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

Although the reasons remain unclear, or at least the evidence seems contradictory, it is evident that Germany treated Denmark with a leniency and courtesy it denied all the other countries it occupied. Although Danish neutrality may have been a fiction cynically imposed by Germany, the exceptional arrangements that were in effect during the occupation meant that Denmark enjoyed more freedom, more autonomy and more democracy than any other occupied state. Crucially, Denmark also enjoyed a higher standard of living, which the proponents of Samarbejde – be they politicians, entrepreneurs or civil servants – were always at pains to preserve. No degree of German leniency, however, could save Denmark from the economic problems that ensued from the country's inclusion in the German economic realm. After imports from most of its normal trading partners had come to a halt, shortages inevitably arose.

Moreover, although Germany may have been more lenient towards Denmark than to other countries, this did not mean that it refrained from exploiting the Danish economy. Denmark became part of the economic apparatus behind the war machine that Germany had become. It churned out uniforms, boots, ships, bunkers and countless other goods, all of which disappeared into the bottomless pit of Hitler's military and political ambitions. Most importantly, it provided Germany with a steady stream of pork and butter, helping it to overcome what was perhaps its greatest challenge, namely to nourish its enormous population in densely populated central Europe. Denmark became both the pigsty and the dairy of the Nazi economic realm.

After the invasion of 9 April 1940, the impoverishment of the Danes was inevitable – and many in Denmark were well aware of it. The country was prepared to introduce extensive economic controls, which for the most part were implemented with remarkable ease, with a few exceptions such as price controls. Overall, the Danish policies that were introduced to ensure both economic stability and relatively equal access to the most important goods were a considerable success. However irritating the shortages during the occupation may have been to the Danes, at least their basic consumption was safeguarded. Shortages of fuel, soap, chocolate and shoes made life uncomfortable, but the Danes escaped lightly in comparison with
other Europeans. Ragged, dirty, lice-infested and cold, the Danes found refuge in food and drink: although pork, butter, beer and the infamous potato whisky perhaps were a meagre replacement for all the lost luxuries, they did help to make life bearable.

In many ways, the fate of the Netherlands mirrored that of Denmark. The Dutch, who were occupied a month later, had been no less aware that occupation (or even war in general) would require the introduction of highly intrusive economic policies. Even more products were rationed than was the case in Denmark; sensibly included among the rationed goods were textiles and shoes, which were left mainly unregulated in Denmark. As in Denmark, the occupation seemed to rob everyday life of much of its lustre. Like the Danes, the Dutch were ever more shabbily dressed, short of bed linen, and plagued by lice and scabies. Soap shortages and endless queuing brought housewives to the verge of despair. Dutch life was spartan during the occupation, but not dangerously so until well into 1944. The impoverishment of the Dutch, like that of the Danes, was a constant irritation, but not life-threatening. Austerity remained much preferable to the carnage that befell many less fortunate European countries.

In both Denmark and the Netherlands, the occupation had its economic victims and beneficiaries. To an extent, the victims included nearly everybody, in as much as all but a few suffered a setback in consumption. On the other hand, the occupation also brought great economic advantages. In both countries, unemployment all but disappeared, and the very poorest enjoyed a higher income. Farmers, who had fallen on hard times during the 1930s, profited as food prices soared. Consumers, obviously, suffered a financial setback as a consequence, which was only partly ameliorated by rising wages.

Other winners among the Danes and the Dutch were those who made or supplemented their income through crime. In both countries, economic crime increased explosively as the bureaucratic control over the economy became ever tighter. In the shadow of economic controls, markets developed where controls were absent and violence and theft were the normal attributes of trade. Because black markets are difficult to investigate – being as necessarily secretive as controlled economies are necessarily public – it is quite attractive to ignore them and to forget the gaping hole between administrative and actual reality. The black market was part
and parcel of the economic strategy of many households, developed in the wake of economic change and constraints, and as such was an important aspect of wartime economies. Rationing currency was, effectively, a tradable asset, and in the wake of wartime inflation offered a welcome opportunity to adapt consumption to budgetary constraints.

However different their official status, the wartime development of standards of living was remarkably similar in Denmark and the Netherlands. There were differences, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, but they were mostly superficial. There were no fish-skin shoes in the Netherlands, fewer synthetic detergents in Denmark and many other such differences, but the overall picture is one of similarity. Except, of course, for one overriding difference: the availability of food and drink. The Danes lived through the cold, itchy, dirty and criminal years of the occupation with a full belly, and often more than a little tipsy. The Dutch had no such luck. Not only was alcohol very scarce, but more importantly the rich diet of the 1930s soon was, quite literally, no more than a sweet dream. The bulky, fatty diet people had been used to, had suddenly become unavailable. As a densely populated country, the Netherlands was in a far less favourable position to nourish its population than Denmark was. Indeed, had the RBVVO, under the leadership of S.L. Louwes, not worked a small wonder in transforming agriculture, the country could well have suffered an acute food shortage throughout the occupation. Without this transformation, the calorific needs of the Dutch would in all likelihood have not been met.

Although highly unpopular at the time, even the starchy, meagre diet of the early years of the occupation was dearly missed when, towards the end, famine did strike. Unlike Denmark, the Netherlands became a front country. After the liberation of the south, the Dutch living north of the Rhine had good hopes of a speedy liberation, but this was not to be. The railway strike – a dubious act of heroism more or less imposed on the Dutch by their government-in-exile in order to aid the Allied military advance – fatally disrupted food supplies to the most densely urbanized areas. The decline in German goodwill, freezing temperatures and the reluctance of skippers to sail westward, did the rest. The western Netherlands was struck by a famine that killed thousands and almost doubled the number of indirect civilian casualties in the country.
Apart from these gruesome final months, the similarities between the wartime economy of the Danish and that of the Dutch are striking. Although there were many differences between them, both economically and politically, both countries were well-prepared to introduce economic controls. It is difficult to say precisely why Denmark and the Netherlands had made extensive economic preparations whereas, for example, Belgium and France had not. One could argue that in the latter two countries, the memory of the First World War had induced a more martial attitude towards Germany, an attitude that left them far more concerned with preparing for trench warfare than for the regulation of the civilian economy. It may be that the different economic and political position of agriculture played a role, as Just and Klemann have suggested. But whatever the causes, in both Denmark and the Netherlands the responsibility for the standard of living was placed unequivocally in the public realm. What both these countries have shown is that a massive economic intervention in virtually every aspect of economic life can alleviate the impact of a sudden economic crisis. It came at a price, notably of curtailed freedom and rampant crime, but the subsistence crisis that it averted would probably have been much worse.

However successful the economic interventions by both Danish and Dutch officials may have been, there were different outcomes in terms of disease and mortality. Denmark happened to be thinly populated, while the Netherlands was not. The transformation of agriculture in the Netherlands was necessary to ensure that the Dutch would remain sufficiently nourished, at least calorifically. That the new diet led to what today is called 'hidden hunger' could hardly have led to a different food policy in the Netherlands, even if it had been known. Perhaps more could have been done to ensure that at least children consumed what they were officially supposed to consume. The fact that the provision of school milk was hijacked by National Socialist activists by and large killed off the main initiative in that direction. Children and adolescents, as the Danish counter-example shows, could live healthily amid the relatively chaotic and not always hygienic circumstances the war inevitably brought. The onslaught on their immunity, however, took a heavy toll.

All this leaves one question still unanswered, namely whether the comparative methodology employed in this thesis has indeed yielded insights that would have been unattainable without it. In the work at hand, the comparison in fact generated
much of the research question: neither increased infectious disease mortality in the Netherlands nor the absence thereof from Denmark has previously been identified as a subject particularly worthy of structural investigation, because neither phenomenon was seen as being exceptional. The phenomena become remarkable only when the difference between the two countries is observed. In so far as asking relevant and sensible questions is central to historical investigations, this is certainly a strong point of the comparative method.

The comparative approach has a further, by now hopefully evident advantage. The causal relation between the dietary deficiencies and Dutch wartime mortality (as well as the absence of both from Denmark) was identified through a process of excluding possible causes by means of international comparison. It is impossible to conduct historical research in an experimental fashion. It is also impossible to intervene in the population in the way that, for example, food scientists can, that is, by supplying one group with a food supplement and a control group with a placebo. Because of such limitations, comparative historical research has great advantages over other historical investigations. Moreover, this advantage is not limited to investigations into wartime living standards, but relates to a much wider field of historical research. For example, the still unknown causes of the general decline in child mortality over the past two centuries could and should be investigated by comparing data for a number of countries or regions. The comparative approach can enable future historians to investigate more rigorously and to test theories in a more structured manner than is, regrettably, common today.

That said, there are a number of serious disadvantages as well, many of which have become apparent in the above. There must be a great degree of similarity between two countries to successfully undertake any historical comparison. Even in the case at hand, it is certainly questionable whether a minimal level of similarity existed in historical reality to justify the comparison in a historical investigation. The different levels of German repression, which led to a generally higher standard of living in Denmark, are certainly a problem. In many cases, uncertainties about data quality posed problems, not to mention differences of a climatological or cultural nature. These problems would have been even greater had different research questions been applied to these same countries. The very different legal status of each country in the German European order makes a comparative investigation of,
for example, resistance activities or the persecution of the Jews difficult or even impossible. That is not to say that these issues cannot fruitfully be investigated comparatively, but rather that these two countries would not be the obvious candidates to subject to such a comparison.

Comparative historical investigations are important to understanding or furthering the understanding of history, but they are not panacea for the problems that are plaguing historians. Nor will such investigations, as Pirenne suggested in 1923, bring about a new, peaceful world. Although a comparative historian must at all times be ambitious, there are limits to what he or she can be expected to achieve.