

RASMUS GLENTHØJ and MORTEN NORDHAGEN OTTOSEN:

***Experiences of War and Nationality in Denmark and Norway,
1807-1815***

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We are not well served when it comes to histories of Scandinavia in the Napoleonic period. An objective of Glenthøj and Ottosen's book is to fill the gap, at least insofar as the Danish-Norwegian monarchy is concerned; the other is to contribute to an understanding of nationalism, patriotism and memory in this period. That this book succeeds on both counts is in large measure due to the fact that the Danish-Norwegian monarchy was, in many respects, a fairly typical composite-style state. Its experience therefore serves as something of a case study in state formation and nation building in the early nineteenth century.

Just how sprawling and vulnerable this entity was is made clear at the outset: not only did its king, resident in Copenhagen, have to balance the interests of the two main components, Denmark and Norway, physically separated by the Skagerrak; he also needed to weigh the needs of Schleswig and Holstein, the latter containing a preponderance of German speakers. There were also overseas holdings, including the Norwegian dependencies of Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Greenland, and colonial specks in the Caribbean, East

Indies and West Africa. Within this entity lived subjects with multiple identities. In particular, 'national patriotisms', as were developing in places like Norway, did not automatically preclude adherence to the wider Danish-Norwegian 'empire'; nor did they supersede enduring localisms. From this perspective again Scandinavia serves as a microcosm of Europe, and is comparable especially to other composite formations like the Habsburg Monarchy and even Britain. Glenthøj and Ottosen note how on the eve of the Napoleonic period there was a fair degree of mutual irritation between Germans, Danes, and Norwegians, including national stereotyping, and overlay between social, political and linguistic divisions. However, there was no reason to suppose that the Danish-Norwegian union should not continue. Indeed, the early war years – up to 1807 – were on the whole good ones for all northern European neutrals, who benefitted from the displacement of trade away from the belligerents.

The Franco-Russian treaty of Tilsit (1807) changed the situation, forcing Copenhagen to abandon neutrality and join Napoleon's Continental System. This sparked a war with Britain, the most dramatic events of which were the bombardment of Copenhagen and destruction of the Danish fleet in 1807, followed by a maritime version of asymmetric guerrilla war conducted by the Danes and Norwegians against the Royal Navy. The second major turning point came in 1812/early 1813, with the conclusion of the alliance between Sweden and Russia, the destruction of Napoleon's army in Russia, and recognition by Britain, Prussia and Russia of Sweden's claims to Norway. Glenthøj and Ottosen go beyond this narrative, and vividly demonstrate just how total the Napoleonic Wars were for ordinary people, especially in Norway. This found itself isolated after 1807, cut off from Denmark, its economy – dependent upon timber exports to Britain – wrecked, and its people eventually starved by the blockade. Cheer was only provided by some minor victories obtained in 1808 against the Swedes, who menaced the eastern borderlands – triumphs whose main significance lay in the subsequent mythical status they acquired. In this sense, the wars helped forge a stronger Norwegian identity over the longer term – one directed not only against Sweden, but also against Denmark that had allegedly abandoned its subjects across the Skagerrak. In reality,

so Glenthøj and Ottosen, there was little practical sign of Norwegian unity during the wars, but instead plenty of localism. That said – and this book is full of qualifications – a degree of popular mobilisation was not entirely absent. In particular, the fleet of gunboats constructed after 1807 was financed in part through patriotic donations by members of the public – both Danish and Norwegian – that was genuinely outraged at the British assault. Similar public donations were also made to aid Danish and Norwegian sailors in British captivity. Profit mingled with patriotism as a motive behind the investments made by the public in the 900 or so vessels engaged in privateering activities, directed again – but not exclusively – against the British.

Dynastic politics intrude prominently at various points in the narrative. Given the wider geo-politics it is difficult to envisage how even a genius could have safely guided the Danish-Norwegian monarchy through intact. Unfortunately, Frederick VI fell far short, not least because of his stubborn adherence to absolutism. This alienated potential support not only in his own realms, but also in neighbouring Sweden where the throne effectively became vacant with the deposition of Gustav IV Adolph in 1809. Frederick's absolutism made him unacceptable to the Swedes, thereby precluding a Scandinavian union. This might still have come about had the winning candidate – Carl August – not died soon after of a stroke in May 1810, or a second Danish prince (Christian Frederick, the future Christian VIII of Denmark) been trumped by the French Marshal Bernadotte. Key people in Stockholm believed Bernadotte, who assumed the name Charles John as Swedish Crown Prince, to enjoy the backing of Napoleon, but this apparently was a misunderstanding. One is left with one of those intriguing historical 'what ifs', pondering the possibility of a Scandinavian union as an outcome of the Napoleonic Wars, and of the capacity of dynastic accident to shape state formation even at this late juncture.

In conclusion, this book demonstrates how historians writing on lesser-known peripheral areas often bring in a wider comparative perspective. There is a breadth here that one would not expect to see in work devoted to say Napoleonic France, Germany or Italy. Throughout, parallels are drawn between the Danish-Norwegian case and analogous

entities. If there is one obvious weakness, it is in the use of English language. It often reads badly, and it is a shame this was not improved during the final editing. That said this volume achieves its objective in both filling a need for more on Scandinavia in the Napoleonic era, and above all in increasing our understanding of state formation and nation building in this formative period of European history.

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