

# Danish Resistance during the Holocaust

[Guest Publication]

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At the beginning of World War II, the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway declared their neutrality. That means they would not take sides in the conflict. With memories of the devastation of World War I still fresh in the memories of many Danes, the governments thought that by being neutral their citizens would be spared the horrors of this new crisis.



Occupied Denmark

This however was not to be the case.

The morning of 9 April 1940, German forces crossed the border into neutral Denmark, in direct violation of a German-Danish treaty of non-aggression signed the previous year. In a coordinated operation, German ships began disembarking troops at the docks in Copenhagen. Although outnumbered and poorly equipped, soldiers in several parts of the country offered resistance; most notably the Royal Guard in Copenhagen and units in South Jutland.

At the same time as the border crossing, German planes dropped the notorious Oprop leaflets over Copenhagen calling for Danes to accept the German occupation peacefully, and claiming that Germany had occupied Denmark in order to protect it against Great Britain and France. Colonel Lunding from the Danish army's intelligence office later confirmed that Danish intelligence knew the attack would be coming on either April 8th or 9th and had warned the government accordingly. The Danish ambassador to Germany, Herluf Zahle, issued a similar warning which was also ignored.

As a result of the rapid turn of events, the Danish government did not have enough time to officially declare war on Germany. Sixteen Danish soldiers died in the invasion, but after two hours the Danish government surrendered, believing that resistance was useless and hoping to work out an advantageous agreement with Germany

Within the first years of the German occupation, the Germans had often raised the question of the status of the Danish Jews. However the Danish government had consistently refused to engage in any debate on the "Jewish question" as they insisted there existed no "Jewish question" in Denmark.

It became increasingly clear to Berlin that if they wished to maintain a peaceful occupation and secure the collaboration of the Danish government, it would be opportune not to put pressure on the government. It was abundantly clear that a compromise was out of the question, and as long as the Danish government adhered to collaboration the "problem" was put aside.



Danish troops the morning of the invasion (all were killed)

During the first years of the occupation, active resistance activities were few in number and consisted mostly of the production of underground newspapers. This lack of active fighting prompted Winston Churchill to refer to Denmark as "Hitler's Pet Canary". Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, many Danish Communists formed resistance cells.

### Resistance Groups

**BOPA** (Borgelige Partisaner, Bourgeois Partisans) was a group of the Danish resistance movement operating at the time of the occupation of Denmark by Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

In 1942, the illegal Communist Party of Denmark had begun organizing small sabotage cells across the country, mainly formed by veterans who had been part of the volunteer anti-Franco brigades of the Spanish Civil War. However, as arms were scarce, the weapon of choice was often petrol and matches, and only small scale operations were carried out.



On January 25, 1943 a group of students — who had previously been refused membership of the communist resistance group due to the mistrust held by its members toward any elitism — set fire to a stock of German listening devices at Dansk Industrisyndikat in Hellerup using a bottle of spirit. The students were hereafter accepted into the group, and this caused a change of name from the original KOPA (Kommunistiske Partisaner, Communist Partisans) to BOPA. The new name was at first used jokingly by old members, but it soon became the most widely used name.

BOPA action in 1944 -Copenhagen

Operations grew in magnitude as individuals with inside knowledge of possible targets joined the group. Especially young apprentices from large factories proved useful in identifying targets which were supplying the German military, and this resulted in attacks on factories such as Burmeister & Wain and Riffelsyndikatet in 1943, Riffelsyndikatet (again) and Global in 1944 and Always in 1945.

### **Holger Danske** (Resistance group)

The group was formed in Copenhagen in 1942 by five men who had all fought on the Finnish side during the Winter War. By this time of the occupation resistance work carried a great deal of risk

because the general public was still largely opposed to sabotage and the government was following its "co-operation" policy with the Nazis to avoid as much German intervention in Danish affairs as possible.

Holger Danske, as well as the rest of the Danish resistance, was very opposed to this collaboration and continued to believe that the Danish should have resisted the invasion much more fiercely. Gunnar Dyrberg recalls in his book how he had seen Danes engage in friendly conversation with the Germans immediately after the invasion and cites this as one of the reasons he later decided to enter Holger Danske.

The group was infiltrated by the Gestapo twice but because of its loose structure (unlike BOPA the organization was very loose) they were unable to identify all the members. A total of 64 members were executed by the Gestapo during the occupation.

Among their largest sabotage actions were the blowing up of the Forum Arena in 1943 and the attack on Burmeister & Wain in 1944.

### Resistance Leaders

- Christer Lyst Hansen
- Mogens Fog
- Flemming Muus
- Monica Wichfeld
- Ove Kampman
- Poul Brandt Rehberg
- Poul Bruun
- Marius Fiil
- Niels Fiil
- Jørgen Kieler

In 1942-43, resistance operations gradually shifted to more violent action, most notably acts of sabotage. Various groups succeeded in making contacts with the SOE which began making airdrops of supplies. The number of drops were slow until August 1944, but increased in the last part of the war.



Holger Danske Workshop & Hideout



German trucks sabotaged by BOPA agents symbolic, increased rapidly.

As the war dragged on, the Danish population became increasingly hostile to the Germans. Soldiers stationed in Denmark had found most of the population cold and distant from the beginning of the occupation, but their willingness to cooperate had made the relationship workable.

The government had attempted to discourage sabotage and violent resistance to the occupation, but by the autumn of 1942 the numbers of violent acts of resistance were increasing steadily to the point that Germany declared Denmark "enemy territory" for the first time. After the battles of Stalingrad and El-Alamein the incidents of resistance, violent and

On August 29, 1943, SS-General Werner Best declared martial law and demanded the introduction of capital punishment. The Danish government, after cooperating for three years, defiantly stopped functioning but refused to resign formally to prevent Germans from taking over, without violating the Danish constitution. The Danish administration however continued to function.

In a move to save face, Best decided to crack down and launched plans to arrest Jews. On September 8, he sent a telegram to Berlin: "The time has come to turn our attention to the solution of the Jewish question." When final orders for the raid arrived from Berlin on September 28, Best informed his confidant, Georg Duckwitz, that Jews would be rounded up within two days, on the night between October 1 and 2.

German maritime attaché Georg F. Duckwitz leaked the information to Danish politicians and the news spread like wildfire through friends, business acquaintances, and strangers wanting to help. Ordinary citizens all over the country offered refuge in churches, attics, and country homes, and residences. Complete strangers walked up to Jews on the street to offer keys to their apartment. Medical staff hid more than 1,000 Jews in Copenhagen hospitals.

On the night of the raid, Germans only found 284 Jews out of almost 8,000 in the population.

Read more about the fate of the Danish Jews [HERE](#)

The Jews were smuggled out of Denmark by transporting them by sea over the Øresund from Zealand to Sweden, a passage of approximately 10 miles. Some were transported in large fishing boats of up to 20 tons, but others were carried to freedom in rowboats or kayaks. Some refugees were smuggled inside freight cars on the regular ferries between Denmark and Sweden, this route being suited for the very young or old who were too weak to endure a rough sea passage. The underground had broken into empty freight cars sealed by the Germans after inspection, helped refugees onto the cars, and then resealed the cars with forged or stolen German seals to forestall further inspection.



Georg Duckwitz



Refugees sailing to Sweden

Some of the fishermen assisting in the rescue charged money to transport Jews to Sweden, while others took payments only from those who could afford passage. Some profiteers took advantage of the confusion and fear during the early days of the escape, but as time passed, the Danish underground movement ousted them and took an active role in organizing the rescue and providing financing, mostly from wealthy Danes who donated large sums of money for the rescue.

During the first days of the rescue action, Jews swarmed into the many fishing harbors on the Danish coast for rescue, but the Gestapo became suspicious of activity around harbors (and on the night of October 1-2, eighty Jews were caught hiding in the loft of the church at Gilleleje, their hiding place betrayed by a Danish girl in love with a German soldier). Subsequent rescues had to take place from isolated points along the coast. While waiting their turn, the Jews took refuge in

the woods and in cottages away from the coast, out of sight of the Gestapo.

In September 1943, the 'Danish Freedom Council' was created. This attempted to unify the many different groups that made up the Danish resistance movement. The council was made up of seven resistance representatives and one member of SOE. The resistance movement grew to over 20,000 and in the lead-up to D-Day acts of sabotage markedly increased. Though the D-Day landings were to be in Normandy, SOE believed that the more German soldiers tied up elsewhere in Europe, the less that could be present in northern France. Therefore, the more acts of sabotage in Denmark, the more German troops would be tied down there.



Danish refugees register in Sweden

In 1944, the 'Danish Freedom Council' stepped up its efforts and more than 11 million copies of underground newspapers are published. That June, following a declared state of emergency, the entire city of Copenhagen goes on strike. Infuriated, Germany floods the city with troops, cuts off water and electricity, and establishes a blockade. By July 2, 23 Danes have been killed and more than 203 are wounded. But the dauntless Danes persevere. Exasperated, the Germans abandon these punitive measures by July.



Strikers in Copenhagen

Later that fall, when the Germans try to deport Danish police officials whom they believe are turning a blind eye to sabotage and disorder, Copenhagen goes on strike again, joined this time by 58 other cities and towns. Unafraid of Gestapo arrests, civilians flock to the resistance movement; enrollment exceeds 45,000 at its highest point. In May 1945, war-ravaged Berlin succumbs to advancing Allied forces, prompting Germany to abandon Denmark altogether.

After the war, 40,000 people were arrested on suspicion of collaboration. Of these, 13,500 were punished in some way. 78 received death sentences, although only 46 were carried out. Most received prison sentences of under four

years.

Many people criticized the process for victimizing "small" people disproportionately, while many politicians and businesses were left untouched. Another difficult issue was what to do with collaborators who were essentially "following orders" that their own government had given them, such as business executives who had been encouraged to work with the Germans.

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### Sources:

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Danish Peace History  
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