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The Breakup of a Composite State and the Construction of a National Conflict: Denmark and the Duchies in the 19th Century

Steen Bo Frandsen*

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Meiner Gesinnung nach bin ich so gut Schleswiger oder Holsteiner als Däne [...] Wir lebten lange friedlich beisammen, klagten gemeinschaftlich über Druck und schwere Zeiten, aber ohne mißgünstigen Groll; in den späten Jahren aber hat dies Unkraut fruchtbaren Boden gefunden, was allerseits sehr zu bedauern ist, denn nur durch Einigkeit gewinnt man Kraft und Stärke.¹

In the vast literature on the conflict in Schleswig that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century, opinions like those of the 80-year old miller Hans Wulff from Nebel Mølle, close to the border between the Danish kingdom and the Duchy of Schleswig, have been largely absent. In his letter of 12 January 1844 to the editor of *Itzehoer Wochenblatt*, the most widely read Holsteinian newspaper of the time, Wulff rejected a call from the prominent Holsteinian politician and landowner Neergaard for people in Schleswig and Holstein to organize their own regional associations and institutions. Wulff's dissenting position appealed to the traditional sentiments of unity and respect that existed among the different ethnic groups of the composite state. Instead of confrontation and strife, national organization and indiscriminate hatred he

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¹ *Itzehoer Wochenblatt*, Letter to the editor from Hans Wulff, Nebel Mølle by Kolding, 12 January 1844. Author's translation: 'In my disposition I am Schleswiger or Holsteinian as well as a Dane [...] For a long time, we lived peacefully together, jointly lamented pressure and hard times, but without begrudging ill-will; during the last years, however, this weed has found fertile land, which is to be regretted on all sides, because only through unity does one gain power and strength.'

advocated compromise and cooperation in order to maintain the old societal balance that had enabled Danes, Schleswigers and Holsteinians to live peacefully together over centuries.

Wulff was far from alone in adopting a loyal position towards the king and the government of the composite state. However, in the end, he and like-minded defenders of the old order could not hold back the tide of nationalism. The small empire of the Oldenburg dynasty fell apart in two bloody wars (1848-1850 and 1864) and gave way to the nation state, where the past was reinterpreted through national ideologies and a nation state-based understanding of history. By this reading, the breakdown of the composite state had been inevitable, and historians of the triumphant nation state ignored the arguments of those representing the lost cause. The latter were silenced and practically excluded from the work of national historians, who would not admit the slightest doubt that the multiethnic composite state had been almost unanimously rejected. They adopted a very effective strategy of *damnatio memoriae*: today we can hardly think of an argument in favour of the *ancien regime*, and the idea of a composite state including the Danish kingdom and the partially German-speaking regions north of the Elbe seems obsolete.

However, the miller's letter leaves us with the impression that the national conflict, which resulted in the construction of a sharp national border, was perhaps not the only possible outcome after all. This paper will discuss some aspects of the end of the composite state.² It presents a critical and, in some respects, alternative reading to the traditional nation state-biased way of describing the development that led to the breakdown of the *Gesamtstaat* in the nineteenth century, and suggests that the composite state was not inherently destined to fail. We should be aware that the *ancien regime* lost out by only very small margins, and should not uncritically accept the view propagated by adherents of national ideology that different nations cannot live together in peace and harmony within the same state.

² Even after the loss of the duchies of Schleswig, Holstein and Lauenburg in 1864, Denmark remained a composite state (including Iceland (to 1944), Greenland (to 2009), and the Faroe Islands), and was officially called a *Rigsfællesskab*. The geographical distance and the superiority of the kingdom within this 'commonwealth' made the old importance of the composite state fade, and Danish history became primarily a history of the kingdom.

The miller's conviction that a solution could be found, and his unwillingness to admit that the subjects of the monarchy could no longer agree, was a sign that there were different perspectives within the national conflict. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in detail why the national ideologies succeeded in breaking the old order, but my research on political developments in Denmark and the duchies during the first half of the nineteenth century points towards the king's and the government's failure to adopt a more progressive line with respect to the constitutional question and win the liberal elites at an earlier stage when they would still have been able to take the initiative.³

Particular attention will be given to the question of the interpretation of the First Schleswigian War (1848-1850): was it a civil war or a national conflict? The war that broke out in March 1848 has been called an 'uprising' (by the Schleswig-Holsteinians), a 'rebellion' (by the Danish Government), a 'civil war' and a 'national conflict'. One phase of the war could even be characterized as an 'international conflict', when Prussian troops and volunteers from German and Scandinavian states entered the fighting. Where an 'uprising' idealizes the heroic efforts of the Schleswig-Holsteinians to gain liberty and independence from the despotic Danish government, a 'rebellion' of course signifies illegal action. In later years, historians have used the term 'civil war' to describe the war between 1848 and 1850⁴, rather than defining it as a 'national conflict'. But what difference does it make? Most importantly, 'civil war' is more neutral. It underlines that the war began and ended as a conflict within the monarchy, fought by subjects of the same head of state. A national conflict, by contrast, is fought between 'us' and 'them', and there can be no doubt whatsoever that we were right and they were wrong. National historians will prefer this approach, while civil war is more useful for a detached discussion.

However, it is possible to argue that the conflict was not exclusively a civil war. It was not just the intervention by Prussia and the German confederation that gave it a national dimension, but the fact that parties within the monarchy regarded the war as being waged between Danes and

³ S. Bo Frandsen, *Opdagelsen af Jylland. Den regionale dimension i danmarkshistorien 1814-64* (Aarhus Universitetsforlag: Aarhus, 1996); and id., *Holsten i helstaten. Hertugdømmet inden for og uden for det danske monarki i første halvdel af 1800-tallet* (Museum Tusulanums Forlag: Copenhagen, 2008).

⁴ A prominent example is C. Bjørn, *1848. Borgerkrig og revolution* (Gyldendal: Copenhagen 1998).

Germans. A national element was also present when the new Danish national-liberal government sought to annex Schleswig and create a nation state, while Schleswig-Holsteinians fought for their own independent state within the German confederation. However, this nationalist reading of the conflict is not entirely convincing. The war over Schleswig was not fought between nations or nation states; rather, it was an internationalized internal conflict within the Danish monarchy, where other states intervened and where the powers finally decided to guarantee the existence of the composite state.

Although national arguments can easily be found, there are other reasons why we should feel more comfortable calling it a civil war. The war was fought among the subjects of the monarchy, and their respective positions reflected a much broader spectrum than simply ‘Danish’ versus ‘German’. The ‘German’ position was in many cases more a regionalist than a nationalist one; to many Schleswigians it was very difficult to choose between the two extremes, and the conflict itself divided families and villages. On the ‘Danish’ side a large group of loyalists held on to the *Gesamtstaat* and rejected the nation state. These nuances do not receive fair treatment under the label of national conflict – which was exactly what national historians on both sides hoped to achieve. ‘The terminology of ‘civil war’ opens up the discussion of whether the conflict was really inevitable. It brings in dissidents like the miller, who rejected national antagonism and the propaganda of national hatred within political discourse.’⁵

Seen in a larger European context, the two wars over Schleswig were the first of several conflicts that arose from the impossible task of drawing a line between two nations in accordance with the principles of national ideologies. The conflict in the region between Elbe and Kongeaa clearly demonstrated that the idea that two nations could be defined without any overlap was illusory. Although the Danish fiefdom of Schleswig and the German fiefdom of Holstein had traditionally

⁵ Here it is not possible to list a larger number of skeptics, anti-nationalists and opponents of war. Among them were the prominent newspaper editor and journalist J.P. Grüne (Kjøbenhavnsposten) and in Northern Jutland a number of dissidents were quite active in 1848 and during the 1850s (Lars Bjørnbak, Geert Winther, Bernhard Réé). This discussion can be found in S. Bo Frandsen, *Opdagelsen af Jylland. Den regionale dimension i danmarkshistorien 1814-64* (Aarhus Universitetsforlag: Aarhus, 1996). The comprehensive work by H. Schultz Hansen, *Hjemmetyskheden i Nordlesvig 1840-1867, I-II* (Institut for Grænseregionsforskning: Aabenraa, 2005) contains an analysis of the many different positions within the Schleswigian population.

been separated by the Eider, which also formed the border between the Holy Roman Empire and the lands of the Danish king, no clear division existed between Danish and German. Politically, the power of the Danish state reached well beyond the Eider, but at the same time German culture and language had a very strong position north of the river. The close relationship between Holstein and Schleswig was evident in the ties between the biggest landowners of the two duchies, the *Ritterschaft*, which was also responsible for electing the duke.

To a large extent, the identity of the people of this region was a mixed one. The duchies were geographically in between, and this position was reflected in identities that were neither Danish nor German.⁶ Holstein and Schleswig had developed a very close relationship, one that meant more to them than their respective connections with Germany and Denmark. To most Holsteinians the country south of the Elbe was a foreign land, and their ties with Schleswig were far more important to them than a closer connection with Germany. Unambiguous nationalities and national identities in a modern sense simply did not exist. Copenhagen, the capital of the Oldenburg monarchy, had a large German-speaking population. In the late eighteenth century, the German philosopher J.G. Herder characterized Denmark as ‘the Danish end of Germany’, but Holstein could just as easily be known as ‘the German end of Denmark’.

The conviction that every single nation is clearly divided from its neighbours by blood, race, history, a so-called ‘natural border’ and so on also proved to be wrong in Schleswig. Actually many Schleswigers were hardly aware of their nationality themselves, and they had strong reservations about identifying themselves exclusively with one of the two national categories between which they were expected to choose. However, over the course of the conflict Danish and German nationalists forced the Schleswigians to make this choice. Families often split up and stressed the point that national identity was not objective, but a question of convictions and beliefs. It was not until 1920 that it was possible to draw a line on the basis of a referendum, but even this left minorities on both sides of the new state border.

⁶ The regional movement of Schleswig-Holstein fought for a separate state in personal union with Denmark before being driven into a separatist and pro-German position from the middle of the 1840s.

As a result of the failure to find an indisputable dividing line between the two nations, both sides put forward claims of ‘historical rights’. The dogma of the Eider as their southern border since time immemorial prevented the Danes from agreeing to a peaceful solution or a compromise, and on the opposite side the conviction of keeping the two duchies undivided had a similar effect.⁷ Both arguments implied a forced annexation of thousands of people with a different national identity.

The dramatic events in Schleswig and Holstein in the middle of the nineteenth century brought an end to the long process of state formation of the Danish composite state, and led to the emergence of new states on both sides. Both duchies were annexed by Prussia, and Denmark was organized for the first time as a nation state. The conflict over Schleswig thus represents a critical juncture in the statebuilding process of the region. It stands at the beginning of a new political order – the nation state – although the roots of the conflict are to be found in a different type of state: the composite state.⁸

The Danish monarchy of the first half of the nineteenth century constituted the last vestige of the small empire of the Oldenburg Dynasty, which had originally controlled large parts of Scandinavia. Centuries of bitter rivalry with Sweden had weakened the position, and in 1814 the union between Denmark and Norway was dissolved. This loss dramatically altered the balance within the state, but it also turned the remaining *Gesamtstaat* or *Helstat* into a geographically more compact entity. Given the long tradition of the union between the kingdom and the duchies, prospects were not as bleak as historians would later judge them. Only after 1864 did everybody seem convinced that the composite monarchy had been a failed state from its very inception.

Composite states were condemned and ridiculed by national movements. The famous slogan of ‘a people’s prison’, used by enemies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, shows how national

⁷ The two positions produced the two famous slogans of the war of 1848: on the Danish side, *Danmark til Eideren*; and, on the German side, *Up ewig ungedeelt*.

⁸ See J.H. Elliot, “A Europe of Composite Monarchies” *Past and Present* (1992) IV: 48-71; H. Gustafsson speaks of a ‘conglomerate state’ in his article on “State Formation in Early Modern Europe”, *Scandinavian Journal of Modern History* (1998):189-212.

ideology gave rise to the – negative – reputation of former states. In most cases, this was hardly justified. In general the Oldenburg monarchy was not a repressive state, and the government made a great effort to treat different parts of the monarchy fairly and equally. The king could not govern his state like a prison. Of course, he had close connections to the leading elites of all regions, and he felt an obligation towards all of his subjects.

II. CONSTRUCTION AND INVENTION OF CONFLICT

Conflicts – past and present – are very often presented as ‘inevitable’. This is not a satisfying explanation, and we soon discover a much more complicated background, where elements of ‘construction’ and ‘invention’ always play an important role. This was also the case in the conflict over Schleswig in the nineteenth century.

Over the last two or three decades, these concepts have influenced many historians. Eric Hobsbawm edited *Invention of Tradition* which showed how well-known national stereotypes can have a rather short history.⁹ Hugh Trevor-Roper described this brilliantly in the case of Scotland.¹⁰ Another important contribution was Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, which undermined the idea of the nation as an unchanging entity.¹¹ It is probably still necessary to stress that the word ‘construction’ does not signify something false or artificial. When the modern nation state was ‘constructed’, it could not have succeeded without a large number of existing elements that were actually combined into a new and, to many people, convincing meaning. Nations and national identities had existed for a long time, but the idea that each nation had to have its own state and each nation state had to be culturally homogeneous was new. However, it is important to be aware of alternatives and competing designs. The fact that they did not succeed should not prevent us from discussing them as serious bids for future structures. This approach can also improve our understanding of the successful strategies.

⁹ E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁰ H. Trevor Roper, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland”, in *ibid*: 15-41.

¹¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, London, New York, 1991).

A way to obtain a more balanced understanding of alternatives and possibilities of the past is to consider history as a work in progress, rather than a compilation of facts establishing a single, definite chronology. If we regard chronology as inevitable, we miss out on the possibility of understanding what alternatives protagonists were faced with in the past, what they chose to do, and why they did it. Historians cannot dispute the facts of a chronology, but if it is merely read backwards from a later vantage point some of the most important details are lost. In dealing with the conflict in Schleswig this paper considers relevant, albeit often unsuccessful, positions to develop a more nuanced picture of a development that has been almost exclusively related through the perspective of national history.

Returning once more to the letter from the Danish miller, who worried about the possible effects of separate institutions and organizations in promoting divisions among the people of the monarchy, we can observe the changing discourse within the state. Miller Wulff represents the traditional position that sought to strengthen cooperation and the common structures within the monarchy. According to the king and his government, the process of state formation should not take into account national sentiments and identities that lacked any constructive function in a process aiming at integrating – and if possible even amalgamating – different ethnic groups into a modern state.

After almost 150 years of nation states and nation state history, we have come to take for granted the conclusion of those who succeeded in breaking up the composite state: that Danes and Germans are totally different and should not live together in a common state. It seems obvious that the composite state had to end the way it did, and it does not affect our conviction in the slightest that Denmark and the duchies had been united for 400 years without any open national conflict and had experienced almost a century of a close and, in many respects, fruitful relationship.

This perspective is the result of work undertaken by historians on both sides. They interpreted a long, differentiated relationship between the kingdom and the neighbours of northern Germany as a mostly dark time, developing a particular historical understanding of the events of the nineteenth century. By this reading, there was hardly any mention of cooperation and inspiration.

It was constructed with the purpose of demonstrating that Danes and Germans had always lived in competition with one another, that the composite state was a perversion, and total separation the only possible way to end this frustrating chapter.¹² This creation of a monodimensional past can be considered a necessary precondition of all ethnic and national conflicts.

The nineteenth century idea of the nation and the need for all nations to organize themselves into their own state had been unknown to kings and knights of the past. Even during the final stages of the old regime, it represented just one possible design for a future state. Among the competing projects were a composite state with a constitutional monarchy, a confederation and a personal union. If we turn our attention to the forgotten narrative of the composite state and its political strategies for the region of transition between the Danish Kingdom and the German Empire, we must bear in mind that the absolute monarchy was never given the opportunity to recount its own story. The history of the late *Gesamtstaat* was only written after it had ceased to exist, and by historians who had rejected the fallen regime. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the description was unfavourable and that the old order and its politicians were held responsible for all faults and for the final catastrophe. This chapter of Danish history was never written from the perspective of the protagonists who experienced it. Hardly anybody took seriously the arguments of the miller and those like him who suggested that the inhabitants of the composite state could and should stay together and combine their forces to common advantage

To the king and his closest political advisers the composite state was far from an outdated model, but rather was rooted in the historical logic that that Danes, Holsteinians and Schleswiger were meant to stay together and cooperate. The regions north of the Elbe formed a natural unit, and as the state extended respect to different cultures and identities the king guaranteed the continuation of peace and prosperity into the future. Reforms and integrative measures might be needed, but since the end of the eighteenth century the king's government had undertaken important steps towards closer integration and modernization of the state. Even if this reshaping did suffer

¹² Like the Schleswigan Historian Georg Waitz opened his history of the Duchies from 1864 with the audacious and apodictic claim that the fight between Danes and Germans was almost as old as history itself, G. Waitz, *Kurze schleswigholsteinische Landesgeschichte* (Homann, Kiel, 1864).

setbacks, and had been slower than the government might have hoped, substantial improvements could not be denied.

The possibility of the success of the multiethnic state had proven itself over the course of an almost 400-year union. In 1460 the knights of Schleswig elected the Danish King Christian of Oldenburg to be their duke, and a short time after their fellow knights of Holstein chose him to be their count.¹³ Christian's German origins and his close ties to Schleswig and Holstein made it easier for the knights to choose the king of a country that had been their main opponent for centuries. The knights knew that the election of the Danish king represented a potential threat to their independence, but the need for peace and stability could not be ignored. Furthermore, Christian had been offered the Danish crown only six years earlier under rather similar considerations. In that choice, the interests of the magnates of the kingdom and the duchies coincided and a certain mutual understanding among leading circles remained an important reason behind the stability of this union. Schleswig as a Danish fiefdom and Holstein as a German one were already closely connected through the personal and property relations of the leading circles; the ties with Denmark strengthened these still further.

The two main reasons behind the choice of the knights of Schleswig and Holstein were the need for peace and their wish to stay together under the same head of state. They believed that the Danish king was the most powerful candidate, and the fact that the union was to last for 404 years proved them to be right to a large degree. The union held the duchies together even if the region came to suffer from a century-long schism resulting from an intradynastic conflict in the House of Oldenburg.¹⁴ The dukes could not guarantee peace; the Thirty Years War and the wars with Sweden foreign troops devastated the region. However, open conflict between Danes and Holsteinians did not occur again until the civil war of 1848.

¹³ Holstein was turned into a duchy by the German Emperor in 1474.

¹⁴ The conflict between the main line (Oldenburg) and the Dukes of Gottorp was especially threatening to the unity of the monarchy during the seventeenth century.

After 1460 the duchies formed part of the Oldenburg monarchy, which can be characterized as a typical composite state.¹⁵ Within this structure they became involved in a statebuilding process similar to those of other European composite states. Independence, local rights and the position of the landowning aristocracy could hardly be challenged. The Oldenburg monarchy was a dynastic state, where the hereditary rights of the monarch held a number of territories together. The common head of state brought the single and often heterogeneous parts together; the composite state was never a union like Switzerland or the United States of America, where member states came together and agreed to develop a common state. Rather, it was the link between the monarch and each single territory that held the state together. To a large extent, the monarch ruled the single lands separately and in accordance with their specific rules and traditions. At the same time, the monarch could be king in Denmark and Norway, duke in Holstein, and count in Oldenburg. Within his monarchy there existed different languages, different regional laws, different religious and administrative systems, different customs and laws and different currencies. It might be the king's ambition to create a more homogeneous state, but this could only be achieved through a long and extremely difficult process. He could not simply impose his will upon his different lands and subjects, even if he so wished.

Within this structure the duchies were able to retain a strong regional identity, and when absolutism was introduced in Denmark in 1660 Schleswig and Holstein were not included. Although the king/duke tried from that point on to strengthen his control over the region, as a duke he remained an elected head of state. In many respects the duchies even profited from the introduction of absolutism in Denmark. A reorganized central administration opened up the possibility of a career in the government for the nobles and the bourgeois elite of Holstein and Schleswig. The king openly preferred advisers from the Holsteinian nobility to those of the old Danish noble families, which he deeply distrusted. Consequently the alliance between the absolutist monarch and the Holsteinian elite became a cornerstone of the *Gesamtstaat*, and led to a remarkable intensification of Danish-German relations during the eighteenth century.

On the other hand, considerable German and Holsteinian cultural and political influence

¹⁵ A concept of the composite state has been developed by Gustafsson, "State Formation in Early Modern Europe", above note 9. See also Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies", above note 9.

provoked the growth of a Danish cultural elite, whose increasing self-consciousness was directed against 'foreigners' in an attempt to avail itself of the leading positions in state and society. After the fall of the German reformer Struensee in 1772 anti-German sentiment spread across the bourgeois circles of Copenhagen. The difficulties – both intended and unintended – of making the distinction between Germans and German-speaking Holsteinians unveiled dangerous potential within the Danish elite, and during the rule of the new prime minister Guldberg the traditional composite state ideology assumed a stronger Danish accent. The king had finally eliminated the influence of the Duke of Gottorp and consolidated his control over Holstein in 1773, and the government introduced a program of modernization and integration in order to strengthen ties among the single parts of the state and increase identification with the state: Danes, Norwegians and Holsteinians should consider themselves brothers. The world's first law of citizenship gave the same rights to all subjects – Danes, Holsteinians and Norwegians – and excluded foreigners from the state administration. Cohabitation within the monarchy was not entirely harmonious, but in general worked out quite well. A huge majority of the king's subjects did not consider alternatives to the existing union.

During the Napoleonic War the relationship among the ethnic groups within the state was put to a test. Dramatic events hit all parts of the monarchy, and after decades of peace and prosperity the composite state suffered very hard blows. The loss of Norway was the catastrophic outcome of a policy that kept the state far too long in the alliance with Napoleon, but the unity was never questioned from within. Only after the war some Holsteinians began to regret that they had had no chance to fight against the French side by side with their German brothers.

In 1806, the king annexed the Duchy of Holstein after the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, but a determined 'Danification' of the region was soon abandoned due to growing problems caused by the war. In 1814 the annexation was cancelled, and Holstein became a member of the new German Federation, although it remained part of the Danish monarchy. The failed effort to make Holstein Danish left many Holsteinians suspicious of their duke, and there was a residual fear that the Danes would revert to this policy as and when they got the chance. Just as accentuation of the Danish position within the kingdom was a dangerous development in a multiethnic monarchy, the composite state was also threatened by a new interest in German

culture and a national awakening that followed the German War of Liberation (1813). At this time only a small Holsteinian elite wanted their country to leave the composite state and enter into closer union with the rest of Germany, and the traditionally reserved feelings towards Germany south of the Elbe were soon refuelled by the repressive and reactionary policy of the German powers after 1815.¹⁶

Still shocked by the catastrophic war, King Frederick VI and his government took a very defensive and cautious position after 1815. In Vienna the princes of the new German Federation had promised to introduce assemblies of the estates into their states but, like most, Frederick was in no hurry to comply. He fundamentally rejected a constitutional monarchy, had no intention of sharing his power with elected politicians, and did not want to install a forum for the opposition. The government did not consider cautious democratization as a way of strengthening the bonds between the single parts of the monarchy. Another strategy might have changed the fate of the union.¹⁷

Things began to change in 1830. The French revolution of July spread to other European countries. It provoked the dissolution of the Dutch composite state, and as it reached Hamburg the Danish king saw himself forced to comply with his promise at the Congress of Vienna. Surprisingly, he decided to introduce an assembly of the estates not only in Holstein but also in the rest of his monarchy. The new institution was only to have a conciliatory function, not a legislative one, and to prevent strong political opposition the king divided his state into four regions, each with their own assembly (Holstein, Schleswig, Jutland, and the Danish Isles including Iceland).

¹⁶ S. Bo Frandsen, *Holsten i helstaten* (Museum Tusulanums Forlag: Copenhagen, 2008). See also the interesting analysis in J.S.M. Ostenfeld, *Studier over Stemninger og Tilstande i Holsten (1815-1830)* (Gads Forlag: Copenhagen, 1909).

¹⁷ It was almost exclusively left liberal democrats who argued for a constitutional *Gesamtstaat*. Democracy as a means of creating support was not understood in the Danish monarchy – interesting examples that it could work offered some of the more liberal German states, e.g. Baden.

At the same time, the king made it clear from the very first session that the new institution was an instrument to speed up integration. He presented a new customs law in order to eliminate internal borders. This was a very progressive step, and the worst case scenario of the liberal opposition immediately came true: all three continental assemblies favoured reform, and only the assembly of the Danish Isles turned it down after strong pressure from the members from Copenhagen. They feared competition from Hamburg and were not prepared to give up their old privileges in the Danish economy. As the government had predicted, the four independent assemblies made it difficult to cooperate and produced a climate of distrust. Leading liberals in Copenhagen feared that the continental parts of the monarchy would drift towards the south, attracted by the expanding power and influence of Hamburg. The strength of the city in the Elbe was stronger than ever before, and Copenhagen was seriously weakened after the loss of Norway. In this context, the independent assembly of Northern Jutland and its articulation of regional interests was considered a serious threat to the unity of the kingdom. This was rather typical of politicians in the capital of a centrist organized state, to whom the representatives and interests of other assemblies were unknown and distrusted.¹⁸

In the session of 1838 the two Danish assemblies demanded that they be unified, and Holsteinian and Schleswigian deputies did the same.¹⁹ As with other far-reaching opposition ideas, the king rejected these proposals. This defeat frustrated liberal opposition in all four regions and fuelled general disappointment over the political process, especially the absence of any progress over the constitutional question. The liberals were increasingly anxious to find a strategy to gain the initiative and pushing the government forward. However, at the same time they were unable and probably none too interested in combining forces. Regional tensions grew, and their articulation marked a first step towards a new turn in political debate.

Just as liberal politicians in Copenhagen feared for the loyalty of the Jutland assembly and the unity of the state, their counterparts in Kiel – the political and intellectual capital of Holstein –

¹⁸ S. Bo Frandsen, *Opdagelsen af Jylland. Den regionale dimension i danmarkshistorien 1814-64* (Aarhus Universitetsforlag: Aarhus, 1996).

¹⁹ In the assembly of Northern Jutland, the decision to ask for a united assembly was very close and followed an animated debate.

feared that the king would succeed in drawing Holstein even further into the process of integration. The risk of lost identity gave sway to the regionalist argument. The founder and editor of the *Kieler Correspondenzblatt*, Theodor Olshausen, took the opportunity to introduce this dimension by advocating a Holsteinian boycott of a museum collection for the works of Thorvaldsen in Copenhagen, which he argued would not be to the advantage of any of the peasants of Holstein who could not afford to go to Copenhagen to visit the museum. He fundamentally questioned the existence of a common culture. The money would be better spent in the region, and the Danes could build their own museum if they wanted to.²⁰

This was a new line of argument. Soon the liberals in Copenhagen began to argue that the government spent too much money on roads in the duchies and, from that point on, claims of unfair treatment created an atmosphere of growing regional tensions. In the Duchies the old fear of losing regional rights and privileges was also evident in political discussion. A new regionalism – *Schleswig-Holsteinism* – began to emerge. This did not begin as a separatist movement but, to the liberals in Copenhagen, a regional argument was in itself sufficient to trigger discussion of the future of the composite state.

The opposition in Copenhagen welcomed the prospect of Holstein leaving the monarchy, but was anxious to keep Schleswig from following suit. It insisted that the northern duchy belonged exclusively to Denmark. This national argument was supported by stressing the language problem, and the Danish side succeeded in raising this question to the top of the agenda. From that point on, the national question dominated the political debate and even calls for a constitution were almost forgotten. By around 1840, the liberals in Copenhagen and Kiel had finally discovered how to use the nationalist argument as a trump card, and the government and the idea of a composite state were forced into a defensive position. Danish liberals now claimed that the king and the monarchy did not represent the national interest, and in Holstein a new orientation towards Germany began to gain ground. The two most important political and intellectual centres of the opposition cultivated exactly the kind of destructive antagonism which the government had tried to avoid. It had to give up its ambitions of introducing integrative measures and restrict itself to limiting the consequences of a destructive political debate.

²⁰ *Kieler Correspondenz-Blatt*, Speech to the Landsleute in Schleswig-Holstein, 4 March 1837.

Except for a few weeks in the late winter of 1848, when the king proclaimed his intention to introduce a constitutional monarchy, the government never regained the initiative and found no way to neutralize the nationalist discourse on either side. The opposition's search for a weapon against the absolute monarch finally brought the nationalist argument to the fore. A strong element of construction is evident in the political process at that time. The national question was hardly ever mentioned during the early stages of the new political development and in the first sessions of the assemblies. Just five or ten years before the state stood on the brink of civil war, the nationalist argument was absent from political debate. In fact, some of the most convinced opponents of the composite state did not even know it existed. The Holsteinian journalist Theodor Olshausen was hardly even aware of a Danish-speaking population in Schleswig²¹, and in 1830 even the Danish nationalist N.F.S. Grundtvig was convinced that the people of Schleswig would choose Holstein and not Denmark.²²

The language problem in Schleswig would be one of the most important issues in the Danish—German conflict. Discrimination against the Danish language in the parts of Schleswig where it dominated was a well-known problem, and in the 1830s the issue had been reintroduced into public debate by Christian Paulsen and Christian Flor, two professors of north Schleswigian origin from the University of Kiel. In the 1840s, it was strongly promoted by the national liberal opposition in Denmark. One of the most controversial episodes of the national confrontation took place in the assembly of Schleswig in 1842 as one of the delegates contested the rules and demanded the right to address the assembly in Danish. The dramatic incident sparked a hitherto unknown interest in this problem in the Danish public, and soon the political elite in Copenhagen would try to instrumentalize it for their own purposes. The nationalist intellectuals of Copenhagen and Kiel demanded a clear choice of language and identity from the Schleswiger: Danish or German. According to nationalists on both sides the Schleswigers had to renounce their traditional position in between. Olshausen expressed his conviction that it was not important whether Schleswig chose to be Danish or German, but it had to make a clear and

²¹ *Kieler Correspondenz-Blatt*, "Was ist Hauptsprache?", 22 April 1837.

²² N.F.S. Grundtvig, *Politiske Betragtninger med Blik paa Danmark og Holsteen* (Der Wahlske Boghandels Forlag, Copenhagen, 1831).

unequivocal decision. Danish nationalists, Schleswig-Holsteinian regionalists or separatists, and Holsteinian German nationalists all used the conflict and the fundamental idea of an irreparable divide between the two nationalities in support of their efforts to destroy the composite state and pave the way for nation states.

The king rejected all national ideas aimed at excluding certain groups among the population, as they were incompatible with his project of an increasingly integrated but multiethnic composite state. However, once the national dimension had been introduced he was no longer accepted as an impartial head of state but judged according to a set of norms and values with which he did not agree. The opposition began to discuss whether the politics of the government were in accordance with national interests, often concluding that they were not. As the liberal opposition turned towards national liberalism they demanded a new state, organized in a totally different way. They rejected the composite state and the prospect of living together with the German-speaking population.

National politics later paved the way for integration, but initially it represented a strategy of exclusion and breaking up. Without discussing what were undoubtedly reasonable demands for greater linguistic equality in the state, and in Schleswig especially, one of the consequences of the language conflict was the idea that it was better to speak only one language. National ideologies stressed difference, and demanded a clear border and the exclusion of foreign people and foreign cultures. This development had its focal point in Schleswig, where it was impossible to draw a line between nationalities. In a region where the main characteristics were a transitional character, and multiple linguistic and cultural traditions, it was extremely difficult to draw the linear border demanded by a real national state.

The national ideology embraced the whole of society, offering a totally new explanation for existing problems and a new model for the future. In contrast to the miller Wulff it was considered very important not to understand the other side in the conflict. It was a discourse of conflict, and it was claimed that the conflict had always been present and that differences between the nations could never be put aside.

As the war broke out in 1848 it was not considered a civil war by the nationalists; it was construed as a conflict between different nationalities – Danish and German – and not as a conflict among subjects of the same king. There were several problems with this interpretation, but it is important to mention that it helped to blur the fundamental problem of the nationalist perspective, principally, that the conflict in Schleswig was not fought between ‘Danes’ and ‘Germans’ at all.

Those like the miller Wulff, who thought it worthwhile to search for compromises instead of adhering to the slogans of hatred that were being presented by nationalists on both sides, were no longer heard. However, their arguments and belief in a common state should cause us to rethink the debate and nationalist discourse surrounding the inevitability of conflict. It helps to understand the collapse of the composite state as the outcome of a strategy pursued by actors in both Denmark and the duchies. Separatists and nationalists on both sides wanted a conflict and pushed for it relentlessly from the beginning of the 1840s.

They finally succeeded in making the composite monarchy ungovernable, and their actions were responsible for two bloody wars and an outcome for which the majority of inhabitants of the two duchies could hardly have wished. The nationalists managed to present the conflict as ‘inevitable’, a conclusion that has hardly ever been questioned by national historians in either Denmark or Germany. It perfectly reflected the ideology of the nation state, and this is the reason why we still live under the logic that Danes and Germans are totally different and should definitely not live together or, at least, not within a common state.

It is also the reason why the idea of a ‘national conflict’ has prevailed over that of a ‘civil war’. A civil war implies that opponents come from within the same state; they have lived together previously and had a certain overlapping interests before the conflict broke out. As the miller wrote, even if the different groups had known hardship and difficult times in the past, they always stood together and never harboured resentment or grudges against one another. By national conflict, however, we understand a confrontation between two parties that are fundamentally different, for example with respect to nationality, and that excludes from the very

outset the idea that they could have anything in common, even a common history in a century-old political union.

The king took one final, almost desperate step to prevent collapse of the monarchy. And he almost succeeded. Just before Christian VIII died in January 1848, he told his son Frederick VII to give up resistance to a constitution. The new king announced that he would follow this advice and some of his closest advisers were told to write a draft. This concession shocked the opposition in all parts of the monarchy. The decision was greeted by conservatives and leftist liberals who saw the constitutional *Gesamtstaat* as a great opportunity. To the nationalists and the separatists it represented a worst-case scenario. They had demanded a constitution for years and could hardly reject the offer when it finally came, but in their eyes a constitution for the whole state was worse than no constitution at all. They were still trying to solve this paradox when they were saved by the bell: news arrived from Paris that the Bourbon King had been forced to step down. The revolution in Paris made it possible for the nationalists in Kiel and Copenhagen to reject the king's plan and demand a Danish nation state and an independent Schleswig-Holstein respectively.

III. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

The 1848-1850 war over Schleswig holds an undisputed place in the narrative of the modern nation state as the national conflict that brought to an end the old order of the composite state and finally paved the way for a homogeneous nation state. This is a very traditional narrative to describes how events developed into the reality we know today. It pays little much attention to opinions and trends that ultimately did not prevail.

This paper has tried to examine the conflict from a different angle and bring out the voices of some of the contemporaries who refused to believe that the existing multiethnic state was a dead end. The national ideology did not convince everybody. The Danish miller and those like him were convinced that problems could be solved together, and they wanted their contemporaries to recall a tradition of living peacefully together in the same state for hundreds of years. They

considered that Danes, Schleswigians and Holsteinians had a close relationship and saw no reason why they should split up.

Even though this position has consequently been left out of the narrative of the national revolution and the coming of the nation state, it cuts across very different groups of society, from conservative loyalists to left-wing liberal democrats. This paper argues that the concept of a national conflict was constructed in order to delegitimize the composite state. Using the terminology of a national conflict instead of a civil war is to accept the nationalist idea of a necessary course of events in support of the claim that different nationalities cannot live together in the same state.

The nationalist ideology would not acknowledge the idea of a civil war because nationalists would not accept that their opponents were part of the state at all. We should, however, not least because it demonstrates the complexity and the long historical tradition of the composite state to which all combatants belonged. The nationalist conclusion is similar to positions we hear nowadays in conflicts between ethnic groups. Today, people expect the ethnic groups in Bosnia, Macedonia, Sri Lanka or Sudan to pull themselves together and find peaceful solutions. Furthermore the break-up of federations is often considered a tragedy. However, in our own Danish case we are convinced that there was no alternative to conflict and that it was impossible to find a solution within the existing composite framework. Why do we still consider the politicians and ideologues that preached antagonism, hatred and insuperable differences to be the heroes of our history, when we have almost completely forgotten those who believed in compromise and cooperation? It would be worth reflecting further upon this question, and on the importance of construction in historical narrative.