Norway. There had been open speculation in the last few days in the Danish and international press about a possible counterattack of this kind and the idea was supported by reports that the German fleet was heading for Norway. In either eventuality, there

were good reasons for Copenhagen to hope that the operation would bypass Denmark. In this context, the German division south of the border could be seen as a military back-up for a diplomatic request for transit for German troops through Jutland on the way to Norway. An invasion into Jutland of this nature could occur without any warning, but it was commonly believed that Berlin would first issue an ultimatum, which would give time to negotiate. In the government's view, this was the most likely scenario the night before 9 April. Neither the politicians nor the army envisaged the situation that actually resulted, namely a total invasion of the country, without any warning. Here, the strategic plan combined with historical experience and general wishful thinking acted as a bar to the correct perception of what was happening. When judging the government's behaviour, however, it is important to remember that no matter what scenario was adopted, it would still have to exercise the utmost care to avoid provoking Germany. The German ambassador, who knew as little about Operation Weserübung as the Danish government (he was only informed of it by courier late on the evening of 8 April) and who shared the Danish assessment of the situation, warned Munch repeatedly throughout the day against any actions that could sow doubts about the sustainability of Danish neutrality and force the Wehrmacht to intervene.

Therefore, the government again rejected the Army Supreme Command's request for mobilisation, which would actually, at the eleventh hour, have created chaos. Furthermore, the troops were kept away from the border to avoid accidental shooting incidents that might lead to a warlike situation that would be out of the government's control. It was also in accordance with this line that, on the morning of 9 April, the Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet circumvented operational instructions and ordered ships in Copenhagen not to fire without further orders. At a meeting with party leaders on the evening of 8 April, which had been called in order to pacify the Opposition, Munch stated unequivocally that Denmark could not wage war against Germany or Britain and that Denmark must thus, according to Munch's neo-neutral line, remain neutral, even if there were German troops inside the country. This meant yet again that the important thing was to avoid violence likely to jeopardise the search for a non-violent solution. It was obvious that any armed resistance would be merely symbolic. As a result, every effort would be made to maintain neutrality in the form of non-participation in the war within the tight limits that would be imposed by the acceptance of a foreign occupation.

CAPITULATION

On 9 April, at 4.15 a.m., German troops advanced across the border and there were minor skirmishes with Danish units. In all, sixteen Danish soldiers were killed. Parachute troops landed in Ålborg, and the most important ports were occupied. The small Danish air force was destroyed on the ground. A warship conquered the capital without a shot being fired. At the same time, the German ambassador went to the foreign secretary with an ultimatum demanding an immediate laying down of arms. In return, Germany promised to 'preserve Denmark's territorial integrity and political independence'. This promise should be seen in relation to the necessity of acquiring as speedy and painless a control of Denmark as possible. The chief government ministers met the king and the military commanders and after a brief consultation decided to accept the ultimatum under protest. The king asked whether, considering the reaction in other countries, there had been enough resistance. Munch thought that armed conflict would make no difference at all. The Army Supreme Commander wanted the fight to be continued from North Zealand, but this was rejected. At around 6 p.m., the order went out for a ceasefire.

In this way the so-called peaceful occupation, *occupatio pacifica*, came into being, which by and large lasted until the end of the Second World War. It would be wrong to say that it had been a foregone conclusion. Alternative situations and different German plans could have changed the course of events, as was the case in Norway, where the Nazi Quisling suddenly appeared on the scene and destroyed their 'Danish' solution. But there it is clear that the German offer of non-interference and continued non-participation in the war went hand in hand with Munch's concept. In that respect, capitulation was a logical consequence of historical experience and a historical tradition. Seen in this light, the government's strategy throughout April 1940 showed a marked continuity and a clear, rational coherence between ends and means, in the handling of the threat, in the anticipation of the attack, and in the response to the invasion.

CONTINUITY AND BREACHES IN THE DANISH POLICY
OF NEUTRALITY

The government and official Denmark, supported by the population in general, responded to the peaceful occupation of 1940 by following a

line of collaboration and appeasement, the greatest virtue of which was that it allowed Denmark to emerge from the war as the occupied country in Hitler's Europe which had suffered least harm and destruction. On the basis of the fiction that it retained its neutrality and sovereignty, Denmark succeeded in holding on to its democratic institutions and in containing German repression for the longest period of time. At the material level, too, it succeeded in maintaining a higher level of welfare than that in Germany. The price was a pro-German line which, despite its involuntary nature, harnessed Denmark to the German war machine, morally, politically and, not least, economically. The opponents of collaboration from 1942 consisted of extreme nationalists and Communists and other left-wingers, who from the 1930s had opposed the policy towards Germany and who became the nucleus of an organised resistance. In August 1943, the pro-Allies mood in the population exploded in a revolt that forced the government and parliament to step back and allow the resistance movement to take charge. The movement's main organ, the Danish Freedom Council, declared war on Germany and embraced the Western Allies' invasion strategy. For both foreign policy and domestic reasons, the politicians had to adjust to the new centre of power, but from the wings they tried to contain the Freedom Council's war programme as far as they could.

After the German capitulation, the old political system was quickly restored to power. Denmark was recognised as an Allied Power and joined the UN with the flag flying high. Under the slogan 'Never again a 9 April', the resistance movement had demanded a break with the isolationist neutrality policy from before the war, but it is difficult to distinguish between the so-called 'bridge-building policy' between East and West from 1945 to 1948 and the earlier, alliance-free defence policy. When the Cold War forced Denmark to choose sides, the first response was to try and form a Nordic defence pact with Norway and Sweden. The great advantage of this was that Scandinavia would be able to remain a neutral bloc at a time of increased international tension. It was therefore not so much an act of positive enthusiasm as a choice of the lesser of two evils that the government committed Denmark to membership of NATO after the breakdown of negotiations between the Nordic countries.

Political and historical literature has viewed the membership of NATO in April 1949 as a decisive break with a foreign policy that had prevailed for two hundred years, but the latest studies of Denmark's role in NATO draw particular attention to the elements of continuity. This may be

seen, for example, in the attempts of successive governments to preserve Scandinavia as an area of low tension and their efforts to tone down a more aggressive American policy that might provoke the Soviet Union and threaten Denmark's vulnerable position on the north-eastern flank of NATO. These elements of lie-low policy and non-provocative behaviour show fidelity to the policy of neutrality and thereby the importance of historical experience and geographical factors in the shaping of Denmark's defence policy.⁶

⁶ For a discussion of Denmark's policy of non-provocation in NATO see Poul Villaume, *Allieret med forbehold. Danmark, NATO og den kolde krig. En studie i dansk sikkerhedspolitik 1949-1961* (Copenhagen, 1994).