

The Danish Historical Television Drama 1864

by Norman Berdichevsky (September 2015)



I looked forward with much anticipation to the largest ever and most expensive (170 million kroner, or \$30 million) televised dramatic series entitled “1864” dealing with the Second Dano-German War. It premiered on Danish state television in October 2014 and has since been shown in English translation by the BBC. What a disappointment! Within the eight hours shown on three dvd disks, a foreigner with little knowledge of the background to the historical events portrayed, will emerge with a distorted view, if any at all, regarding what the war was about and how the half a dozen subplots make the events any clearer.

The director, Ole Bornedal, also wrote the screenplay. He is not a historian and certainly had poetic license to introduce additional “human interest” material to make an eight hour long production more engaging for a broad public but this is a case of the historical truth being drowned in melodrama. Imagine a historical film such as *The Alamo* (actual running time in movie theaters; 202 minutes) that had to find an additional four and a half hours of such human interest by creating fictional characters linked by the most improbable connections and romantic involvements all ending up at the last moment inside the Alamo during the climactic battle with the Mexicans.

Several very successful American television series, *Band of Brothers* (2001, American war drama miniseries based on historian Stephen E. Ambrose’s 1993 non-fiction book of the same name), and *Winds of War* (1983, based on Herman Wouk’s book of fiction of the same name, starring Robert Mitchum) are even longer than “1864”, running ten to fifteen hours. *Band of Brothers* is very closely based on research, facts and interviews with veterans of the 101st Airborne Division whereas *Winds of War* was turned from a literary fictional work to a screenplay in which the characters are fictional but closely modeled on real personalities set amid the actual events leading up to World War II and utilizing a minimalist approach to literary license.

The characters in *1864* are all of the soap opera variety with loads of gratuitous violence (beyond the battle scenes), rape, masturbation, illicit sex that include bestiality (practiced by the arch Danish villain in the story – Didrich, who nevertheless rises to the rank of captain in spite of being a notorious coward and deserter), and one dimensional misrepresentations of real historical characters. These include Hans Christian Andersen and Bishop Ditlev Monrad of the National Liberty Party, the equivalent of Prime Minister in the Danish government that made the most important decisions about policy over Schleswig.

The many side show plots involve two brothers, Peter and Laust, who are children of a tenant farmer where Didrich's father is the Baron. Both fall in love with Inge. The estate is visited by a band of travelling gypsies who have a beautiful daughter Sophia. Both Inge and Sophia are raped by Didrich and her family swears revenge. All these characters are woven in and out of the story along with their modern day descendant, Claudia, a teenage drop-out, who lives next to where the last decisive battle of the 1864 war took place and works for a descendant of the Baron. They are simply mouthpieces for producer Borndal's political views.

Even more disturbing is the descent of the subplots from soap opera to fairy tale. A mature man, Johan Larsen appears early in the third episode as a veteran of the 1848-51 war who fought alongside Didrich in the successful Danish suppression of a revolt of the German minded population in Schleswig-Holstein. A few officers recognize him as a model soldier who possesses unusual "capabilities." He knows Didrich's intimate secrets and later casts his protective aura over the brothers, Inge and Sophia as well as many simple Danish soldiers and demonstrates amazing magical faculties – divining future events, hypnotizing enemy soldiers, performing surgery with his bare hands, restoring Sophia's ability to speak and confronting everyone with the unpleasant truth of the hopeless war. Is Johan some kind of metaphor for the Danish spirit or producer Borndal's alter-ego?

Hans Christian Andersen is portrayed for one minute in the eight hours (getting equal time with the bestiality scene starring Didrich) as a dilettante and fop, upset that his poetry reading to a group of wealthy citizens is interrupted as if his ego were at stake. In reality, he rallied the people both during and after the war with new creativity including some of the most patriotic verses of love for his homeland, most notably "*I Danmark er jeg født*" ("I was born in

Denmark" -an alternative national anthem).

In 1864, there is a flowing tendentious narrative informing the audience of what it is viewing that portrays the Danes, like the Jews, as a self-appointed "chosen people" and absolves Prussia and Bismarck for the scheming and launching the war in an alliance with Austria. The very first words Inge speaks are that all the people she cared for were the victims of the (Danish) politicians "euphoric folly." The repetitive narration continuing through all eight episodes are actually entries in Inge's diary.

The move by Austria and Prussia invading the border region of Schleswig without even a declaration of war relied on an antiquated, obsolete treaty that was centuries behind the development of national feeling on both the German and Danish sides, none of which is handled in any way meaningful for the audience, yet producer Ole Bornedal places the onus for the war almost entirely on Danish nationalistic "euphoria."

Moreover, one of the soap opera sub-plots set in modern times uses the disastrous war of 1864 as a cover for the producer's political views attacking Danish military participation in Afghanistan. The most abominable imaginable character who manages to transgress all of the ten commandments before the series is half over is the Dane – Didrich, the very incarnation of evil, who survives by every dirty trick as if to emphasize the central message that war is the very essence of injustice.

The border conflict over the entire southern portion of the Jutland peninsula (called *Sønderjylland* in Danish, meaning "South Jutland"), comprising both North and South Schleswig is of particular interest in modern history because it demonstrates that national and ethnic identity are not necessarily the same thing and not all national conflicts are destined to endure as the result of unchangeable inherited ethnic traits. This contrasts with the popular view that the population of a border region unequivocally "belongs" to either one nationality or another if given the opportunity to express their opinion.

Nationality is often perceived as an inherited set of discrete characteristics including a distinctive language, religion, race or view of history that regards the disputed territory as one's own sacred heritage. The history of Schleswig offers considerable insight into the process of how Danish ethnic origin was not

sufficient to prevent the Germanization of a substantial part of the population over several centuries. Ethnically and historically conscious Danes in much of the region first adopted German as the principal language of education, administration, the church and polite society while still retaining many other identifiable Nordic-Danish aspects of behavior, culture and tradition. The linguistic shift was not entirely synonymous with national feeling and loyalty.

The two duchies of Schleswig and Holstein had been joined together "forever" in the person of Danish King Christian I in the Middle Ages. His heirs were simultaneously King of Denmark and Duke of Schleswig-Holstein. This polite fiction was shattered in 1863 when the rising tide of German nationalism used the excuse that the legal succession to the duchies had come to an end with the termination of the House of Oldenburg in Denmark because there was no male to continue the line.

We "learn" from the television drama that the elite of wealthy landowners in the rural districts and nationalistic politicians in Copenhagen representing the upper middle class of professionals and businessmen (ignoring the fact that the 1848 Constitution had granted the people a more liberal constitution than anywhere else in Europe) who influence the King "push him to absorb Schleswig outright." According to *1864, ...* "These haughty Danes have convinced the nation that they are a 'chosen people' whom God will never abandon."

In actual history, the spirit of pan-German nationalism had been fanned by the revolutions throughout Europe in 1848 and were cynically manipulated by Prussian ambitions to work towards unification of a large German state. By 1863, the crisis brought about by the absence of a male heir to the Danish throne (the eventual monarch who succeeded to the throne was the nephew of the deceased king's sister) was seized upon by Bismarck to advance the pan-German cause. It was not held in sympathy even by the leading pretenders to the title of Duke – the Augustenborg family who rejected the ambitions of Bismarck and the Prussian desire to unite all of the German states.

Prussian intervention was, however, the first major step on the road to forge a united German nation-state by fostering nationalist sentiment in Schleswig (ethnically and linguistically mixed) and Holstein (wholly German in character and not a cause of contention).

The dispute was portrayed by Bismarck as a legal matter rather than a German nationalist cause, a charade to mask his designs to unify a large German state under Prussian domination. The province of Schleswig in 1864 had a substantial Danish minded population who were unable to fully express their identity in the Duchy. Their language in the churches, schools, courts, and representative assembly was suppressed by a wealthier upper class of German speaking functionaries. It was only natural that many of the people in Northern Schleswig aspired to be accepted as Danes in the Kingdom of Denmark as equal citizens, not as foreigners, yet the television series never makes this point clear.

One embittered Danish soldier on the verge of a mental breakdown during the critical final battle exclaims that he wished he had never heard of Schleswig, and was far away from it, as if the place, were as foreign to him as Afghanistan. Who among the ordinary people of Schleswig with deep bonds of affection for Denmark would have objected to a partition? Would this have satisfied Bismarck? These are questions that are never posed. The terrible tragedy of the war was compounded by the subjugation of the Danish minded Schlesvigers who were under German rule from 1864 to 1920 and as part of their obligations as German citizens had to fight in the wars of 1866 against Austria, 1870 against France and in World War I on all fronts. In this last conflict, more than 5,000 were killed, at least twice the number of fatalities as Danes killed by the Prussian forces in 1864.

The 1848 revolutions elsewhere in Europe provoked serious calls for reform but Denmark had the great misfortune to have been ruled by an out-of-touch monarch, King Frederick VI. He had ruled Denmark for 55 years (first as prince regent, and then as king) until his death in 1839. Resentment towards the throne and association with Denmark prevailed in thoroughly German speaking Holstein, in the university city of Kiel, and among the Frisian population in South Schleswig along the west coast who had never experienced the type of feudalism that prevailed in most of Denmark and Germany.

The cause of the duchies evoked considerable sentiment in Prussia as the focus of a greater German fatherland while in North Schleswig, local Danish speakers began to fear that a drift towards involvement in a German confederation would be detrimental to their culture and life style and promote the already privileged position of the German-speaking aristocrats, merchants and bureaucrats.

The new king began by ordering a modest, more favored use of the Danish language in schools and churches throughout Schleswig but was forced under pressure to withdraw his proposal that Danish should be in official use only where there was a preponderant population of monolingual Danish speakers and the local representative was unable to express himself in German. The king was sarcastically referred to in the German press as *Der König von dem Inselreich* (King of the Island Kingdom), a term of ridicule contrasting Denmark's maritime situation with the mighty continental dimensions of Prussia and seditious papers were circulated denying the right of the new Danish line to maintain the joint title as dukes of Schleswig and Holstein where the Salic Law (prohibiting succession through the female line) had prevailed since medieval times.

As with the accusations against Israel by the Palestinians today, the real victim, Denmark, was portrayed by German propaganda as "a shameless little dwarf state" (this is the way Denmark was presented in 1864 – much like Israel is today by the Muslim world) and the ethnic German conspirators in Schleswig-Holstein, bent on secession, were cast in the role of an "oppressed people" (like the Palestinians), yearning to participate in the wave of liberal revolutions sweeping Europe.

It also played on latent feelings of Danish inferiority. Two wars (1848-50 and 1864), resulted in an initial Danish victory due to a favorable constellation of European power interests on the part of the foreign ministries of czarist Russia and Great Britain, only to be followed by a massive defeat at the hands of a joint Prussian-Austrian assault in alliance with the rebellious duchies.

The 1864 Second Dano-German War

The Danes had pinned their hopes on continued support of the great powers. However, their strategic interests were diverted by other priorities; the Russians in Poland, support for the declining Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, Swedish duplicity (much worthless talk about Scandinavian solidarity), British fear of confrontation with the United States over their sympathy for the Confederacy, and worries about an invasion of Canada. Prussia undertook to support the rebels in Schleswig-Holstein oblivious to all Danish attempts to placate national feeling by ceding Holstein outright to the German confederation and Austria tagged along so as not to leave the field of German nationalism entirely to Prussia.

Denmark had in the past relied on the *Dannevirke*, a line of earthwork ramparts that had initially been erected in the tenth century and reinforced periodically, enabling Denmark to prevent an invasion of the Jutland peninsula from the south since the days of Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire. Danish resistance was crushed in a final assault preceded by a massive artillery bombardment at Dybbøl mill near Sønderborg on the island of Als following retreat from *Dannevirke*. Thirty-seven thousand Prussian and Austrian troops opposed an outnumbered Danish force of eleven thousand equipped with inferior, front loading out-of-date muskets and artillery.

Following their victory – Prussia and Austria divided the spoils – Schleswig was annexed by Prussia and Holstein by Austria – the prelude to the Seven Weeks' War in 1867 when Prussia decisively defeated Austria, took Holstein and used the fruits of victory to seduce many of the small German principalities to get on the bandwagon of a great German empire. The war cemented the leading role of Kaiser Wilhelm and Bismarck as masters of the new German "Reich."

An ironic expression of the deeply embedded Danish folk character and newly acquired German nationalist sentiment in Schleswig-Holstein was revealed by none other than the poet Hoffman von Fallersleben, the author of "*Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles*," in 1845 when he arrived in the city of Schleswig to meet with and congratulate the leadership of his "fellow German tribesmen brothers" for their resistance to the Danish crown and wound up noting in his diary that "It turned into a depressing meeting. These Schleswigers have almost nothing in common with us other than our language. The Danish soul is deeply embedded within them and emerges at every opportunity."

The 1864 war had immeasurable consequences for the balance of power in Europe. It led directly to the unification of a great German empire and a powerful naval rival of Great Britain in the Baltic, North Sea and North Atlantic. It was perfect timing for Bismarck. Such a development was inimical to the long-term interests of not only Great Britain but also of Russia, France and the United States, none of which were able or willing to lift a finger to stop German aggression.

The lesson of 1864 cast a long shadow into the 20th century. Danish forces had been badly outnumbered, outgunned and without allies. The alternative to Denmark's shrinking geography and keeping one's head in the sand was that

military preparedness and strong, dependable allies had to be the means to prevent further aggression and disaster. A large majority of the Danish public at first accepted the lesson taught by the “ostriches” on the political left that led directly to the humiliating capitulation to the German invasion of April 9, 1940 (of four hours duration). By 1949, enough Danes had realized their folly by switching to the other view and approving Denmark’s full membership in NATO.

All this is lost on the ordinary viewer who has only the dialogue of the series to go by. The dramatic seventh episode featuring the final Prussian attack on the Danish fortress of Dybbøl is extremely realistic and exciting, probably ranking with the best of American Civil War scenes. Nevertheless, viewers of the Danish television series should be aware of the historical significance of the conflict and not simply the naïve “war is evil” entertainment message.

Note to the reader: Dr. Berdichevsky is the author of two books about Denmark and the Dano-German Wars. They are

1. *An Introduction to Danish Culture* Paperback: 239 pages, Publisher: McFarland (September 21, 2011). Language: English ISBN-10: 0786464011, ISBN-13: 978-0786464012

2. *The Danish-German Border Dispute, 1815-2001: Aspects of Cultural and Demographic Politics*. Hardcover: 264 pages. Publisher: Maunsel & Co (April 1, 2002). Language: English. ISBN-10: 1930901348, ISBN-13: 978-1930901346.

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