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Becoming a Warring Nation: The Danish ‘military moment’ and its repercussions

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Abstract:

This introduction sets the frame for the section’s four articles, all themed on contemporary developments in Denmark in the wake of the country’s involvement in the ‘coalition’ wars of recent decades. During this period, Danish governments have adopted a so-called ‘activist’ foreign policy, a key element of which is the increased utilization of its armed forces in operations across the globe. These processes are interesting, not least because they run counter to earlier conceptions in and of Denmark, a country that has been known, for long, as a bastion of politically liberal stances, widespread pacifism and a strong foreign policy tradition of noninvolvement. We outline this Danish road from ‘adaptation’ to ‘activism’, arguing for a need for a critical, qualitatively based research focus on the social and cultural repercussions of this peculiar ‘military moment’ in Denmark. The four articles that make up the themed section are written on the basis of ethnographic case studies that seek to contribute to such a wider discussion.

Key words: Denmark; Danish foreign policy; Scandinavian internationalism; military activism; cultural ramifications of warfare

The aim of this section is to document and discuss contemporary social and cultural transformations in Denmark in the wake of the country’s involvement in the ‘coalition’ wars of recent decades, with a particular focus on Afghanistan. In what has become known as a new wave of ‘activist’ foreign policy, Danish troop contingents on the ground have – from the Balkan conflicts (1992-), over Iraq (2003-2011), to Afghanistan (2002-2014) – tended to become deployed to ever ‘sharper’ missions. Recent overseas engagements include airborne operations over Lybia (2011), in Mali (2013) and participation in the continuing fight against Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2014-). Notably, this new outlook in Denmark is not just a political trait: regularly conducted opinion polls continue to indicate that the Danish population supports the overseas deployment of its military significantly more than any other coalition nation (Jakobsen and Møller 2012; Jakobsen and Ringsmose 2015).

In the four anthropological contributions that make up the section, we explore different dynamics of this seemingly increased Danish ‘appetite for war’ (Jakobsen and Møller 2012: 106). We find the case of Denmark to be particularly interesting, given the country’s post-WW2 reputation as a society characterized by tolerant, humanitarian and pacifist stances, and by a strong foreign policy tradition of non-involvement. How come that this peaceful Scandinavian welfare state has turned, seemingly, to embracing the waging of war, indeed – as we suggest – to ‘reinvent’ itself as a warring nation? And if this is really the case, how may we begin to measure and grasp such currents through qualitatively oriented research? How do these tendencies actually figure and matter socially and culturally?

To be sure, a significant amount of policy- and systems-oriented analyses exists on the Danish slide towards new forms of foreign policy activism (e.g. Rynning 2003; Rasmussen 2011; Halskov and Svendsen 2012; Pedersen 2012; Branner 2013; Kristensen 2013). Another body of literature, departing from psychology and related disciplines, considers the personal costs, scars and traumas of homecoming veterans (e.g. Birkeland 2010, 2011; Karstoft et al. 2013; Karstoft et al. 2015; Poulsen & Stigsdotter 2016), and how these pervade the representation of soldiers and veterans in public culture (Rothstein 2014). However, the present selection of articles and the research projects from which they spring¹ have been crafted in the belief that in-between these two already-existing research trajectories, focusing respectively on systems and on individuals, a significant gap can be found regarding the understanding of the *social and cultural meanings and ramifications* of the new wars on the (ill-defined) ‘home front’. We seek, through ethnographic attention and cultural analysis, to address this ‘middle ground’ in which structural and systemic changes and pressures are negotiated and refracted in and through social practice (Sørensen and Pedersen 2012; Sørensen 2015). This complex ‘ground’ is made up of all facets of everyday Danish life; of movements, struggles, hopes and concerns found both in the private and public sphere; of agendas and discourses asserting themselves across politics, institutions and (mass and social) media; of norms, obligations and routines enacted by people from all walks of life. Some are heavily involved in the realities of the new wars, be that as military participants, relatives, veterans, politicians or correspondents, while for many others, the faraway conflicts seem to not matter much in their day-to-day businesses. Yet, the present situation in Europe (and beyond) means that matters regarding security, policing, ‘radicalization’ and other consequences of war and violence are never further away than a TV newsroom or a swipe of your smartphone. In that sense, and even for those who consider themselves uninvolved, the ‘distant wars’ have become ever-present.

¹ Three of the four sub-studies (by Sørensen, Pedersen and Daugbjerg) formed part of a collective research project, entitled *Soldier and Society: Exploring the Revival of Danish Warriorhood* (running 2012-15), supported by a grant from the Danish Research Council for the Humanities. The study by Heiselberg was supported by a grant from the Danish Veteran Centre.

Danish foreign policy from adaptation to ‘activism’

In Denmark, the year 1864 carries significant symbolic power. This was when the powerful militaries of Prussia and Austria defeated the Danish army, in the first of three wars leading to German unification under Bismarck in 1871. The Danish state lost two-fifths of its territory and one-third of its population, leading to widespread doubt as to whether the nation was too small to survive as an independent state (Østergaard 2004: 34). The most common interpretation of the trajectory of Danish foreign policy ‘takes as its point of departure the traumatic experience of 1864, which until recently haunted both Danish foreign policy makers and the Danish public’ (Branner 2013: 140; see also Daugbjerg 2014). For more than a century, Danish defence policy would be focused on avoiding involvement in the power struggles of bigger nations and to adapt to their agendas. The country managed to stay out of World War I (after which parts of the lost land from 1864 was returned to Denmark) and did not put up much of a fight against German occupation in 1940-45, instead opting for a policy of adaptation and appeasement towards the Nazi rule.

In the period 1945-1989, when the Scandinavian welfare states evolved on the basis of strong Social Democratic and egalitarian movements and values, Danish foreign policy continued to be marked by peacekeeping and mediation. A special Nordic ‘brand’ of internationalism and aid work emerged, as Denmark and its neighbours came to be seen, and also in large measure to view themselves, as ‘good international citizens’ (Bergman 2007: 77) and promoters of ‘solidarist pockets of justice’ (Linklater 1998: 35) across the globe. The actual reach and depth of this outlook is hard to assess, but according to Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen (2005: 72), a certain brand of ‘Scandinavian cosmopolitanism’ developed which was also highly normative: the followers of this school, he argues, ‘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.: 73).

In contrast to Sweden and Norway, however, the political current of ‘active internationalism’ that began to take shape in Denmark after 1989 looked increasingly to the use of military force as a foreign policy tool. During the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, Danish military faced combat on a scale not seen since 1864. The September 11 attacks against the USA in 2001 marked a further escalation. A few months after the attacks, the then new Danish prime minister (and subsequent NATO Secretary General) Anders Fogh Rasmussen formed a coalition government on the political right, resting on crucial parliamentary support from the anti-immigrant Danish People’s Party; an axis that was to dominate Danish politics and policies for a decade. Rasmussen’s reign included a strong commitment to the US-led ‘war on terror’, leading – among other things – to Danish deployment to Afghanistan from 2002 and to its notorious Helmand region from 2006. Seeing itself as representatives of a break with previous ‘soft’ (social democratic and socialist) policies and tradition, the Rasmussen cabinet propagated a new look on Denmark’s foreign policy history in which the adaptive dogmas of the 1940s were frequently scorned as ‘cowardly’ and ‘humiliating’, and the present Danish engagements across the world were billed, conversely, as necessary and righteous.

Although political power has shifted several times since then, the ‘active’ use of military force in Denmark seems to have become widely accepted. Across the political spectrum, it has become an adopted truism that Danish security policy is no longer tied to conventional homeland defence, or, perhaps better, that the defence of the homeland today often takes place far from the national borders. As observed by policy analyst Peter Viggo Jakobsen (2005: 37), ‘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’. He adds that ‘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.).

Coming to grips with war and violence in today’s Denmark: the four articles

It is hard to measure what these newer political realities and increased engagements mean and “do” culturally. One way to begin tracing such shifts is by looking at the iconic figure of the soldier and the meanings connected to it. The soldier, traditionally, personifies national virtues, struggles and hopes. According to Andrew Bickford, the soldier *is* the state, ‘the personification, the sign, the representation of the state’ (2011: 3). However, the significations and values connected to the soldier as national symbol also shift over time, together with concomitant commemoration policies and practices (Mosse 1979; Winter 1995). Former notions of heroism, (national) sacrifice and masculinity may wane, for instance, leaving room for new conceptualisations and associations.

In the Danish case, Ulf Hedetoft argued in 1993 that what he called ‘the mentality of war’ in Denmark was characterised by the small-state defeatism resulting from 1864, ‘all very unheroic and non-militant’, traceable in popular (e.g. filmic) renderings of the Danish soldier as ‘an honest but blundering, upright but harmless fellow, an anti-hero donning his uniform for as brief a time as possible, subsequently to boast about the combination between ridiculous hardships and his personal ability to pervade them’ (1993: 291). This diagnosis, accurate as it may have been at the time, has changed profoundly over the course of the last few decades. Today – as the present contributions detail and discuss – a new, less passive and less antiheroic image of the soldier and of being at war is emerging, concomitant with the political ‘activism’ described already. It is a soldier image and a ‘military moment’ that is in no way simple to assess, but also one that is perhaps less one-sided than the archetypes of the Cold War era. This multiplicity, in which the (Danish) soldier takes on a range of different meanings and roles, from ‘diplomat’ to ‘warrior’, and from conscript to contracted, can be said to mirror the complexity of the current global security situation and Denmark’s place in it. These are certainly much less given than they were pre-1989.

The image of the ‘blundering’ and ‘harmless’ Danish conscripts of former times is largely gone. Today, the units engaged across the globe are made up of professional soldiers and characterized by a different ethos. Indeed, a certain eagerness to join the fray and be ‘tested’ can be discerned, as Thomas Randrup Pedersen details in his article,

in which he follows some of the last Danish combat troops deployed as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan. He discusses perceptions and practices of war and violence among the soldiers not so much as a matter of necessary evils or as a sense of global service or 'doing good' in the world, but instead as what Pedersen identifies as an inwards-directed 'existential window of opportunity' in which several of these young men are driven by personal desires to feel 'real' and 'authentic' in the mettle of fighting.

In her article, Birgitte Refslund Sørensen focuses on the changing memorial landscape in a Denmark coming to terms with an increasing number of war dead. She analyses both 'official' national monuments as well as more informal grassroots memorials and individual graves and tombstones, identifying a nuanced picture of competing narratives, protests and meanings traceable from these potent material markers. Many are placed far from the public eye and contain subtle stories and emotions that are largely invisible in the Danish mainstream.

In Maj Hedegaard Heiselberg's contribution, we enter further into another private and unglamorous realm of civil-military relations: the families affected by the absence of a father or a partner. Following a number of women and children who seek to get by while 'their' soldier is deployed in distant lands, Heiselberg details how these military operations infiltrate families' daily lives profoundly. She discusses various efforts at overcoming these distances and the creation of what she calls 'shared relational spaces' across time and space. The article constitutes a reminder that our analytical scope of what may be considered 'military' needs to be widened to include the social relationships and consequences in the private sphere.

The section's final contribution by Mads Daugbjerg also grapples with the notion of distance, but in a different setting: the Danish Arsenal Museum in Copenhagen and its exhibition, entitled *The Distant War*, on the Afghanistan conflict. Daugbjerg's article draws attention to museums as important sites of knowledge creation about war and the military, and of the relationship between military and civilians 'ways of knowing' (Harris 2007). In it, the museum's attempts at bringing the so-called distant war 'closer' to the visiting public, by use of particular scenographic and cinematic means, is analysed, together with an explicit wish to 'hide' the conventional curator and his/her mediation. While the exhibition's unusual format certainly allowed for new identifications and approximations, Daugbjerg also criticises the ways in which the stagings were coupled with claims to fuller, more 'real' or more 'honest' renderings of the war in Afghanistan.

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