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Traumas and trends

The foremost watershed in the history of Danish–Norwegian and Danish foreign policy is the end of the Great Northern War in 1720. In the centuries before that year Denmark–Norway, with Iceland and Greenland, colonies in the Caribbean, India and West Africa and a powerful navy, played a very active part in the politics of the region. As a major power situated by the Baltic Sea, it fought aggressive and defensive wars, mostly against Sweden, and gained and lost territories. In the centuries following 1720 Denmark–Norway, and later Denmark, adopted an increasingly passive role in European politics. Taking leave of one means after another of conducting foreign policy, the kingdom gradually resigned itself to the fate of a small state. While becoming ever more preoccupied with international trade, international law, international morality and international organization, Denmark eventually came close to turning its back on international politics.

The retreat from power politics, which went on till the middle of the twentieth century, comprised several stages. Each stage may be defined by reference to the character of the policy pursued by the kingdom in conflicts among the European powers. The first one lasted from the end of the Great Northern War to the country’s involuntary involvement in the Napoleonic Wars in 1807. During this long period Denmark–Norway managed to secure neutral status in the various wars that occurred. However, while steering clear of actual hostilities between the emerging great powers, it participated in the shifting alliances of the European balance of power, which was possible under the loose and rather accommodating rules of neutrality then prevailing. The second stage began at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and finished soon after the First World War. Apart from its own wars with its southern neighbours, Denmark again stayed neutral in all wars in this period. But its position among the powers changed. While most of the time armed with fairly substantial
military forces, the country was now so isolated that it played only a minimal role in the working of the balance of power. The last stage of the Danish retreat from international politics lasted from the initial years of the League of Nations to the later part of the Second World War. In this period Denmark remained diplomatically isolated, but now based its policy of neutrality on extremely weak military foundations.

Apart from 1720 itself, the most formative years in the history of Danish foreign policy were 1814, when the kingdom lost Norway to Sweden only half a dozen years after losing its navy to Britain; 1864, when German forces defeated the Danes and all of Schleswig-Holstein went to Prussia; and 1914, when Denmark declared strict neutrality in the hostilities but gave Germany certain assurances. While the events marked by the year 1814 dwarfed the kingdom and those of 1864 checked its territorial ambitions, the conjuncture of 1914 established Denmark on its course of disengagement and neutrality. Twenty-five years later, when another major war broke out in its vicinity, Denmark again declared its neutrality, in the hope that this policy would once more see the country through the hostilities unscathed. Instead, it led to German invasion and five years of occupation. That experience started a debate about the prudence and morality of Danish international conduct which is not yet over.

Though a member of one or other of the great European alliance systems most of the time since 1720, Denmark did not become involved in the actual hostilities of any of the major wars during the period. Despite several close shaves, it also managed to avoid wars with its northern and North German neighbours. Thus, much of the time during more than 80 years of peace Denmark was in the fortunate position of being able to concentrate its international efforts on the economic interests of the country. When major powers were at war, it could carry on its shipping and develop its commerce, and enjoy the advantages of increased demand for such services brought about by the war. This lenient and prolonged experience of European politics was bound to affect the style of the kingdom’s diplomacy and the nature of its foreign policy, and perhaps even the Danish conception of international politics in general.

In playing the European balance of power cautiously and defensively, and exploiting the absence of established conventions of neutrality through skilful bargaining with belligerents, Denmark developed a decidedly pragmatic and opportunistic form of diplomacy. ‘To plead our case and steal our way through as best we can,’ as O.H. Guldberg, head of government from 1780 to 1784, once put it, became the Danish way.¹
The circumstance that Denmark, usually enjoying the protection or support of some powerful ally, often could afford to devote its efforts to championing the rights and exploiting the advantages of neutrals tended to give its foreign policy a mercenary character. In crisis or war, when some other states might have to struggle for security and survival, Denmark could go on enriching itself. The prosperity that the kingdom enjoyed in the second half of the century helped to substantiate the notion of foreign policy as largely a pursuit of economic interests.

The long-lasting combination of peace and prosperity also helped to foster a conception of international politics as essentially a competition for economic advantage, rather than a rivalry for power and struggle for survival. Among those responsible for shaping and directing the kingdom’s foreign policy it may even have given rise to a certain smugness about Danish conduct in European affairs. In a confidential letter written in 1757, J.H.E. Bernstorff, who conducted the foreign policy of the kingdom from 1751 to 1770, told a friend that ‘a war started without just reason – I will go even further: without necessity, seems to me to be the most dreadful of all decisions that human beings could take’. In retrospect, eighteenth-century Danish neutrality may be seen as not only the first phase of a withdrawal from European power politics, but also as the beginning of what might be described as a process of sentimentalizing the nature of international relations. Though the sovereign identity, territorial extent, political system and social structure of Denmark, as well as the international conditions of Europe, all changed, that process continued in the following centuries.

1.1 1814

In the final decades of the first long period of neutrality distinguished here, the diplomatic situation of Denmark–Norway worsened considerably. During the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars it soon became more difficult to secure the basic interests of the kingdom by playing the European balance of power the way earlier statesmen had done, and sometimes also more dangerous to champion the rights and exploit the advantages of neutrals. Having tried, in rapidly changing international circumstances, to steer a safe course between great-power rivals and, at the same time, uphold its preferred principles of neutrality, Denmark ended up as an ally of Napoleonic France. The seven years of war that followed started with a major disaster for the kingdom and ended with an even greater one.
In the crises and wars of the earlier part of the period, Denmark had predominantly followed its own neutral course, which on the whole had been cautious and defensive. In the later decades, however, it moved, sometimes by force of events and sometimes deliberately, towards a collective and more offensive policy of neutrality. In 1794 Denmark and Sweden signed a neutrality convention, and in the following years demonstrated their willingness jointly to defend their neutral status in the French Revolutionary War. However, while making the most of the economic opportunities presented by a war which involved all the great powers of Europe, the Danish government refused to provide convoys for its ships and avoided challenging Britain diplomatically.

This measure of restraint disappeared after 1797, when crown prince Frederick as regent took over the direction of foreign policy. Within a year his government provided convoys and ordered commanding officers to refuse visitations by belligerent powers, and if necessary to back the refusal with armed force. Eventually the new policy led to clashes in the Mediterranean between Danish convoys and ships of the British navy. When the British government reacted, the Danes refused to back down, and maintained the principle of the inviolability of neutral convoys in the expectation that Denmark would have the support of Russia, which by then had left the coalition against France. While Denmark appealed to Russia to revive the Armed Neutrality League of 1780, Britain sent a diplomat to Copenhagen to enforce an agreement. Faced with a threat of bombardment by a squadron of the British navy, the Danish government gave way temporarily. Shortly thereafter the tsar invited Denmark, Sweden and Prussia to join Russia in re-establishing an Armed Neutrality League, a principal aim of which would be to enforce the inviolability of neutral convoys. Hopeful that such an alignment would lead to a negotiated settlement with Britain and a formal acknowledgement of the principles of neutrality that Denmark had long been championing, the Danish government decided to accept the invitation.

However, far from strengthening its bargaining position by this move, Denmark soon ended up a victim of new developments in the relationships of the great powers. While tension between Russia and Britain rapidly rose, the tsar and Napoleon moved closer to each other. Denmark, aware that Sweden had been trying to secure Russian support for an attempt to conquer Norway, recognized that it would be geopolitically dependent on Russia in an armed conflict between Britain and the two strongest powers on the Continent. So when Britain sent a fleet to Danish waters and presented an offer of a defensive alliance,
the government refused, and engaged in an unequal battle with Nelson’s squadron at Copenhagen. In the armistice negotiations it procrasti-
nated, and accepted the British terms only after the death of Tsar Paul
and the succession of his pro-British son Alexander I.

A few months later Denmark’s diplomatic situation became even
more difficult. In a Russo–British convention Alexander renounced not
only the principle of the inviolability of neutral convoys but also the
rather more important one of ‘free ship, free cargo’ which Denmark had
championed for generations. Unable to secure a release of the Danish
ships captured and a return of the colonies occupied by Britain during
the hostilities unless it accepted unconditionally the terms of the con-
vention, the government gave in to the pressures of the two powers and
accepted the British terms only after the death of Tsar Paul and the
succession of his pro-British son Alexander I.

Thus, when four years later Denmark found itself exposed to dip-
ломatic pressures even severer than those experienced after Frederick
assumed responsibility for foreign policy it had little to do with the
nature of its neutrality policy. The reason was another realignment
of the great powers. Following the defeat of the Russian army by the
French in 1807, the tsar signed a peace treaty by which he undertook
to accede to the Continental System of blockade and to join Napoleon
in forcing the remaining neutrals to close their ports to all British ship-
ping. A month later Denmark received ultimatums from both France
and Britain, each of which presented the government with the choice
between becoming an ally and being treated as an enemy. For Britain,
the real concern was with the Danish navy, which, if it fell under French
control, would complicate British naval movements and economic war-
fare. Hence the British government demanded that Denmark either
became an ally and put its navy under British command or handed it
over as a pledge of Danish neutrality. When the crown prince turned
down the ultimatum, a British fleet prepared to blockade Zealand and
landed troops north of Copenhagen. The Danish government responded
by declaring war. After encirclement of Copenhagen and three days of
bombardment of the capital, the Danes requested a cease-fire. When
the British left they took with them, as their property, the entire Danish
navy and its equipment.

Without its navy, Denmark felt compelled to accept the French ulti-
matum and join France and its allies in the war. In the treaty alliance,
Napoleon promised his support in case of an attack on Denmark and guaranteed the territorial integrity of the kingdom, while the Danish government undertook to join the Continental System and, together with France and Russia, declare war on Sweden to force it to follow suit. Thus Denmark, after generations of neutrality, peace and prosperity, ended up actively involved in a major European war.

The later years of that war became increasingly foreboding for Denmark. In 1810, when marshal Bernadotte was made an heir to the Swedish throne under the name of Carl Johan, the old idea of taking Norway away from Denmark received new impetus in Stockholm. Over the next few years Frederick VI, as the crown prince had become in 1808, and his advisers were disturbed by news of successive Swedish plans for taking possession of Norway, and at one stage also parts of Denmark itself, with the support of one or more of the great powers. However, they were still inclined to rely on the guarantee of Napoleon, who renewed the alliance treaty in 1812. But after the subsequent defeats of the French army in Russia the insecurity of Denmark became more obvious. The king, still focusing narrowly on the possession of Norway, maintained his confidence in the military genius of Napoleon and decided to remain his ally. On the other hand, the Danish foreign minister and several other advisers, now increasingly apprehensive for the very survival of the state, feared the possibility of their country ending up as the ally of a defeated Napoleon and wanted Denmark to seek support elsewhere. The immediate anxiety about the loss of Norway and the deeper fear of a deprivation of independent statehood became the twin preoccupations in Danish circles in the final stages of the war and first years of the peace.

Early in 1814 the peace treaty with Sweden was signed in Kiel. Denmark had to hand over all of Norway, but – apparently as a result of the pressure of time and an oversight by the Swedish negotiator – kept Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands. As compensation it received Swedish Pomerania, which however went to Prussia in the subsequent Vienna settlement. Instead Frederick VI was made duke of Lauenburg. In the peace settlement with Britain, various colonies were returned to Denmark, but not the navy; and the island of Heligoland went to Britain. As part of the post-Napoleonic settlement of Germany, Holstein and Lauenburg joined the new German Confederation, where their representative in the Diet became the Danish sovereign.

Thus, 1814 marked one of the lowest points in modern Danish history. Only seven years after the seizure of its navy and one year after the financial bankruptcy of the kingdom, Denmark lost about two
thirds of its territory (Greenland excluded) and one third of its population. Domestically, poverty and unemployment added to the burden. As the great loser of the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark found itself isolated and exposed when peace returned. For some time, its very survival as an independent state seemed at stake. A Norwegian rebellion against the transition to Sweden, which raised doubts about the role of the Danish government and led the great powers to set up a commission to determine its responsibility for the events in Norway, gave Carl Johan another opportunity to pursue his project of securing the Danish islands, Zealand in particular, for Sweden. The Russians, too, seemed to present a threat. After their peace with Denmark they left an army in Holstein, which gradually grew bigger and eventually occupied nearly all of the duchy. Thus, on the eve of the Congress of Vienna, which the king attended uninvited, there was a real fear in Denmark that the country might be about to suffer a fate comparable to that of Poland in the eighteenth century. For a while, defeatism set in.

Only a few months later, however, the danger began to recede. The tsar, satisfied with developments in Norway, ratified the peace and started to withdraw his troops. The fear of a military attack from Sweden lingered for some time yet. However, once the central issue became payment of the Norwegian part of the debt of the Danish kingdom the tension between the two countries took on a rather different character. In the early 1820s relations with Sweden began to improve, after the great powers had put pressure on the Swedish king to settle the outstanding matter. As a co-signatory of the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, Denmark now enjoyed the protection of what later became known as the Concert of Europe. For the following decades Denmark had no potential enemy.

From the mid-1820s Denmark became increasingly inclined to turn its back on international politics and to involve itself in domestic affairs alone. As in some other parts of Europe in the restoration period, those were the Biedermeier years in Danish political and social life. To say that Denmark had no foreign policy, a historian of the period considered, would be only partly true of the years from 1824 to 1831, but entirely true of the following years.³ Denmark simply took care to keep its balance among the great powers. That required a little more skill in the 1830s, when tension between the two liberal powers in the west and the three autocratic powers in the east of Europe compelled Denmark to keep the lowest possible profile in diplomacy, than it had done in the 1820s. Maintaining such a balance allowed the government to concentrate its international efforts on trade and transport.
Official preoccupation with economic matters reflected not only the relative calm of European politics in those years but also a change in the character and attitudes of the foreign ministers of the country. Niels Rosenkrantz, who had advised the king in matters of foreign policy during most of the years of the alliance with Napoleonic France and had stayed in office until 1824, had been in the aristocratic, cosmopolitan tradition of the eighteenth century. His successors, the first of whom was Ernst Schimmelmann, identified more with the commercial interests of the wealthy circles at a slightly lower level of Danish society.

The age of restoration was the first part of the second long period of Danish foreign policy distinguished here, which lasted more than a hundred years. If in the eighteenth century the kingdom had been a power of the third rank, in the course of this period it became simply a small state. The most obvious reason was the succession of losses suffered. However, it was also the result of certain changes in the structure and organization of the European states system which made the difference between great powers and other sovereign states more marked than before. The four principal allies of the coalition that had defeated Napoleon, together with France itself, were clearly superior in terms of power to all other states in Europe. The dominant role assumed at the Congress of Vienna also gave them a new status in the society of states. Moreover, their subsequent efforts at joint management of European politics, initially through the congress system of the post-war decade and later through the looser Concert of Europe, lent them some of the qualities of a class in international society. Various changes of relative power among the great powers themselves, first the decline of Russia in the earlier part of the period and, more important, the rise of Germany in the later age, further weakened the diplomatic position of Denmark.

As in most of the eighteenth century, Denmark stayed out of the wars of the great powers throughout this period. But it now moved one step further away from the kind of active participation in European politics that so often had characterized its foreign policy in the centuries before 1720. It no longer entered into military alliances. One reason was that the country now had so little to offer others that it was barely worthy of an alliance. However, in the course of the century, particularly after 1870, Danish governments made a virtue of necessity by adopting a policy of isolation. Prudently staying neutral in the conflicts of others, they became increasingly inclined to present this policy in a legal and moral framework. Thus Danish neutrality, which in the eighteenth century had been more a practice of diplomacy, eventually became also an ideology of foreign policy.
When Denmark did go to war again in the nineteenth century it was not as an ally of a great power in a European war but as principal in a local conflict, bent on defending or pursuing vital interests by its southern border. In the course of the quiet years in European politics tension had begun to rise again in many parts of the Continent, both within and between states. Motivated by the new forces of liberalism and nationalism, growing pressures had been directed against the dynastic and territorial order imposed by the victorious powers at the Congress of Vienna. Both the national politics and the international relations of Denmark became affected too. Early in 1848 the new king, Frederick VII, responded to political pressure by voluntarily putting an end to absolutism and starting a process that eventually led to constitutional government. One result was that National Liberal leaders soon secured a dominating influence on the foreign policy of the country. Almost immediately they became involved in a crisis in the relations between Denmark and the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein.

Nationalist stirrings in the two duchies had given rise to a movement which sought to separate Schleswig from Denmark, unite it with Holstein under a joint constitution and take it into the German Confederation. The policy of the new Danish government, on the other hand, was to unite Schleswig with Denmark. After a rebellion in the duchies, the government went to war on the programme of ‘Denmark to the Ejder’, the river separating Schleswig from Holstein. Shortly it found itself engaged in hostilities not only with the recalcitrant duchies but also with Prussia and the loose German Confederation. The Danish forces fought with patriotic enthusiasm and wide popular support. But, as the war progressed, disagreement about its aims developed among the Danish government, the armed forces, the diplomatic service and even the king, who found it difficult to accept his new constitutional role. The disagreement became even more pronounced in the peace negotiations. Eventually, after the Conservatives had gained more influence in the government at the expense of the National Liberals, the Ejder programme was abandoned. Instead the government accepted an arrangement which gave the kingdom three separate units: Denmark, Schleswig and Holstein. This outcome, agreed in 1852, presented a constitutional problem for the government, the solution of which became the principal concern of Danish foreign policy for the next dozen years.

The general idea behind successive Danish attempts to solve the problem was to order relations between the three units of the kingdom in
a way which could provide a lasting framework for national development and the best possible protection against German interference. Reflecting a revival in the influence of the National Liberals, the efforts became increasingly aimed at tying Schleswig closer to Denmark and giving Holstein a separate status. This revival of the Ejder policy was in conflict with the agreement of 1852, and acceptable to neither Holstein nor the German Confederation, which threatened to occupy Holstein. Prussia favoured a solution which involved a division of Schleswig. The Danish government, expecting that long-standing rivalry between Austria and Prussia would prevent the Confederation from intervening militarily, persisted with its policy, in the hope that a crisis would lead to a great-power conference and a satisfactory settlement. Here it had the support of the press, the people and most politicians. Following a German invasion of Schleswig, war broke out again in 1864. Denmark fought defensively with a view to bringing about an international conference. But when a conference eventually did meet, the Danes again found it difficult to agree on a policy. In the course of the conference, the differences between the king, the government and the foreign ministry became increasingly marked. In the end Prussia and Austria imposed a peace of their own, with the result that two years later Schleswig-Holstein became a province of Prussia.

When the king, following the defeat of the Danish forces and the poor performance of the diplomats, had to give up the two duchies and cede Lauenburg, the kingdom lost about two fifths of its territory and approximately one million of its inhabitants. The loss of Schleswig was particularly painful to the nation. A despair of the sort that had set in 50 years earlier returned. Among politicians it was widely feared that Denmark might not be able to survive as an independent state. Since so much of Danish territory had been lost already, perhaps all of Jutland would be taken on some future occasion. Such fears reasserted themselves half a dozen years later, when some thought that Bismarck, following his defeat of France and the unification of Germany, might go on to conquer all of Denmark. Gradually, the darkest forebodings receded. Yet, some events in the next few decades, in particular the repeal of paragraph 5 of the Peace of Prague of 1866, which had allowed for the possibility of Denmark some time in the future regaining part of Schleswig through a plebiscite, and the treatment of the Danish minority south of the new border, did little to remove Danish anxiety. In the longer run, of course, the sources of lasting Danish insecurity in the half century after 1864 were not merely the growing strength and self-assertive policies of Bismarckian Prussia and imperial Germany but also the rising tension among the great powers of Europe.
Whereas Danish concerns about survival after 1814 could be put to rest within a few years thanks to the territorial stability introduced by the Vienna treaties and maintained through the relative solidarity of the great powers, after 1864 it became much more difficult to rely on the great powers for ultimate security. While the development of Bismarck's alliance system tended to divide Europe, his successors' excursions into world politics helped to intensify rivalry among the great powers in global as well as European politics. A further source of insecurity for Denmark was the relative decline of Russia as a great power. In the earlier part of the century after 1814 the kingdom had sometimes relied on the tsar for diplomatic support in critical situations, even as late as the difficult years from 1848 to 1852. After the Russian setback in the Crimean War this was no longer quite so possible. The Russian defeat in the war with Japan in 1904–05 left Denmark even more isolated diplomatically. By then Danish governments could not escape the conclusion that their country was firmly within the German sphere of influence, in a Europe which seemed to be growing increasingly dangerous for a small state.

In the long run, Danish reactions to the trauma of 1864 were of several kinds. First, there was a marked introversion of national efforts. ‘What is lost outwards must be gained inwards’ became the watchword of the nation. Through education – of adults as well as children – religion, literature and art, the spiritual level of the people was raised. Through land reclamation, more efficient agriculture, improved transport, modernized commerce and industrial initiatives the material resources of the country were developed. In the later decades of the century the foundations were laid for the prosperous and egalitarian Denmark that was to take shape in the twentieth century.

Second, there was a thorough adjustment to the external situation of the country after the Prussian victories and the establishment of the German Reich. Bismarck’s defeat of France in the war of 1870–71 soon put an end to Danish dreams of taking revenge for 1864 and recovering Schleswig – or a substantial part of it. Instead rules were developed for living next to a forceful and assertive great power. As early as 1878 J.B.S. Estrup, Conservative president of the council, asserted that Denmark in its diplomacy ought to move close enough to Germany to leave no doubt that it would be on the side of this power in a major war – ‘in any case never against it’. In the following decades Denmark, out of respect for the preponderance of its neighbour, desisted from pursuing the cause of the Danes living south of the border. After 1901 Liberal governments, in particular that formed by J.C. Christensen in 1905, found it necessary
to steer so close to Germany in their foreign policies that they in effect compromised the neutral position of the state. This policy of accepting German hegemony came to a head with the outbreak of major war in 1914.

Third, in the last decade of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth centuries some politicians tried to secure permanently peaceful relations with all other states through the introduction of two measures available under international law, namely neutralization and arbitration. In Danish political thought, the idea that a country might save itself from the worst calamities that could befall a member of an anarchical society of states by declaring itself perpetually neutral in the conflicts of others, and having such status recognized or even guaranteed by the great powers, can be traced back to 1864. Amid the despair following the defeat, the government instructed its representatives at the peace negotiations to seek a permanent neutralization of the country. The victors rejected the proposal; and the idea played no real part in politics again till the 1890s. By then the idea, together with that of arbitration, had become part of the programme of the Danish peace movement. The Liberal party adopted it, and had it included as a goal in the foreign policy and defence programme drawn up for a landmark parliamentary agreement reached in 1894. But it was not until after 1901, when the parliamentary system finally gained acceptance and the Liberals formed a government for the first time, that the party was able to pursue the status of neutralization actively. The Hague Peace Conference in 1899 and certain other developments a few years later gave some encouragement to those working for the idea. But by 1905, when the government resigned, it was clear that it was not possible to obtain adequate great-power support for its realization. Though the goal had to be dropped, pursuing it in a critical situation of European politics had underlined Denmark’s determination to remain neutral in any future military conflict of the great powers.

While the quest for neutralization may be seen as inspired by a disposition to contract out of international politics, the pursuit of arbitration was motivated more by a desire for the reform of international society. The idea of reducing the occurrence of violent conflict in international society by signing treaties for the settlement of disputes through the process of arbitration had been developed and canvassed by the international peace movement in the later part of the century and had been given some impetus from a diplomatic initiative by the United States in 1890. While the initial aims were to set up a network of arbitration conventions and establish a European or international court of arbitration,
the ultimate goal was an international society regulated by law, rather than by force. For Denmark, a small state in a precarious geopolitical situation, this was a particularly attractive goal. Having previously been brought up for public discussion in the 1880s, after 1890 the principle of arbitration became a subject of more serious debate between parliament and government. The principal champions were members of the Liberal party, who demanded that the government enter into treaties of arbitration with other countries. But the Social Democrats and later also the Radical Liberals, who formed a party in 1905, gave their support too. After the Hague Peace Conference of 1899 Denmark signed a considerable number of permanent treaties of arbitration. By then many Liberals, Social Democrats and Radical Liberals, representing, respectively, the farmers, the workers and the smallholders of the nation, were inclined to see the twin principles of arbitration and neutralization as offering an alternative to traditional defence and security policy.

In most of the post-Napoleonic period of European restoration, which had been an age of international order, peace and security, the concerns of Danish foreign policy had been largely of an economic nature, relating to commerce and prosperity more than anything else. In the middle part of the century, a period of growing nationalism in Europe and moderate rivalry and limited wars among the great powers, the goals had been essentially political, concerned with vital interests and national security. In the later decades of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries, when tension among the great powers was rising and Danish dependence on Germany increasing, the ends often pursued most vigorously were of a more ideological kind. They were addressed to the quality of external relations and the norms of international society. While both of the earlier sets of goals had been confined within the current state of the international system – the first aimed at drawing advantage from it and the second at providing security against it – the later set transcended the international conjuncture. It not only proposed legal measures for improving the existing situation of the country but also projected ideals for international society in general, pre-eminently peace and justice.

Thus, while the governmental response to the external pressure presented by German preponderance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stayed within the narrow limitations of geopolitical considerations, some projections of the goals of Danish foreign policy in the same years transcended the usual confines of international politics and soared into the spheres of international law and international morality. A remarkable optimism in the framing of ideological goals
coexisted with a marked pessimism in the formation of security policy. In retrospect, both attitudes may be seen as indicating a reluctance, or inability, to accept the basic terms of international politics. While the more idealistic pursuits of reform in international relations seem to have taken too little account of the limitations imposed by the nature of politics among sovereign states, the ultra-realistic acceptance of the confined external situation of the country apparently left little room for exploring the diplomatic opportunities presented by an international system of rivalling great powers. Danish attitudes to, and thoughts about, foreign affairs in the period leading up to the First World War suggest that an over-optimistic idealism, apt to encourage futile pursuits, and an over-pessimistic realism, conducive to fatalistic passivity, can be alternative, and complementary, ways of contracting out of the international politics of a given historical situation.

1.3 1914

The real test of Danish neutrality came in 1914. Towards the end of July, when a great-power conflict seemed imminent, the Radical Liberal government consulted the leaders of the other parties, and found they all agreed that the only possible policy for Denmark would be a strict and impartial neutrality. When war broke out, early in August, the government issued a series of declarations of neutrality, relating to the several great-power conflicts. However, a number of contacts with German authorities had already indicated the nature of Danish neutrality. As early as 30 July a message from Berlin requested ‘a favourable neutrality’, to which the foreign minister Erik Scavenius replied ‘yes of course – to the extent that this can be reconciled with the concept of neutrality itself’.6 On 2 August, before Britain had entered the war, the German minister in Copenhagen asked the foreign minister how Denmark would react to a possible violation of its territorial waters. After intense discussions with the king and representatives of the armed forces, Scavenius presented his answer the following day. The government hoped, he said, that such a violation would not take place. If, through no fault of Germany’s, it nevertheless did, that would make no difference to the position of neutrality assumed by Denmark. ‘In no case,’ he asserted, ‘would Denmark ally itself with the enemy of Germany.’7 Thus the government made its position quite clear. Whoever might violate its neutrality, Denmark would not go to war. It followed not only that the country in no circumstances would be the enemy of Germany but also that it could never become its ally.
On 5 August, after Britain had entered the war, the German minister enquired whether Denmark intended immediately and effectively to close the Great Belt, one of the straits providing access to the Baltic Sea. As the German navy had already started mining the area south of that passage, decision-makers in Copenhagen were inclined to regard the enquiry more as a demand. A refusal, they thought, would be likely to lead the Germans to complete the mining by themselves, in the process perhaps occupying a couple of strategic points in Denmark. All of them anxious to avoid any kind of involvement in the war, most were inclined to accept the demand. But when the parliamentary opposition showed reluctance to support such a decision, the government changed its mind. At this stage the king, encouraged by the chief of the navy who believed in accommodating the Germans, intervened to make the government reverse its decision again. The German minister was given an affirmative answer, and the mines were laid. To assuage the British government, the king, apparently under the impression that the mines would not be charged, sent a message of explanation to his British counterpart. George V was very understanding, as was the British minister in Copenhagen. At this stage of the war Britain had no real intention of entering the Baltic. But now Danish neutrality, in contrast with earlier wars between great powers, rested on closed straits.

The war itself provided further examples of Danish willingness to adjust to German needs. In the autumn of 1914 the government, concerned about the possibility of the war moving into the Baltic, which might lead Germany to occupy some Danish territory, made an attempt to mediate between the various belligerents. When it became clear that there was no way of bringing about a general peace, the Germans encouraged the Danes to explore the possibility of a separate peace between Germany and Russia. Although such a peace could not be in the interest of the Western powers, Denmark maintained its mediating efforts till the summer of 1915, all the time, however, discreetly keeping Britain informed. In 1917, when the intensified naval warfare enhanced the strategic importance of southern Norway and Germany feared a British action in that area, the prospect of a German occupation of Danish territory arose again. To forestall it, the foreign minister offered to put certain Danish islands at the disposal of Germany if the need arose, and once again assured the Germans of his government’s intention to resist any British violation of Danish neutrality. However, while the political leaders broadly accepted the need to pursue a policy of pro-German neutrality, the sympathy of the king (personally quite critical of Germany), the army, the press and the people was overwhelmingly
on the side of Germany’s enemies. With Britain in particular there were many unofficial contacts throughout the war, the flow of military and political intelligence to London from highly placed Danish sources being especially important.

The bias towards Germany did not stop Denmark from championing the rights of neutrals and exploiting the advantages of non-belligerents. In its former efforts, Denmark collaborated with the other Scandinavian countries, mainly through consultation and coordination of attempts. In the first few years of the war the Scandinavian countries, and other small European neutrals, repeatedly approached the United States with a view to gaining American protection for the rights of neutrals. The minimal response of the Americans did not make it any easier for weak European neutrals to resist the diplomatic pressure of belligerent great powers and maintain a strict and impartial neutrality.

In drawing on the economic advantages of non-belligerent states, Denmark was rather more successful. Though highly dependent for its foreign trade on both Britain and Germany, it had considerable bargaining power over each, which it used with remarkable skill. Its negotiators could argue that unless Denmark kept up its exports to Britain, it would not be able to receive the raw materials needed to maintain the supply of agricultural products to Germany. Thus they convinced the Germans that it was not in their interests to continue the embargo on Danish exports to Britain that had been imposed at the outset of the war. Britain, on the other hand, wanted Danish exports enough to accept that an increasing share went to Germany. Within Denmark, the pattern of foreign trade that emerged was of particular benefit to the agricultural interests. But the shipping section, too, benefited from the war, even though a very large part of the merchant navy was requisitioned by the allied powers and many ships were lost.

Notwithstanding the various concessions to Germany, Denmark remained a neutral state. Whereas the Conservative Estrup in 1878 and the Liberal I.C. Christensen in 1907 had envisaged an alliance with Germany as a possibility in an extreme situation, the Radical Liberal leaders of 1914–18 did not go beyond a fairly passive and guarded compliance with German requirements in specific matters and never really considered engaging in the war. Though the government carried out a partial mobilization at the beginning of the war and repeatedly expressed its intention to resist a British violation of Danish neutrality, the Radical Liberal lack of faith in military resources qualified its determination to defend its position with physical means. The anti-militarism of the governing party, which was shared by many Social Democrats,
pointed to the security and defence policy that would take its final form in the following decades.

So did another characteristic of Danish neutrality in the First World War, namely a suggestion of intellectual and moral superiority. As upheld by the Radical Liberal leaders, the policy reflected an inner confidence that the principle of non-involvement in the violent struggles of great powers was in harmony with the intellectual and moral forces that they, in common with a growing number of Social Democrats, believed would be shaping international relations in the twentieth century.

After the end of the war most Danes regarded the policy of neutrality as having been successful. It had kept the country out of war and given it substantial economic advantages, and had done the same for Sweden and Norway. The Radical Liberal government, which remained in office till 1920, now wanted to obtain some lasting protection for the international status of neutral states. Following an abortive revival of the old ideas of neutralization and arbitration, its representatives, together with those of the other Scandinavian nations, concentrated their efforts on influencing the drafting of what became known as the Covenant of a League of Nations projected by the victorious allies. Danish attention focused on the plans for a system of collective security, in particular on article 16 of the draft Covenant, which set out the obligations of members of the proposed League in dealing with a state in breach of the Covenant. The main concern of the government was that a member might find itself automatically obliged to participate in military sanctions. However, it received assurances that, while participation in economic sanctions would be obligatory, in the application of military sanctions the duties of members would not go beyond granting right of passage to those engaged in imposing them.

Early in 1920 the parliament unanimously approved Danish membership of the League of Nations. Yet the new Liberal government continued the endeavours to ease the role of small states in the new organization, and did achieve a few concessions regarding the obligations to participate in economic sanctions and to grant right of passage. Three of the four parts of the programme for maintaining peace among nations laid down in the Covenant, namely peaceful settlement of disputes, disarmament and peaceful change, were in harmony with most Danish thinking about international relations. But the principle of solidarity against aggression and war, on which the fourth part, collective security, rested, remained difficult to accept for large sections of a nation which for more than a hundred years had stayed out of alliances and escaped involvement in major wars.
1.4 1940

As early as the Crimean War, a French critic of Danish policy had described the country as ‘craintif et optimiste’ at one and the same time. That description would apply equally well to Denmark in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, it was in the decades before the First World War, when the concern to reform international society was more urgent and the need to adjust to geopolitical conditions most pressing, that the psychological and philosophical dichotomy in the Danish approach to foreign affairs became most pronounced. The coexistence, in a duality of hope and fear, of a tenacious faith in the advance of international law and order and gloomy apprehensions of war and invasion marked the pre-1914 Danish mind.

The attitudes and policies of Denmark in the third historical period distinguished here, which started a few years after the First and led up to and included most of the Second World War, again contained opposite strands. On the one hand, there was a marked tendency to draw inspiration from the goals and principles of internationalism, of both the liberal and the socialist kind. On the other hand, there was a compulsion to respond to the necessity of geopolitics. In the 1920s, when the state of the world in the eyes of most people in many countries seemed to present substantial grounds for optimism about the consolidation of international society, the former set of ideas was clearly the prevailing influence. But in the 1930s, when Denmark again was exposed to pressure from a powerful and aggressive neighbour, the internationalist creed was soon cast into the shade by a geopolitical determinism more pessimistic than ever before.

In the early 1920s the international situation of Denmark seemed safer than it had been for centuries. The collapse of the Russian government in 1917 and the establishment of five states round the eastern part of the Baltic had reduced Russian pressure on the region. The defeat of Germany in 1918 had removed the pressure from the south. And the subsequent signing of the Versailles peace treaty and setting up of the League of Nations had restored a formal concert of great powers and provided a machinery for maintaining peace among nations. Even later in the post-war decade the situation seemed fairly safe. The Soviet Union did not yet appear to present a serious danger. The eastern boundaries of the two central European powers were protected by the alliance system formed by France and the new states in eastern Europe, while the western borders of Germany were guaranteed by the Locarno system set up in 1925. The following year the pacification and rehabilitation of
Germany was sealed when the Weimar Republic joined the League of Nations. As late as the beginning of the 1930s the international political situation still seemed calm.

A further source of satisfaction for Denmark was the redrawing of its southern boundary in 1920, when, following a plebiscite, North Schleswig was reunited with the rest of the country. At last Denmark could count itself a satiated state. However, the circumstance that the reunification had been effected as part of the Versailles settlement, and not been explicitly endorsed by Germany, was a matter of some concern to the Danish government. When it subsequently attempted to confirm the new border by securing a formal recognition, no German signature was forthcoming. In the 1930s, when Germany increasingly showed signs of its intention to overthrow the Versailles settlement, the status of South Jutland, as the province was known to the Danes, became a source of considerable nervousness in Denmark.

With no threat looming on the political horizon and no further revisionist goal preoccupying the country, it seemed safe for Denmark to reduce its post-war military establishment. In 1922 parliament passed a new defence act, which reduced the number of battalions from 52 to 35, gave up the concentration on the defence of Zealand and confirmed the demolition of the fortification of Copenhagen, which had been carried out already. The act, which was based on the work of a committee set up in 1919, represented a rather one-sided compromise between the Liberal party, in government since 1920, and the Conservatives, who had found it expedient, in terms of parliamentary politics, to accept most of the Liberal proposals. It entailed a sharp reduction in the budgets of both the army and the navy. While the spokesmen of the navy had exerted some influence on the negotiations, the army chiefs had suffered from internal divisions and had played only a minor role in the decision-making. The Radical Liberals and the Social Democrats voted against the bill. While the former wanted an even severer reduction of defence expenditure, the latter advocated disarmament. However, in neither theory nor practice was there much difference between the positions of the two parties. Basically, the leaders of both believed not only that Denmark would be quite unable to defend itself against Germany, the only potential enemy, but also that maintaining armed forces of any significant size would be more likely to provoke than to deter an attack on Denmark. During the 10 years that followed the 1922 act, the two parties repeatedly put forward proposals for unilateral disarmament.

With security and defence not matters of pressing concern, the governments of the 1920s were able to concentrate their efforts in other
fields. In diplomacy, they aimed at staying on fairly good terms with the great powers, particularly with Germany, and keeping out of any wars that might occur. In economic relations, they cultivated the two foremost trading partners, namely Britain, which bought nearly two thirds of Danish exports, and Germany, which supplied more than a third of the imports. In the ideological sphere, they were guided by the values and norms which the nation had inherited from the past. On one level, they upheld the democratic ideals and practices in a world in which rival political ideologies were beginning to establish themselves. On another level, they continued the pursuit of the broad internationalist goals formulated in the later part of the previous period of Danish foreign policy. Here the aim was to develop an international society which would be regulated by law rather than by power and characterized by peace instead of by recurrent wars. The League of Nations provided new machinery for the pursuit of international order. In this forum Denmark concerned itself with the rights of small states in particular. Seeking to protect and develop the rights of the lesser and more numerous members of international society could be seen as an attempt to extend democratic principles to international life.

In the early 1930s, however, signs of a rapid deterioration in the general situation of Europe began to accumulate. The economic difficulties that had plunged the world into a major crisis in the late 1920s persisted. Fascism, already triumphant in Italy, was fast undermining the political structure of the Weimar Republic, Germany’s first experiment with democracy. Adolf Hitler’s accession to power in 1933 signalled a new aggressiveness in German foreign policy. Within only a few years Germany withdrew from the League of Nations, introduced conscription and reorganized the army, and invaded the Rhineland. In 1935–36 Mussolini’s Italy was conquering Abyssinia, and subsequently intervening in the Spanish civil war together with Germany. By the middle of the 1930s Denmark once again found itself in an exposed position.

In October 1936, when Hitler and Mussolini formed the Berlin–Rome Axis, the multiple system of five European great powers took on a triangular shape. In one corner were the two Axis powers, in another the two Western League powers and in the third the Soviet Union. The ideological struggle between fascism, liberal democracy and communism reinforced the diplomatic–strategic triangularity. The shape of the triangle changed several times. In the original configuration the three rival parties were all quite far from each other. But the Anglo–French efforts to appease the dictators, culminating in the Munich agreements of 1938, brought the two League powers and the Axis powers closer to
each other. Later the Nazi–Soviet pact, signed in August 1939, and the outbreak of the war in the West established a bond between the Soviet Union and the Axis powers. Finally, after Germany invaded Russia in June 1941, the Soviet Union joined the Western powers in the military alliance against Germany and its allies.

For Denmark, one of the most significant events in the changing diplomatic alignments of the period was the signing of an Anglo–German naval agreement in June 1935. That agreement, which could be seen as an early move in the British attempt to appease Hitler, in effect left the control of the Kattegat and the Baltic Sea to Germany. Thus Denmark and Danish waters once again became part of the German sphere of influence. Subsequent changes in the alignment of the great powers did little to alter that situation.

Throughout this critical period in Danish history the country was governed by a coalition of Social Democrats and Radical Liberals. With Thorvald Stauning, leader of the Social Democrats, as prime minister and Peter Munch, Radical Liberal leader, as foreign minister, the government stayed in office from 1929 till immediately after the German invasion of Denmark in April 1940. The traditional anti-militarism of the Social Democrats and the pacifist tendencies of many Radical Liberals left their mark on the defence, the security and the foreign policy of the government.

The reduction of the military forces initiated in 1922 was continued. In 1932, at a time when the international political situation still seemed relatively safe but the economic conditions had become very serious for Denmark, a bill for a new defence act was prepared and, with a minimum of debate, passed by both houses of parliament in less than a week. The number of army battalions was reduced from 35 to 24 and the size of the navy cut severely. The army now had only two divisions, one on Zealand and the other in Jutland. Later the same year the minister of defence described the new act as amounting in reality to disarmament of the country. The bill had been presented on the initiative of the Liberal party, which represented the agricultural interest, the section of the economy hardest hit by the international crisis. The two governing parties had accepted the proposal as a big step in the right direction. They were still advocating unilateral disarmament, but had failed to have their successive proposals passed by the upper house of parliament. Only the Conservatives voted against the bill.

The third set of inter-war defence laws was enacted in 1937. By then the rearmament of Germany and the ambitions of Hitler were presenting a growing threat, to the sovereignty of particular neighbouring
states as well as to the peace of Europe. The League of Nations had shown itself unable to provide protection against aggression by a great power. All the political leaders in Denmark were aware of the risk of major war and the potential threat to their country. Yet the changes to the existing defence structure now proposed by the government were a mixture of fairly minimal improvements and some further cuts. While both the army and the navy received some additional funds for new matériel, the army incurred a reduction in size. The air force was reduced from five squadrons to four, and only three batteries were allocated for the aerial defence of Copenhagen.

The bill, which was passed with the votes of only the two governing parties, reflected more the convictions of the Radical Liberals than of the Social Democratic leaders. Since 1933 Stauning, encouraged by some influential younger members of his party, had developed certain doubts about the long-standing anti-militarism of the labour movement and had made a few tentative moves towards a strengthening of the defence of the country. But Munch, a dogmatic anti-militarist and the dominating intellectual influence on the government, had rejected or ignored such attempts to change the policy. He and some of his colleagues, and no doubt many supporters not only of his own but also of other parties, were still of the opinion that a build-up of defence would not reduce the vulnerability of the country, and might even add to it. The Conservatives, on the other hand, attacked the bill strongly and voted against it. In their view, a reasonable defence, though of course it could never be strong enough to meet a German attack in a war with Denmark alone, might well help deter an attack in the more likely situation where Germany was at war with one or more great powers and had most of its forces engaged elsewhere. The Liberals abstained from the vote. The service chiefs had had only a minor role in the preparation of the bill, mainly because of disagreement between the navy and the army, but largely shared the views of the Conservatives.

After the German annexation of a compliant Austria in 1938 the government did allocate some funds for the strengthening, as distinct from the expansion, of the armed forces. However, the effect on the military capability of the nation was of no great significance. In April 1940, when Germany was ready to invade Denmark and Norway, the Danish army consisted of two divisions, the navy was small and most of its ships old, and Copenhagen was practically without any aerial defence. It was a force capable only of dealing with incidental violations of Danish territory, not of defending the country against a proper attack. While the reduction in the defensive forces introduced in the early 1920s had been
facilitated by confidence in the stability of post-war international relations, the restraint exercised in the later 1930s was conditioned more by despair about the external situation of Denmark, in a Europe of rapidly rising tension and instability.

One reason for despondency was the diplomatic isolation of Denmark. As in the nineteenth century, the government made various attempts in the 1930s to find allies or protectors. In 1933 it entertained some hope that Britain would offer military help if needed. But the British did not commit themselves. Four years later, when Stauning spoke to the foreign secretary Anthony Eden in London and voiced his concern about the Danish–German border, he received only assurances of diplomatic support against a threat from Germany. In February 1940 Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, confirmed verbally that, because of Denmark’s proximity to Germany, Britain would be unable to provide help in case of a conflict between the two neighbours.

The other conceivable source of support was the other Nordic countries. The events in Germany in 1933 gave impulse to Danish efforts to strengthen the bonds with the neighbours in the north. But when Stauning began to explore the idea of cooperating in matters of defence it became clear that there was no prospect of establishing a Scandinavian front against German aggression. The Norwegian and the Swedish governments were against it; and the pacifist sections of Stauning’s own party as well as the Radical Liberal leaders and supporters did not like the idea either. While the Danish objections were largely ideologically conditioned, the Norwegian and Swedish reactions rested mainly on strategic considerations. The two governments shared the risk assessment of the Danes, and found the strategic position of Denmark essentially hopeless. Nor did the decline of the League of Nations and the abandonment of the system of collective security later in the 1930s, or even the outbreak of war in 1939, lead to Scandinavian cooperation, whether in matters of defence or in the fields of politics and economics.

The military weakness and diplomatic isolation of Denmark were clearly reflected in the foreign policy of its government. From the mid-1930s to the retreat of the coalition government in the crisis of August 1943 Denmark’s foreign policy was dominated by its fear of Germany. In the first few years of Hitler’s regime it still seemed just possible that the system of collective security introduced in 1920 might offer some protection against latent German aggression. But the great powers’ handling of the Italo–Abyssinian conflict in 1935–36 indicated that it could be of little help. Instead of enforcing economic sanctions against Mussolini’s Italy after its attack on Abyssinia, Britain and France chose
to appease Italy at the expense of Abyssinia. For Denmark, as for many other small states, that crisis became a turning-point in the attitude to the League of Nations. To its foreign minister, whose long-standing doubts about the ability of the League of Nations to check expansionistic actions by a great power temporarily had given way to a certain amount of optimism, the handling of the crisis confirmed that a small state could not rely on the League for help against a great power. Only the more traditional ways of responding to the German threat, it now seemed, were open to Denmark.

In the later 1930s Danish foreign policy increasingly followed the principle of accommodating Germany. Initially, when Denmark was a member of the Council of the League of Nations, that policy was pursued largely through the League. Danish representatives devoted much effort to attempting to improve relations between the Western great powers and Germany, and to securing a more equal position for the latter within the Versailles system. Thus, when Hitler's government in 1935 challenged the system by announcing its intention to build up the armed forces and reintroduce conscription, the Danish foreign minister tried to make the great powers tone down their condemnation of the proposed measures and, when he failed, abstained from the vote. When, the following year, Germany sent troops into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland, the Danish line in the debate of the Council was again conciliatory. After the usual round of consultations with the other Scandinavian governments, the Danish decision-makers found that they could vote for a resolution which simply acknowledged that a breach of treaty obligations had taken place, but not for one which amounted to a censure of Germany. Guided by a wish to see all the great powers concerned take up negotiations with each other, the foreign minister recommended, in a secret meeting of the Council, that Germany should not only be allowed to participate on an equal footing in the deliberations of the Council but also be free to make proposals of its own. In the diplomacy of the next few years, after the Italo–Abyssinian crisis, Denmark continued on its course of conciliation mainly by steering close to Britain, which itself was gradually moving nearer to Germany.

In the last year of peace, after Hitler had invaded and incorporated Austria and German foreign policy had entered a more aggressive phase, Denmark had to handle relations with Germany on its own. Afraid of being drawn into a major war and anxious to have its neutrality respected, it scrupulously avoided offending Hitler's government and did what it could to accommodate German requirements. Earlier
in 1938, it had already conceded Germany the right to fly over the Danish straits in times of war. In April the following year, when Hitler offered Denmark a pact of non-aggression, the government was again responsive. Such a pact, the decision-makers thought, might serve as a substitute for a more explicit recognition of the Danish–German border of 1920. At any rate, a rejection of the proposal, they feared, might offend the German leadership. While the other Scandinavian countries declined similar offers from Hitler, Denmark took up negotiations on its own. When the Germans agreed to include in the protocol of the treaty a statement which in effect allowed Denmark, in any future war between Germany and Britain, to continue trading with the latter according to the normal rules of neutrality, the pact was soon ready for signature. However, out of concern for the reactions of the Danish public, Munch declined an invitation to attend the signing ceremony in Berlin.

On 1 September, when Germany and Poland were at war with each other, Denmark issued its first declaration of neutrality. Two days later, when the Second World War had broken out, it followed up with a declaration of complete neutrality, based on a set of rules drawn up by a group of neutrals in March the previous year. On 5 December, a few days after the Soviet Union and Finland had gone to war with each other, Stauning confirmed in parliament that Denmark had to maintain its policy of neutrality.

In the First World War, one of the most important means, and ends, of pursuing such a policy had been foreign trade. Now again the government’s line was to seek to balance its trade with Germany against that with Britain. After an unsuccessful attempt by a group of neutrals to cooperate in defence of their rights to trade with the belligerents, Denmark took up independent negotiations with each of the two powers. The German negotiators, adhering to the agreed interpretation of the non-aggression pact, accepted the argument that the export of Danish goods to Germany was dependent on the import of British raw materials for Danish agriculture, and therefore on the Danish export of agricultural products to Britain. With the British, who saw Danish exports to Germany as an obstacle to their economic warfare and were prepared to reduce their dependence on Danish products, it was much more difficult to reach an agreement. The negotiations went on for more than four months, the parties signing an agreement only a week before the Germans invaded Denmark. Yet, in the economic sphere, Denmark managed to maintain a balance between the two principal belligerents in the first winter of the war.
In other areas it proved more difficult to sustain such a balance. In November the Germans requested a mining of the Danish straits, which before the war they had wanted kept clear for passage even in wartime. The Danish government decided to meet what was in effect a demand, for the same reason as in 1914, namely that if it refused the Germans would lay the mines themselves and thereby violate Danish neutrality. Thus, from an early stage of the war, Denmark seemed set on a course which would render its neutrality as biased in favour of Germany as it had been in the First World War. Soon, however, signs began to appear that in this war the country might have to face a more radical challenge to its neutrality than it had encountered in the earlier one.

By the middle of January several reports indicating that both Germany and Britain might be preparing military actions against Denmark and Norway had reached the foreign ministry. The information had only little effect on the defence posture of the country. In his New Year speech the prime minister had already reminded the nation that Denmark was armed with a view to defending its neutrality, and that the character of the country and the population’s aversion to war excluded the possibility of preparing effectively for a real war. Reductions in the size of the standing army continued as planned, leaving only 6,263 men in early February, though approximately 8,000 men were recruited in the course of February and March. On the diplomatic level, the growing threat led the foreign minister to initiate a Scandinavian peace appeal, his third such appeal since December. It made as little impression on the belligerents as the earlier attempts had done.

When German forces invaded Denmark in the early hours of 9 April, they met only token and sporadic resistance. The government, threatened with aerial bombardment of Copenhagen, capitulated the same morning. Since the occupation, so to speak, took place in a peaceful manner and the Germans presented it as an act of protection against an imminent British attack on Denmark and Norway, promising not to use Danish territory as a base in the war with its enemies and to respect the territorial integrity and political sovereignty of the country, the government was able to maintain that Denmark had retained its non-belligerent status. However, the new situation did affect both the diplomatic links and the foreign trade of the country. While Denmark could maintain diplomatic relations with the neutrals and with Germany’s allies, it had to break them with Britain and France. Similarly, it could continue its trade with the neutrals and Germany’s allies but not with the Western powers.
Though neither of the two major opposition parties wanted to share the responsibility for the foreign and defence policy pursued in the 1930s or to become too closely identified with the decisions made by the king, the principal ministers and the service chiefs within hours of the invasion, both the Liberals and the Conservatives agreed to be represented in a coalition government. Still with Stauning as prime minister and Munch as foreign minister, the new government assumed the responsibility for protecting the population, social structure and political system of a country under occupation. The way it went about it became known to its supporters as the policy of negotiation, the term cooperation then being used to refer to relations among the political parties represented in the government. The negotiations with the authorities of the occupying power, usually the minister representing the foreign ministry in Berlin, were conducted through the Danish foreign ministry.

Three months later a reconstruction of the government took place. In accordance with the wishes of the Conservatives, the unpopular foreign minister Munch was removed from the post he had occupied since 1929. His place was taken by Erik Scavenius, the man who as foreign minister in a Radical Liberal government had helped to see Denmark through the First World War. Strongly supported by the king and well respected by Stauning, he was recognized as an expert in handling the Germans. Like so many other observers, in Denmark and elsewhere, he had been so impressed with the early victories of Hitler’s armies that he had come to believe that Germany would win the war. Consequently he thought it prudent, perhaps necessary, step by step to shift the line of the government from procrastinating negotiation towards deliberate cooperation with the occupying power. However, in no way an admirer of the ideology of Nazism or the style of the Hitlerite regime, Scavenius never abandoned the basic concerns of protecting Danish interests and values and retaining as much of the sovereignty of the state as possible.

After the death of Stauning in May 1942, his place as prime minister and Social Democratic leader was taken by Vilhelm Buhl, who, as minister of finance, had been critical of Scavenius’s readiness to accommodate the Germans. Buhl’s brief tenure of office was marked by growing difficulties with the Germans and mounting dissatisfaction in Berlin with developments in Denmark. The major problem was the beginning of sabotage and other signs of the emergence of organized resistance to the occupying power. In November Buhl resigned after strong pressure from the German authorities. A ministerial crisis was resolved when Scavenius, at German insistence, agreed to head the government and handle foreign relations. Thus it was he who, together with the new
representative of the German foreign ministry Werner Best, became responsible for managing the difficult process of cooperation in a period of emerging organized resistance. Less than 10 months later this phase of Danish–German relations came to a dramatic end.

Since the autumn of 1942 Danish workers had become increasingly dissatisfied with the economic consequences of the policy pursued by the government and supported by major institutions, including the leadership of their trade unions. The Communist party, illegal since the summer of 1941, and others intent on rupturing cooperation with the occupying power had exploited such dissatisfaction and encouraged rebellious tendencies, particularly in key industries. The result had been a considerable number of strikes. In the summer of 1943, when Germany had suffered major defeats in Russia and Africa and the fortunes of war seemed to have shifted decisively in favour of the allied powers, both strikes and acts of sabotage multiplied. Disturbances in the form of stirring public meetings, hostile demonstrations and street fights with German soldiers took place in several provincial towns, notably Odense, Esbjerg and Aalborg. Though the industrial strikes and the major public disturbances may have appeared at the time as essentially spontaneous, they were often initiated by individual members of the Communist party and organized in coordination with local resistance groups. However, they enjoyed the support of sections of the public which, growing tired of the policy of cooperation, were ready to react to reports or rumours of German brutality.

When the situation seemed to be heading for breaking-point, with one town after another subjected to curfew and other repressive measures, and paralysed by mass strike, the first reaction of the government once more was to appeal to the population to maintain order and not allow control to slip out of the hands of the Danish authorities. However, in the course of the month of August the role of the government, as a buffer between the Danish population and the German authorities, rapidly became far more difficult. At a time when it already was losing authority, the government came up against German demands and pressures so extreme as to leave little room for negotiating solutions to the mounting difficulties.

The situation was becoming equally difficult for Werner Best. He had committed himself to the policy of managing the occupation of Denmark through cooperation with its government, and had staked his career on its success. The inability of the Danish government to control the situation and put an end to the disturbances caused him to lose ground in a long-standing rivalry with the military authorities in the
country, who favoured a more heavy-handed way of dealing with rebellious manifestations. Soon he was called to Berlin to face his superior, Ribbentrop, and present his account of the developments in Denmark.

On 27 August he returned with an ultimatum, which he presented to Scavenius the next morning. The list of German demands included the proclamation of a general state of emergency, which prohibited any assembly of more than five persons and any kind of strike. It also imposed a strict curfew, the introduction of censorship of the press with German participation and the establishment of special courts to deal swiftly, and most severely, with breaches of regulations to maintain security and order. The ultimatum also demanded that capital punishment be introduced forthwith for acts of sabotage, attacks on German forces or individuals and possession of firearms or explosives. The German government expected an answer the same afternoon.

The cabinet and a standing committee of representatives of the old political parties met to discuss the terms of the document, and immediately agreed that the German demands were unacceptable. An answer went off, which stated that, while the government was willing to take all necessary measures to secure order, it could not agree to implement the arrangements demanded since such a course would destroy all possibilities of maintaining lasting public order. The Scavenius–Best negotiating duel was coming to an end. While Scavenius, facing a growing public dissatisfaction with the policy of the government, was in effect losing his popular mandate, Best, through a weakening of his position in the power struggle with the military occupation forces, was losing his support in Berlin. The base of the intergovernmental form of Danish–German cooperation was about to disappear.

The following night German forces carried out surprise attacks on army camps throughout the country and, often after intense exchange of fire, disarmed and interned officers and men and seized all war matériel. When, simultaneously, they attacked naval establishments, most of the units managed either to sink their ships or, in a few cases, to take them to neutral port in Sweden. The Germans also arrested many prominent men and women and interned them, for use as hostages in case of public disturbances.

In the early morning of 29 August, general Hermann von Hanneken, commander-in-chief of German forces in Denmark, proclaimed a state of emergency with severe restrictions, including nationwide curfew and the death penalty for strikers. He also announced that he had assumed executive power, and that the king and the government had thus ceased to function. Later the same day, the government met for
the last time, and decided to tender its resignation to the king. Not till after the liberation, on 5 May 1945, did Denmark again have an active government.

Despite his difficulties in Berlin and failure in Denmark, Best remained Ribbentrop’s man in Copenhagen, and continued his rivalry with von Hanneken, and later also with general Günther Pancke, chief of the German police forces in the country. Best’s first concern after 29 August was to have a new government established. Through Nils Svenningsen, head of the foreign ministry, he put his case to members of the deactivated government, stating that the alternative would be direct German government of the country. An inner circle of politicians met to discuss the proposal, and found that it would not be possible now to form a lawful government. The king concurred, and only Scavenius and a few others thought that it would be wrong and irresponsible to refuse to comply.

In the course of the debate among the politicians it appeared that German rule might not be the only possible alternative. After the king and the government had ceased to function, the permanent secretaries had decided, with the approval of former ministers, to stay in office. Each of them, acting on his own responsibility, had been taking administrative decisions within his department. In the process, they had acquired certain necessary additional rights. The rest of the civil service had also stayed in place and continued their work. Thus, in September it was possible to argue that the public administration of the country could be maintained without a government, and that there would be no need for German rule. That point was made when the politicians’ refusal to form a government was presented to Best.

In the end, a practice developed of maintaining the Danish–German diplomatic relationship through meetings and negotiations between Best and Svenningsen. In this way, Germany could sustain its political pressure on Denmark through its usual channel, the local representative of the German foreign ministry. And Denmark could respond to such pressure through the head of its foreign ministry, who not only enjoyed the support and cooperation of the permanent secretaries of all the other administrative departments but also received backing and some discreet guidance from members of a committee of politicians representing the old parties and the defunct government. Thus, though the relationship could no longer be intergovernmental, the practice of limited cooperation between unequal partners continued. The arrangement lasted till the end of the occupation. However, from the spring of 1944 it was complicated by increasing contact between some of the administrative heads and the leadership of the resistance movement.
Before the August crisis the principal feature of Denmark under occupation had been governmental cooperation with the occupying power. After that event it soon became active resistance. One reason for the shifting picture was simply that the continuation, through administrative channels, of the practice of cooperation was so discreet that it attracted much less attention. The real change, however, was the growing strength and determination of the resistance movement. Here several factors played a part. One was the disappearance of a government which regularly had admonished the population to maintain order and show moderation and warned against sabotage and other militant acts. Another factor was the intensification of German brutality and terror. This was marked by the attempt only weeks after the August crisis to round up Jews and send them to German camps, by the reactions to the mass strike in Copenhagen in the summer of 1944 and by the subsequent arrest and deportation of about 2,000 police officers as well as by the torture and execution of members of the resistance movement who had been arrested by German police.

A contributory cause of decisive importance for the efforts and achievements of the resistance movement in the later period of the occupation was the arrival of organizers, instructors and radio operators as well as weapons, explosives and other equipment from Britain under its Special Operations Executive (SOE) programme. Last, but not least important, was the conditioning influence of the news of German defeats on several fronts and the prospect of Hitler probably losing the war. With German armies on the retreat in major theatres and its forces stretched, it made more sense to move from passive to active resistance in Denmark. For the same reasons, such resistance now enjoyed growing public support.

Its first aim, ending governmental cooperation with the enemy authorities, having been achieved, the resistance movement was able to concentrate on the major task of offering resistance to the occupying power. The most urgent needs were to organize the movement and build up its strength. In September 1943 six men met in Copenhagen to seek some coordination of the activities of the many different resistance groups scattered across the country. Representing four major illegal organizations, namely the Communists, the right-of-centre national movement Danish Unity, the cross-party organization Frit Danmark and the nation-wide cultural and political association the Ring, they decided to set up what became known as Denmark’s freedom council. After a lengthy struggle to gain acceptance and secure control, the council established itself as the body representing the whole movement.
Though generally distrusted by the leaders of the old political parties and the officers of the general staff of the army and other representatives of official Denmark, initially inclined to suspect that it was a front organization of the Communists, the freedom council eventually acquired an authority which went far beyond resistance circles. In a country without government, army and police, it became a central organ with considerable influence. In crises between the public and the Germans, it gradually acquired a political role. In the general strike in Copenhagen in 1944, its influence proved decisive.

After some suspicion and hesitation, the allied powers, too, came to recognize the freedom council as the body to deal with in occupied Denmark, in both military and political matters. SOE’s leader in Denmark since March 1943, Flemming B. Muus, joined it almost at the outset, representing the ‘free Danes’ abroad. His successor, Ole Lippmann, took part in its meetings as observer and joined its command committee. When the Soviet Union, in the spring of 1944, agreed to accept a permanent representative of ‘the fighting Denmark’ in Moscow, he was appointed by the freedom council.

Throughout its existence, the council issued a number of proclamations and guidelines. Aimed at both members of the resistance movement and a wider public, they were marked by moderation and a sense of responsibility. The council also set up various committees to manage existing activities, including the illegal press and sabotage, and to deal with new matters arising. Soon priority had to be given to the setting up of an underground army, to support allied forces in case of an invasion or of a final battle with German forces on Danish soil.

The plans for such an army, as for similar forces in other occupied countries, had been prepared by SOE, partly with a view to keeping the Germans in uncertainty as to the location of the Anglo-American invasion, then already under preparation. The instructions reached the leadership of the resistance towards the end of 1943. SOE envisaged a force that would be armed by Britain and be under allied command. While the former arrangement was most acceptable, the latter was not. The freedom council insisted on maintaining command and control, at least up to the time when the force might become actively engaged in the war. Eventually a compromise was reached. In June 1944 the council set up its command committee, in which SOE, the council and the illegal general staffs of the professional army and navy were represented. The committee would be responsible for recruiting, organizing, equipping and, prior to direct combat, commanding the army.
The organization of the force and the allocation of weapons, most of which arrived from Britain in the last winter of the war, presented serious difficulties, some of which had not been overcome by the end of the occupation. Already from the summer of 1943 small groups of a military nature had been set up in various parts of the country, some under Communist control and others led by Danish Unity or other middle-class nationalist associations. There were signs, and a good deal of suspicion, that some such potential task forces might be arming themselves not only against the Germans in the existing situation but also against each other in an uncertain future. A basic principle of the organization of the new army was the integration of both existing and newly established groups. This was never quite achieved. While some groups remained under Communist control, others for a long time carried the stamp of Danish Unity or other such associations. Moreover, certain task forces set up by the illegal professional army in the form of six-man groups retained a degree of independence, even though they were formally under the command of the freedom council. Such divisions led to conflicts about the distribution of weapons, the professional officers in particular being concerned that arms received from Sweden or elsewhere should not end up in Communist hands. However, despite the disagreement about command and difficulties of allocation of weapons, by the end of the occupation the resistance movement had a force totalling, according to some estimates, close to 50,000 men, though far from all of them armed.

The freedom council had to prepare not only for war but also for peace. The prospect of the allied powers defeating Germany and liberating the occupied countries raised important questions about Denmark’s status in relation to the allies, about its post-war political programme and about the composition of its first government after liberation. Dealing with such matters eventually involved some contact and negotiation between the council and leaders of the four old political parties. From the outset, the politicians had been nervous about the activities, plans and ultimate goals of the council. The news that the Soviet Union was prepared to establish diplomatic relations with the council by accepting Thomas Døssing, a man of leftist views, as its representative in Moscow had added to their insecurity – at a stage when it was far from clear which of the allied armies would be liberating Denmark.

Acting on their own, the politicians had taken the initiative in seeking recognition of Denmark as an ally in the coalition against Germany. While the British and the Americans had pursued the idea in the spring of 1944, the Soviet Union had rejected it. Later in the year, after Døssing’s arrival in Moscow, the politicians, still on their own but enjoying British
support, tried again to secure Soviet acceptance. When the Russians failed to react, it seemed clear that nothing could be achieved in Moscow without the support and participation of the freedom council. After long and difficult negotiations between the politicians and members of the council, which involved the post-war political programme and the composition of the liberation government, a joint appeal went off to the capitals of the three great powers in January 1945. It was signed by the leaders of the Social Democrats, the Radical Liberals, the Liberals and the Conservatives, and by representatives of the freedom council. The initiative led to other lengthy debates, which in Moscow were complicated by Døssing’s hostile attitude to politicians associated with the coalition government. When Denmark was liberated, by British forces, the matter was still pending. However, in May 1945 Denmark received an invitation to send representatives to the San Francisco conference, where allied states would meet to set up the United Nations.

Initially, contact between the freedom council and the politicians had been more ad hoc. After the establishment of a contact committee of the council in August 1944, with two council members and two politicians, it became more continuous. In the last winter of the war the uncertainty about the post-war political situation loomed large in the relationship between the two sides. The concerns of the politicians were fairly obvious. Since 29 August 1943 they had been disturbed by the influence of the Communists in the resistance movement. With the establishment, and ever growing authority, of the freedom council they had become afraid that it might set itself up after the liberation as some kind of government, eventually perhaps under Communist control. What they wanted instead was a restoration of parliamentary democracy, with their own parties resuming the management of the political process. Thus, when those politicians in the later stages of the occupation enhanced their influence by changing course and moving closer to the resistance movement it was more with a view to securing the future position of the parties they were leading than to strengthen the resistance to the occupying power. However, they enjoyed a degree of support from Britain, which also wanted a stable and reliable government in post-war Denmark.

For a long time the members of the freedom council, generally preoccupied with resisting the Germans in the immediate situation, gave relatively little thought to post-war problems. From the outset, however, they had made it clear that the council was not pursuing party-political aims but fighting for national goals, primarily the restoration of the freedom of the country and the reintroduction of Danish democracy but
also the judicial prosecution and punishment of those who had betrayed their country by helping the Germans. Later the council expressed its views on the national programme of the transitional government and the international orientation of post-war Denmark more forcefully. Severely critical of the passive and compliant response to the invasion in 1940 and strongly opposed to the negotiation and cooperation policies of the following years, the council renounced the traditions of neutrality, isolation and weakness, which it recognized as the sources of such conduct. In a document of December 1944, addressed to the political parties represented in the committee of party leaders and former ministers, it stressed that everything possible should be done to avoid a repetition of the disaster and humiliation suffered by the country: ‘Denmark’s future defensive forces must be brought up to the necessary dimensions, and all notions of Denmark’s isolated neutrality must be abandoned after this war.’ In the projected new international organization, the country must take on all duties that may be required of it.¹⁰

Before the debate about the composition of the liberation government had reached its conclusion a disagreement arose within the freedom council about the political programme for the post-war period. The representatives of the Communists and Danish Unity had drawn up a detailed economic and social programme and had secured the support of some other members of the council. Given that Danish Unity was politically much weaker than the Communists, the initiative could be seen as a step by the latter towards securing control of post-war politics. In a situation where it was still uncertain whether it would be British or Soviet forces that would liberate Denmark, this was a disturbing prospect. Frode Jakobsen, organizer and representative of the Ring and from the outset a central figure in the council, argued forcefully against adoption of the programme, stressing in particular the divisive effect it would have not only on the council but on the resistance movement as a whole. As a result, the matter was dropped, and did not become an issue in the negotiations with the politicians.

Only days before the liberation, an agreement was reached about the composition of the first government. The politicians, who originally had angered the council members by secretly preparing a list of ministers made up entirely of politicians from the largest parties, had to accept the council’s demand for equal representation in the liberation government and exclusion of all ministers who had served in the government led by Scavenius. Though the final list of ministers did give the resistance movement numerically equal representation, most of the
more influential ministries went to politicians of the four parties. And Vilhelm Buhl, the Social Democratic leader, became prime minister.

The first free general elections took place in October 1945 and resulted in a Liberal minority government. The new prime minister was Knud Kristensen, known for a remark he made during the debate about representation of the resistance in the liberation government: ‘The resistance movement? Surely it says nothing about that in the Constitution.’ The establishment of his government marked the restoration of the pre-war parliamentary system, again managed by the four old parties, and the end of the formal political role of the resistance movement.

The regression from limited involvement in European politics towards disengagement that marked Danish foreign policy in the centuries after 1720 was linked to the democratization of the social structure and political system of the country. In the first long period distinguished here, foreign policy was largely in the hands of aristocrats who accepted war as a fact of international life, and were prepared to play an active role in European politics. Though war, if it involved one’s own state, might be a dreadful experience which should not be undertaken without good reason, war among other powers could well present not only dangers but also opportunities for non-belligerents. Neutrality could be a means of defending one’s state from the dangers, but also a way of pursuing the opportunities. While in the former instance it might call for a league of neutrals, in the latter case neutrality did not preclude some form of alliance with one or more of the belligerents. The advantages of playing the European balance of power in this restrained manner were largely economic.

In the second period, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the conclusion of the First World War, most decision-makers in Danish foreign policy were middle-class politicians, typically more wary of war and often less able and inclined than their aristocratic predecessors to exploit opportunities it might offer third parties. Except when deemed essential for the defence or the pursuit of vital interests of one’s own nation, war in the region usually appeared as a source of danger, especially to a former minor power in severely reduced circumstances and diplomatically isolated. Now neutrality, used essentially as a protection against involvement in the wars of others, came to be perceived more in terms of the rights and duties governing relations between neutrals and belligerents. While the notion of neutrality in the eighteenth century had been basically political, in the course of the nineteenth century it became much more legal.
In most of the inter-war period, the government was in the hands of political leaders who represented the broader sections of Danish society, where anti-militarist tradition and pacifist tendencies influenced attitudes to foreign affairs. In their abhorrence of war, such politicians not only found it prudent to steer clear of the power politics of the great powers but also pointless to maintain more than the most minimal armed force. In their anxiety about national security in a Europe of growing international tension, they tried to reconcile the League principle of collective security with the traditional precepts of neutrality. In the process, they developed a novel version of neutrality. While the neutrality of earlier times had been, at least in principle, impartial as between the belligerents and passive in regard to their wars, the new neutrality was more partial and active. By all means at their disposal, short of going to war themselves, the neutrals should seek to prevent or restrict war among others. The theory of such neutrality, developed largely by Georg Cohn, legal adviser to the foreign ministry, and the international lawyer Philip Jessup, rested on a new evaluation of war. On both legal and moral grounds this phenomenon of international politics was simply disqualified. Whatever the circumstances, nobody had the right to go to war. Staying out of war and endeavouring to prevent or extinguish wars between other states, it followed, was the morally superior policy. Neo-neutrality, as it became known, added a moral dimension to the tradition of neutrality – and sometimes lent a touch of self-righteousness to its champions.

Generally speaking, the Danes who in the 1940s rebelled against the long trend towards disengagement and neutrality by offering active resistance to the occupying forces of Nazi Germany did not represent a particular class of society. In the first year after the invasion, when they numbered perhaps no more than a few hundred, most seem to have come from the middle classes, especially from Danish Unity circles. In the next few years, after the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the banishment of the Communist party, a larger number of Communists took up resistance, with the result that the emerging movement came to rest on an alliance between the right-of-centre and the left sections of the Danish political spectrum. In the final two years of the occupation, after the turn in the fortunes of the German armies on the fronts, the retreat of the Danish government and the establishment of the freedom council, the movement built up its strength rapidly, in the process broadening its social base on both the right and the left. Though the four old political parties remained under-represented in the movement, many young Conservatives and left-wing Social Democrats joined
the resistance at that stage. Throughout the years of resistance, the typical freedom fighter, as the members became known, was a man in his twenties living in a town.

In the later years of occupation, and especially towards the end of the war, the resistance movement gained fairly broad support. Shocked by the invasion, humiliated by governmental policies, provoked by German atrocities and, of course, encouraged by allied victories and German retreats in major theatres of war, a large number of people from most walks of life eventually came round to accepting the resistance and offering at least moral support. The series of events denoted by 9 April, the date of the invasion of Denmark, had been an experience traumatic enough, it seemed, to lead a large and representative section of the population to question the wisdom and morality of traditional Danish foreign policy. On the eve of liberation there were signs that the nation might be moving towards a moral and political turning-point in its international conduct.