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Heroes Once Again

Varieties of Danish ‘Activism’ in Conflated Commemorations of The War in Afghanistan and the Prusso-Danish War of 1864

Mads Daughbjerg

Aarhus University

Abstract

This article addresses a peculiar historical moment in contemporary Denmark, a nation coming to grips with its increased involvement in the ‘coalition’ wars of recent decades, especially in Afghanistan. It explores how and why, in a Scandinavian society previously conceived as a bastion of tolerance, humanitarianism and pacifism, a new preoccupation with and support for war participation – often referred to as Danish ‘activism’ – seems to be on the rise. I analyse public commemoration settings, focusing especially on events connected to the 150th anniversary of the War of 1864 in which Denmark was defeated by Prussia and Austria. This major anniversary in 2014 coincided with the withdrawal of Danish combat troops from Afghanistan. Utilising theories of time and temporality, I explore how the two conflicts – both ‘remote’ from the Danish public; one in time, the other in space – came symbiotically to inform the interpretations of each other.

Key words: War commemoration, Denmark, Danish ‘activism’, national identity, temporality

Introduction: Coming Home

In the summer of 2013, Denmark withdrew its last regular combat troops from the fighting fields of Afghanistan, following suit from the leading powers of the international coalition, USA and the United Kingdom.¹ As a consequence of this formal departure from a decade of fighting the Taleban, Danish media brimmed with stories and evaluations pertaining to the question of whether or not the deployment had been ‘worthwhile’. A number of newspaper pieces focused on the points of view from the returning soldiers themselves. One veteran told Danish newspaper *Politiken*: ‘What the government asked of us in the military, we have done. Denmark can be proud of it; we have represented the Danish flag [*Dannebrog*] on a high level, and we do it better than many others, you can write that. There’s still a damn bit of Viking in us’ [*Der er sgu stadig noget viking i os*](Svendson 2013).² In an interview in *Berlingske Tidende*, then Danish commander-in-chief Peter Bartram echoed this core satisfaction, stating that ‘Afghanistan has been a fantastic journey during which we have improved vastly professionally’ (Pedersen 2013). He added:

When I speak to commanders-in-chief from other countries they stress that Denmark is always part of the missions, and that we deliver. I have just had a visit from the departing British commander-in-chief, who opted to pay his last formal visit [to a foreign nation] to Denmark. He confirmed that we are on the same high level as the British. (ibid.)

While such enthusiastic voices were certainly not all-dominant, the Danish news reports contained a remarkable dose of pride and satisfaction with the nation’s abilities to wage war, to ‘deliver’ and to be at least on the ‘same level’ as other countries. Sometimes, the fact that Denmark has suffered the highest relative number of military casualties in Afghanistan among coalition members (measured per capita) was cited as evidence for the Danish devotion. Although, of course, casualties were understood first and foremost as tragic and horrible, it was clear that the body count could also be mobilised as a proof of national sacrifice and devotion. Dead bodies mattered.³ Meanwhile, regularly conducted statistical surveys continued to indicate that the Danish population supported the overseas deployment of its military significantly more than any other coalition nation, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.⁴

In this article, I address this seemingly increasing ‘appetite for war’ in contemporary Denmark (Jakobsen and Møller 2012: 106). It is especially remarkable given the country’s post-World War 2 reputation as a society characterised by tolerant, humanitarian and pacifist stances, and by a strong foreign policy tradition of non-involvement. This break, and the ideas and understandings that underpin it, call for close analytical scrutiny (see also Daugbjerg and Sørensen 2017). I do so by exploring three relatively recent public events in Denmark in which the nation’s past and present military engagements were brought together symbolically, rhetorically and physically, attending especially to ideas of a certain Danish ‘activism’ underpinning them. In these public contexts, meanings and values connected to the recent and current international coalition wars – specifically the war in Afghanistan

raging since 2001 – intersected with memories and interpretations of the War of 1864, in which the Danish army was defeated by the militaries of Prussia and Austria (Daugbjerg 2014; Østergaard 2004). The calendar year 2014 offered a particularly rich analytical opportunity, as the 150th anniversary of the 1864 war was marked by a series of stagings, rallies and activities across Denmark. Recollections and images of the ‘old’ war were thus displayed and re-invoked along with – often literally side by side with – renderings, evaluations and tales from the field ‘coming home’ from Afghanistan. While events such as those I analyse here cannot be said to have invented or produced ‘activist’ stances in themselves, neither must they be seen as mere mirrors of the already existing. Rather, I suggest we view them as what Max Gluckman (1958 [1940]: 8) called ‘social situations’; key occasions offering up new interpretative horizons, full of analytical possibility. A main point for Gluckman, as pointed out by Bruce Kapferer (2005: 92), was precisely that the event or situation ‘is not intended as an illustration of larger processes and therefore passively representing what is already known; rather, it is a particular point of entry that opens toward a knowing that is not already apparent.’

In Time

The events in question thus brought together past and present conflicts in particular constellations and understandings. As I shall detail, they were saturated with complex temporal navigations and interweavings, gazing backwards and forwards simultaneously. To grasp their significance, I utilise Reinhart Koselleck’s theories of time and temporality, most notably his ideas on the here-and-now configured as a relation between an (accumulated) ‘space of experience’ and a (prospective) ‘horizon of expectation’. These, he argues, ‘are not to be statically related to each other. They constitute a temporal difference in the today by redoubling past and future on one another in an unequal manner’ (Koselleck 2004: 263). *Experience*, to Koselleck, is ‘present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered’ (2004: 259). *Expectation*, while obviously future-oriented,

(...) also takes place in the today; it is the future made present; it directs itself to the not-yet, to the non-experienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it. (ibid.)

Koselleck stands on the shoulders of a line of intellectual giants within German hermeneutics and phenomenology – from Dilthey and Husserl over Heidegger to Gadamer – who have struggled intensely with issues of temporality in various guises. Indeed, as noted by Keith Tribe, translator of Koselleck’s *Futures Past*, the ‘linkage that Koselleck makes between a chronological past, a lived present that was once an anticipated future, and expectations of the future – such that any given present is at the same time a “former future” – is clearly indebted to the hermeneutic circle that

Heidegger identified' (Tribe 2004: xi). And in his utilisation of the metaphor of the 'horizon', Koselleck is inspired by Gadamer, who wrote that 'the horizon is something into which we move and which moves with us' (Gadamer 1996 [1960], quoted in Pickering 2004: 276). This implies that specific understandings of the nature of time, history and causality must be seen as themselves historically conditioned and dynamic. In the case of the creation and upholding of *national* communities, as famously noted by Benedict Anderson (1991), new ideas of time and temporality were crucial. This was so in at least two senses. Firstly, in the modern nation states it became possible or even required to imagine the national community as having deep, prehistoric roots.⁵ Secondly, and just as importantly, new print technologies and mass media worked to sustain feelings of temporal *simultaneity*, of sharing particular moments, events and 'news' across the nation, and thus of apprehending the nation as 'a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time' (ibid.: 26).

Within anthropology, Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005: 262) have issued a call for renewed ethnographic focus on what they term 'historicity', understood as 'a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions.' Stressing the need to focus not merely on individuals' 'inner' experiences but on social relations unfolding in particular empirical contexts, they wish to draw 'attention to the connections between past, present and future without the assumption that events/time are a line between happenings "adding up" to history' (ibid.). Although Hirsch and Stewart intend primarily to alert us to non-western ways of conceptualising the past and its relations to the present, they also note that such an ethnographic sensibility can be utilised in Western contexts, asking: "Do we really know what we mean by the term 'history' in the West?" (ibid.: 265).⁶

Above, I quoted Kapferer (and behind him, Gluckman) on viewing the public event as 'a point of entry' with the potential to open up towards not-yet fully articulated cultural understandings. This chimes well with Koselleck's view of how particular concepts surface and become imbued with meaning already at hand in somewhat embryonic form. For example, in a discussion of the German notion of *Bund* [federation] emerging in the late middle ages, and of a set of later composite terms, he argues that 'various activities of *Bündnisse* [alliances] became retrospectively consolidated in a collective singular. *Der Bund* incorporated experience that had already been made and brought them under one concept' (2004: 271). Through such processes of what we may call conceptual 'congealment', possible future scenarios, only dimly identifiable at first, become asserted and take on concrete and reinforced form through the coining, propagation and gradual acceptance of specific new understandings. 'Because they concentrated obscure and hidden experiences, the concepts contained a prognostic potential which opened out a new horizon of expectation. This, then, no longer involves concepts that register experience, but rather, concepts that generate experience' (ibid.).

First Event: Making History at Dybbøl

To begin addressing the emergence of new martial horizons in Denmark and their ‘prognostic’ capacities, let me turn first to a public event that took place seven years before the 2014 anniversary, during an earlier fieldwork of mine around the historical battlefield of Dybbøl in Southern Denmark. This is the location of the key Danish defeat of the 1864 war, an important symbolic site, charged, throughout much of the 20th century, with pro-Danish and anti-German sentiment. The event in question is the opening in 2007 of a reconstructed trench milieu at the local Battlefield Centre, a heritage institution whose dynamics I have analysed in some detail elsewhere.⁷ On this occasion, then Minister of Education Bertel Haarder stepped up to deliver a speech that conjured up and propagated a particular understanding of Denmark’s past. Although directed at the specific experiential opportunities of the revamped heritage centre, the speech utilised the field of Dybbøl as a stepping-stone for a much larger narrative revolving around the themes of being Danish today and defending the homeland in times of crisis.

To capture the gist of Haarder’s story, a brief bit of further historical and political context is necessary. The 1864 war, in which Denmark lost two-fifths of its territory and one-third of its population, triggered a widespread doubt about whether the nation was too small to survive as an independent state (Østergaard 2004: 34). Most analysts of Danish foreign policy take as their point of departure ‘the traumatic experience of 1864, which until recently haunted both Danish foreign policy makers and the Danish public’ (Branner 2013: 140). For more than a century, Danish defence policy would be motivated by avoiding involvement in the power struggles of bigger nations. The country managed to stay out of World War I – after which parts of the lost land from 1864 were returned to Denmark – and did not put up much of a fight against German occupation in 1940–1945, instead opting for a policy of adaptation towards the Nazi rule.

The Danish welfare state developing after the war was powered, like those of its Scandinavian neighbours, by strong Social Democratic and egalitarian movements and values. Indeed historian Uffe Østergård, writing in 1992, described Denmark as ‘a country with a huge public sector dominated by an ethos of libertarianism and solidarity and with a Conservative party that is more socialist than most socialist parties in Europe’ (1992: 7). At the same time, Marianne Gullestad (2002) has argued, the Scandinavian welfare states have nurtured a particular version of egalitarian individualism in which a specific notion of equality – conceived as what she terms ‘imagined sameness’ – has reinforced ethnic and exclusivist understandings of national identity.⁸ In Denmark, this is visible in a notable political slide away from the left over the last three decades. This includes the emergence and rise of the anti-immigrant and protectionist *Dansk Folkeparti* or Danish People’s Party (DPP), exhorting a considerable influence on Danish political agendas and jurisdiction since the turn of the millennium. In 2001, a landmark election ousted the social democrats who had been in power since 1993 and saw new prime minister (and subsequent NATO Secretary General) Anders Fogh Rasmussen of the *Venstre*⁹ party form a

coalition government with the Conservatives, resting on crucial parliamentary support from the DPP; a centre-right axis that was to dominate Danish politics and policies for a decade and which included a strong commitment to the US-led ‘war on terror’ in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

A key member of the Rasmussen cabinet, Haarder began his Dybbøl speech by stating, somewhat surprisingly, that ‘I was there in ’64!’ The opening was a day of grand celebration at the symbolic field, with the Queen, Margaret II, also at hand to perform the official inauguration. Haarder’s enigmatic opener held a startling temporal claim, seemingly alluding to some kind of time-traveling ability of the senior politician. He went on, however, to qualify his statement along more rational lines:

Not in 1864, but in 1964, when the 100th anniversary for the storm on Dybbøl was celebrated. I carried the banner of the Rønshoved high school, among countless other banners, all the way from Sønderborg to Dybbøl Hill.

Yet it soon turned out that the reminiscing speaker *was* in fact out to bridge epochs and merge temporal horizons. He went on to recount how the late Danish King Frederik on that centennial day in 1964 had delivered an emphatic speech in which he had stated: ‘Back then [in 1864] there were no statements such as ‘What is the use!’ [*Hvad skal det nytte!*] Back then it was ‘Go on and endure!’

The king’s words, reanimated here by Haarder, were originally uttered as a critical comment on the Danish passivity during the Nazi occupation in World War II, and on the resigned political slogan, devised by the Danish social liberals [*Det Radikale Venstre*], on the questionable ‘use’ of maintaining a Danish national defence in the face of overwhelmingly powerful neighbouring powers. In his 2007 speech, Haarder made the former king’s words his own as he contrasted the Danish non-resistance of the 1940s with the determination he claimed characterised the 1864 soldiers. The temporal connections drawn were indeed intricate, as the speaker recalibrated relationships between selected moments and dispositions from various epochs. By pointing back to his own proud memory of the 1964 centennial and to his recollection of the former king’s call for endurance, Haarder blended personal and national ‘experience’, attempting to generate and bolster a particular mood in the present. He went on:

The wound [after the 1864 defeat] bled in the national mind [*folkesjælen*] and turned the country introspective – and only healed properly very recently, 17 years ago, when Denmark, after more than 100 years of adaptive foreign policy during two world wars and a cold war, once again dared to join the world on equal terms with others.¹⁰

In this contemporary mobilisation of 1864, a particular version of history was given shape, pivoting around a string of past and present armed conflicts. It was a narrative of defeat, darkness, and ultimate recovery. In Haarder’s making of history, not only was the Danish army routed and destroyed in 1864, but also the defeat thrust the country as a whole into a dark and humiliating century of ‘adaptive’ (i.e. disgraceful)

foreign policy. The loss shattered Danish confidence and identity, which suffered for more than a century, until ‘17 years ago’ – that is, until 1990 – when Denmark again ‘dared to join’ the rest of the world. This allegedly crucial turning point was not immediately clear or specified in Haarder’s speech, but it turned out to be Denmark’s decision to send a warship, the *Olfert Fischer*, to the Persian Gulf to support the UN resolutions against Iraq during the first Gulf War. That act, in this narrative, signalled the end of a shameful and reluctant era and heralded a new interventionist foreign policy, in which ‘we’ – ‘again’ (as we supposedly did in 1864) – ‘dare’ to take up arms and confront the world. The minister continued:

Since then [1990], Danish units have distinguished themselves in innumerable peacekeeping and peace building operations. The battle of Tuzla in Bosnia and the dangerous engagements in Helmand Province in Afghanistan make it obvious that Denmark has joined the world [*meldt sig ind i verden*] with everything it involves, including the risk of an unexpected outcome, as in Iraq.

According to this rationale in which nations can act as persons, ‘Denmark’ has finally come to terms with its humiliating pacifist past and today ‘dares’ to join the fray across the globe in the war for peace. The period in-between the two proposed moments of active bravery – 1864 and the present – is comprehended as a dark and disgraceful age, and today’s new missions are narrated as a kind of renaissance or reawakening of the slumbering national spirit. Denmark has ‘joined the world’ – the Danish wording ‘*meldt sig ind*’ implying a process of signing up for participation – with ‘everything it involves’. If Haarder indeed ‘made history’ during his short speech, we must understand this activity as involving more than a retelling and reordering of past events. History, here, references the past but also provides it with direction and thrust, installs motives, anticipation, and trans-temporal emotion.

Becoming ‘Active’

What Haarder’s 2007 speech indicated and disseminated was a newfound spirit of Danish ‘activism’. It is a powerful term that has taken on a particular set of meanings in contemporary Denmark and created a considerable space for – or even, as we shall see, an expectation of – military intervention in foreign countries. Haarder’s tale was structured along a narrative curve with two high points, the alleged bravery of 1864 at one end and today’s international missions at the other, and with darkness and humiliation in between. Activism was not Haarder’s invention, however. Indeed, as political scientists have discussed for some time, a changed foreign policy has emerged since the end of the Cold War era, although security and policy analysts continue to debate the finer points of the definition of the new policies and their distinctiveness in relation to earlier Danish approaches.¹¹ It is safe to say, however, that ‘activism’, a term carrying obvious positive connotations, has come to increasingly signify the legitimate use of armed force across the globe in the service of Danish interests. With Foucault (1991), we may say that ‘activism’ has become a

central node in a broader ‘governmental’ progression towards a discourse of just interventionism. Such a changing discursive terrain consists, of course, of words and narratives, but also of corresponding policies, procedures, legal arrangements and so on. It nurtures new ways of thinking about (subjective, national and international) values and duties. It encourages related, appropriate actions and practices. And it imposes a temporal, moral normativity on the nation’s collective endeavours.

From several operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, over Iraq (2003-2011) to Afghanistan (2002-14), Danish troops have tended to be deployed to ever ‘sharper’ peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions, with a particularly strong commitment to the American-led ‘War on Terror’ from 2001 onwards. Engagements such as these have also meant that Denmark has become a target of opposition and aggression. This was testified most profoundly by the so-called cartoon controversy in 2005-06 sparked by the publication, in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, of a series of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Danish and international Muslim communities protested over what they saw as a grave violation of the Muslim stricture against the depiction of a holy figure, and the outrage escalated into a diplomatic crisis between Denmark and much of the Islamic world.¹² A steady stream of ‘revenge’ acts targeting Denmark or Danish interests have deepened the already entrenched positions since then; these include the 2008 car bombing of the Danish embassy in Islamabad, the attempted murder in 2010 of one of the Muhammad cartoonists by an axe-wielding Islamist breaking into the artist’s home, and the 2015 shootings in Copenhagen in which a young Dane of Jordanian-Palestinian origin, allegedly ‘inspired’ by the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, killed two.

These developments must be seen as the backdrop of the current calls for Danish activism. The rhetorical space for political argumentation has shifted concomitantly. ‘The argument that peace operations equal national defence has become an axiom of Danish defence and security that is rarely questioned’, security analyst Peter Viggo Jakobsen has noted (2005: 37). He adds:

Nobody (...) raised an eyebrow in October 2004 when the Defence Minister stated that the defence of Denmark now took place in caves in Afghanistan and in the Iraqi desert. The shift from invasion defence to a more expeditionary posture triggered very little debate, a fact that sets Denmark apart from many other European countries and certainly its Nordic neighbours. (ibid.)

Political scientist Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen suggests that activism can be seen as a concept enabling policymakers to reunite two previously irreconcilable logics in Danish security thinking, what he calls (Scandinavian) ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘defencism’, respectively (2005: 72). Cosmopolitan-minded politicians of the Scandinavian ilk ‘have been enthusiastic followers of the League of Nations and the United Nations because these organizations emphasized the community of a transnational civil society based on the universal equality of individuals’ (ibid.: 73). According to Rasmussen, they ‘basically find the use of armed force unnecessary’ and hold ‘the cosmopolitan belief that the rest of the world would enjoy peace and

prosperity Scandinavian style if only Scandinavian values were adopted' (ibid.). While Rasmussen identifies this strand of political thinking as uniquely Scandinavian, on the other hand the 'defencism' position, based on the fundamental belief that proper national security requires a strong military capacity, is well known and widespread across the world. As we shall see, these different stances, although ultimately too black-and-white to account for actually emerging practices 'on the ground', are useful in seeking to understand the ways in which military and humanitarian – sometimes military *as* humanitarian – action is remembered and anticipated in Denmark today.

Second Event: 1864 as a Template for the World to Emulate

Haarder's 2007 narrative was forcefully 'defencist' in Rasmussen's terminology. However, it was not the only one around. First of all, it was of course not his narrative alone but must be seen as part of a distinct ideological project orchestrated by the centre-right Fogh Rasmussen government, as already outlined. Secondly, activism did not by any means disappear after the shift in power that followed in Denmark in 2011. The incoming government, led by the Social Democrats, continued the nation's considerable overseas engagement, including fighter bomber missions over Lybia (2011), Mali (2013), and participation in the continuing fight against ISIL (2014–).¹³

Still, a distinctly different spirit was to permeate the large 150th anniversary of the 1864 war that followed in 2014, seven years on from Haarder's speech. Over the first six months of 2014, an extensive string of cultural and commemorative events took place across Denmark, with a particularly heavy concentration in Southern Jutland, immediately North of the border to Germany. Most activities were planned, initiated and coordinated under a large umbrella project steered by the Region of Southern Denmark, cooperating with partners from the German state of Schleswig-Holstein. It was evident, even from a brief glimpse on the bilingual project website,¹⁴ that something very different from Haarder's fierce national rhetoric was underway. The core anniversary story was not about the nation. In fact it was not even very much about war. Or, to put it more precisely, war and nation featured, but mostly as dark images of something *left behind*, backdrops for a tale on how far 'we' have progressed since that terrible time.

The 2014 activities had to contribute to a 'new narrative' on the Danish-German relations, the regional coordinators insisted. The aim was a 'contemporary, forward-looking and border-transcending' commemoration, chairman of the Regional Council Carl Holst explained.¹⁵ This was first of all about realising new cross-border potential for growth and for economic as well as cultural exchange. The grim tales of past suffering and enmity were necessary, but primarily invoked as reminders of a horrific past, historical 'lessons' that we had to realise lay behind us. Importantly, the 'we' of this new narrative did not simply refer to the Danes, but to Danish and German neighbours, the descendants of former enemies who were now viewed as able

to reach across the graves of 1864 (and also see past the dark memories of the German World War II occupation of Denmark).

The unquestionable calendric climax of the year was a large commemoration event on April 18, the date of the historic battle of Dybbøl, held in the heart of the old battlefield itself. Attended (again) by Queen Margaret II and other members of the royal family, and by the Danish Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence (both Social Democrats) and the Chief of Defence, the official program also featured contingents of Danish and German soldiers as well as German political representatives from Schleswig-Holstein. An audience of around 15,000 had turned up on this chilly spring day to witness a military commemoration with parades and wreath-laying followed by a so-called ‘civilian’ program of speeches, music and dance. A range of popular 1864-themed activities, including historical children games and food stalls, were also on offer to the public. The neighbouring city of Sønderborg was dressed for the occasion, with special exhibitions at its history museum and a grand evening show at the *Alsion* music hall. Lining the main road between city centre and battlefield, a series of green cardboard signs carried questions clearly meant to support the forward-looking and border-transcending messages: ‘Did you know that Germany is Denmark’s biggest trade partner?’ ‘Did you know that a total of 1751 Germans study at the University College South Denmark or the University of Southern Denmark?’ Half of the messages were in Danish, the rest in German, and some did in fact mention the war – ‘Did you know that 1200 Prussian and 1700 Danish soldiers were killed or wounded on April 18, 1864?’ – but it was obvious that these were useful primarily as indicating a ‘*Stunde Null*’ baseline for assessing the subsequent progress in the region.

In his speech on the big day, Danish Minister of Defence Nikolaj Wammen stressed that he was ‘proud that we, despite the suffering and horrors that took place 150 years ago, can stand here today and mark the battle of Dybbøl. Our point of departure is the long-lasting peace and the strong friendship that has been built up since 1945’.¹⁶ The German Minister-President of Schleswig-Holstein, Thorsten Albig, confirmed this, saying that ‘what bloody wars and nationalism have separated belongs together again today’, in a time when ‘Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein are tied together as friends’. Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt argued:

The defeat cast long shadows. It took many years to realise that a small country cannot close in upon itself. That, conversely, we need to be part of the world. That we must lift our responsibility internationally. And that we have plenty to offer. For small countries can be large in their own way. Just take a look at the border region, where Danes and Germans live side by side in a way which few thought possible just a few generations back. Enmity turned to neighbourliness. Neighbourliness turned to friendship. And that is a feat and a format serving as exemplary model in the world around us.

As is evident, these ways of recounting the 1864-2014 story shared a number of traits and themes with Haarder’s previous narrative (pride; long shadows, being ‘part of the world’). The main difference was that the pride emanating from the 2014 ceremony was not understood chiefly in martial or national terms. Instead, it was connected to the reconciliation and corporation with the former enemy.

A crucial and recurring motive, not just on the big day but across the year's anniversary activities more broadly, was the idea that the development in the Danish-German border region could and should serve as inspiration for beleaguered regions across the world; that 'our' exemplary coming-together could serve as a more generic 'format', as Thorning-Schmidt put it. One of the green signs asked: 'Did you know that the Red Cross had its debut on the battlefield at Dybbøl?', thus in an interesting semantic turn connecting the birth of humanitarianism to the blood-stained field itself (see also Daugbjerg 2009). The emerging 'space of experience', in Koselleck's terms, seemed to allow the Danes, together with their German friends, not just to envision new horizons of their own, but also prefigure that the rest would follow. Another example of this 'template' logic, in which the site-specific stories were imagined as important global inspirations, could be found in a newspaper headline, from an anniversary section promoting the 1864 activities circulated with *Jyllands-Posten*, which read: 'Dannevirke is a model for the whole world' (Jyllands-Posten 2014). The piece referred to developments at Dannevirke, a defensive line of earthworks south of the present-day border, which the Danish army had abandoned in 1864 before relocating to Dybbøl. Today, the small museum there, the article proposed, 'shows you how Dannevirke can inspire to peace and reconciliation between warring parties both regionally and internationally' (ibid.).

In terms of the underlying understandings of temporal connectivity, and recalling Haarder's 'reawakening' chronicle (golden age of bravery–dark age of cowardice–present age of bravery), the dominant anniversary narrative thus invoked a slightly different trajectory. Again, it was evident that the present age was to be understood as a pinnacle, an era of light and righteousness. But the master theme was if not *anti-* then at least *transnational*, stressing togetherness with the former enemy. For that narrative to work, the image of the horrible 'slaughter bench' – a term used by the Danish soldiers to refer to the feared field at Dybbøl, and popularised by a bestselling book by historian and journalist Tom Buk-Swienty in 2008 – was useful. But it was so primarily as a reminder of the irrationalities that were supposedly left behind. Its blood, gore and mutilation worked to display a condition of meaninglessness from which 'we' have allegedly risen. As Hirsch and Stewart (2005: 265) have noted, 'that the past is disconnected from the present has become a deeply embedded assumption in the West'. They add that this 'reconfiguration constituted a key step towards modernity itself, since "the past" defined "the modern" by opposition' (ibid.).

If the historical war was in a sense peculiarly reduced – peculiarly, since it was of course the *raison d'être* for the grand anniversary in the first place – to serve merely as a narrative necessity for staging the current success story, a related point can be made about the current wars. The activities of the big day on Dybbøl Hill were clearly not meant to draw too much attention to the brutal details of Denmark's (or Germany's) present engagements in Afghanistan or elsewhere, beyond vague statements of the 'lifting of international responsibility' type. Of course, the notable military presence during the wreath-laying ceremony served as an obvious reminder that soldiers were still around, that the whole world had not (yet) become peaceful

and reconciled. Still, the role of today's wars, to the degree that they featured at all, was mainly that of supporting the master reconciliatory plot: 'Today, Denmark and Germany stand shoulder by shoulder when we deploy soldiers to the hotspots of the world', as Danish Minister of Defence Wammen put it.

Both the war of the past and those of the present thus seemed oddly 'displaced' in the performative enshrining of peace and bright futures. If, on April 18, 2014, the past war was indeed imagined as a 'foreign country', adopting David Lowenthal's well-known term, then the present one – raging, of course, *in* a faraway land – appeared just as remote. If one was 150 years off in time, the other (often referred to, in the Danish mainstream, as a war fought in a 'medieval' or 'backwards' region) seemed 150 years away as the crow flies. 'The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there' is the original quote from novelist L.P. Hartley promoted by Lowenthal (1985: xvi). On the commemorative field of Dybbøl, it felt as if the two distant wars both served to remind us all that 'we' did things right.

Third Event: Heraldng Heroes in Give

While the 18 April events clearly marked the pinnacle of the 150th anniversary and the officially endorsed mode of remembering, one found a long list of smaller-scale events dotted across the 2014 calendar. Not all of them were attuned to the Dybbøl messages, and some contained a much more conspicuous blurring of past and present wars, efforts and values. As my final object of analysis, I will discuss one such example. Each year on February 28th, in the small provincial town of Give in East-central Jutland, the death of local cavalryman Niels Kjeldsen in 1864 is commemorated by a wreath-laying ceremony. According to popular lore, Kjeldsen, a dragoon straying behind his comrades in a small Danish reconnaissance unit, was intercepted by a group of Prussian hussars and fell to a bullet fired from his rear after having himself put several enemy horsemen to the sword. A highly celebratory rendering of the episode and the gallant Danish hero – facing off, against all odds to protect his comrades, and only downed, cowardly, by a bullet from behind his back – circulated from the early 1880s, popularised and condensed in paintings, popular culture and national school curricula (Christensen 2014: 56-57). Although the truth-value of this heroic account had been subject to intense historical debate already in the early 20th century, Kjeldsen's local legacy as self-sacrificing role model has survived, as we shall see.

Because of the anniversary, the 2014 event was significantly larger than usual. On this cold February day, the town centre was transformed into a peculiar mixed zone of military and popular encounter, exchange and celebration. This was a big day out in Give. As the event poster announced: 'Come and experience dragoons, battle tanks, F16 fighters and leg amputations'. Modern military machinery was lined up, brought along by units from the aptly named Niels Kjeldsen squadron of the Jutland dragoon regiment. Nowadays, armoured vehicles have replaced the horses of former times, but these soldiers were clearly here as the contemporary descendants of – or

even stand-ins for – the fallen 1864 dragoon. Adventurous children in large numbers crowded the military vehicles, supported by freezing family members and catered for by hot dog and soup vendors. In particular, the F16 fighter parked on the town square seemed to possess a magnetic pull on the younger generation, eagerly queuing up to test out a real pilot's seat and the opportunity to feel airborne. Helpful, polite and outgoing (or 'active'), the soldiers of today were at hand to explain, lend out equipment and instruct the youngsters and their parents in the use of weaponry, aiming procedures and technical and horsepower details. One lieutenant told me that he really enjoyed such public outings, but also that, as he said, 'this is pure promotion' of the Danish Army. A company of costumed re-enactors in 1864 uniforms and other historical interest and hobby groups were also present, providing the tangible, 'living' links back to the famous conflict.

These jumbled combinations of past and present somehow supplied both with authoritative depth. The 1864 and 2014 soldiers in a sense 'confirmed' each other's worth simply by being present. In the morning, the historical re-enactors paraded next to their modern-day counterparts on the town square, conducting drills and presentations almost like a shadow of today's 'real' troops lined up next to them. Then, in a rather disorderly performance of an 1864 'amputation' scene – utilising theatre blood, artificial limbs and an arsenal of cruelly looking surgical tools – the re-enactors sought to absorb the public in a display of the horrors of the era's field surgeons. Later in the day, everyone would see war action of a more 'regular' kind on a meadow on the town's outskirts. Here, the 1864 re-enactors faced off against their modern-day counterparts, including a fully operational *Leopard* battle tank, in a curious, smoke-filled mock engagement between the Danes of then and now. This was advertised in cheerful tones in the printed program: 'See a battle tank really kicking it', it stated, inviting the audience to 'compare the bang from the cannon with the historical guns from 1864', since the re-enactors were 'certainly planning to challenge the battle tank'.¹⁷ A jolly spirit indeed permeated the action of the afternoon, black powder and horsepower on show, explosions ripping through the chilly winter air. Soon, we were all engulfed in heavy smoke, a 'fog of war' so thick it became almost impossible to tell the silhouettes of historical and contemporary performers from each other. Then again, this seemed in a way to be exactly the point.

If a certain playful enthusiasm thus characterised these popular stagings, the day's main ceremony at Kjeldsen's grave was conducted in structured solemnity. The rigidly ritualised space of the commemoration and wreath-laying ceremony followed tried-and-tested templates from previous years and from similar events, at Dybbøl and elsewhere, with military parading, saluting, dues paid to the Danish colours, fanfare and speeches in honour of the fallen. For this 150th commemoration, hundreds of spectators crammed themselves into the town's modest-sized cemetery, creating a packed and dense atmosphere in which the alleged bravery of Kjeldsen was cherished and remobilised for the living. There was no room, physically or discursively, for myth busting. This was clearly not about nuances or hair-splitting historical details. The strong local and regional investment – economically, materially, politically, affectively – seemed to require, even produce, heroic speech. Indeed, all three

speakers at the cemetery, two soldiers and a local politician, praised the 1864 dragoon and his deeds and went on to explicitly link them with contemporary ones.

First, the leader of today's Niels Kjeldsen squadron spelled out the inspiration he and his men took from their valiant forebear. The young lieutenant stated that the soldierly values and ideals represented by the 1864 hero – courage, self-sacrifice, steadfastness and a focus on 'getting the job done' – were eternal and still relevant.¹⁸ To the regional TV station, the lieutenant explained that 'every time we get new soldiers, and in order [for us] to get the right attitude into them, it helps having a person that they can look up to'.¹⁹ As an ideal type and role model for new recruits, Kjeldsen (or rather the myth of Kjeldsen) still had a role to play. Continuing this train of thought, the day's second speaker, a seasoned Colonel and regiment commander of the Jutland dragoon regiment, went on to connect Kjeldsen's courage directly with that of his own soldiers. He emphasised how the 1864 hero absolutely deserved the attention awarded to him but that, in his view, 'the praise also applies to the dragoons of today who perhaps right now advance in their battle tanks far from Denmark in Afghanistan on a new perilous task.'²⁰ Entertaining the possibility that today's incarnations of the historic soldier were in fact, as he spoke, engaging the Danish enemies in remote lands, the Colonel traversed effortlessly across time and space in his tribute. He extended the parallel further, claiming that:

Niels Kjeldsen fought bravely and valiantly since he was of a proper Ullerup-Give mould, but also because he was part of a closely-knit unit that had support from home. The same applies to the battle tank dragoon of the present who fights far away from Denmark to protect his comrades and because he experiences support from home.

If the Dybbøl ceremonies had in a way worked to separate the conflicts and stress their respective remoteness – letting 'us' move out of darkness toward the rational, cosmopolitan present – then the events in Give thoroughly collapsed them.

The third speaker, the mayor of Vejle, the larger municipality in which Give is located, took the hero out of the purely military sphere, identifying a wider 'need for heroes' in today's Denmark. 'Why do our children choose to dress up as heroes?' he asked, referring to the annual Danish *Fastelavn* tradition in which children dress up and where colourful superhero costumes are a popular choice. 'It must be because heroes are easy to identify with. In our busy day-to-day lives it is the heroes we remember. Their actions are simple and without ulterior motives. It is not about the heroes themselves but about what they can do for others'. The mayor exemplified a number of everyday 'heroic' acts – 'at breakfast, when daddy loosens the lid of the marmalade jar', 'when little sister stumbles, and mommy comforts her', 'when your classmate defends you against the school's bully'.²¹ It was a plea for human selflessness and sacrifice, qualities that he said characterised Niels Kjeldsen's deeds 150 years ago as well as those of today's Danish soldiers deployed abroad. Once again, what was celebrated seemed to be the ideal more than the man; the need for heroes more than actually existing ones.

What the Give speakers expressed are 'only words', one may of course object. But in a way they are not. The lack of room for doubt or non-heroic action was also a

physical one, an enacted and *felt* one, as the very organisation and ritualisation of the ceremonial routines in effect precluded such counteraction. And by turning out in such great numbers, by our joint attendance, we all contributed to the continued pedestaling of the Danish hero (past, present and future). When, in conclusion, the mayor laid down a large wreath at the gravestone, he was accompanied by a young girl, Amalie Kjeldsen, a great-great-great granddaughter of Niels' brother. If any of us had until then doubted the continued presence of the Kjeldsen legacy, here was the final, living proof – writ in blood, so to speak – that it was still with us.

Conclusion: Varieties of Activism and the Shaping of Expectation

At the three main events I have explored in this article, the links and consequences being forged between past, present and future are clearly related, yet different. Traces of both 'defencist' and 'cosmopolitan' outlooks are evident, sometimes sharply contrasted but more often blurring or overlapping. For example, prime minister Thorning-Schmidt in her 2014 speech drifted from a cosmopolitan and all-encompassing vision to a more narrow, national scope. Today's peaceful Danish-German coexistence was utilised by her as a positive example of the consequences of being 'active' and then tied rhetorically to the 'international responsibility' that 'we' have to 'lift', clearly advancing what Rasmussen (2005) would call a Scandinavian-cosmopolitan position. Yet she concluded her speech in a mode almost reminiscent of Haarder's bombastic national rhetoric seven years earlier, when she stated: 'And when we meet today to mark April 18, 1864, we do so with an indomitable belief that Denmark is worth fighting for. Then and now.'

What my case examples have shown is that we may speak of different Danish 'varieties of activism' that coexist and obtain momentum, credence and historical resonance in various settings and moments.²² The enthusiasm for 'activism' in itself is not in question, though; and the idea that 'we' can (once again) make a difference, and throw off the traumatic shackles from 1864, dominates throughout. With its positive connotations and relative flexibility, the conceptualisation of activism allows Danish politicians, soldiers and citizens alike to sense direction and purpose. The temporal trajectories and horizons inherent in each specific case may vary; from the homecoming Afghanistan trooper claiming that 'we' are 'still' Vikings, over Haarder's tale of a national rebirth, to the effective collapse of now and then at Give cemetery on 28 February, 2014.

In a larger perspective, paper deals with the ways in which events of the past are made sense of, and become consequential, in the present. An overarching, Western ideal of history – a 'historicism' based on shared assumptions of temporal chronology and of the separation between past, present and future periods, for example²³ – clearly permeates my field material. And yet, a key point for me is that we cannot assume we know what 'history' means and does, even in Western settings, but must attend to the complex temporal associations and interweavings unique to each particular case. Examples such as the past-present connotations I have analysed

here are not merely backward-looking or instrumental ‘uses of the past’, ‘uses of history’ or ‘uses of heritage’ in the present (Brow 1990; Trouillot 1995; Rozenzweig and Thelen 1998; Smith 2006). They are *also* that, yet they are *more* than that; they are examples of how temporal experience operates, is apprehended, and is bound up with the emergence of particular concepts and ideas.

Recall Koselleck’s example of the German concept of *Bund*, discussed in my introduction, which ‘incorporated experiences that had already been made and brought them under one concept’ (2004: 271). I suggest that the emerging Danish ‘activism’, not just as a linguistic or political term but as a genuine cultural current or mood, can be analysed along similar lines: not merely as a concept well suited for a cultural coping with and sorting of historical ‘experience’ but also, and importantly, full of what Koselleck calls ‘prognostic potential’ (ibid.). In Denmark, this is evident in the ways in which activist outlooks clearly partake in the creation of new horizons. In other words, ‘activism’ is able to not just summarise a status quo but to actively articulate and shape new landscapes, practices and collective, future experiences. Indeed, the country’s recent military engagements have created strong new expectations. Returning to the 2013 media reports with which I began my article, it is clear that those retrospective assessments were also profoundly prospective: they sketched out new possible scenarios for intervention, sometimes even a direct yearning. ‘It is not that we are actively looking for war, and I don’t hope to bring soldiers out to be killed again’, one officer reflected, ‘but the missions raise our level. There is no doubt that we hope for another assignment soon’ (*Berlingske Tidende* 13 July, 2013). In the same vein, the chairman of the Danish military officer’s union explained: ‘the officers want to use what they have learned. Alternatively [in the case of no new missions] it would correspond to having a football team that could only train but never play a competitive match. (...) It is when they are abroad that they gain the experience of doing a difference’ (ibid.).

As already indicated, such mounting anticipations are not restricted to the military system but have become largely mainstream and supported by the majority of the Danish population. Having indeed, as former minister Haarder phrased it in his 2007 speech, ‘joined the world’ in ways unthinkable a few decades ago, the Danes have grown increasingly used to and seemingly fond of seeing themselves as military ‘active’. That the popular commemorations of the type I have explored here often refer to distant and/or mythical engagements – in the ‘foreign country’ of the past, or in the dark lands of the present – is not a problem, but in fact a quality. Indeed, these events thrive better when the wars and heroes they refer to remain on the distance.

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¹ This does not mean that Denmark’s military was in fact entirely out of Afghanistan by that point (although it was easy to get that impression from the media hype at the time) but that the last contingent of regular combat troops was withdrawn. A reduced Danish presence, consisting primarily of armoured vehicles and logistics and transport units, as well as staff involved in the training of the Afghan security forces, remained in the country.

² All translations from Danish, from media, web material, and from oral interviews and speeches, are my own.

³ Such ‘body count’ stories are almost inevitably framed in exclusively and exclusionary national terms. Media reports, public ceremonies and discussions in Denmark on the ‘cost’ of the war have thus routinely measured this as the forty-three *Danish* soldiers who have lost their lives during the Afghanistan mission. Meanwhile, the thousands of non-Danish casualties – including, of course, the enemy fighters and local Afghans silenced by the Danish soldiers themselves – almost always go unmentioned. Borrowing Michael Billig’s (1995) useful term, we may say that there is a ‘banal’ national logic in place, in which ‘our’ bodies are understood to be those that are ‘grievable’ (Butler 2009; see also McSorley 2013: 13).

⁴ See e.g. Jakobsen and Møller 2012; Jakobsen and Ringsmose 2015. One of several examples is a 2012 poll conducted by market research firm YouGov, indicating that 27% of (a nationally representative sample of) the Danish population supported launching a ground invasion against Iran in response to the dispute over the country’s nuclear production, involving troops from their own country – significantly more than British (12%), German (18%) and Middle Eastern (14%) populations, and also higher than the corresponding US figure (22%). See Rogers 2012 for details.

⁵ See especially the two new chapters added as part of Anderson’s 1991 revision of *Imagined Communities*, pp. 163-206. This temporal logic is captured neatly by Timothy Mitchell’s (2001: 212) observation that ‘one of the odd things about the arrival of the era of the modern nation state was that for a state to prove it was modern, it helped if it could also prove it was ancient’.

⁶ See also Palmié and Stewart 2016 for a more recent call for an ‘anthropology of history’, focusing on ‘the ways in which people variously conceptualize and morally evaluate the past in relation to the present (and future)’ (2016: 208).

⁷ See Daugbjerg 2009; 2011a; 2011b.

⁸ For more on concept of egalitarian individualism, see Dumont 1987; Kapferer 1988.

⁹ *Venstre* (literally: ‘the left’) somewhat confusingly belongs on the right side of the political spectrum. As the largest and historically dominant force on the Danish right, it is a conservative-liberal party in the Nordic agrarian tradition, advocating free trade and historically supporting the interests of the peasantry.

¹⁰ All excerpts are from the written manuscript of the speech, archived at the Sønderborg castle museum, in my translation from Danish.

¹¹ See Branner 2013, Pedersen 2012; Wivel 2005; Rynning 2003.

¹² Several political analyses of the cartoon crisis emerged in its wake. See Linde-Laursen 2007; Müller and Özcan 2007; Rytönen 2007; Ammitzbøll and Vidino 2007.

¹³ Indeed, Danish ‘activism’ does not belong solely on the political right. While the term’s roots are usually traced back to Haarder’s fellow party member, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Uffe Ellemann-Jensen (in office 1982–93) who coined the term ‘active internationalism’ in a speech in 1989, the political responsibility during the Balkan missions of the 1990s were in the hands of governments led by the Social Democrats. See Jakobsen 2005 and Pedersen 2012 for discussions.

¹⁴ <http://www.dybboel2014.dk/> .

¹⁵ From interview with Holst, in Jørgensen 2014.

¹⁶ Quotes from Wammen’s speech are from Ritzau 2014a. Quotes from Albig’s speech are from Ritzau 2014a. Quotes from Thorning-Schmidt’s speech are from Gormsen 2014.

¹⁷ Quoted and translated from printed promotion handout, circulated on the day.

¹⁸ Quoted from fieldnotes.

¹⁹ Quoted from my transcription from local TV news clip, previously watchable on the website of regional TV station *TV Syd*: <http://www.tvsyd.dk> (clip no longer available).

²⁰ All quotes are from the written version of the speech, previously downloadable from the website of the Danish defence forces: [http://forsvaret.dk/JDR/Nyt og Presse/Nyheder fra JDR/](http://forsvaret.dk/JDR/Nyt%20og%20Presse/Nyheder%20fra%20JDR/) (manuscript no longer available online).

²¹ All quotes are the from written version previously downloadable from the website of Vejle Kommune, <http://www.vejle.dk/> (manuscript no longer available online).

²² Here, I draw inspiration from Ulf Hannerz' (1999) analysis of different 'varieties of culturespeak'.

²³ See Palmié and Stewart (2016: 210) for a consideration of Western historicism (including a basic definition) and its status in relation to other non-western conceptions of past-present relationships.