Lard, lice, and longevity: a comparative study of the standard of living in occupied Denmark and the Netherlands, 1940-1945

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Introduction

The greatest impression of destruction we had as we flew over Holland.
[...] If one flies from England, over Holland and Germany, to Denmark, one cannot help thinking how cheaply we escaped and what duties we have to join the work of restoration. (Mogens Fog1)

Mogens Fog – resistance hero and minister in the immediate post-liberation government of Denmark – had a clear message for his compatriots: while Denmark had survived five years of German occupation relatively unscathed, the Netherlands had been ransacked, and the Danes had a moral obligation to come to their rescue. Apparently, this feeling was widespread in Denmark, as it was in many other countries at the time. In the first year after liberation, the Danish charity Hollands Hjælpen campaigned to raise funds for the impoverished Dutch. Through posters, brochures and exhibitions, it portrayed a nation ravaged by bombardments, its population decimated by starvation and – last but not least – its great stretches of farmland swallowed by the North Sea. Going quite beyond Mogens Fog’s call for solidarity, Hollands Hjælpen even went so far as to claim that through their suffering, the Dutch had made an important contribution to the Allied war effort and that the Danes had nothing but a debt of honour to come to the aid of their southern brethren.

And so they did. In late 1946, Hollands Hjælpen proudly reported that it had already raised millions of kroner and collected 200,000 pieces of cutlery, over 2000 kettles and 43,384 pairs of used shoes for the destitute Dutch. In a joint effort with the Red Barnet child-aid organization, hundreds of Dutch children from the worst affected households were taken in by Danish families in order to reinvigorate them. Many of these children returned after a few months in much improved health and laden with goods and gifts, tokens of the hospitality and generosity of their Danish foster

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parents. Even today, many rural Danes can recount the stories of the impoverished Dutch children who temporarily moved in with families in the countryside. A Danish woman who was a child herself at the time told this author how a Dutch girl had arrived in her village, emaciated and bald. She was later told that the girl's hair had fallen out because she had had to survive the war on a diet of old newspapers. In reality, the baldness is more likely to have been the result of a radical delousing, but the example is illustrative of the impact of the foster children, as well as of the successful campaigning for donations, on the Danes' understanding of the German occupation of the Netherlands.

Was Denmark really so much better off than the Netherlands? Surely things must have looked very bad from the plane seat of Mogens Fog, who saw some of the 11% of Dutch farmland that had been inundated by the retreating German army. Moreover, there had been ample attention in the international press for the gruesome famine that had struck the Netherlands in 1944 and 1945, for the bombardments of Rotterdam, Nijmegen and Eindhoven, and for the fierce fighting in the Battle of Arnhem. Few people at the time would have denied that the fate of the Netherlands had been much worse than that of Denmark, which had seen very little actual fighting. Denmark had its own war casualties to lament, found itself in a nasty currency crisis and had many other problems, but at least the country had escaped the genocide, bombardments and inundations to which the Dutch had fallen victim.

What seemed obvious in 1945, however, need not have been true, or may not have been the whole truth. As the following thesis will demonstrate, the wartime experiences of Denmark and those of the Netherlands were in most respects very similar, diverging only, though importantly, during the very last months of the war. Until mid 1944, extreme hardships had befallen almost exclusively the small minorities whom the Third Reich considered its racial or political enemies. It has become apparent in recent decades that for most people in Denmark and the Netherlands, the German occupation was surely a nuisance, but not a disaster of the scale it is often supposed to have been. Recent literature on Dutch occupation

history is relatively optimistic about the wartime standard of living, emphasizing that for most people life could to a large extent continue as usual, albeit stripped of many of the luxuries they had enjoyed during the 1930s. The picture drawn up in Hollands Hjælpens's brochures may have been rather more dramatic than the reality of wartime life in the Netherlands before September 1944.

Or was it? On closer inspection, the relative peace and quiet that marked the wartime experience of most of the Dutch veils a substantial deterioration of the biological standard of living. This is best illustrated by the demographic impact of the German occupation. In the Netherlands, the number of people, and more specifically the number of children, who died of infectious disease was far higher during the occupation than it was before or after it. In this respect, the Netherlands more or less followed a general pattern whereby, from 1933 onwards, National Socialist rule had a markedly negative impact on public health, even in Germany. It seemed impossible, in an era of constantly moving troops, declining food and fuel supplies, and social disruption, to maintain public health at prewar levels, let alone to continue the trend towards drastic improvement that had prevailed during most of the twentieth century. The deterioration of health seemed to pervade all of continental Europe – or, rather, all of Europe except Denmark. In Denmark, despite Nazi occupation and many of the economic ills experienced elsewhere, public health appears to have improved rather than deteriorated during the early years of the occupation. Throughout the war years, child mortality, which increased quite dramatically in the Netherlands, declined in Denmark, just as it had done in the preceding years. Infectious diseases, which claimed thousands of lives in the Netherlands and many other countries, did not kill significantly more than usual in Denmark.

This discrepancy between similar economic circumstances on the one hand and a considerable epidemiological difference on the other, is indicative of the problems the historian faces when trying to investigate the standard of living during the Second World War or any such period of crisis and turmoil. Measuring the quality of life is a troublesome undertaking under the best of circumstances, mainly because so many different aspects of life – including not only such variables as income and health, but also, for example, political freedom and level of education – influence the standard of living. Various methods (such as the Human Development Index; HDI) have been developed to create a more or less universal tool for the measurement of
standards of living, and they have been deployed with promising results in historical research. In the case of wartime Denmark and the Netherlands, however, many of the factors that normally play a decisive role in achieving a certain standard of living play a much less important (or at least different) role in wartime. Income, to give the most obvious example, mattered much less in the price-controlled economy of the time, in which very little was for sale. Other factors, such as good health, became more important. Because these changes occurred quickly, the weighing of various factors becomes highly problematic. Periods of short-lived but radical changes are ill-suited to compose indices of standards of living, not to mention the shaky data generated in such periods.

Although assessing the wartime standard of living may be a difficult undertaking, it is highly relevant to our interpretation of these dramatic periods. Questions of poverty and wealth play an important role in many of the discussions, both among historians and in the general public realm, about especially the Second World War. Götz Aly, in his recent work *Hitlers Volksstaat*, claims that raising the standard of living of ordinary Germans was the central concern of the Nazi regime, and that this aim explains both its popular success and the gruesome genocide it committed. Recently, some rather rash statements by Prime Minister Fogh

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Rasmussen of Denmark sparked off a series of debates that were largely focused on the question whether or not Danish wartime policies and attitudes towards Nazi Germany had been inspired by the desire to eke out a comfortable life at the expense of principle and duty.⁵ The Dutch historian Chris van der Heijden, who in his 2001 book *Grijs Verleden* attacked the moralist historiography of the Second World War, emphasizes that the economic circumstances of the bulk of the population were far less disastrous than has often been claimed, and explicitly links the relative comfort of the early war years to the relative ease with which the Dutch accepted the occupation by Nazi Germany.⁶

Politicians, historians and journalists make opinionated claims about wartime standards of living with gratuitous ease. How people actually fared materially in the exceptional circumstances of the Second World War remains ill-understood. Unsurprisingly, then, research into wartime standards of living tends to be hindered by the very complexity of the subject matter. What did the swelling bank accounts of Danes and Dutchmen during the occupation really mean if there was almost nothing for sale? What was the welfare effect of, say, mandatory delousing in Denmark or the newly introduced health insurance in the Netherlands? How, to sum up, can we assess the impact of the Second World War on the quality of life in the countries affected?

One approach (which will be taken in Chapter 3) is to focus primarily on outcomes. Because there was a distinct difference between Denmark and the Netherlands in terms of public health, it may be assumed that there also was an underlying difference in the circumstances of life. A second approach (which will be operationalized in Chapters 4-8) is to measure, in so far as such is possible, the various constituent parts that together made up the material quality of life. Here, the

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⁵ This debate escalated over the course of 2004 and 2005 into a confrontation between the prime minister (and certain resistance veterans) on the one hand, and almost the entire historical establishment on the other. As far as I can see, Fogh Rasmussen’s statements are not based on new, or indeed any, research, and they need not be discussed in detail in this thesis. See M. Rostgaard Nissen, *Til fælles bedste: det danske landbrug under besættelsen* (Copenhagen 2005) 7-10.

historical comparison proves particularly useful, for while it is not feasible to calculate a single number to describe the standard of living in these wartime societies, it is quite possible to investigate and measure various aspects (income, diet, housing, employment, etc.) separately. By comparing two countries – in this case Denmark and the Netherlands – the development of various aspects of the standard of living can be not only measured but also contextualized: just as the HDI enables researchers to place standards of living in context, a comparison of various constituent aspects will permit a nuanced assessment of the quality of life in occupied Denmark and the Netherlands.

The finding that public health developed very differently in these two countries in a sense facilitates the study of the various material circumstances of life during the occupation. If outcomes were so very different, there must have been one or more considerable differences in the circumstances under which people had to live during the war, even if the circumstances in each of the two countries seem mostly similar when judged superficially. It is the remarkable divergence between Denmark and the Netherlands in the pattern of mortality that gives this investigation the character of a quest – a quest to identify which of the myriad of changes at the time was responsible for the considerable loss of life in the Netherlands. Yet this quest is only one, albeit an important aspect of what this comparative investigation attempts to do. Another aim, although perhaps slightly far-fetched, is to investigate whether a comparative approach can yield insights that would have remained unattainable without such an approach. In other words: can a systematic comparison bring order to and provide insight into the chaotic economic circumstances these countries experienced during the Second World War? And, if it can, is it worth the trouble?

While a comparison may lead to new insights, there also are undeniable downsides. Comparative research is cumbersome to execute, often boring to read and at least potentially dangerous. After all, the history of one nation is different in so many respects from that of another nation that a comparison is necessarily an onslaught on historical detail and nuance, cutting to size two separate histories until they are sufficiently compatible to be compared. The history of a country is so specific, arguably, that a comparison necessarily amounts to comparing apples with
International comparisons appear to go against the historian's instinctive desire to seek out the unique in historical reality, to take proper account of detail, and to place his or her work within a historiographical tradition. Despite these drawbacks, historical comparisons are often advocated, especially in the field of war and occupation history. It is worthwhile to dwell briefly on the question why this, mostly theoretical popularity has been in existence for so long, and why comparative history may be a viable approach despite the evident problems it creates.

The why and how of comparative research

Plans to write the history of the Second World War from an internationally comparative perspective have a long lineage. As early as September 1950, European and American historians convened in Amsterdam for what appears to have been the first ever international historical conference on the Second World War. Although the war had ended a mere five years earlier, the writing of its history had already commenced. The work that lay ahead for historians, however, was daunting. The archival records of the war years were vast, seemingly insurmountable and often badly accessible. At the conference, they keynote speaker Arnold Toynbee urged delegates not to be discouraged by the amount of work that lay ahead of them, arguing that nuclear war would soon enough dispense of most of the enormous body of source material. His gloomy prediction fell on an audience that was already strongly affected by the rifts caused by the Cold War: no delegates from newly communist states in Eastern Europe were present at the conference. Just as the new enemies were not welcome, neither were the old: not a single German scholar had been invited.

Despite their being rather an amputated group, geographically representing less than half the theatre of war, the delegates drew up plans to write its history. A recurring theme in their discussion was the multiplicity of subject areas to be covered. This indeed was a particularly poignant issue: the Second World War had

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7. The metaphoric comparison of apples and oranges is critically discussed in Sandford, 'Apples and Oranges: a comparison', published in the Annals of Improbable Research. Although (presumably) comic in nature, this brief article is an excellent illustration of the philosophical confusion surrounding comparative research.
pervaded virtually every aspect of life over a period of several years. Those who had been fortunate enough to have escaped the violence, genocide, bombardments, conscription and other immediate ills of warfare, had all too often fallen victim to food shortages, outbreaks of disease, runaway inflation and general impoverishment. Never had the world experienced a war that affected so many people so strongly and in so many ways. How were historians to write the history of a six-year period of radical change in virtually all dimensions of life – change that affected almost all Europeans and perhaps even more people elsewhere? In 1950, analysing the Second World War in its bewildering variety seemed an impossible task, one in which a single scholar could never succeed. It was therefore decided form teams of historians to collectively investigate specific aspects of war history. Notably, the tasks were not divided geographically, by country, as would have been the traditional approach. Rather, the delegates agreed to collaborate on a thematic basis, focusing for example on persecution, military history or economics, and to address Europe as a whole, as far as such would be possible. By focusing in the first instance on subjects rather than countries, the delegates revealed their preference for a European, or even global, history of the Second World War.8

Although the scholars at the Amsterdam conference may or may not have been aware of it, there was a precedent to their enthusiasm for comparative contemporary history, namely the World Historical Congress (Brussels, 1923) – or rather the opening address given at the congress by the Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne. He had likewise addressed his colleagues five years after the end of another disastrous world war, and had done so in the grimmest of terms. Pirenne – a medievalist – used his opening address to promote a methodology of historical research, pairing it with nothing less than an agenda for restoring European civilization. Historians, Pirenne claimed, had allowed themselves to get carried away by romantic notions of history and had become the pall-bearers of a catastrophic

8. The minutes of the conference are available on request at The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation. For a concise restatement of the comparative initiatives at this conference, see A.E. Cohen, ‘Problemen der geschiedschrijving van de Tweede Wereldoorlog’, reprinted in J.C.H. Blom et al. (eds.), A.E. Cohen als Geschiedschrijver van zijn tijd (Amsterdam 2005).
nationalism. They had mostly related to states ‘like architects to their patrons’, trying hard to deliver history that fitted a political, often nationalist, agenda. The Great War, the horrors of which Pirenne reminded his audience at some length, had been the ultimate consequence of the various nationalisms that historians had so obligingly furnished with scientific credentials. Pirenne also proposed a way out of the ill of modern historiography, namely internationally comparative history. Comparative historical investigation would reveal the general mechanisms of history and break the mould of national and nationalist history, and thereby ultimately destroy nationalism itself. Pirenne ended his lecture by stating that history would have to cease to be French, Belgian or German, and become a universally human and rigidly scientific discipline.9

Pirenne died in 1935, early enough to have missed the carnage of the Second World War but late enough to have witnessed the utter fruitlessness of his opening address. Writing history in the interwar years remained very much a national, and all-too often nationalist, affair. This was true in particular for the history of the Great War. As international an occurrence as the war had been, it became a pillar of various European nationalisms, as is evidenced today by the staunchly nationalist monuments that litter Western Europe. The imagery of suffering and heroism is virtually always placed in the context of the fatherland, and rarely relates to universal values, shared experiences or even the advocacy of peace.10 In Germany, the prevalence of an aggressively national historiography, of a particularly racial bent, indeed contributed to (but did not solely cause) the establishment of one of the most barbarous of political regimes.


Times, or rather minds, were not ripe after the First World War to engage in a historical discourse on the past conflict that transcended the prevalent national and nationalist historical cultures. This, regretfully, was also the fate of the plans drawn up at the Amsterdam conference in 1950. However enthusiastic, learned and good-willed the delegates at that conference may have been, their plans never materialized. Since that conference, a limited number of transnational and comparative studies have seen the light of day, such as Raul Hilberg’s 1961 *The Destruction of the European Jews,* but these remain rare. This is all the more remarkable, since historians have been far from lazy. Since 1950, more books have been written about the Second World War than about any other historical subject, and new works are still appearing every day. In addition to tens of thousands of books of varying pretence and quality, there are innumerable websites, articles, movies, television programmes, lectures, monuments and museums that are devoted in one way or another to the Second World War. The vast bulk of these, however, focus on specific nations, just as debates about the war tend to be national in orientation, audience and partakers.

Both the First and the Second World War, then, elicited calls for comparative history among historians, but both conflicts were in practice investigated very predominantly from a rigidly national point of view. Without claiming, as Pirenne did, that historians of the Second World War have behaved as political lackeys (which they have not), it is clear that there existed a much greater demand in postwar Europe for works that extol national histories and memories of war, than for the more detached, scientific investigations proposed by the proponents of historical comparison. Like the First World War, the Second World War in the former occupied countries has very predominantly been remembered in the context of national unity, national resistance and national martyrdom.\(^\text{11}\) There have been historians who have

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broken, to a certain extent, the mould of the national viewpoint, such as Umbreit, Rings, Hæstrup and Durand, but they remain a small minority.12

In so far as the production of national histories of the Second World war had been a demand-driven phenomenon, it was to be expected that things were about to change. In the Europe of the early twenty-first century, national identities face competition from a politically desired, supranational, European identity that seeks support in the shared history of Europeans, just as postwar nation states used the memory of the war to strengthen or create national unity. The European Science Foundation decided in 2000 to fund a four-year project involving over one hundred historians to launch a comparative investigation of the impact of National Socialist and Fascist occupations in Europe.13 This thesis is, in a sense, a result of the renewed interest in comparative research, although its scope of course falls far short of a pan-European history. Nevertheless, the time now seems ripe for historical comparison, and hence for the evaluation of the comparative research strategy.

**Denmark and the Netherlands**

Scientific fashion may have stimulated (and, arguably, financed) this comparative investigation, but that does not explain the selection of Denmark and the Netherlands as the two states to be compared. Historians have only rarely compared the occupation history of each of these two countries – and then only superficially. In many respects, of course, the wartime experiences of the Danes and of the Dutch can hardly be compared.14 The persecution of Jewish minorities, the military reaction to the German invasion, the judicial status of king and government were so different

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in each of the two countries as to defy reasonable comparative investigation. Notwithstanding, the pairing of these two states is sensible where economic matters are to be investigated. Although different in many ways, the economic fate of Denmark and that of the Netherlands stand out among Nazi-occupied countries because of both the similarities between these two countries and the difference between them and all other occupied countries. What sets these countries apart is primarily their exceptional economic administration: in both Denmark and the Netherlands, indigenous, non-Nazified civil servants designed and implemented extensive economic controls that, with only a handful of exceptions, were executed with great effect during the five years of the occupation. It is hard to think of any other country where a centralized state apparatus so successfully and comprehensively intervened in the economic lives of its citizens at such short notice, let alone while another, foreign power had usurped national sovereignty.

War and occupation brought innumerable changes, both big and small, in daily life in Denmark and the Netherlands. Many of the goods people were used to buying and consuming daily became scarce or were simply unavailable. Most essential goods were subject to rationing. Slowly but surely, their shoes and clothing wore out, soap shortages arose, and lice and scurvy spread like wildfire. People faced a wide array of problems, most of which are difficult to measure. A historical comparison can bring order to the chaos of differences and similarities between Denmark and the Netherlands, because they can be studied in the context of that one overriding difference between the two, namely that Danish mortality declined and Dutch mortality increased during the five years of the German occupation.

In the following chapters, living standards in Denmark and those in the Netherlands will therefore be investigated comparatively. That is to say, following Hartmut Kaelble's definition of comparative history, various aspects of Dutch and of Danish history will be explicitly and systematically compared. This has consequences for the selection of subjects treated here. In the first place, many aspects of each country's occupation history are so country-specific as to defy comparison. Where these are of immediate relevance to the prevailing standard of

living in one of the countries, they will of course be discussed separately. In other cases, however, seemingly important aspects of national occupation histories will be ignored. A comparative study is not the place to give comprehensive overviews of the histories of two or more countries. There is an extensive and recent body of literature on the occupation of each country at hand, and thus their histories need not be reiterated in detail.