The Chameleon Territory of South Schleswig (Slesvig): Fluctuations in the Perception of National Identity

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Introduction

Almost all studies in political geography concerned with the rivalry of states over disputed territories lying astride their borders have adopted a zero-sum game approach. This simply means that the gain of one side is at the expense of the other. The population in the border zone between states A and B are regarded as belonging unequivocally to nationality A or B. Nationality is thus perceived as an inherited set of discrete ethnic characteristics often including a distinctive language or religion, as well as a historiography which regards the disputed territory as one's own sacred heritage alone.

A look at the conflicts which recur most frequently in today's headlines reinforces these perceptions. One cannot imagine individuals who were born and raised as Arabs and Israelis, Russians and Chechens, Indians and Pakistanis, Hungarians and Romanians, Greeks and Turks or Croats, Bosnian Moslems, Serbs and Albanians as ever being in doubt about their ethnic identity and to which state they should owe their loyalty (regardless of their present citizenship).

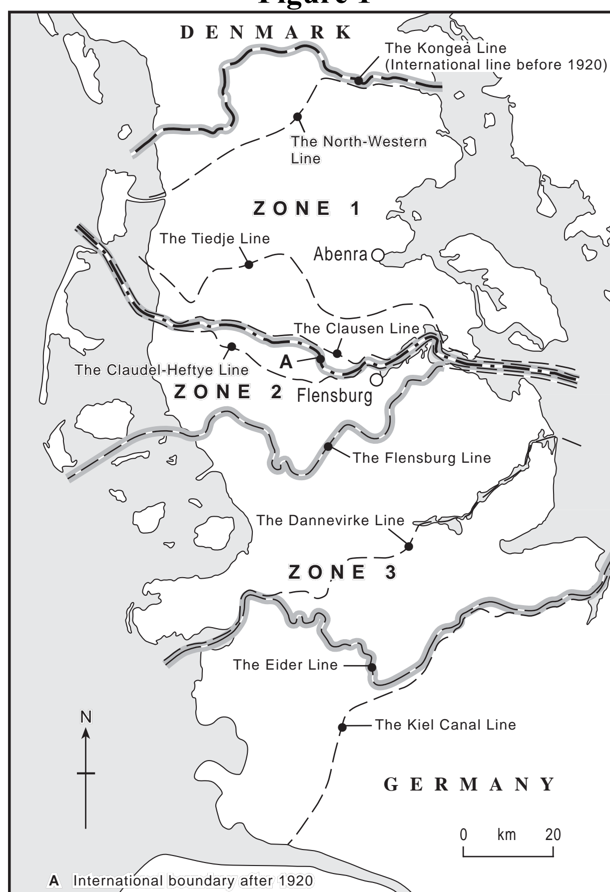
Several conflicts with a long historical development, particularly in Europe, do, however, present a less deterministic framework in which a vigorous competition for the hearts and minds of individuals regarding their ethnic origins and future loyalties has played a significant role. Notable among these is the case of South Schleswig known in Danish as Sydslesvig, part of the German lände (Federal State) of Schleswig-Holstein.

The Curious Case of South Schleswig (Slesvig)

In 1920, a plebiscite was held to decide the political future of Schleswig. The province, which had previously been part of the German Empire (1864-1920), was divided into two zones. A majority of 75% in the northern Zone 1 voted to become part of the Kingdom of Denmark whilst in the southern Zone 2 an even larger majority of 80% elected to remain within Germany (Figure 1). By the outbreak of war in 1939, the Danish minority among the indigenous population in Southern Schleswig had been reduced from 20% to less than 10% of the electorate. Yet, in 1947, communal elections indicated that more than half the native born population in South Schleswig identified with the Danish political movement agitating for a new plebiscite and seeking to enjoy the cultural rights established for the "Danish minority."

How and why did so many Schleswigers in the South remain loyal to Germany after World War I, provide a large measure of support for the Nazi Party's accession to power in 1933, only grudgingly accord the small Danish-minded population their right to cultural autonomy from 1933-39, then massively transfer their loyalties during 1945-47?

Figure 1



What accounts for the subsequent diminishment of the Danish minority in South Schleswig among the total indigenous population (i.e. not including post war refugees) to its present level of 10-15% today?

An easy answer is, of course, opportunism. However, a closer look provides insights into the component elements of ethnic identity, culture, language, religion, class, political loyalties, economic interests, education and the prevailing power relations between Germany and Denmark, and how these were evaluated differently over time. They also put into sharp relief two opposing principles on which boundary disputes have been settled and reveal that sometimes the individual may be split between heart and mind.

1. Descent – portrayed by the Nazis under the rubric of *"Blood and Soil"* (Blut und Boden). Hitler summed it up by writing: *"A Chinese does not become German because he begins to speak German and votes for a German party."*

2. The Right of Self-Determination – the loyalty of the heart and mind of the individual. This has been expressed by Denmark's great poet-philosopher-theologian Grundtvig as: *"All belong to a people who so regard themselves."*

The two views have often been confused, especially since the slogan of self-determination has been espoused by fanatical nationalists unwilling to accord individuals any right of challenging their ascribed national identity. It is an issue which has become particularly topical in today's Europe due to the presence of second and third generation descendants of migrant workers.

While no one finds it at all strange that 'New World' countries, built largely by massive immigration, such as Peru can have a President of identifiable Japanese ethnic origin (Fujimori), or American Presidents of Dutch (Roosevelt, Van Buren) or German ancestry (Eisenhower), different standards have always applied in 'Old World' nations. It remains an open question whether or not Germans can accord the status of 'Turkish-Germans' to the descendants of migrant workers to the same degree as there are hyphenated Americans of every variety.

In 1936, a book entitled *Dansk Grænselære* (Danish Border Lesson) by a young student, Claus Eskildsen, looked at the border conflict and national dispute in Schleswig over the generations. Eskildsen contrasted the two principles and explained how the 1920 border dividing Schleswig into North and South between Denmark and Germany respectively had utilised self-determination on the basis of a freely held plebiscite as the fairest method of leaving behind the smallest national minorities. He then took the Nazi arguments of Blood and Soil and applied them to Schleswig.

The author examined a host of characteristics which are handed down through inheritance and have left their physical mark on the landscape or in the *"popular sub-conscious"* of the native population: place-names, house, farm and barnyard construction, architecture, personal family names, customs, manners, work habits, myths, beliefs, superstitions, nursery rhymes, clothing, food. From this Eskildsen argued that South Schleswig clearly revealed its origin as part of the Danish folk territory, albeit one which had been subject to generations of German influence. This had laid down a veneer of German acculturation, primarily in terms of language, but had left the old Schleswig folk character still in tune with its close Danish and Nordic antecedents (Figure 2).

Critics argued that Eskildsen's book had been written largely as a tongue-in-cheek critique of the Nazi regime and its evidence of a Danish presence in the landscape and among the habits of local Schleswigers was anecdotal and *"belonged in a museum."* The book gave considerable moral encouragement to the hard pressed Danish minority in Nazi Germany and later played a considerable role in the post-war debate on the future political identity of the area when tens of thousands of German refugees from areas annexed by Poland and Czechoslovakia poured into Schleswig. South Schleswigers were then able to *"feel"* as well as intellectually appreciate how much closer to the Danes than to other *"Germans"* they were in the *"popular unconscious"* aspects of their identity. A majority then translated this feeling into a conscious rejection of their identity as German Schleswigers and voted for the SSV *(Sydslesvig Vælgerforening)* – a new organisation in political alliance with the umbrella organisation representing the Danish minority (SSF – *Sydslesvig Forening*).

By 1947 a majority of South Schleswigers subscribed to support the SSV's programme of an administrative separation from Holstein, removal of all German refugees who had fled to Scheswig from other areas lost to Poland and Czechoslovakia, a mandate administration under the UN and an eventual plebiscite on reunification with Denmark. What had been objects and attitudes claimed fit only

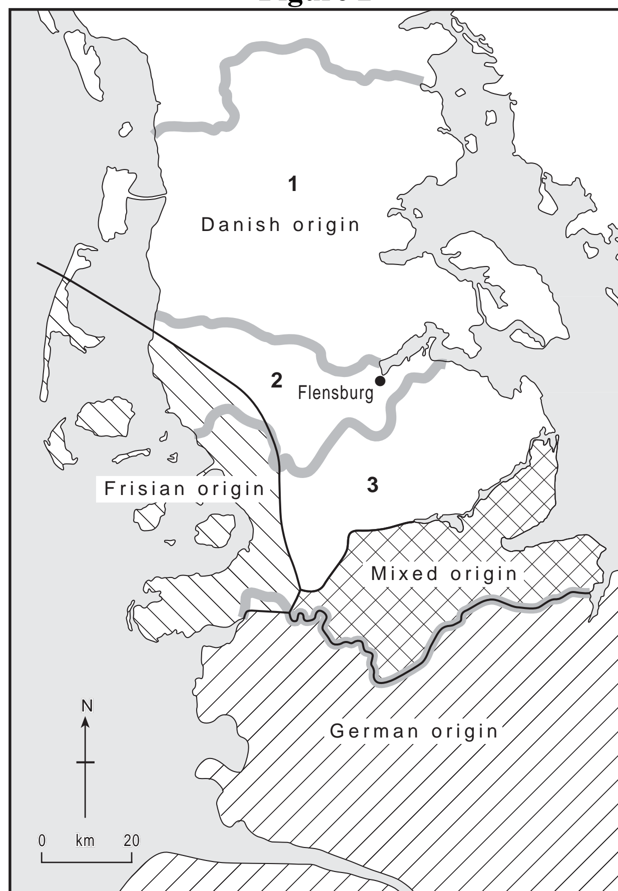
for a museum had become part of a new self-identity.

Historical Background

Schleswig had been part of the Kingdom of Denmark for close to a thousand years but subject to complicated medieval dynastic arrangements with the status of a Duchy together with its southern lying sister province of Holstein. The King of Denmark was simultaneously the Duke of Schleswig and Count of Holstein but the two Duchies hadbeen administered separately from the rest of the Kingdom since 1472. Holstein was entirely German in language and culture but local German noblemen, large landowners and powerful merchants played a major role in Danish affairs and politics and did not regard their German culture as an obstacle to their loyalty as subjects of the Danish king.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the German nobility and wealthy merchants dominated the cultural life of Schleswig as well as Holstein and played an increasingly prominent role in the Church and school system which both promoted the use of German at the expense of Danish. Their attitude that German was the language of high culture and Danish only a rough peasant tongue permeated down through society at a time when their loyalty to the Danish ruling house was not in question. Only during the 19th century did the language divide come to play a major role in defining newly established national movements.

Figure 2



The achievement of Germany's philosophers, musicians, writers, and scientists, the appeal of modern nationalism, the problems of an orderly succession to the Danish throne, and the attraction of many Holsteiners for the ambitions of a dominant Prussia all conspired to make Holstein look southwards and draw with it the dominant classes of large landowners and well-to-do *"free professionals"* of Schleswig. Danish continued to be spoken predominantly by those classes who had the least influence in the prevailing 'High Culture' of Schleswig – poor farmers and pockets of an urban proletariat in the few big cities – Flensburg (Flensborg) and Schleswig (Slesvig). Denmark's defeat in 1864 by Prussia and Austria only confirmed the appeal of the German Empire on its way to becoming a world power whilst Denmark emerged as a truncated minor power and a cultural backwater.

Success breeds success and the emergence of a unified German Empire under Prussian leadership in 1870, following the defeat of France, confirmed to most Schleswigers that their espousal of German high culture was a passport to a place on the world stage. They progressively abandoned first the local variety of Danish (sonderjysk) and then the closely related local 'low German' (platdeutsch) patois which had become the vernacular of home and workplace. They sought to learn and imitate the literary standard 'High German' which became the national language of the German Empire. Islands of Danish speakers became more isolated and German replaced Danish as the language of both elementary education and many churches in South Schleswig even prior to 1864.

Flensburg still had a Danish-speaking majority before its incorporation into Germany and most Danish speakers were workers in the city's northern district who constituted the most active members of the Social Democratic Party. Their adoption of Marxism made them doubly suspicious elements as far as the German national authorities were concerned at the outbreak of World War I.

The Aftermath of World War I

More than 5,000 Danish-minded Schleswigers fell in German uniform for a war which was viewed with little or no enthusiasm in contrast to the German-minded population's vision of even greater German aggrandisement. Most supporters of the Social Democratic opposition in the northern districts of Flensburg, who were still identifiably Danish in their sympathies, were nevertheless swayed by the opportunity to be a part of what they hoped would be a democratic republican industrial Germany rather than by the opportunity to be reunited within an enlarged but monarchist and still largely agrarian Denmark. It was a decision they would come to rue.

During the years of the Nazi regime prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Danish-minded minority was repeatedly labelled by the German authorities as a front for Social Democratic and Marxist elements hiding their dissatisfaction with the new regime behind the guise of national minority rights. In fact, just the opposite was the case. The large 'German' majority in plebiscite Zone 2 in 1920, especially in the city of Flensburg itself, was the result of the Marxist sympathies of Social-Democrats who regarded themselves as Danish Slesvigers but voted for their 'class interests' rather than ethnicity.

Many Danish-minded workers in South Schleswig became increasingly aware of their mistake in having voted to remain part of Germany out of Marxist theoretical principles. Their close proximity to Denmark and cross border contacts made them aware of how far the working class progressed economically and socially in Denmark under a system opposed to militarism, and committed to the fostering of humanitarian values and the spread of adult education on a massive scale. Germany's war of aggression against Denmark in 1940 and the agitation of many German-minded North Schleswigers to rejoin Germany was a doubly bitter pill to swallow.

During the inter-war years Denmark made the social and economic strides on behalf of the working class which had been held responsible for the high pro-German vote in 1920 due to the mistaken belief that these objectives would be more easily realised in Germany. In the 1933-45 period the organised minority Danish community in South Scheswig (SSF – *Sydslesvig Forening* – the South Schleswig Association) stood fast against the Nazi juggernaut and maintained its own schools, libraries, welfare assistance and the only non-Nazi newspaper in Germany (*Flensborg Avis*). This was due to their courage in the face of constant Nazi harassment and official German government policy, which necessitated the formal respect of commitments based on the reciprocity of the Danish government toward the German-minded minority in North Schleswig.

The Aftermath of World War II

Following Hitler's death, the Nazi high command was transferred to Admiral Doenitz in Flensburg. As a result the city was subjected to further destruction in April-May 1945. This was another irony – the city with the most significant non-Nazi community in Germany held out and endured further Allied attack as a result of its strategic location as the last stronghold of the Nazi regime. The collapse of the Nazi regime, Germany's overwhelming defeat, revelation of the crimes against humanity carried out in the name of the German people, the economic ruin and chaos at the end of the war in 1945 and the arrival of a wave of refugees provided the inhabitants of South Schleswig with a new vantage point to view the preceding centuries of national ferment. It also led to a re-emergence of the long suppressed local Social Democrats in Flensburg who had endured the Nazi regime in silent opposition and had been too intimidated to openly identify with the Danish minority. Many of them now sought to identify with their Danish roots and colleagues as an independent local Danish-oriented Slesvig party rather than continuing as an essentially German party.

Denmark faced a crisis and dilemma of the first magnitude. Its own declaration forswearing any demand for border changes was made immediately following German surrender in May, 1945 and did not envision the mass popular wave of support for the tiny minority's organisation which would come to embrace a majority of the population. Nor did it foresee the massive in-migration of German refugees which more than doubled the population of Schleswig and threatened to permanently change the ethnic balance in the area.

Danish politicians had come to judge the strength of the Danish minority in South Schleswig on the basis of the last free communal election before 1933 when approximately 4,700 votes were cast for the Danish minority's party and 100,000 for the Nazis, amidst a total electorate of 185,000. This was the basis for the Danish statement against any territorial revision. The Danish government could not have expected that centuries of gradual Germanisation in Schleswig could be wiped out by a landslide of Danish sympathies in the course of a few years.

By June 1945 a petition with close to 13,000 signatures appealed to the British occupation authorities to let the local population seek a closer association including reincorporation into Denmark. On this basis, *Südschleswigsche Vereiningun* (SSV) was established with the declared object of working in cooperation with the existing Danish minority organisation SSF. In 1946-47, membership in the SSV increased more than twenty-fold. Careful monitoring was undertaken to prevent membership by opportunists. Membership was limited to those born in South Schleswig or Denmark and their spouses provided that they had not been members of the Nazi party (apart from those obligatory organisations for teenagers such as the *Hitlerjugend* – Hitler Youth).

Danish nationalists argued that it would be a repeat of the mistake of 1920 not to demand the incorporation of all Schleswig but met with the powerful resistance of the Danish Social Democratic Party, anxious to lead the country into renewed prosperity. Its leaders aspired to work closely with the sister Social Democratic party in the new Federal Republic of West Germany. The hesitation and subsequent refusal of the Danish government to press the British administration of South Schleswig for adoption of this programme made it obvious to the local population that the area would remain under German sovereignty, albeit with new safeguards to ensure the full cultural autonomy of the German and Danish minorities on both sides of the border.

Nationalist circles in Denmark saw the cause and effect of SSV's vote decline in opposite terms. They believed it was precisely the Danish refusal to seek an alteration in the border which gravely wounded the incipient expansive movement of the post-war years. It meant that South Schleswig's original character had been severely distorted by the presence of a new non-native German refugee population whose hostility towards 'fellow-countrymen' seeking to 'surrender' their new refuge to 'a foreign power' could only be expected to intensify as Germany emerged from the trauma of defeat. The view of the spokesman for the federal legislature in Kiel, the capital of the state of Schleswig-Holstein, that supporters of the SSV were *"Germans who risked turning their backs on their own people"* gave a clear indication of the further recriminations that would surely follow continued agitation. This point of view also coloured the attitude of the British occupation authorities who were reluctant to antagonise German feelings as the Cold War increased in intensity and both Denmark and West Germany became allies in NATO.

German defenders of South Schleswig's cultural identity and political status regarded the SSV as the subject of Danish manipulation and rank opportunism. Supporters of South Schleswig's status as part of Schleswig-Holstein argued that Schleswig's 'High German Culture' could not be replaced except by the import of a foreign state Danish culture rather than an indigenous movement. Other German-minded Schleswigers in the revived Social Democratic party saw the events of 1945-47 as an indication that something was indeed lacking and to be distrusted in the postulated German High Culture which primarily spoke to a privileged class. New SSV members were labelled 'Pork Fat-Danes' because for a brief time they were eligible to receive food parcels distributed by the Danish Minority Organisation with help from a special Danish Food Aid Fund. This special help was ended in February 1946 and did not account for the second great wave of membership in the SSV.

Denmark's failure to seek any change in the border resulted in a major governmental crisis which settled the issue of a boundary change. The question of South Schleswig's future political status caused a grave crisis and new election to the Folketinget in October, 1947. This toppled the government that had been led by Knud Kristensen of *Venstre* (Liberal Party), who in an emotional moment had stated: *"Let us hope that our folk family will one day stand before the judgement of history with the verdict... 'They did what they could, they left behind a Denmark larger and richer than they had received.'"*

Although Venstre increased its representation significantly, its additional support was largely taken from other small parties sympathetic to incorporating South Schleswig. A new minority government under Social Democratic leadership with support from other left-wing groups followed a policy of reconciliation and rejected 'regaining' South Schleswig as potentially too risky. It avoided any demand to change the status of South Schleswig and steered the government through the next few years. Full minority rights accorded to both minority groups were worked out between the Danish and West German governments in 1949 and 1955 (The Kiel and Bonn Accords). The subsequent decline in support for the SSV in communal elections (from its high point of 99,000 votes in 1947 to 66,000 in 1951, 42,000 in 1954 and 24,000 in 1967) has been used by most Danish politicians to justify their decision to react to what critics

described as opportunism and a fair-weather-friend movement.

Conclusions

It is pointless to argue what might have happened had Denmark demanded incorporation of Schleswig in its entirety in 1920, or responded to the movement seeking a border revision in 1947. What is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, is that most South Schleswigers underwent a change in self-identity from Danish to German (1700-1850) to Danish (1945-47) to German again (1948-1965) or maintain a 'Schleswig first' outlook today. The 'core' Danish minority population today in South Schleswig is much stronger than in 1920 and 1939. Even the descendants of the refugee population who entered the lände from other areas are aware of its special border area character as distinct from Holstein. A closer examination of other conflicts may reveal similar ambivalence and changes in self-image under conflicting pressures and fluctuating circumstances.

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