

Denmark in the Napoleonic Wars

A Foreign Policy Survey

Ole Feldbæk

For 87 years Denmark had enjoyed virtually uninterrupted peace and prosperity. But in 1807 the far-flung conglomerate state consisting of the twin kingdoms of Denmark and Norway with their North Atlantic possessions, the duchies of Holstein and Schleswig and valuable overseas colonies was whirled into the global conflict between France and Britain. Denmark was forced to enter the war on the side of its eventual loser: Napoleon, ending up as the greatest loser of the Napoleonic Wars in terms of population and territory. After seven years of war on land and sea, Denmark was tied in an economically crippling support of the Emperor's Continental System, which resulted in the state bankruptcy of 1813, and furthermore was involved not only in fierce competition for the succession to the Swedish throne but also in a desperate effort to uphold the political loyalty of the Norwegians towards the king and the state. Efforts that towards the end of the war were also directed at the dubious political loyalties of the German population of Holstein and Schleswig.¹

It is this, admittedly, complicated net of relations woven into one foreign policy conducted by one absolute ruler for the ultimate benefit of one conglomerate state which will be analysed on the background of the wildly fluctuating conditions of the Napoleonic Wars.²

1. Neutrality

It goes without saying that the British attack on Zealand in the late summer of 1807 did not change the basic elements of the geopolitical conditions in the North.³ It is essential to stress that the war policy of King Frederik VI was crucially based upon the traditions and experience of the peace period. Since the coup d'état of Gustaf III in 1772, the overriding problem for the Danish absolute state was to defend

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¹ O. Feldbæk, *Nørhed og adskillelse. 1720–1814. Danmark-Norge 1380–1814*, vol. 4 (Oslo, 1998), pp. 309–375; Ø. Rian, *Foreningen med Danmark. 1536–1814* vol. 1 (Oslo, 1995), pp. 212–230 in N. Bjørgø, Ø. Rian & A. Kaartvedt, *Norsk utenrikspolitikk historie. Selvstendighet og union. Fra middelalderen til 1905*.

² P. W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 287–582.

³ O. Feldbæk, *Denmark and the Baltic, 1720–1864*; G. Rystad et al., eds. *In Quest of Trade and Security. The Baltic in Power Politics, vol. 1, 1500–1890* (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 257–295.

herself against Swedish aggression by political and military means. Political security was based upon the alliance of 1773 with Russia, in which Denmark accepted her role as a client state, trusting that Russia needed Denmark in the event of a Swedish attack over the Finnish border just as much as Denmark needed Russia in the event of Swedish aggression directed against Norway – whether the military operations be directed against Norway or against Zealand. It was agreed that Norway should be defended by her own army – and also that the political loyalty of the Norwegians should be upheld by concessions as long as the latter did not come into conflict with the upholding of the authority of the central government in Copenhagen. Politically, Denmark built her defence of the territorial integrity of the state upon the Russian alliance – and dreaded the day when Russia might no longer need Denmark. Militarily, she built her defence upon keeping the entire navy as a fleet-in-being in Copenhagen, where the Swedish attack was expected, and by demonstrating a naval strength which was at any time superior to that of the Swedish navy in Karlskrona.

During the last years of peace, however, the great war moved closer to the southern border of the state.⁴ With the approval of Napoleon, Prussia had occupied Hannover. Denmark reacted by moving part of her army towards the border in Holstein in order to resist violations of her neutrality. But events moved fast. In 1806, after the defeat of Austria, the old German Empire was dissolved; Napoleon established the Confederation of the Rhine under his own control and the Kingdom of Westphalia; and he accepted that Denmark should incorporate the former German fief of Holstein into the Danish state. Now events began to move really fast. In October 1806 Napoleon defeated Prussia at Auerstedt and Jena; and from Berlin in November he issued the decrees of the Continental System that were to force Britain to sign a peace on Napoleon's terms. French armies were now camped close to the border of Holstein. The Danish Prince Regent reacted by withdrawing his army from the southern districts of Holstein in order to evade clashes with French forces in Northern Germany. At the same time, he signed a radically new naval plan which aimed at gradually reducing the traditional navy of ships of the line in favour of light gunboats and brigs, which could operate along with the army along the southern border.⁵

At the same time Denmark kept a low profile in her relations with France and Britain. Admittedly, clashes over Danish exploitation of neutrality occasionally did strain relations between Danish diplomats and British foreign ministers, but they remained without real political effect.⁶ Danish historians have argued that Denmark would eventually have joined Britain against Napoleon. The argument, however, is not supported by the sources, and it also lacks probability. A conflict with Napoleon would have led to the occupation of Holstein, Schleswig and Jutland and thereby put a stop to those shipments of grain which were the precondition for maintaining the Norwegian army and the political loyalty of the Norwegian population. The British navy would not have been able to prevent such an

⁴ H. Søby Andersen, *En lus mellem to negle. Dansk-norsk neutralitetspolitik 1801–1807* (Odense, 1991).

⁵ O. L. Frantzen, *Truslen fra øst. Dansk-norsk flådepolitik 1769–1807* (Copenhagen, 1980), pp. 126–132.

⁶ T. Munch-Petersen, "A Prelude to the British Bombardment of Copenhagen: Viscount Howick and Denmark, 1806–1807", *Scandia*, vol. 65 (1999), pp. 37–70.

occupation – and, furthermore, it would have had to withdraw from Danish waters during the three winter months. Therefore, the Danish foreign minister told the truth when stating that Denmark would defend herself against any aggressor. And a real option never occurred.

2. Copenhagen 1807

In the summer of 1807 Denmark could be characterized as a weak state in a strategically exposed position straddling the vital passages to and from the Baltic, but at the same time unable to defend herself and maintain control of her navy of twenty ships of the line.

Lying low, however, was not enough to keep Denmark out of the war. It was Napoleon who forced the issue. Immediately after proclaiming the Berlin Decrees, he pursued the Russian armies eastward through Poland in a winter campaign. After defeating them at Pultusk and Eylau, he won on the 14th June the bloody victory at Friedland, only a few days' march from Russia's borders. In this situation Tsar Alexander agreed to sign an armistice and to promise Napoleon to participate in forcing the remaining neutrals, Denmark, Sweden, and Portugal, to join the continental system and to make Britain accept the Tsar's mediation. It was Napoleon who dictated the terms, but it was to become of paramount importance for the Nordic countries that he granted Alexander a free hand with regard to Finland. This was the first step towards what became reality in Kiel in January 1814, when the Danish king ceded Norway to the king of Sweden.

The new British foreign minister, George Canning, had been studying the meagre and disconcerting reports from the Russian front through the spring of 1807,⁷ and on Friday 10th July he received the first politically reliable report about the Tsar concluding an armistice and entering into negotiations with Napoleon. The information he had received the previous day about the Danish navy preparing for sea and the following day about Napoleon planning to invade Holstein did not make him act. But the secret intelligence from Tilsit did. At the first possible moment – on Monday 13th July – he called a Cabinet meeting, which took the crucial decision – to be justified by further intelligence from Tilsit in the subsequent days – to forestall Napoleon. In his letter to the admiral commanding the fleet to be sent against Denmark, the Minister of War Lord Castlereagh expressed the king's "most anxious apprehension that the maritime power, position and resources of Denmark may shortly be made the instrument in the hands of France not only of excluding our commerce from the Baltic and of depriving us of the means of naval equipment, but also multiplying the points from which an invasion of His Majesty's dominions may be attempted".⁸

This was the background for what became probably the most successful combined operation in the history of warfare. The demands to Denmark were

⁷ S. G. Trulsson, "Canning, den hemliga kanalen till förhandlingerna i Tilsit och invasionsföretaget mot Köpenhamn 1807", *Scandia*, vol. 29 (1963), and id., *British and Swedish Policies and Strategies in the Baltic after the Peace of Tilsit in 1807. A Study of Decision-Making* (Lund, 1976).

⁸ Castlereagh 19th July 1807 to Admiral Gambier, in A. N. Ryan, ed. "Documents Relating to the Copenhagen Operation 1807", *Naval Records Miscellany* vol. 5 (1984), p. 304.

agreed upon at a Cabinet meeting five days later. Denmark should either enter into an alliance in which she placed her navy at England's disposal, or she should surrender her navy for the rest of the war as a pledge for her neutral behaviour. This alternative, however – whether it was at all meant as an alternative or just as a sop to Parliament and to continental public opinion – was in fact never fully presented to the Danish government. The special British envoy, Francis Jackson, arrived at the Prince Regent's headquarters in Kiel on the 8th August, where he had an informal talk with the Danish Foreign Minister Christian Bernstorff. As the talk almost immediately developed into a heated argument, Jackson found it prudent not to reveal the full contents of the British demands. And at his likewise heated talk with the Prince Regent that same afternoon he also chose not to disclose the full harsh extent of his demands for the navy. This, however, was the only contact he managed to have with the Danish government. The Prince Regent and Christian Bernstorff thus perceived his mission as an alternative: alliance or war. In this context it is interesting to note that the day before Jackson's arrival Bernstorff interpreted the British fleet in the Sound and in the Great Belt as a prelude to the occupation of Zealand for the rest of the war.

The military operations are well known. Thanks to the surveying of the Great Belt on the return of the Baltic fleet in 1801, the British were able to isolate Zealand immediately from the army in Holstein. Copenhagen was then invested from land and sea. Two peasant militia regiments were broken up by Sir Arthur Wellesley,⁹ and after the commandant of Copenhagen had refused to deliver up the navy, the Danish capital was exposed to three nights of bombardment.¹⁰ The commandant then gave in to pressure from the Copenhagen citizens and signed a capitulation, according to which the entire navy was surrendered as British property. On 20th October the invaders left Zealand, bringing with them a fully equipped fleet of 15 ships of the line, 15 frigates, and 7 gunbrigs, as well as a number of smaller vessels – a ship of the line in the naval dock and three under construction having been previously destroyed.¹¹

During the operation against Denmark, the British Cabinet had discussed whether Britain should remain on the island – or let the expeditionary force evacuate and then reoccupy the island. The prospect held many advantages – military as well as commercial. The problem was not whether it was sound strategy, but whether Britain had the disposal of the 30,000 soldiers necessary for defending the island against Napoleon and his allies – troops that were at the time much needed in Spain. Diplomatic feelers to induce Denmark to participate in the occupation were instantly turned down. The king of Sweden, on the other hand, was willing to furnish the necessary number of soldiers, provided he was given a free hand against Norway, which was now cut off from Denmark and lacking grain and military equipment. When the Cabinet eventually gave up its plans for Zealand, the reasons were not military but political. It was not in the interests of Britain at that moment to challenge the Tsar so blatantly in what he considered to be Russia's

⁹ E. O. A. Hedegaard, *Krigen på Sjælland 1807* (Helsingør, 1970).

¹⁰ E. Holm, *Danmark-Norges historie 1720–1814*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Copenhagen, 1912), pp. 310–386.

¹¹ C. Bjerg, “Flådens ran 1807”, *Marinehistorisk Tidsskrift* 1982: 2.

particular sphere of interest. In Danish foreign policy, however, the “Zealand trauma” had come to stay for more than a century.

3. Frederik VI

The direction of Denmark’s foreign policy was formally in the hands of the absolute – but mentally deranged – King Christian VII, who according to practice and law was expected to exercise power in the Privy Council – the *Geheime Stats Raad* which was established back in 1772 immediately after the Struensee dictatorship. In practice, however, since the death of the old statesman Andreas Peter Bernstorff in 1797, power had been in the hands of the king’s only son, as Prince Regent.¹² He worked in close and sympathetic collaboration with Bernstorff’s son Christian, and the deliberations in the Privy Council increasingly had become a pure formality. Immediately after the king’s death in March 1808, Frederik VI instructed all administrative departments that from now on all matters should be referred immediately to the king, who would then decide whether or not they were to be discussed in the Privy Council. The political reality, however, was that the king did not summon the Privy Council for the entire duration of the war.

In essence, therefore, Frederik VI was his own foreign minister during the war. He continued to work in close cooperation with Christian Bernstorff, who was foreign minister until the spring of 1810 when he resigned on the flimsy pretexts of health and the needs of his estates.¹³ Bernstorff’s real reasons are still not known, but his resignation at the same time as that of his brother as head of the Foreign Department and that of the king’s brother-in-law Duke Frederik Christian of Augustenborg as head of the Department of Education seems to indicate a protest against the king’s general subservience to Napoleon. Bernstorff was succeeded as foreign minister by the experienced diplomat Niels Rosenkrantz, who served in that capacity until his death in 1824, loyally executing the king’s policy directives.

In Danish historiography Frederik VI has been depicted as a soldier with limited political understanding and with an unbound admiration and loyalty for Napoleon. Towards the end of the war loyal public opinion did try to cast the blame for the state bankruptcy, the military debacle and the loss of Norway on his military entourage: the so-called Redfeathers.¹⁴ There is, however, no evidence to support that belief. If one looks for irrational traits in his foreign policy, it would be more meaningful to take into consideration how personally painful it was for him to consider giving up Norway or even part of it. It was, after all, his heritage, for which he was to stand responsible to his forefathers on the throne. As will be demonstrated, he actually had an essentially sound understanding of the geopolitical situation of his realm, and he was in fact prepared to break relations with Napoleon – provided, though, that he was guaranteed the territorial integrity of his state. That was his *conditio sine qua non* at the outbreak of the war. And it remained so until its bitter end.

¹² A. Linvald, *Kronprins Frederik og hans regering 1797–1807* (Copenhagen, 1923), pp. 1–96.

¹³ G. Nørregaard, “Christian Bernstorffs afsked fra Danmark”, *Jyske Samlinger*, vol. 5 (1959).

¹⁴ E. O. A. Hedegaard, *Frederik 6. og “de røde fjer”*. *Studier i Danmarks militære og politiske historie under Napoleonskrigene*. 1–2 (Copenhagen, 1976).

4. Basic conditions

The immediate reactions to the British attack clearly show the government's perception of the problems which faced the state, now that it was forced into the war.¹⁵ On 16th August, as a reaction to Jackson's ultimatum, the Prince Regent declared a state of war to exist between Denmark and Britain, and the following day he issued the orders necessary to wage a privateering war. On 24th August a Government Commission was established in Norway, as a reaction to the normal communications between the two kingdoms being severed. The Commission was given royal authority and was authorized to act in all the important matters without specific authorization from Copenhagen. Its main functions were twofold: to provide grain for the army, the naval vessels and the population, and to issue loans to the timber exporters in order to keep the complicated production system in working order. It was typical for the relations between the central authorities in the capital and the growing national feelings in Norway that the wide-sweeping delegations of authority in August 1807 were taken back as soon as it was at all practicable. But it was at the same time observed by the king that the hardships of the war years strengthened the Norwegians' national pride in being able to rely upon their own resources and to manage their own affairs. Towards the end of the war these feelings had reached the point of no return.

In the short perspective, the most pressing problem in 1807 was, however, the relations with Napoleon. It was obvious that Britain – even if she so wished – was unable to resist the occupation of the Jutland peninsula – and probably not an occupation of the islands either. And it was equally obvious that Napoleon – whose armies stood just south of the border – was able to do exactly that.

With good reason, Denmark feared having French troops on its own territory, both on military and financial grounds. Both parties were, on the other hand, interested in an alliance, although not with the same content. But the British bombardment of Copenhagen forced the Prince Regent's hand. It was he who had to apply to Napoleon for an alliance, and this fact together with the actual balance of power between the two states settled the issue.¹⁶ In the treaty signed at Fontainebleau on 31st October 1807, the two rulers agreed to make common cause for the duration of the war and not to conclude peace separately; they further guaranteed the territorial integrity of their respective states. Napoleon promised to procure compensations for Denmark's losses during the war, and Denmark, on her side, undertook to join the Continental System and to participate actively in forcing Sweden to join the trade war against Britain.

The occupation of Danish territory came to be the exception during the war, rather than the rule. In connection with the outbreak of the war, the island of Heligoland was occupied, as were the West Indian Islands and the Indian colonies – but not the forts on the Gold Coast. At the same time, shipping between Copenhagen and the North Atlantic isles was stopped by Britain. Soon after,

¹⁵ O. Feldbæk, *op. cit.* (1998), pp. 313–351.

¹⁶ K. Heils, *Les rapports économiques franco-danois sous le directoire, le consulat et l'empire. Contribution à l'étude du système continental* (Paris, 1958), pp. 108–135; and *traité d'alliance franco-danois 31st October 1807: Danske Traktater efter 1800*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1877), pp. 34–36.

however, it was permitted once again; and in an Order in Council of 7th February 1810 the official British view was expressed: King George III being “moved by compassion for the unmerited sufferings of these defenceless people”.¹⁷ Shortly before – in 1809 – the Kattegat island of Anholt with its strategically important lighthouse was occupied and held until the end of the war – classified as the HMS Anholt.

The strategic rationale behind the British attack on Copenhagen had been to secure free access to the Baltic import and export market. For Britain it was vitally important to be able to convert her own exports and colonial produce into precious metals for paying her allies’ wars of coalition against Napoleon and for her importation of naval stores and – first and foremost – of grain.¹⁸ Denmark’s war was, therefore, her continuous efforts to block the passage of the Sound and the Great Belt to British ships and cargoes. The great number of gunboats built during the war – probably a much more effective weapon for that task compared with the ships of the line and the frigates which Britain had taken – fought valiantly to close the gates to the Baltic; so did the Norwegian gun brigs and gunboats operating in the Skagerak.¹⁹ But neither the naval vessels nor the considerable number of Danish and Norwegian privateers could do much against the professionalism of the Royal Navy and the regular and highly effective convoy service it instituted in and out of the Baltic through the Danish straits.

5. Sweden and Norway

A particularly heavy burden was the war against Sweden in 1808–1809. The main burden was borne by the Norwegian army, which proved able to keep its Swedish opponents off Norwegian territory.²⁰ The reason for this, however, was the Russian attack on Finland where the greater part of the Swedish army had to be deployed. And it was in this theatre of the war that the death knells began toll for the twin monarchy of Denmark and Norway. With the peace of 17th September 1809 in Fredrikshamn, Sweden ceded the entire Finland to the Russian Tsar. It was during these peace talks that Russian diplomats openly pointed to Norway as the obvious territorial compensation. The situation which the Bernstorffs had dreaded had eventually materialized: the situation where Russia no longer needed Denmark–Norway as an ally against Swedish aggression.

During this short war the competition for the Swedish throne was fought.²¹ The deposed Gustaf IV had been succeeded by his childless uncle Karl XIII, and among the candidates for the position as Crown Prince of Sweden were both Frederik VI and his relative, Prince Christian August of Augustenburg, whom he had actually appointed as head of the Government Commission in Norway and commanding

¹⁷ A. Agnarsdottir, *Great Britain and Iceland 1800–1820*. Unpublished thesis 1989. London School of Economics and Political Science.

¹⁸ A. Ryan, “The Defence of the British Trade with the Baltic 1807–1813”, *English Historical Review*, vol. 74 (1959).

¹⁹ C. F. Wandel, *Søkrigen i de dansk-norske farvande 1807–1814* (Copenhagen, 1915); J. N. Tønnessen, *Kaperfart og skipsfart 1807–1814* (Oslo, 1955).

²⁰ T. Holm, *Krig, provins og helstat*, in *Norsk Forsvarshistorie*, vol. 1 (Oslo 2000), pp. 283–308.

²¹ E. Holm, *Danmark-Norges Historie 1720–1814*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Copenhagen, 1912), pp. 32–250.

general of the army in Southern Norway. This incredibly complicated situation – in which the Swedes as well as some Norwegians expected that he would, so to speak, bring Norway with him to Sweden as a dowry – ended with Christian August actually being elected Swedish Crown Prince. Upon his death shortly afterwards, the Swedish Riksdag elected Napoleon's Marshal Bernadotte, who came to his new country unburdened by historic dreams of reconquering Finland. On the contrary, he was keenly aware of the need to establish good contacts with the Tsar and to concentrate on Norway as the obvious compensation for Finland.

Eight months earlier Denmark had concluded a hurried *status quo ante*-peace with Sweden.²² It was now clear to most political observers that the Tilsit-understanding between Napoleon and the Tsar did not exist any longer. Their territorial interests were too incompatible, and the forced membership of the Continental System was slowly bleeding Russia to death. In this situation Frederik VI and Rosenkrantz concentrated their efforts on keeping Napoleon to his territorial guarantee of the Danish state.

Napoleon had done nothing to support his Danish ally in the competition for the Swedish crown. From the conclusion of the alliance with France and onwards Frederik VI as well as his foreign ministers and his envoys at the Emperor's court had no illusions about Napoleon's benevolence and generosity. Both parties knew that Denmark needed France much more than France needed Denmark, and that imbalance decided Denmark's destiny during the entire war.

This was obvious from the very beginning. Crown Prince Frederik had successfully evaded a premature entry of French troops into Danish territory, because the costs would be ruinous. But after the conclusion of the alliance he could no longer do that. Now he had undertaken to participate in the efforts of Napoleon and the Tsar to force Sweden to join the Continental System. The grand strategy comprised a Russian attack on Finland and a thrust by the Norwegian army against Gothenburg, while the Danish army, supported by a Franco-Spanish corps commanded by Bernadotte, was to invade Southern Sweden from Zealand. The plan failed, however. Napoleon delayed the entry of Bernadotte's corps for so long that the British navy back in Danish waters in March 1808 effectively controlled the Great Belt and the Sound. Adding insult to injury, the Royal Navy evacuated most of the Spanish regiments to fight Napoleon in Spain.²³ In addition, the payment of the crippling costs of feeding Napoleon's soldiers and horses became a bone of contention between the two parties for the rest of the war: the Danes knew that the French would not pay one sou – and the French knew that the Danes knew that they knew. But for tactical reasons and in the hope of better times, the claims had to be kept alive.

It is well known that in Napoleon's planning, the Continental System was not meant to be for the benefit of his continental allies, but only for himself and for France. Denmark was no exception to that rule.²⁴ Some industries did find a shelter

²² Peace treaty between Denmark and Sweden 10th December 1809, in *Danske Traktater efter 1800*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1877), pp. 37–46.

²³ A. N. Ryan, "The Saumarez Papers. Selections from the Baltic Correspondence of Vice Admiral Sir James Saumarez 1808–1812", *Navy Records Society*, vol. 110 (1968), p. xvii.

²⁴ K. Heils, op. cit., pp. 136–206.

against imports of British goods, but only a few proved able to survive the peace and the reintroduction of open competition. There were constant clashes with the French civil and military authorities in Hamburg over the illicit importation of colonial produce to the Continent through the North Sea ports of Holstein and through Altona. Admittedly, some of the King's German subjects grew rich from smuggling, but most of the spoil was shared between the equally corrupt French military and customs authorities in the former Hanse town. What rankled most, however, were the activities of the French privateers operating in the North Sea and in the Baltic, making good use of Norwegian and Danish ports. These privateers, admittedly, did play a role in Napoleon's strategy, and he therefore turned a deaf ear to Danish complaints that they were taking Danish vessels with much needed grain who tried to slip through the Royal Navy's hunger blockade of Norway. The almost total unreliability of Napoleon and his ministers and officials must time and again have reminded Bernstorff and Rosenkrantz – as it reminds the historian – of the most turbulent years of the French Revolution.

6. 1812–1813

The break between Napoleon and Russia was drawing closer. The Tsar's ukas on 31st December 1810 virtually terminated Russia's participation in the Continental System. Both parties were now preparing for war. And both sought allies.²⁵ The Tsar paid court to Denmark. But the King and Rosenkrantz agreed early in 1811 that a break with Napoleon would mean French occupation of Holstein, Schleswig, Jutland and the island of Funen. Furthermore, Frederik VI considered Alexander to be an untrustworthy ally.

The Treaty of Fontainebleau dealt only with war against England. But Napoleon needed protection of his northern flank. In December 1811, therefore, his foreign minister approached Denmark with the offer of a commercial treaty that would eliminate the many points of complaint concerning Danish shipping and trade. On this basis Frederik VI, on 7th March 1812, concluded a secret offensive and defensive treaty in which he put a corps of 9000 foot soldiers, 1000 cavalry soldiers and 50 field guns at Napoleon's disposal in Northern Germany, between the Zuider Sea and the river Oder, to be used against uprisings and landings on the Baltic coast. The treaty included a clause promising a commercial treaty – which, needless to say, was never honoured.²⁶

But the Tsar was also preparing for war. In a treaty concluded in St. Petersburg on 5th April 1812, Russia and Sweden guaranteed each other their territorial integrity and agreed upon an attack upon Zealand that should force Denmark to cede Norway in return for compensations in Northern Germany. The treaty was made known in Copenhagen one month later.

On 24th June Napoleon attacked Russia with an army of almost half a million, and the general opinion among statesmen and generals was that he would win this

²⁵ E. Holm, *Danmark-Norges historie 1720–1814*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Copenhagen, 1912), pp. 297–323.

²⁶ *Traité d'alliance franco-danois* 7th March 1812, in *Danske Traktater efter 1800*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1912) pp. 47–49.

war as well. Among those was Frederik VI, who expected that “a few battles will decide the destiny of Russia”.²⁷ Rosenkrantz, however, who had served in Russia for two periods and who was married into the Russian aristocracy, did not share that opinion. On the contrary, he expected that Napoleon would lose the war, and that Denmark should therefore seize the opportunity to join his enemies, thereby saving the territorial integrity of the Danish state. Accordingly, in September 1812 he presented a project in writing in which he tried to persuade the King to make use of this unique opportunity where Napoleon could not spare troops to occupy the Jutland peninsula. Otherwise, the Danish state would disappear from the map of Europe.²⁸ What separated the two men was, however, their military assessment. The King, therefore, wrote back and thanked his minister for his well-meant advice. But as he expected Napoleon to be victorious, he ordered Rosenkrantz to stick to the alliance with Napoleon,²⁹ which Rosenkrantz of course obeyed.

Rosenkrantz turned out to be right. On 14th December 1812 the remaining 4000 French troops scrambled in panic over the frozen river Njemen, with the Tsar’s cossacks in hot pursuit. At that time Russia and Sweden had already presented Rosenkrantz with their demand that Denmark should cede Norway and receive territorial compensations in Northern Germany. The King had refused their demands. And when the French minister on 6th January officially demanded to be informed whether the Emperor could still regard the King as his ally, the answer two days later was an unconditional confirmation. Napoleon’s defeat in Russia had, however, changed the entire political situation. The year 1813 turned out to be the most complicated of an otherwise extremely complex war period.

Austria took on the role of the great mediator.³⁰ Napoleon accepted Vienna’s offers of mediation, and Frederik VI likewise put his trust in an Austrian *démarche* in January. In the middle of that month the King took the first steps towards an understanding with Britain – still, however, on the condition that Norway remained part of the Danish state. A question that the British Cabinet had not yet definitively decided upon. But the King doubted whether, from a military point of view, the Russian army would be able to progress further than the Elbe, and whether Napoleon would, therefore, still control the areas of Germany bordering on Denmark.

This military knot seemed to be untied by a strange diplomatic approach that took place in Copenhagen late in March 1813.³¹ Prince Sergei Dolgorukij of the Tsar’s intimate entourage arrived with a suggestion from Alexander that Denmark should join the allies in their pursuit of Napoleon. The bait was a postponement of the question of the cession of Norway against territorial compensations in Germany until the general peace – a period during which all things might happen. The King’s reaction was to speed up the approach to Britain that was already under

²⁷ Frederik VI, 21st July 1812 to Prince Frederik of Hesse. C. T. Sørensen, ed. *Meddelelser fra Krigsarkiverne*, vol. 5 (1892), p. 332.

²⁸ Rosenkrantz, 19th September 1812 to Frederik 6, *ibid.* p. 261.

²⁹ Frederik VI, 20th September 1812 to Rosenkrantz, *ibid.* p. 353.

³⁰ K. Woynar, “Österreichs Beziehungen zu Schweden und Dänemark vornehmlich seine Politik der Vereinigung Norwegens mit Schweden in den Jahren 1813 und 1814”, *Archiv für österreichische Geschichte*, vol. 77 (Vienna, 1891), pp. 379–542.

³¹ E. Holm, *Danmark-Norges Historie 1720–1814*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Copenhagen, 1912), pp. 374–394.

way, and to dispatch a high-ranking diplomat to the Tsar's headquarters to ask for further particulars.

During these early weeks of spring, Frederik VI demonstrated that he was by no means petrified in his loyalty towards Napoleon and that he was able to show political flexibility.³² In the chaotic military situation around Hamburg at the beginning of May 1813, he actually let his troops in Northern Germany fight along with the Russians against the French – who took some of the Danish soldiers prisoners, and immediately returned them with profuse apologies. It soon turned out, however, that Dolgorukij's mission was based upon a misunderstanding – or perhaps rather upon a miscalculation on the part of the Tsar. At any rate, Prince Dolgorukij was officially disavowed by his master. At the same time, the British Cabinet informed the Danish emissary to London, Count Joachim Bernstorff, that Britain had just officially agreed to support the Swedish claim upon Norway.

Now the time had come for Frederik VI to play his last cards. The heir to the throne, Prince Christian Frederik, was sent to Norway as vice regent with instructions to bolster the Norwegians' loyalty to the King and the state. One of the King's most trusted advisers, the president of the Danish Chancellery, was sent to Napoleon in Dresden to make amendments and to assure the Emperor of his master's loyalty. The Anglo-Swedish *démarche* on 31st May proposing that the King should cede Northern Norway to Sweden and join the allies in their war against Napoleon was met with a blank refusal. And on 10th July – shortly before the armistice between the belligerent parties expired – the King signed his last treaty with Napoleon.³³ He pledged to put an auxiliary corps of 12,600 at the disposal of the Emperor in Northern Germany on to the river Vistula; and Napoleon, on his side, promised a corps of 20,000 to defend the Jutland peninsula against invasion. They further pledged to declare war against each other's enemies.

The rest of the story is mainly military history. Napoleon did not really want peace. He let the armistice expire. And in the middle of October he was definitively beaten at Leipzig. The three coalition armies now pursued the scattered French forces westward; in this situation the commander of the Northern Army, the Swedish Crown Prince Karl Johan, decided to force the issue and take Norway.³⁴ The French forces under Marshal Davout retreated behind the walls of Hamburg; and the Danish auxiliary corps was pursued by superior forces and forced to take shelter in the fortified city of Rendsburg – which at that time had provisions only until mid-January 1814. The rest of the Danish army was concentrated on Funen, and Jutland now lay open for invasion. And from his headquarters in Kiel, Karl Johan granted an armistice which was to expire at midnight on 5th January.

³² P. Hertel Rasmussen, "Dansk udenrigspolitik 1812–1813", (Danish) *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 13:4 (1977), with an English summary.

³³ *Traité d'alliance franco-danois* 10th July 1813. *Danske Traktater efter 1800*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen, 1877), pp. 50–55.

³⁴ G. Nørregaard, *Freden i Kiel 1814* (Copenhagen, 1954), pp. 75–91.

7. Kiel 1814

The peace process in Kiel in January 1814 was dramatic until the very last moment.³⁵ Prince Metternich thus made a last effort to save the Danish state – or at least most of it – by delaying tactics. The chancellor's mission by one of his young diplomats, Count de Bombelles, did not succeed, however. Metternich's attempt to conduct his own diplomacy was thwarted by his coalition partners, and he was forced to recall Bombelles from his mission. But it was Bombelles who was able to do what neither Rosenkrantz nor the King's other trusted ministers were able to do. They were not able to persuade the King to cede Norway. But at a private interview at the King's headquarters on Funen in the evening of 7th January, Bombelles made the by now shattered absolute monarch accept the inevitable. When he left the room, the 434 years of dynastic union between Norway and Denmark had come to an end.

On 10th January the Danish negotiator, the West India-born diplomat Edmund Bourke, arrived in Kiel with full powers to sign a peace in accordance with the alternative formulated by Karl Johan. The Swedish negotiator was Baron von Wetterstedt – who constantly referred back to Karl Johan for his acceptance of the individual clauses in the treaty – and the British diplomat Edward Thornton. The two diplomats were also authorized to guarantee Denmark an immediate cessation of hostilities with Russia and Prussia.

The peace negotiations with Thornton went fairly smooth. Britain did refuse to give back the navy. She kept Heligoland – which she exchanged in 1890 with Imperial Germany for Zanzibar. But to Bourke's surprise, she gave back the island of Anholt, just as she gave back the overseas colonies.

The negotiations with Wetterstedt – which were held on the basis of a Swedish draft treaty which Bourke readily accepted – were more time-consuming. From the very beginning Frederik VI had agreed to cede the whole of Norway – and to cede it here and now. But it was of vital importance to Karl Johan – who was under strong pressure from his coalition partners to take up the hunt for Napoleon – that Swedish Pomerania, the insignificant territorial equivalent for Norway, was not given up until the Norwegian fortresses were surrendered to the Swedish forces. The main subject, the secession of Norway, on the other hand, raised very few problems. Bourke did, of course, observe that Norway was to be ceded to the King of Sweden and that it was to be a kingdom united with the Swedish kingdom. But Bourke insisted upon adding eleven words to the Swedish draft: namely that the cessation of Norway did not include Greenland, the Faroes and Iceland. He assured Wetterstedt that these islands had never belonged to Norway, which of course was a lie – and which resulted in a reprimand from the Swedish foreign minister in Stockholm to Wetterstedt.³⁶

In Nordic historiography Bourke has been presented as the quick-witted diplomat who outwitted his not so intelligent Swedish counterpart. He did lie, even if it was not necessary, because the Swedish draft defined exhaustively the Kingdom

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 92–181; O. Feldbæk, “Frederik VI. og Norge i januar 1814”, (Norwegian) *Historisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 74, no. 3 (1995).

³⁶ O. Feldbæk, “De nordatlantiske øer og freden i Kiel 1814”, (Dansk) *Historisk Tidsskrift* 1995: 1.

of Norway as continental Norway. Why Bourke insisted upon the addition to the text is not quite clear. He might have wished to eliminate the risk that Sweden might use historical arguments in future negotiations about other matters. It has lately been suggested that the British negotiator inserted the words, but this hypothesis lacks both proof and probability.³⁷

8. Perspective

Denmark's war as Napoleon's ally had finally come to an end, and it ended in total defeat. From the very beginning in 1807, the constant and unalterable purpose of Danish policies had been to uphold the territorial integrity of the state. In concrete terms, to thwart Sweden's endeavour to conquer Norway. This policy went back to Gustaf III's coup d'état in 1772, and Denmark's entry into the war in 1807 had only made this policy even more imperative. It is a historical fact that towards the end of the war most of Frederik VI's advisers did try to make him come to terms with the coalition against Napoleon. But the King had persistently refused to pay the price: Norway. Even with the historian's hindsight, it is difficult to claim that he might have saved his realm by following his foreign minister's advice in the autumn of 1812 to break with Napoleon. Neither Prussia nor Austria dared breaking with the seemingly invincible Emperor at that time.

The treaty clauses negotiated in Kiel were not, however, to be definitive. Denmark had to accept a previous arrangement between the great powers that the former Swedish Pomerania together with the Island of Rügen would go to Prussia. Denmark, instead, received the small Hannoverian Duchy of Lauenburg, bordering on Holstein, and compensation in ready money. With regard to Norway, the King of Sweden, with the political backing of the great powers, had to take Norway sword in hand and to recognize the very liberal Eidsvoll Constitution, which the Norwegians had proclaimed on 17th May 1814. The great powers forced Denmark – through political pressure and by leaving a considerable Russian army corps in Holstein – to abstain from supporting the Norwegians in their struggle for independence.

Only then could the peace in Kiel be considered definitive. And only then could Frederik VI go to the Congress in Vienna, formally accepting Denmark's position as a small power in the new European order.

³⁷ F. Gad, "La Grönlande, les isles de Ferröe et l'Islande non comprises". A New Look at the Origins of the Addition to Article 4 of the Treaty of Kiel of 1814", *Scandinavian Journal of History*, vol. 4 (1979).