

## The Stuff of Legend

### Resignation and Resistance in occupied Denmark and Norway\*

**leg·end** (lə-jend) *n.* **1.** An unverified story handed down from earlier times, especially one popularly believed to be historical. **2.** A romanticized or popularized myth of modern times.  
— from *The American Heritage Dictionary*

The rescue of the Jews of Denmark is the stuff of legend. Books and movies, authors and even scholars have long reflected on “one of the most remarkable chapters in human history” [Goldberger (ed)] — when tiny Denmark stood up to the most powerfully evil regime in human history, refused to bow to its pressure, and, in the nick of time, ferried over 7,000 Jews (nearly the entire Jewish population) to safety in neighboring Sweden.

No doubt, the story is remarkable — especially when seen in the light of more ordinarily-tragic events in Norway. But with time, the legend of ‘little Dunkirk’ has grown even larger than the events which inspired it. One story even has the Danish king wearing a yellow star on his sleeve in mockery and defiance of the Nazi decree that Jews wear this identifying badge. But the story is almost certainly false. In fact, precisely because of Danes like King Christian X, the Germans never dared introduce such anti-Jewish legislation in the first place! But the legend lives on; and, historically speaking, legends like this one have a tendency to grow. One historian even surmises that the events of October 1943 would have been included in the bible had they happened in the time of Esther.<sup>†</sup>

But the ‘miraculous’ events of that fateful season did not fall upon the Jews of Denmark like *mana* from heaven. Rather, they were the culmination of a policy of ‘negotiation’ which had dominated Danish-German relations since the occupation began in April 1940. Storywriters and mythmakers may wish to make the rescue of the Jews of Denmark a story of heroism and glory. But it wasn’t this. On the contrary, this essay endeavors to show that the ‘spontaneous’ rescue of Danish Jewry has its roots in something other than the national character of the Danish people. Here is indeed a “rare instance”, as Leni Yahil writes, “where the researcher must be careful not to overdo his enthusiasm for the rescuer, any more than he should overindulge his hatred for the persecutor” [1969: p. xx].

By comparing the Danish myth with the prevailing situation in the rest of Scandinavia, I will show that the policy of ‘negotiation’ was itself responsible for the ultimate failure of Nazi operations in that country. Though this policy sometimes turned out to be a “camouflage for passive resistance” [Yahil 1969: 33], the fact of the matter is that ‘negotiation’ — which, when it happened in the rest of Europe, was simply called ‘collaboration’ — normally worked to the benefit of Denmark *and Germany* alike. ‘Negotiation’ no doubt saved the lives of countless Danes, Jew and gentile alike. But the policy, often regarded as the lesser of two evils, only worked because it brought Denmark

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<sup>†</sup> Julius Margolinsky, as related in Abrahamson [1987: p. 11].

into the service of the German war effort. The policy of negotiation —which Denmark only gave up when prospects of a German victory grew slim, and then, for reasons having nothing to do with welfare of the country’s Jews —thus contributed —indirectly, but not insignificantly —to the suffering of Europeans elsewhere on the continent. It’s not only the Danish people who saved Denmark’s soiled reputation from the first half of the war, but selective memory, mythmaking, and historians like us.

***Denmark and Norway in context.***

The ‘miracle of Denmark’ is given further life in comparisons with Norway, its Scandinavian neighbor. In few places is the comparison so stark. Both countries have a similar political culture and long histories of democracy and religious toleration. Both were constitutional monarchies —indeed, their kings, Christian X in Denmark and Haakon VII in Norway, were even brothers. Both countries figured similarly in Nazi racial ideology and German military objectives. And yet, while Denmark has (rightly) earned the distinction of ‘righteous among nations’, the head of Norway’s collaborationist government has lent his name to traitors and quislings for generations to come. While Denmark succeeded in saving nearly its entire Jewish population, Norway —which shared a land border with Sweden and which lay only further from Nazi killing centers in Poland —lost nearly half of its Jewish population to the Nazi genocide.

This paper elucidates why, despite such similarities, the Jews in Norway and Denmark fared so differently. It is one part of a much larger, comparative project, which identifies the significant determinants of variation in Jewish victimization across the German sphere of influence during World War Two. At a glance, the relevant Jewish victimization statistics are as follows:

	Jewish Population	Number (%) deported	Number (%) killed
Denmark	7,800	464 (5.9%)	60 (0.8%)
Norway	1,800	763 (42.4%)	762 (42.3%)
Finland*	2,000	8 (0.4%)	7 (0.4%)

My general project —of which this essay is but one part —shows that the ‘success’ of the German genocide program depended most importantly upon the administrative relationship between Germany and each occupied country. In each country it occupied, Germany faced a choice as to how it was to administer the newly acquired territory. In some cases (like Poland and Bohemia-Moravia), Germany occupied and ruled the territory directly. In others (*eg*, Vichy France), Germany ruled through collaborators. I argue that where German rule was direct, its implementation of the final Solution was unhindered, and therefore more effective. On the other hand, where Germany ruled through collaborators, the precise implementation of genocidal policies was the result of complex bargaining and negotiations: In return for their loyal

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\* Because its independence from Germany was never formally violated, Finland is less important to this study of occupational administration than Denmark and Norway. In fact, the following study uses it for mostly illustrative purposes, and does not treat Finland explicitly as a case in its own right. Still, the fact that, without ever violating Finnish independence, Germany was able to deport and murder even *some* of Finland’s Jews suggests that even formally-independent countries might usefully be considered within the German sphere of influence. As we shall see in a moment, the difference between independent and occupied countries during World War Two (if not also today...) was often a matter of degree, not of kind.

cooperation in military or economic policy, collaborators could often get away with partial or simply ‘unenthusiastic’ implementation of the Final Solution. This was often a major factor in reducing rates of Jewish victimization.

The purpose of the current study is to test this theory by applying it to one region, Scandinavia, thereby controlling for the influence of other factors, including and especially domestic political culture or national attitudes about Jews. By comparing Denmark and Norway, two countries with a similar cultural heritage, similar political institutions, and similar traditions of democracy and religious tolerance, I qualify the role these attitudes played in determining the fate of the region’s Jews. Instead, I will outline differences in the way Germany occupied and administered these two countries as key to their different victimization rates.

Thus, contrary to most reflections on the rescue of the Jews of Denmark, this essay attributes the survival of Denmark’s Jews, not to the national character of the Danish people or to the inherent religious tolerance of its political culture, but to the fact that the leaders of Denmark were willing to ‘deal’ with Nazi Germany, whereas the leaders of Norway were not. Because of Denmark’s quick capitulation and continued cooperation with overwhelming German forces, the leaders of Denmark were permitted to stay in office and bargain with Nazi Germany under a policy of ‘negotiation’. This policy, and the willingness of Danish leaders to live up to their —not insignificant — end of the bargain, gained for Danish citizens, at least for a while, a kinder and gentler German occupation —one that softened (but didn’t eliminate) the harsh impact of Nazi policy for nearly everyone in Denmark, Jewish or otherwise. Indeed, the policy itself laid the groundwork for the eventual evacuation of Denmark’s Jewish population, when such drastic measures finally became necessary. The policy involved difficult choices, however, precisely because it required Denmark’s close participation in the German war effort. Historical hindsight and the moral judgments that go along with it have helped us forget, however, that the Danish policy required a difficult —and morally questionable —choice: Win for (some of) our citizens protection from Nazi persecution, but only at the cost of supplying and supporting German aggression elsewhere on the continent. The case study section of this paper, below, will demonstrate that Denmark’s contribution to this aggression was more significant —and more direct —than most reflections on Denmark choose to remember.

The Norwegian leadership made a very different, but equally difficult, decision in its response to Nazi terror. Despite enormous odds of defeat and a dramatically similar offer of peace for negotiation, Norway’s leadership refused to make any such deal with Nazi Germany. Instead, Norwegian leaders continued the fight, striking a dramatic blow in the German military machine and leaving German forces (particularly, the navy) with a Pyrrhic victory that very well might have saved Britain for the Allied cause. But the resistance, so important for the Allied military effort, ‘won’ for the Norwegian people a brutal occupation, complete with all the horrible trappings of Nazi occupational policy so common in the rest of Europe: a fascist dictator, harsh military reprisals, and the familiar pattern of anti-Jewish persecution, deportation and murder. As this essay will endeavor to show, however, the terrible fate of Norway’s Jews does not constitute a ‘failure’ in the attitude of the Norwegian people, who resisted German rule throughout and organized a rescue effort only more impressive in light of the lack of information and draconian conditions under which it was carried out. Reflections on the role of Quisling and the

German-imposed government in Norway in this persecution forget that such a government was only imposed upon Norway because Norway's constitutional leaders — in contrast to their counterparts in Denmark — refused to act like the quislings in the first place.\*

Romanticized arguments which emphasize the role of Danish national character in the rescue of that country's Jews —and most of the leading ones do —overlook the very ordinary —and sometimes morally problematic! — decisions, compromises, and 'dirty deals' that made such an operation possible in the first place. Such accounts forget or (more often) underplay the fact that the rescue of the Jews of Denmark only came at a tremendous moral cost, a cost which put Denmark and other countries like it in direct service of the German war effort, the same cost that countries like Norway simply —and perhaps nobly —found too high a price to pay. The Danish case shows us as clearly as any that in order to help Jews during the Holocaust, local leaders had to help the Nazis, too. It is a radiant example of the banality of goodness.

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\* Many people will no doubt take issue with my characterization of the Danish leadership as 'quislings'. To be sure, I explain this characterization in greater detail in the paper itself. But for now, it might be helpful to remember that *our* hesitation was not shared by the Allied powers at the time — who chastised 'Quisling Danes' for the first half of the war.