

Factsheet Denmark

NOVEMBER 2003

HISTORY

In 1939, a diplomat observer at the British legation in Copenhagen wrote in a report on the Danes: 'A few decades of material prosperity and the ministrations of an over-paternal Government seem to have sapped the spirit of a Viking race which can point to 1500 years of vigorous and independent history'.

The statement contains the official's understanding of Denmark's history and the Danes' transformation from hardy, free-born Vikings to a soft and docile breed. He also indicated why things had gone wrong: material wealth and an over-protective Government.

There is no reason to regard the statement as anything other than a worried diplomat's hasty assessment, but he put his finger on two characteristic features of the Danish society in the first half of the 20th century, i.e. increasing affluence and the growth of the welfare state.

Prehistory

The oldest existing evidence of human habitation in Denmark is traces of hunters' settlements from the end of the last Ice Age c. 12500 BC. Organised farming communities did not appear until the Neolithic Age c. 3900 BC and villages are known from the centuries before Christ's birth. Regular towns, such as Ribe, do not appear until the Germanic Iron Age c. 400-750 AD.

The unification of the country under a central power began 700 AD. As the Frankish empire declined, a stable royal power developed which, although it probably did not cover the entire Danish territory, nonetheless managed to defend itself against enemy invasions from the south.

The unification of the country was finally completed under the son of Gorm the Old, Harold I Bluetooth (d. 987), as

stated on his runic stone in Jelling, where the word Denmark appears for the first time. The Jelling stones are often regarded as Denmark's birth certificate.

Viking Age

During the Viking Age, c. 800-1100, a strong royal power developed, as is demonstrated for instance by several strategically placed circular fortresses of impressive size.

The period was characterised by the frequent Viking expeditions which led to the conquest of England for a short period in the 11th century and took the pillaging Vikings as far away as Ireland, Northern France and Russia.

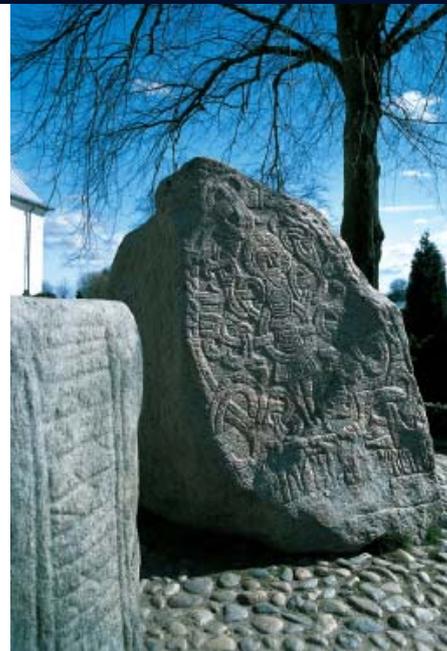
The Vikings' long boats brought rich booty back to their native country, but the Danish Viking kings never managed to turn their conquests into a lasting empire. The murder of Canute IV the Holy in 1086 ended the strong royal power, which had been one of the secrets behind the victorious Viking expeditions.

Christianity

At the same time, Christianity reached Denmark. About 965, Harold I Bluetooth was baptised and the new faith soon established itself. The country got a clergy, who saw to the dissemination of Christianity.

In the following centuries the Catholic Church consolidated its influence; churches were built, and the Danish farming community, which now numbered c. 700,000, organised itself according to Christian social standards.

It separated into a powerful clergy, asecular nobility of great land-owners who also formed the core of the country's defence, an urban middle class which increased as the towns grew, and finally a large peasantry.



The large Jelling stone set up by Harold I Bluetooth (d.987). The stone is decorated with an image of Christ, and the runic inscription announces that it was Harold who united Denmark into one realm and made the Danes Christians. In the foreground is the small Jelling stone set up by Gorm the Old in memory of the queen Thyra. Photo: Wedigo Ferchland.

The Kalmar Union

The Black Death, around 1350, wiped out a large part of the Danish population, which resulted in major economic and social changes.

The main political event of the period was the establishment of the Kalmar Union in 1397, combining Denmark, Norway and Sweden in a personal union under the Danish Queen Margrete I.

The union lasted until Sweden, led by Gustav I Vasa, broke away in 1523. Denmark and Norway remained united until 1814. Norway's former North Atlantic possessions, Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, remained part of the Danish kingdom and still are, with the exception of Iceland, which declared its independence in 1944.

Rivalry with Sweden

The break with the Roman Catholic Church in 1536, after three years of civil





Permanent cedings of Danish territory from the 17th to the 19th centuries.
Source: Danmarks Nationalleksikon.

war, changed the Danish Church into a Lutheran princely church. Denmark thus joined the Protestant side in the lengthy religious wars which ravaged Europe until 1648. Internally, the new State Church became a tool for ideological and moral indoctrination of the population by the greatly strengthened central power.

The period 1560-1720 was dominated by the intensified rivalry with the neighbouring Sweden for the position as the leading Baltic power. Denmark had hitherto held this position, as was symbolically reflected in the charging of Sound Dues, which were not abandoned until 1857. The rivalry triggered six wars between the two nations (1563-1570, 1611-1613, 1643-1645, 1657-1660, 1675-1679 and 1709-1720).

After Denmark had been weakened by Christian IV's unsuccessful intervention in the Thirty Year War (1625-1629), the conflict developed into a struggle for survival on Denmark's part, and for a while the country was on the point of becoming part of a large Swedish Baltic empire. This fate was only avoided because the Netherlands and England intervened, but the price was the ceding of all Scanian provinces east of the Oresund in 1658. The total area of the kingdom was thus

reduced by almost a third and the population declined from 800,000 to 600,000.

Absolutism

The catastrophe caused a political crisis which in 1660-1661 brought about a new form of government. By coup-like means, the old elective monarchy dominated by the aristocracy was replaced by a hereditary monarchy. The new hereditary king, Frederik III, and his successors gained absolute power.

The king's unrestricted authority was subsequently codified in the Royal Law of 1665, which in general remained in force until the abolition of absolutism in 1848 and the adoption of a democratic constitution in 1849. In 1683, the *Royal Law* was supplemented with a Statute Book applying to the entire country, *King Christian V's Danish Law*. Insofar as the means were available, Denmark was transformed into a well-organised bureaucratic state under the paternal leadership of the absolute monarch.

Agricultural Reforms and Wars with England

The main achievement of absolutism was the extensive agricultural reforms of the late 18th century. They were motivated by the desire to make farm production more efficient in order to derive maximum profit from the 18th century prosperity. The reforms involved a shift from ecological farming – i.e. farming on nature's terms – to economic farming – i.e. farming on the market's terms. The old open-field system was dissolved and each farm was allotted a single parcel of land. At the same time, the farms were often moved onto the land itself, so that the ancient village community was also dissolved.

The reforms created an entirely new class of independent farmers, who in the following century became the driving force behind the folk high schools and the co-operative movement. Politically, the farmers united in the late 19th century in

the Liberal party (*Venstre*), which came into power in 1901.

Denmark was helplessly caught in the conflict between Napoleon and the rest of Europe. For fear of the consequences, the Danish government refused to take sides in the conflict, which led to English naval attacks on Copenhagen in 1801 and 1807 and seizure of the Danish fleet. At the same time, the loss of Norway in 1814 meant that the former dual monarchy, which geographically had stretched from the North Cape to the Elbe, was reduced to include only Denmark itself and the German duchies.

Democracy and the Schleswig Issue

As the national movements developed, the duchies' position within the monarchy became a key issue until 1864. Almost a third of the nation's population was German.

Holstein and Lauenburg belonged to the German Confederation, while Schleswig was nationally divided. The crucial question of Schleswig's affiliation became acute in 1848 when the pro-German Schleswig-Holsteiners demanded a liberal constitution and the incorporation of Schleswig in the German Confederation.

Conversely, liberal circles in Copenhagen demanded a democratic constitution for the monarchy and the inclusion within it of Schleswig in it, which conflicted with a long-standing promise that the duchies would never be separated.

This triggered a revolt in the duchies, and in Copenhagen led to Frederik VII declaring himself constitutional king, thereby paving the way for a democratic constitution which was codified in *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Denmark* of 5 June 1849.

The result was the Three Years' War of 1848-1851, which ended with a Danish victory insofar as the duchies after great-power mediation remained part of the Danish united monarchy. However, a satisfactory solution to the basic contentious issue had not been achieved.

The ceding of the duchies

In 1863, the Danish parliament passed the *November Constitution* which in practice separated Holstein and Lauenburg from the kingdom while incorporating Schleswig. This was a clear infringement of the great-power agreements.

As a result, the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck declared war on Denmark on behalf of the German Confederation. The outcome was a humiliating Danish defeat in 1864 and the ceding of all three duchies. Thus, the nation had once again lost almost a third of its total area and population.

At the same time, some 200,000 Danes were left south of the new border. They did not return until after a plebiscite in 1920.

The Hope of Regeneration

With the loss of the duchies, Denmark had become smaller than ever. From this nadir the work of national regeneration started with the motto 'outward losses must be compensated by inward gains'.

The reclamation of moorland gathered momentum, and with the help of the cooperative movement a large-scale shift from the cultivation of plants to livestock farming took place.

Industrialisation also accelerated, creating a regular working class in the towns. In 1884, the first Social Democrats were elected to the Danish parliament, the *Folketing*. The party's number of seats subsequently increased steadily at every election.

In 1905, The Social Liberal Party (*Det Radikale Venstre*) broke away from the Liberal Party as an independent party appealing especially to urban intellectuals and smallholders. This established the party pattern which was to dominate Danish politics until 1973. Its characteristic feature was that no party could muster a majority on its own, so that compromise became a basic condition of Danish politics.

The resultant consensus attitude is still a key element in Danish political culture.

Historical Survey

c. 12500	BC Immigration of the first hunters
3900 BC	Agriculture and animal husbandry
400-700	Incipient urbanisation
866-867	Viking conquest of York
c.965	Introduction of Christianity
1015-1034	England under Danish rule
1397-1523	The Kalmar Union with Norway and Sweden
1479	Founding of Copenhagen University
1536	The Reformation. Incorporation of Norway in Denmark
1660-1661	Introduction of absolutism
1666 1917	Danish colonies in Caribbean
1807	Bombing of Copenhagen by the English navy
1814	Norway's departure from the Union
1848	Abolition of absolutism
1849	First liberal constitution, the <i>June Constitution</i>
1864	Loss of the German duchies
1901	Introduction of cabinet responsibility
1914-1918	Danish neutrality during the First World War
1915	Constitutional reform, enfranchisement of women
1920	North-Schleswig vote in favor of re-union with Denmark
1940-1945	German occupation
1945	Founding membership of the UN
1949	Membership of NATO
1973	Membership of the EEC
1993	Membership of the EU

Neutrality and Occupation

In keeping with the careful policy of neutrality, with a German bias which resulted from the defeat in 1864, Denmark remained neutral during World War I and Danish trade and industry profited from the war-time conditions.

In the hope of weathering the storm, the same line was taken when the sky began to cloud over again after Hitler seized power in Germany in 1933. However, this time it did not work and on 9 April 1940, German troops 'peacefully' occupied Denmark.

The Social Democrat/Social Liberal government led by Thorvald Stauning decided to give in and reluctantly began a collaboration with the occupying power.

Gradually, British-backed popular resistance to the occupying power increased to

such a level that the policy of collaboration collapsed in August 1943.

The government resigned and parliamentary life ceased to function. The fiction of a 'peaceful occupation' burst and the last 18 months of the war were dominated by growing armed resistance to the Germans and their increasingly brutal reprisals.

By the end of the war, the resistance movement numbered around 50,000 members.

Alliance and Welfare

Despite its unclear position, Denmark had by the end of the war achieved de facto recognition as an allied power, due to the activities of the resistance movement and it was therefore invited to become a founding member of the United Nations in 1945.

History

Factsheet Denmark. Published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

Address: Asiatisk Plads 2, DK-1448 Copenhagen K, Denmark.

Telephone: (+45) 3392 0000. Telefax: (+45) 3254 0533.

E-mail: um@um.dk. Website: www.um.dk.

Editor: Flemming Axmark.

Translation: Siri Fischer Hansen.

Design: Ole Jensen - ojdesign.

Reproduction of the text, with or without acknowledgement, is permitted.

Published November 2003.

ISBN 87-7964-579-8

Along with Norway, it joined NATO in 1949 and thus definitively abandoned the policy of neutrality which had been a key element in Denmark's security policy since 1864.

The Marshall Plan assistance from 1948 initiated a huge modernisation of Danish farming and from the mid 1950s industrialisation really took off.

In 1963, the value of industrial exports for the first time surpassed that of agriculture. At the same time a comprehensive welfare programme was introduced, based on the principle of the right of all citizens to receive social benefits within the framework of the legislation. This created the Danish tax-funded welfare model, characterised by a highly developed social safety net and a heavy burden of taxation.

Political Upheaval

However, the traditional party structure collapsed as a result of the incipient youth revolution of 1968 and growing resistance to heavy taxation.

At the landslide election in 1973, electoral support for the four traditional parties declined from around 84% to a mere 58% and a number of new protest parties – The Progress Party (*Fremskridtspartiet*), The Centre Party (*Centrum-Demokraterne*), and The Christian People's Party (*Kristeligt Folkeparti*) – entered the parliamentary arena.

The general election in November 2001 resulted in considerable shifts in the parliamentary picture. For the first time since 1920, The Liberal Party won more votes than The Social Democratic Party.

At the same time The Danish People's Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*), which has immigrant policy as its main issue, registered a gain, while The Progress Party and The Centre Party dropped out of the Folketing altogether.

The Social-Democrat/Social-Liberal Government resigned as a result of its defeat at the polls and was replaced by a government led by Liberal leader Anders Fogh Rasmussen and consisting of The

Liberal Party and The Conservative People's Party (*Det Konservative Folkeparti*).

The Danish People's Party and The Christian People's Party form part of the non-Socialist Government's parliamentary basis.

Denmark and Europe

Alongside Denmark's integration in Europe, its post-war economy has become increasingly internationalised. The country did not participate in the negotiations which, in 1957-1959, led to the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC), but in 1960 it instead joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) together with Great Britain, which was the country's main export market.

Denmark did not join the EEC until 1973, again with Great Britain. Since then, the relationship with the EEC – from 1993 the European Union (EU) – has been a burning domestic issue, dividing the population into two camps of almost equal size.

Thus, the 1992 referendum on the Maastricht Treaty concerning increased integration produced a narrow majority for the opponents, and it took another referendum before Denmark could join the Treaty after obtaining certain opt-out clauses.

Participation in the single European currency, the euro, was rejected at a referendum in 2000. In this, as in other respects, the Danes are reluctant Europeans.

The Historical Inheritance

Denmark's current shape and extent is the result of successive cedings of territory due to its exposed location by the access routes to the Baltic. Until recently, the Danes were an exceptionally homogenous people, which can be attributed to the gradual loss of marginal parts of the realm in the course of time.

However, the traditionally high degree of homogeneity and consensus in Danish society is also closely connected with some of the historical features mentioned above

– the doctrinal influence of the Lutheran State Church, the uniformity of the broad population brought about by absolutism, the late industrialisation which did not create a large urban lower class until the 20th century, and the inability of the political parties to muster an absolute majority on their own, which has made compromise a condition of political life.

Rather than merely weakness and prosperity – as suggested by the British diplomat in 1939 – it is historical experiences of this kind that have determined the development of the modern Danish national character.

Knud J. V. Jespersen
Professor, dr. phil.

Further Information

Nationalmuseet Nybrogade 2
(The National Museum of Denmark)
Ny Vestergade 10
DK-1471 Copenhagen K
(+45) 3313 4411
www.natmus.dk
natmus@natmus.dk

Tøjhusmuseet
(The Royal Arsenal Museum)
Frederiksholms Kanal 29
DK-1220 Copenhagen K
(+45) 3311 6037
www.thm.dk
thm@thm.dk

Det Nationalhistoriske Museum
(The National History Museum)
Frederiksborg Slot
DK-3400 Hillerød
(+45) 4826 0439
www.frederiksborgmuseet.dk
(Danish only)
frederiksborgmuseet@frederiksborgmuseet.dk

Frilandsmuseet
(The Open Air Museum)
Kongevejen 100
DK-2800 Kongens Lyngby
(+45) 3313 4411
www.frilandsmuseet.dk
natmus@natmus.dk