A Raucous Crowd: Examining Contested Ideologies during the German Occupation of Denmark Through the Lens of Sport

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The German occupation of Denmark began on the 9th of April 1940 when a faction of Nazi soldiers docked in the nation's capital, Copenhagen. In direct violation of a German-Danish treaty of non-aggression (signed only one year earlier) the soldiers embarked on the Nazi regime's mission to gain control of the country. In a display of power, the Luftwaffe flew bombers over the city, dropping leaflets explaining how the Germans had come to protect the Danes from the British and that they should accept occupation peacefully.¹ Given Denmark's relatively small army and lack of defensive fortifications, little resistance was shown toward the Nazi soldiers and to the demands of the regime itself. In terms of Nazi occupation, Denmark presents historians with a unique case. Given the Nazi's ideological, and even mythological, view of the Danes as "pure Aryans," the fact that Denmark was granted the ability to retain its sovereignty is unsurprising.² As one 1943 publication reveals, Denmark could carry on, "with nearly all the appearances of an uninterrupted continuity with the past."³ The King continued to take his daily ride through Copenhagen, Parliament was active throughout the occupation, and although there was some economic hardship for the Danes it paled in comparison to other Nazi-controlled states.⁴ Despite the relative ease of life for Danes under Nazi occupation, contemporary discussion of the Danish experience suggests that anti-German attitudes were dominant and grew month by month.⁵ Certainly, the anti-German feelings were strong, but to suggest that these attitudes were felt by all Danes is too politically convenient of an argument and fails to incorporate the entirety of Danish sentiment. In fact, Danish attitudes toward occupation (and toward the Nazis in general) seem to be far more contested than previously thought. The politics involved in the German occupation of Denmark are complex; anti-German convictions clashed with pro-Nazi sentiment, and collaboration conflicted with ideas of Danish resistance. It is the purpose of this paper to examine these ideological contestations more deeply and, specifically, to look at them through the politics of sport. In the case of the German occupation of Denmark, sport serves as a useful and under-explored medium with which to investigate the political underpinnings of the times. The idea that sport is, in fact, inherently political will be explored within the context of German-Danish collaboration. Further, both Danish resistance as well as Danish acceptance of Nazi occupation and ideology will be examined through the lens of sport. Danish sporting icons such as Neils Bukh, Jenny Kammergaard and others will be used to show these ideas of resistance and acceptance during the occupation. Finally, some of the implications of the interaction between politics and sport during the German occupation in Denmark will be discussed.

The notion that sport is political in nature has been expanded upon by historians such as J.A. Mangan who suggests that focusing on one of these ideas over the other is to be guilty, in a metaphoric sense, of leaving an, "incomplete entry in an incomplete ledger."⁶ As Mangan argues, separating ideas of politics and militarism from sport can be problematic given that sport historically reinforces militarism and vice versa.⁷ In a telling quotation, Mangan explains the relationship between the sports field and the battlefield:

Heroes of sports field and battlefield have much in common. They are both viewed as symbols of national prowess, quality and virtue. The warrior and the athlete are crucial to the perceived success of the state. The sports field and battlefield are linked as locations for the demonstration of legitimate patriotic aggression. The one location sustains the other and both sustain the image of the powerful nation. Furthermore, the sports field throughout history has prepared the young for the battlefield. Throughout history sport and militarism have been inseparable.⁸

Certainly the connection between sport and political power was not lost on the Germans who have historically relied on sport to promote political ideals. In the 1920s the Germans implemented a variety of sport-related laws aimed at the nation's youth. Daily sport lessons were made mandatory in all schools, gymnastics and "sports duty" for youth was adopted as a substitute for compulsory service in the army, and sports competitions were held annually to showcase the prowess of German athletics.⁹ In the early 1920s, Adolph Hitler called for the creation of a sport-based youth movement that would reinforce the project of his Nazi party. By 1932, the youth group was recognized by the Reichs Committee of German Youth Associations and was well on its way to becoming an early training ground for potential Nazi soldiers.¹⁰ The prior history of using sport to legitimize the Nazi regime set the foundation for its continuation during the occupation of Denmark.

Analyzing the period of occupation in Denmark through the lens of sport reveals just how complex the politics of the situation truly were. At the time of occupation, sport collaboration between Germany and Denmark had already enjoyed a rich tradition. In fact, Germany had been using sport as a way to forge a bond between the two nations based on the ideological linkage of a "Nordic brotherhood".¹¹ Danish sports historian Hans Bonde argues that for much of the 1930s, the Germans fostered a fascination of Nazi ideology in Denmark through the strategic use of sport and the celebration of the "superior" Aryan athletic body.¹² Germany used its top athletes as political harbingers of sorts, tasked with spreading a positive image of Nazi doctrine through good conduct abroad.¹³ As Bonde argues, one of the clearest examples of how German sport was used propagandistically is found in the amount of resources that were channeled directly into the performance of the sport, rather than the activity itself. Large amounts of money and energy were funnelled into ensuring that sporting events became grandiose political displays, often attended by key political figures in Nazi Germany.¹⁴ For the Reichssportführer, Hans von Tschammer und Osten, the importance of sport as a political tool was made clear when he argued, "The leadership of Reich sports, the foreign ministry and the propaganda administration regard international sporting events as a medium for drawing regions and states that were politically, militarily or geo-strategically interesting more deeply into the sphere of German influence."¹⁵ As the Reichssportführer alludes to, the political goals of sport in Germany reflected the Nazi desire to establish a mutual respect between the Danes and the Germans, and to a large extent, this did in fact occur. For example, Danish and German cyclists had established a particularly close relationship in the early 1930s when a number of races on both German and Danish soil helped build a positive competitive spirit between the two nations.¹⁶ According to Bonde, German-Danish sport collaboration prior to the occupation had, for the most part, sparked in the Danish public a positive view of the Third Reich.¹⁷ This attitude is most often reflected in the athletes who took part in German-Danish sporting events. Danish rower Axel Lundquist expressed this view in his comment of the 1936 Olympic rowing venue, saying, "It is incredible what the Germans had done last year out on the Lange See Lake; but this year, the scenery is even more impressive. In particular, the huge tribune out in the water — with room for more than 6000 spectators — makes a colossal impact."¹⁸ But athletes did not represent the only voice of Danish praise for the Germans; in a statement released by the Danish Olympic Committee (DOC) it was said that, "a solid and friendly collaboration exists between Danish and German sports, about which Danish sportsmen and women are pleased" and that, "we obtain only dividends and delight from this collaboration with Germany."¹⁹ For many Danes, Germans were regarded not with fear or disdain, but rather, with respect and friendly admiration — an attitude which had been influenced by the intense collaboration between the two countries in the world of sport.

Of all the Danish sport figures during this period, Neils Bukh might best embody the Danish public's fascination for Nazism.²⁰ Bukh rose to fame in the 1930s when his form of rhythmic gymnastics became recognized globally for its powerful portrayal of the male body; as his reputation for

producing world-class gymnasts grew, so too did the Danish public's love for him.²¹ Throughout the 1930s and into the occupation years, Bukh was highly active in Danish politics, bringing with him a deep interest for Nazism.²² Bukh's first experience with the Nazis occurred in 1933 when he took the opportunity to visit Berlin while on a gymnastics tour of Hungary and Austria. As Bonde argues, the Nazis seemed to have an awareness of Bukh's political leanings as he was greeted upon entering the Berlin gymnastics compound with the cacophonous roar of approximately 3000 uniformed spectators.²³ Bukh's preference for recruiting gymnasts with primarily blonde hair and blue eyes would have made him a prime target for Nazi propagandists to try to exploit as a political shill — the warm welcome which he and his team received in Berlin is a testament to this.²⁴ Bukh had become enamoured by the Nazi spectacle, convinced that the order and unity of the Hitler Youth was something which Denmark should model its own youth organizations after.²⁵ During the occupation years, Bukh would become highly vocal in local newspapers and would often cite his own convictions that the system of Nazism was ultimately a positive one. In one such newspaper interview, Bukh was recorded saying that his visits to Berlin had only fortified his belief in the inner strength of the German view of the world.²⁶ To illustrate just how convinced Bukh had become of the Nazi plan, his statement made in October 1940 on the persecution of Jews at the hands of the Germans is revealing. In a press release sent to approximately 12 to 14 Danish newspapers, Bukh argued that, "If the new Germany requires all its damaging, foreign blood removed, then Germany must pay and bleed for it, but — trust in this — the operation is necessary and the pain worth it."²⁷ Given Bukh's immense popularity within Denmark, his unabashed vocal support of the Nazi system during the early days of the occupation could be potentially dangerous, especially given Bukh's influence over hundreds of young Danish boys and girls in his gymnastics programs.

As the case of Neils Bukh reveals, the idea that all Danes were anti-German is simply untrue. The nature of Danish attitudes toward Germans during the occupation years is much more complex than this. In the world of sport, there were a number of other high profile Danish athletes who sided with German ideology. The world-renowned Danish boxer Hans Holdt was one such athlete who routinely vocalized his belief in the Nazi doctrine. In 1942, two years into the German occupation of Denmark, Holdt solidified his political designation by joining the Danish Nazi Party.²⁸ Of course, there are numerous examples of Danish athletes whose political affinity rested on the side of the Nazis, but perhaps none were more prolific than Ragnhild Hvegar and Jenny Kammersgaard, both internationally recognized swimming stars. Hvegar was a world-record holding Olympian and renowned for her technique and speed in the water, whereas Kammersgaard became idolized by the Germans for her heart and sheer will in long distance swims. In 1937, after Kammersgaard swam the Kattegat fjord, she received a personal letter of admiration from Hitler himself.²⁹ Bonde argues that for the Germans this, "almost supernatural achievement in the water by a North Germanic woman could be seen as a sign of the perfection of the Aryan race."³⁰ Nazi propagandists looked to capitalize on Kammersgaard's popularity by linking her to Nazi sports. In the late 1930s, Kammersgaard was flown to Berlin where she was greeted by the Reichssportführer himself and subsequently taken on a lavish tour of the city. As Kammersgaard attests, she felt more than welcomed by the Germans who, upon recognizing her, would scream out, "Kattegat Jenny!"³¹ As Bonde argues, experiences like this helped Kammersgaard to form a favourable disposition toward the Germans — something which would prove to take deep root in the girl's personality.³² Even during the occupation years, Kammersgaard would often defend the Germans, citing her experiences in the late 1930s as proof of their civility and hospitality.³³ From the outset of occupation, Hvegar was vocal about her positive view of the Germans in Denmark. She was active in her involvement with members of the Danish and German press and had pictures and interviews of her in several newspapers during the occupation years. One of the most salient of these interviews appeared in the magazine,

Kopenhagener, where a picture of Hvegar in her swimsuit in between two well-kept German soldiers was “proof” that the two sides were getting along under occupation.³⁴ Further, the interview goes on to describe Hvegar’s, “sympathy for the German cause” and how she, “felt a close bond to her German sports colleagues.”³⁵ In a candid letter addressed to the Wehrmacht’s soldiers, Hvegar concretely states her opinion on occupation, saying, “I’d like to wish all the German soldiers in Denmark welcome and I remember with much happiness all the fine times among German sporting friends I’ve had the pleasure of, during my many visits and competitions in Germany.”³⁶ The cases of Bukh, Kammersgaard and Hvegar show how occupation was, for many Danes in the sporting world, not only an acceptable reality, but quite possibly the most desirable reality. Nazi propagandists fed off of sports icons like these and actively used them to spread pro-German sentiment throughout Denmark. Still, there was a large portion of the Danish population who actively resisted the German invasion, and it is through sport that these attitudes often manifested themselves.

During occupation, the soccer pitch came to symbolize the confused nature of the ordeal, where Danish frustrations and German naivety played out in very real ways. Sport collaboration became the most prolific and comprehensive example of cultural collaboration the Danes had with their German occupiers (a somewhat unsurprising fact given the Germans’ affinity toward using sport as a political tool).³⁷ Soccer was arguably the most important of the numerous sporting matches held between the Nazis and the Danes, possibly due to the intense emotions which the game evoked in the spectators on both sides. Spring of 1941 marked the beginning of a number of matches to be held on Danish soil between local club teams and various teams from Austria. In May, FK Austria won a closely contested match against the Copenhagen select team 1-0 and their post-game “heil” salute riled the Danish crowd to the point where various scuffles broke out among the crowd and a “chorus of whistling started up.”³⁸ But this light resistance to Nazi provocation was nothing in comparison to a match which took place just a few days later when the Copenhagen selects took on Admira Wien. The Austrian side won the match commandingly 4-1 in front of a mixed German-Danish crowd numbering over 12,500.³⁹ Much like the match which took place just days earlier, the German fans were quick to give the “heil” salute following the victory, which led to a strong showing of Danish resistance. Hans Bonde does a wonderful job of narrating the chaos:

The ‘heil’ given by the German spectators, mainly soldiers, to their team shortly before the match had also created unrest among young Danish fans, and ‘there were harsh remarks from both sides, and several of the German soldiers had their caps knocked aside’. After the referee’s final whistle, where ‘people streamed onto the pitch, it all went wrong’. Although the German soldiers were off duty, they were armed and they started to threaten the provocative Danish spectators with their bayonets, while the Danish fans brandished their beer bottles. The police presence was unable to stop the fighting. Before reinforcements arrived, four German soldiers and a half-dozen Danish fans had been sufficiently injured that they needed to be taken to hospital. At the same time as the disturbances on the pitch, struggles broke out between German soldiers and Danes on the terraces, which in some cases developed into actual fighting. When the German soldiers from the ‘cheap’ pitch-side stand tried to leave the stadium they did so in bunches, so that the Danish fans suddenly found they greatly outnumbered the Wehrmacht’s soldiers. At the exits the German soldiers became hedged in by groups of Danes, which led to a good number of standing brawls.⁴⁰

Bonde argues that this match can be seen as a psychological tipping point for Danish resisters, as there is a documented increase in Danish resistance after this event.⁴¹ At a 1942 rowing regatta held in Copenhagen, for instance, a crowd of around 2000 Danes gathered to sing satirical songs directed at the German athletes.⁴² In October of 1941, a boxing match held in Copenhagen saw the Danish favourite lose the bout to his German opponent. The decision sent a shockwave through the predominately Danish

crowd and they opened up with unrelenting booing and hissing directed toward the German fighter.⁴³ Interestingly, some of these subtle forms of resistance could be found coming from within the Danish sporting institutions themselves. Bonde highlights one example where a Danish boxing judge, who had grown to be quite popular among the Germans for his decisions in the ring, was refused the renewal of his licence by the Danish Boxing Association. Later that year, it was reinstated, but the association made the recommendation that he were to be used as little as possible to judge professional fights.⁴⁴ In a 1943 publication, Gunnar Leistikow echoes this idea that the Danes had had enough:

Everything indicates that these Danish apprehensions are justified and that the autonomy which the Germans have permitted occupied Denmark for more than two and a half years is ending. The Nazis seem to have concluded that the preferential treatment which they have accorded the Danes has not paid. It has not won their sympathy and recently has not prevented sabotage from increasing throughout the country.⁴⁵

By 1943 the Danish resistance had become palpable enough to suggest that the anti-German attitudes had, at the very least, become the most prominent in Danish society. This increase in overt Danish resistance does not take away from the fact that both pro-German and anti-German attitudes could be found within the Danish population during the occupation years and, moreover, that sport was often the medium by which these attitudes were expressed.

As this paper has shown, understanding sport and politics in unison is helpful in gauging the history of a nation. In the case of the German occupation of Denmark, the symbol-ridden nature of sport and sporting events illustrates the complex relationship between the Danes and the Germans, the collaborators and the resisters, respectively.⁴⁶ Given the Nazi doctrine that a combination of sport and a mobilized youth is key to gaining control over a nation, the implications of sport collaboration in Denmark were all too real.⁴⁷ The polarizing nature of occupation meant that at the same time that men like Neils Bukh were advocating for youth sport movements in Denmark to follow the Nazi model, resisters of the German occupiers were beginning to show their collective disdain at local sporting events. While Danish athletes like Ragnhild Hvegar and Jenny Kammergaard actively spread pro-German messages in newspaper interviews, a raucous crowd was forming in the stadiums, ready to make their anti-German voices heard. In the case of the German occupation of Denmark, sport accurately captures, and subsequently, represents the diversity of political ideologies at the time.

Notes

1 Hans Bonde, "Compromise and Confrontation: Danish Sport Under the Swastika," in *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War Without Weapons*, edited by J.A. Mangan, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 208-209.

2 Ibid., 209.

3 C.M.C. "Denmark Under German Occupation," *Bulletin of International News* 20 (Sept. 18, 1943), 811.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 J.A. Mangan, "Prologue: Combative Sports and Combative Societies," in *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War Without Weapons*, edited by J.A. Mangan, (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 2.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Horst Ueberhorst, "Sport, Physical Culture and Political Action in Germany During the Weimar Republic 1925-1933," in *Sport and Politics*, edited by Gerald Redmond, (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1984), 110.

10 Ibid., 112.

- 11 Hans Bonde, "The Struggle for Danish Youth: Fascism, Sport, Democracy," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (August 2009): 1437.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Hans Bonde, "Danish Sport and the Nazi Seizure of Power: Indoctrination, Propaganda and Confrontation," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (August 2009): 1460.
- 14 Ibid., 1460-1461.
- 15 Ibid., 1460.
- 16 Ibid., 1463.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 1464.
- 19 Ibid., 1465-1466.
- 20 Hans Bonde, *Football With the Foe: Danish Sport Under the Swastika*, Translated by Simon Frost, (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008), 25.
- 21 Hans Bonde, "Gymnastics and Politics: Niels Bukh and the German Occupation of Denmark," *Scand. J. History* 29 (2004): 119-120.
- 22 Ibid., 120.
- 23 Ibid., 124.
- 24 Bonde, "Struggle for Danish Youth," 1438.
- 25 Bonde, "Gymnastics and Politics," 126.
- 26 Ibid., 127.
- 27 Bonde, "Struggle for Danish Youth," 1441.
- 28 Bonde, *Football With the Foe*, 92.
- 29 Ibid., 40.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid., 43.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid., 57.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Hans Bonde, "Revolt: Danish Resistance to Sports Collaboration with Nazi Germany," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (August 2009): 1484.
- 38 Ibid., 1489.
- 39 Ibid., 1490.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Bonde, *Football With the Foe*, 137.
- 42 Ibid., 138.
- 43 Hans Bonde, "Sport and Politics: Danish-German Sport Collaboration During World War II," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 35 (June 2010): 163.
- 44 Ibid., 168.
- 45 Gunnar Leistikow, "Denmark Under the Nazi Heel," *Foreign Affairs* 21 (January 1943): 340.
- 46 Bonde, *Football With the Foe*, 16.
- 47 Ibid., 20.