

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Olaf Søndberg. *Den Danske Revolution 1830-1866*. Ö?rhus: Systime, 1999. 160 pp. ISBN 978-87-616-0064-6.

Reviewed by Michael Bregnsbo (Institute of History and Western Civilization, University of Southern Denmark, Odense)

Published on H-Skand (October, 1999)

The Schleswig-Holstein question was a scourge in Danish history from the 1830s on, culminating in Denmark's debacle during the war of 1864, which would have a social and historiographic impact for a long time henceforth. Classically, the hidden agenda of historiography, both in Denmark and Germany, has been to prove the validity of each country's historical claims. Certainly, for instance, parts of the old duchy of Schleswig moved to Denmark after a plebiscite in 1920. And since then, many have felt that Denmark had a historical right to all of Schleswig, and consequently that justice had not prevailed in 1920.

On the German side, there has also historically been a demand for the revision of borders. The National Socialist regime in Germany and the German occupation of Denmark only exacerbated Dano-German antagonism. However since the Bonn-Copenhagen agreement, between the Danish and FRG federal governments, guaranteed the Danish minority south of the German border and the German minority north of the Danish border rights and protection in 1955, the tension at the Dano-German borderland has virtually disappeared.

These agreements are often praised as a usable model for centres of unrest all over the world. However, this praise is made without a clear understanding of historical context. After 1955, interest in the Schleswig-Holstein question dwindled within Danish historiography. Other aspects of history were attracting the attention of historians. When I started studying history in 1981 the prevailing school of theory was materialist (though not necessarily the Marxist). The national conflict in Schleswig-Holstein is however difficult to interpret from materialist standpoint alone, though some attempts were certainly been made. Most of us were concentrating on themes that seemed easier to interpret using a materialist frame-

work, and or which had more appeal as subject matter at the time. In jest, it was said that the only function of the Schleswig-Holstein question was to be used as a tool of the lazy professor who wanted to flunk students in the exam. A question about Schleswig-Holstein would be just the way to do it!

In recent years, however, the Schleswig-Holstein question has drawn more attention. This is the case not only because there is now less antagonism towards Germany, but also because historians have increasingly realized that the emergence of Denmark as a nation-state after 1864 needs to be understood through the Schleswig-Holstein question. This is true especially for the period from 1848-1850, which should be seen as one of ethnic civil war within the Danish monarchy, including the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenburg. This reassessment of history (e.g. Claus Bjorn, 1848. *Borgerkrig og revolution*, Copenhagen 1998) has been influenced by scholar's attention to the conflict in former Yugoslavia, and through studies of recent national and ethnic unrest in territories of the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere. Consequently, the Schleswig-Holstein conflict has attracted more attention from historians recently.

Olaf Søndberg's book is a result of this renewed interest. It is first and foremost a book that is aimed for use in Danish secondary school history classes (in Danish: gymnasium). The author acknowledges having been influenced by the civil war in Ex-Yugoslavia and elsewhere, and notes that the book is trying to throw light on the development of nationalism and democracy in the Danish monarchy. Søndberg points out that in the leading point-of-view, developments in the kingdom of Denmark and in the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein were very much alike. In both places liberal politicians wanted to abolish absolutism and get a free constitution instead. Still, national

antagonisms overshadowed the political points-of-view they had in common. A good point is made on p. 35, where Sondberg writes that although the conflict was national, both sides were stuck in old perceptions of a dynasty state, and stressed their respective historical rights rather than their population's right to self-determination.

A book that sees the political development of Denmark between 1830 and 1866 and the wars 1848-50 and 1864, and which uses this topical and interest-arousing perspective, is most meritorious. It is good that the author also stresses the fact that—although there are similarities and parallels to Ex-Yugoslavia—there are certainly also differences. For instance, the Schleswig-Holstein wars were fought between soldiers in uniform against other soldiers in uniform, and there was no kind of ethnic cleansing or other cruelties against the civilian population, as we have seen in our own time.

The first 74 pages of the book is a survey first and foremost of political and national events. To a lesser degree it is an analysis of social developments during the period in question. Such an historical survey is a complicated task, and it goes without saying that it is not possible to tell everything about the period within a single volume, just as there is not room for all variations on the themes tackled by the author. The remainder of the book consists of extracts from sources (47 in all), which focus on key themes— with a particular focus on political developments during the period of the 1830s and 1840s, during the war 1848-50 and covering the crisis and war 1863-64. The author's sources include letters, diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, minutes of parliamentary debates and extracts from later historiography. Many of the sources contradict each other, which makes the book well-suited for classroom discussions. The book is also lavishly illustrated, with a quality of print reproduction that is excellent. Captions accompanying the illustrations often contain central and interesting points. Finally, most interesting is the author's comparison of Danish and German drawings on pages 42 and 43, which

interpret the same motive: the entry in Flensburg by Frederik VII on April 10th 1848.

On page 126, an extract of a letter from a village parson at Funen to a member of government is printed, in which the parson relates the allegedly aggressive revolutionary sentiments of peasants in his parish. The parson's letter, dated May 5, 1849, proliferates fear among the village elite. It is written during the crucial period, when negotiations on a new constitution were taking place. The country was in the middle of a civil war, and fear of a domestic revolution could explain why so many members of the Constituent Assembly (*den grundlovgivende rigsforsamling*), though very reluctant to pass a constitution that would extend suffrage privileges, still voted in favour of it—or at least not against it. Many a founding father might have feared that things would run out of control if suffrage remained restricted, or if the constitution was simply voted down.

The orthography of Sondberg's sources has been modernized, and German language sources translated. One might wish that the inter-war period (between 1850 and 1863) had been more elaborately depicted (e.g. How did people adapt to the new scopes of public life, and what role did nationalism then play for different groups of the population, and within different political environments?) Such detail might throw more light on why things went as they did just in the period leading up to 1864. It is also regretful that the bibliography was apparently compiled in a hurry. For example, the author mentions the work: "Troels Fink: *Admiralstatsplanerne i 1840erne*. 1946". One would believe this would be a monograph but it is not: it is an article, published in Astrid Friis & Albert Olsen (eds.): *Festskrift til Erik Arup den 22. november 1946*, Copenhagen 1946, pp.287-303. And correspondingly, it is not mentioned that the work: "Erling Ladewig Petersen: *Martsministeriets fredsbasisforhandling. 1953-56*" is an article in *Historisk Tidsskrift*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-skand>

Citation: Michael Bregnsbo. Review of SØndberg, Olaf, *Den Danske Revolution 1830-1866*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3537>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.