Planning the Welfare State (1940–1970)

In the run-up to the Second World War, the social democratic governments in Scandinavia pursued a policy of non-alignment similar to the one that successfully kept them out of the First World War. This entailed withdrawing wholly or in part from the collective security of the League of Nations and accommodating the increased aggression of Nazi Germany. When Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, following the German invasion of Poland two days earlier, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden immediately declared neutrality. A joint statement issued on 18 September held that to protect their economic sustainability, the Scandinavian countries would continue to trade with all the warring parties.

Events, however, were about to make this policy untenable. In Denmark, whose southern border had not been formally recognized by Germany after the First World War, the centre-left Stauning coalition government had been forced to accept a pact of non-aggression with Nazi Germany in 1938. The Swedish response to the outbreak of the Finnish Winter War in December 1939 was to form a national coalition government, where Per Albin Hansson’s Social Democratic government was supplemented with representatives from all the other parties, except the Communists. No similar efforts seem to have been on the table in Denmark or Norway at this time. And faced with a war at its eastern border, the Swedish government, rather than declaring neutrality, chose a status as a ‘non-warring party’, thus leaving open the option to aid the Finnish resistance. Furthermore, thousands of citizens from all the Scandinavian countries rushed to defend their Finnish brethren as the Soviet invasion caused a public outcry. In Norway, the Altmark incident in February 1940, in which the British boarded a German military vessel
on Norwegian waters to free captured soldiers, caused further strain on the policy of neutrality.

However, during the Continent's Phoney War of 1939–1940, the policy still seemed to be successful, and ‘Unternehmen Weserübung’ – the German invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9 April 1940 – thus took all the Scandinavian countries by surprise. While the Danish state was overrun in just a few short hours, the military campaign in Norway went on for almost two months, allowing the Labour government to escape into exile in Great Britain for the remainder of the war. As we will see, this would have ramifications beyond mere wartime politics.

**Scandinavia and the war**

The almost immediate surrender of the Danish armed forces meant that the political system, including the Stauning government, remained intact. And unlike other countries in German-occupied Europe, the Danish government, expanded with representatives from the Liberal and Conservative parties, was left in power by the German occupation force. The Danish Communist Party, however, was excluded. Over the next three years, the official Danish policy was to be one of collaboration, strengthened by a shared conviction that the most likely outcome of the war was a German victory. Thus a level of cooperation was seen as necessary to protect the interests of the Danish people. Also, the German war efforts demanded an increased importation of Danish agricultural produce as well as the build-up of fortifications along the coastlines of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea, all of which created a boost for the Danish economy.

The German crackdown on Danish Communists following the launch of the ‘Fall Barbarossa’ – that is, the attack on Soviet Russia in 1941 – ignited a budding communist-led resistance movement. However, the coalition government and its official policy of collaboration would remain in place until 1943. In March of that year, a national election brought further progress to the Social Democrats and its coalition partners, by now led by the Radical Erik Scavenius after Stauning’s death the previous year. While the results of this election were initially seen as support for the government, a number of strikes broke out in several Danish cities just a few months later. The strikes were initially directed against the brutality of the German occupation force, combined with a general frustration over the living conditions under the occupation. But the discontent would soon be turned towards the collaboration policy in general. And when the Social Democrats in particular refused to adhere