For Denmark, the most momentous experience of the twentieth century was the five years of German occupation during the Second World War. As a crisis in the political history of the country, it was in some respects comparable to the two major traumas of the nineteenth century, namely the unfortunate involvement in the later stages of the Napoleonic Wars and the disastrous defeat in the war with the German Confederation half a century later. As in those earlier crises, the impact of the war profoundly affected the Danish conception of the international situation of the country and influenced its foreign policy for a long time.

But the nature of the experience of invasion, occupation and liberation, and its effects on the national psyche and future foreign policy, made it very different from the two low points in the earlier century. Both the involvement with Napoleonic France and the war with Bismarck’s Prussia in 1864 led to defeat and very substantial losses of territory and population. After 1814 and, even more so, after 1864 Denmark went through a crisis of anxiety about survival as a sovereign state. In both situations the most significant political outcome was a reinforcement of an already existing tendency to try to steer clear of European power politics. On the other hand, the period of German occupation, which was marked initially by reluctant cooperation with the authorities of the occupying power but later also by growing active resistance, led to a national soul-searching and a reconsideration of the country’s role in international relations. One outcome was a tentative revival of a much older tradition of Danish foreign policy, which had been characterized by a more active engagement in the international politics of the region. However, the inclination inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, towards disengagement and neutrality in international conflict, survived. Thus the years of occupation became a quasi turning-point in the history of Danish foreign policy.

For much of the second half of the twentieth century Danish politics became marked by a recurrent debate between those who sought
a fuller and more committed involvement in the policies and activities of the Western alliance and a more willing participation in the drive towards a degree of European integration and, on the other hand, those who stuck to a more cautious and hesitant line in both NATO and EC relations. Thus, in periods of the East–West conflict, the alliance and security policies as well as the European policy of the country often came to appear half-hearted. The debate continued, though in a lower key, after the end of the cold war, when it at stages came to focus on Danish participation in the US-led wars against Iraq and Afghanistan.

Throughout, the issue was essentially between those who recognized that the wider issues of international politics were crucial enough for Denmark to engage actively in the conflicts and pursuits of the region and those who were content with guarding customary Danish values and interests by keeping a low profile in international politics. In terms of party politics, the division between the former and the latter was largely between right-of-centre and left-of-centre sections of the Danish political spectrum.

On a more intellectual level, the debate may even be seen as roughly reflected in the works of historians and other writers dealing with the Danish reactions to German occupation. The first post-war writings on that subject, most of them written by people who identified with the resistance movement, tended to present the period of occupation as a picture of growing resistance backed by wide popular support, and to give less attention to the presence of cooperation with the German authorities and divisions of opinion in the country. The first wave of revisionist writings queried the strength and efficacy of the resistance, cast doubt on the degree of support it enjoyed and often took a more sympathetic view of the policy and practice of governmental and administrative cooperation with the enemy. A later revisionist wave subjected the resistance movement to criticism more on moral grounds, condemning in particular the practice of shooting informers, and dealt sympathetically with various sets of individuals who, in one way or another, had engaged in personal collaboration with agents of the occupying power. The first post-war historians, to the extent that they accepted the goals and means of the resistance, were in tune with those who advocated a more active engagement in international politics. The revisionists, judging by their antipathies as well as their sympathies, on the whole seemed closer to those who kept an eye on the narrow and immediate interests of the Danish people and opted for a more passive or minimal role in foreign politics.
In more recent years the historical debate intensified, with not only historians and writers but also some politicians and other prominent persons, including a few survivors of the resistance, taking part. The behaviour of the Danes during those five years, at official as well as more private and individual levels, once again became the subject of heated exchanges in the media. Now, more than 70 years after the end of the occupation, the politics and morality of the people who lived through it still seem to be divisive issues, for scholars as well as a wider public.

That the conflict between cooperation and resistance under occupation remains unresolved may be seen as evidence of a profound ambivalence in the mentality of a people conditioned by traumatic defeats and losses and split between opposite reactions to conflict and crisis. On a deeper level of analysis, however, the issue can be understood in terms of the history and geography of a country for centuries burdened with the predicament of being a small state in an exposed strategic location.

The aims of the present study are, first, to consider the whole range of Danish reactions to German occupation, from willing collaboration at one end to armed resistance at the other; then to examine the long debate since 1945 and explore the political and moral dimensions of both the policy of cooperation and the course of resistance; and finally to view those opposite positions in the context of traditional ideas and attitudes relating to conflict and war. It follows that a brief preparatory overview of the trends of thought and tendencies of behaviour that came to characterize Danish conduct of external relations in the centuries preceding the invasion of Denmark in 1940 will be useful.