



HEROES AND VILLAINS: RESISTANCE AND COLLABORATION IN NORWEGIAN MEMORIES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Abstract. This article analyses the role of resistance and collaboration in Norwegian memories of the Second World War. Since the 1990s, scholars of memory have argued that a dominant patriotic memory gradually emerged in Norway after 1945. Though this article accepts this interpretation, it contends that memory scholars have oversimplified certain aspects of Norwegian memory, particularly with regards to military collaborators who served in the Waffen-SS. It is further argued that the patriotic memory was increasingly challenged from the 1960s onwards, with academic and non-academic historians devoting less attention to resistance, instead focusing on collaboration and other less memorable issues. There was also a tendency to adopt both a critical perspective of the “Home Front” and a more flattering approach to Nazi collaborators. Around the Millennium, the growing concern with Nazi crimes and the Holocaust affected the memory of resistance and collaboration. Whereas public discourse concerning the resistance movement centered increasingly on the latter’s alleged abandonment of the Jews, the approach to the SS volunteers grew more critical, shifting attention to the group’s relation to Nazi ideology and atrocities.

Keywords: Second World War, Norway, Patriotic Memory, Resistance, Collaboration, Waffen-SS.

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ГЕРОИ И ЗЛОДЕИ: СОПРОТИВЛЕНИЕ И СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО В НОРВЕЖСКИХ ВОСПОМИНАНИЯХ О ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЕ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль сопротивления и коллаборационизма в норвежской памяти о Второй мировой войне. Начиная с 1990-х гг. исследования памяти утверждают, что доминирующая патриотическая память постепенно сложилась в Норвегии после 1945 г. Автор данной статьи, в целом принимая данный тезис, считает, что это является упрощением, особенно в том, как оценивается роль военных коллаборантов, участников Ваффен-СС. Автор также полагает, что академические и неакадемические историки, начиная с 1960-х гг., ставят патриотическую версию памяти под сомнение, уделяя больше внимания не сопротивлению, а коллаборационизму и другим, отодвинутым прежде в тень, событиям. Также появилась тенденция более критично оценивать сопротивление и более позитивно представлять нацистских коллаборантов. На рубеже веков растущая озабоченность темой нацистских преступлений и Холокоста повлияла на рассмотрение темы сопротивления и коллаборационизма. Публичный дискурс сопротивления в большей степени сфокусировался на обвинениях в безразличии движения сопротивления к судьбе евреев, а подход к добровольцам СС стал более критичным, уделяя больше внимания связи этой группы с нацистской идеологией и зверствами.

Ключевые слова: Вторая мировая война, Норвегия, патриотическая память, Сопротивление, коллаборационизм, Ваффен-СС.

Despite Europe having seen a revival of interstate controversies related to the Second World War, *intrastate* memory conflicts have remained paramount in many countries [On the reinvigoration of interstate “memory wars”, see: Miller, 2020]. Norway is considered to have been marked by high levels of consensus regarding the country’s wartime experience. Echoing findings from other parts of Western Europe, scholars of Norwegian memory have argued that the early post-war years witnessed the gradual emergence of a dominant narrative, according to which the nation stood firm in unified resistance against the Nazi occupier. Allegedly, this rather selective narrative tended to stress acts of resistance and downplay the significance of collaboration, adaptation, and passivity, while establishing a sharp distinction between “good Norwegians” and those who collaborated with the Germans. In this mythical version of history, so memory scholars contend, resistance activists appear as heroes, whereas Nazi collaborators are left to play the role of the villain.

This article aims to shed new light on the Norwegian memorialization of the Second World War by drawing particular attention to the role of resistance and collaboration in post-war memories. More specifically, this article explores the role of organized resistance on the one hand, and Waffen-SS volunteers on the other. It is argued that the prevailing narrative, as it appeared in the early post-war decades, was more nuanced than commonly assumed, and, more importantly, that the dominant approach to the historical issues in question gradually changed markedly, beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting wider trends in Norwegian and Western culture, politics, and memory.

NORWAY’S PATRIOTIC NARRATIVE

Norway was invaded by Nazi Germany on 9 April 1940. As the defending military forces were compelled to lay down arms in early June, the Norwegian government fled the country going into exile in Britain. The government and royal family remained in exile until after Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945. In the meantime, the occupier established a civil administration in Norway, overseen by a German Reichskommissar. By the end of September 1940, Reichskommissar Josef Terboven had banned all political parties, except for the *Nasjonal Samling* (“National Unification”)¹, a marginal fascist party led by former defence minister Vidkun Quisling. The decision to confer on Quisling and his party a privileged role in the occupation regime was a direct consequence of Hitler’s personal intervention. Even if the Germans remained firmly in control of all important matters throughout the occupation, the *Nasjonal Samling* was delegated significant formal powers in domestic affairs both at national and local levels. Quisling was even appointed as the official head of state (“*ministerpresident*”) in February 1942 [Grimnes, 2018, pp. 66–77, 182–183].

Efforts by the occupation regime to nazify Norwegian society soon triggered protests and opposition from Norwegian citizens and an increasingly vigorous resistance movement.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this article are mine.

In contrast to the prevailing situation in much of Eastern Europe, resistance in Norway was mainly unarmed (“civil”), aiming to counteract the nazification efforts. During the initial stages of the occupation, the resistance movement was weak, fragmented, and poorly coordinated. Over time, a more potent and better organized resistance movement emerged, collectively referred to as “*hjemmefronten*” (“Home Front”). A nebulous term, the “Home Front” has also been used in a wider sense to denote all Norwegians who remained in Norway and rejected the nazification of Norwegian society, whether actively or passively [Grimnes, 2018, p. 387]. In other words, the term is hardly applicable as an analytical tool if the aim is to examine aspects of Norwegian resistance during the war. However, as this article deals with memory rather than the history of the war, the term will be used in its restricted sense below, both for the sake of simplicity and because the term has, and continues, to play a key role in debates on Norway and the Second World War.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that certain parts of the complex web of organized networks that will be referred to as the resistance or “Home Front” in this article, have played a more crucial role in Norwegian national memory than others. To most Norwegians, the term “Home Front”, when used in its narrowest sense, evokes associations to resistance groups that stayed in close contact with the government in exile and gradually became subject to the latter’s authority. The most significant armed resistance group, the “Military Organisation” or “Milorg”, remained in a state of readiness until the final months of the war, but cooperated closely with Norwegian saboteurs and intelligence operators who were attached to the Special Operations Executive (SOE) or the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). In contrast to Milorg, communist resistance groups from 1942 onwards pursued a more offensive strategy which included sabotaging German military forces, production facilities, and infrastructure. Although Milorg and the communists at times cooperated closely in their resistance efforts, the latter remained excluded from the central leadership of the “Home Front”. In the shadow of the Cold War, the role of the communists in the Norwegian resistance movement tended to be absent or minimized in the dominant narrative. When adopting the terms “Home Front” and “resistance”, I am referring, unless otherwise stated, to Milorg and other non-communist and government affiliated parts of the organized resistance movement [Grimnes, 2018, pp. 387–431].

The article also explores the memorialization of Norwegian military collaboration with Nazi Germany. Even though other forms of armed collaboration did exist, this article deals with the memory of those who served in Germany’s military forces outside of Norwegian territory. Primarily recruited from the ranks of the *Nasjonale Samling*, these roughly 4,500 Norwegians normally ended up in the Waffen-SS: the military branch of Heinrich Himmler’s SS organization. For the most part, the Waffen-SS (or simply SS) volunteers, as they will be referred to, were deployed to the Eastern Front, thus serving in areas of intense fighting and large-scale atrocities [Sørliie, 2015].

During the initial post-war decades, the prevailing Norwegian memory of the war and occupation, in crude terms, evinced similar characteristics to other Western European countries formerly under Nazi occupation. Despite their diverse and ambiguous

experiences, these countries were all marked by the emergence of a dominant master narrative centred on resistance, often referred to as “patriotic memory”. It is argued that the construction of this narrative served the dual functions of sense-making and integration, consequently facilitating a process of national recovery [See, e.g.: Lagrou, 2000, pp. 1–3].

Concepts such as “collective memory” and “master narrative” invoke notions of a static and uniform memory shared by most, if not all, members of society. Although perhaps unnecessary, it should be emphasized that conflicting and opposing memories have been present in these countries throughout the post-war period, and the dominant narratives have changed over time. However, from an early stage it is possible to identify certain events and topics that have been considered particularly memorable, and, similarly, events and topics that were downplayed or concealed. Arguably, the result of this selection process was a dominant narrative of a unified nation in defiant resistance against the German occupier.

Since the 1990s, scholars have sought to unveil the character of Norway’s patriotic memory. According to this body of research, the narrative associated with this specific memory culture can be attributed four main characteristics: First and foremost, it took on a normative and mythical character, portraying the war and occupation as an epic struggle between good and evil, between freedom and democracy on the one hand, and the dark forces of Nazism on the other. Secondly, this struggle tended to be “nationally framed”, that is understood above all as a patriotic history of resistance, in which “good Norwegians” fought the German occupier and their Norwegian henchmen. In line with this, it also tended to assess, rank, and interpret all events according to the patriotic interpretative framework; for example, by establishing a distinct hierarchy of victims with resistance fighters at the top. Thirdly, it blurred the distinction between active resistance on the one hand and negative attitudes and daily life experiences on the other in such a way as to facilitate the inclusion of almost the entire nation in the struggle against the occupiers and their supporters. Fourthly, it assigned the role of the nation’s “other” to adherents of the *Nasjonal Samling* and presented them as a marginal minority of morally loose, unreliable, unintelligent, cowardly, and incompetent individuals, often with criminal inclinations¹. Some scholars, although not all, also argue that the master narrative has emphasized *armed* rather than *civil* resistance and consequently exaggerated the significance of the former².

¹ My outline of the basic characteristics of Norway’s patriotic memory, as described in the scholarly literature, is based on the following accounts: [Eriksen, 1995; Maier, 2007; Grimnes, 1997; Grimnes, 2009; Grimnes, 2018; Corell, 2010; Corell, 2011; Stugu, 2021].

² This claim can be found in: [Dahl, 1974, p. 181; Eriksen, 1995, pp. 61–62; Bauerkämper et al., 2014, p. 19]. An intermediate position is adopted in: [Maier, 2007, p. 48], which maintains that the emphasis on military or civil resistance varies according to the perspective of the narrator. Corell rejects the idea that armed resistance has been given preference, arguing that the national narrative is characterized by a tendency to blur the distinction between active and passive resistance and to display “scepticism toward active, military resistance” [Corell, 2011, p. 105].

THE AGE OF STEREOTYPES, 1945–1965

Despite heated controversies in the immediate post-war period, evidence suggests that the above description of the patriotic narrative corresponds with the dominant interpretation of the war, as it unfolded in public discourse several years after Norway's liberation. During the ensuing decades, the memorialization of resistance and military collaboration largely conformed to this narrative¹.

At least if we confine ourselves to the most prominent written accounts, the role of resistance in a broad sense completely dominated representations of the war. Arguably the most comprehensive and authoritative popular account of Norway's wartime history was the three-volume anthology *Norges krig* (Norway's war), which was edited by the highly esteemed historian Sverre Steen and published between 1947 and 1950. Of the three volumes, two were devoted almost exclusively to resistance in Norway and abroad, whereas the third covered an array of other topics [Steen, 1947–1950; Corell, 2010, pp. 45–46]. The resistance-centred approach remained dominant throughout the 1950s and 1960s; for example, it was evident in Chr. A.R. Christensen's *Norge under okkupasjonen* (Norway during the occupation), a popular account first published in 1964 [Christensen, 1964]. The focus on resistance was not restricted to popular accounts and cannot be understood as a mere impulse. Hence, even though historical scholarship was not systematically in tune with the patriotic framework, prominent historians did repeatedly declare that resistance, "without doubt", constituted the "main theme of Norwegian history [between] 1940–45" [Andenæs et al., 1966, p. 62; Skodvin, 1956, p. 342; Kjeldstadli, 1959, p. 21].

Unsurprisingly, these early accounts portrayed the "Home Front" and its members in a favorable light. Participants in organized resistance activities were depicted as capable, dynamic, and bold, driven by an urge to oppose the brutal occupier, its aims, and ideology [See, e.g.: Christensen, 1950, p. 371]. Although outright heroization was not rife, these accounts left no doubt that resistance activists should be considered the true heroes of the tale. Sometimes it was less subtle, as in one of the cutlines in *Norges krig*, where SOE personnel were described as "young, strong, hard, and fearless" [Sivertsen, 1950, p. 685]. More importantly, some of these early accounts left the impression that the organized resistance movement arose instantly and comprised a significant proportion of the population, thus furthering the mythical notion of a unified people in heroic resistance².

¹ The immediate post-war years saw several controversies, including the publication of highly contested books that conveyed messages at variance with the patriotic narrative [See, e.g.: Krog, 1946; Langeland, 1948; Langeland, 1949]. Various public enquiries and the legal reckoning also inevitably shed critical light on the conduct of many Norwegians during the war, including the government and resistance. For instance, the so-called "Feldmann case" (Norw.: "Feldmann-saken") disclosed how two resistance activists had murdered an elderly Jewish couple trying to escape to Sweden. Stugu contends that the dominant narrative was firmly established by 1950 [Stugu, 2021, p. 38].

² Both tendencies can be found in *Norges krig*, although the three volumes were far from unambiguous. For an example of the first tendency, see [Sivertsen, 1950, pp. 613–614]. It could be argued that *Norges krig*, by its systematic and detailed account of resistance in virtually all quarters of society and without a critical discussion of the scale and character of popular support and participation, helped further the myth of a unified people in resistance. For more explicit statements and arguments in *Norges krig* that were suited to further this notion, see [Corell, 2010, pp. 73–82]. Andenæs et al. [see, e.g.: Andenæs et al., 1966, p. 62] may also be interpreted as rendering the same impression.

With regards to whether armed resistance overshadowed civil resistance, this holds true in some domains of remembrance; for example, in popularized books and media accounts. However, this was hardly the case with the most authoritative written accounts, unless “resistance” is understood in a wider sense which includes Norway’s armed forces in exile. If “resistance” is confined to activities that took place in occupied Norway, the claim must simply be dismissed as unfounded. Not only is it difficult to reconcile with the assertion that the inclusive concept of resistance, comprising everything from armed activities to negative attitudes toward the occupier and *Nasjonal Samling*, were among the most salient attributes of the patriotic narrative, but it is also incompatible with explicit statements in books considered undisputed elements of the patriotic canon. By way of example, *Norges krig* explicitly maintains that it was “*holdningskamp*” (moral resistance), the unarmed struggle against the regime’s nazification efforts, that distinguished Norway’s war experience, not sabotage and military activities [Sivertsen, 1950, p. 613].

These early accounts did not conceal the flaws and errors committed by Norwegian resistance actors during the initial stages of the occupation. Other potentially contested issues related to strategy, methods, conduct, and cooperation also surfaced. Yet, a critical approach in a more general sense was largely absent¹.

In contrast to resistance, military collaboration with the Germans played a marginal role in these early publications. Even if the structure, objectives, and policies of the *Nasjonal Samling* were occasionally explored, the stereotypical approach to both prominent and ordinary members undoubtedly prevailed, particularly in more popularized accounts [See, e.g.: Skodvin, 1948, p. 676]. Along with other categories of collaborators, Norwegians who had served in the Waffen-SS were prosecuted and sentenced as part of the legal reckoning after the war. In books and newspaper articles, they were, at least initially, not uncommonly subject to mockery and portrayed as opportunists, mentally defective, or social misfits [Corell, 2010, pp. 97–102; Sørli, 2014, p. 275]. Although derogatory perspectives can be observed in the beginning, the public approach to Norwegian collaborators soon turned more ambiguous. In fact, no group illustrates this trend better than the SS volunteers. Rather than being particularly detested by the majority, as claimed in some studies, the approach to the volunteers was strikingly favorable in comparison to other former collaborators, often stressing the volunteers’ young age, misguided “idealism”, and willingness to sacrifice themselves to a higher cause. This tendency was already discernible during the late 1940s².

¹ Apart from indisputable efforts to explore the wavering attitudes of many leading Norwegians in the early months of the occupation, there were hardly any attempts to engage with topics that potentially threatened to undermine the notion of a closely unified people in constant struggle against the occupier, such as the wide-reaching economic collaboration, the Norwegian complicity in the arrests and deportation of Jews, or sexual relations between Norwegian women and German servicemen [See, e.g.: Christensen, 1964; Andenæs et al., 1966].

² For studies claiming that the SS volunteers were particularly detested in post-war Norway, see [Eriksen, 1995, p. 55; Maier, 2007, p. 230]. For arguments underpinning the thesis that the group from an early stage was viewed more favorably than other collaborators, see: [Sørli, 2014, pp. 275–280].

In other words, even if the stereotypical perspective by no means disappeared, the hero-villain dichotomy was almost from the very beginning less clear-cut than commonly assumed. Despite early signs of a more nuanced approach to the group, the history of the SS volunteers remained, at best, on the margins of the prevailing memory. By and large, the volunteers' stories and perspectives had little or no impact on the few accounts that touched upon the subject. To the extent that attention was devoted to the SS volunteers during this period, they were normally indistinguishable from other adherents of the *Nasjonal Samling*. Apart from a few notable exceptions, it is hard to trace any genuine interest in the group's attitudes and experiences, despite its proximity to some of the war's most dramatic and horrific events.

DAWNING DIVERSITY, 1965–1990

Between 1965 and 1990, the national memories of war and occupation, as expressed through a variety of sources, became significantly more diverse. For one thing, the thematic scope of historical investigation and debate underwent an indisputable expansion. There was also a growing tendency to question dominant perspectives, interpretations, and assumptions. Although the small group of academic historians who specialized in the study of the Second World War had shown signs of moving beyond the confines of the patriotic narrative already in the early post-war period, key figures in the late 1960s decided to focus myopically on resistance [Sørensen, 1989a, pp. 43–46]. Thus, new topics and critical perspectives were introduced by individuals positioned on the margins, if not outside, of the established milieu of academic historians. While some of them were trained in the historians' craft, others were not. What most of them had in common, were ties to leftist circles¹. Particularly from the 1980s, the traditionalist and resistance-centered approach faced growing criticism from a group of younger academic historians. During the same period, the dominant patriotic memory was increasingly challenged by authors, journalists, and filmmakers. Two aspects of this process are particularly relevant in this context.

The first is the growing tendency to raise critical questions regarding the role and character of Norway's resistance. An early expression of this tendency came in the form of a 1966 essay by Nic. Stang, who had been imprisoned for much of the occupation due to resistance activities. Writing in a special issue of the periodical *Kontrast* devoted to the

¹ The historian Hans Fredrik Dahl, who later became one of the country's most prominent experts on the Nazi occupation of Norway, was the first to formulate a more systematic critique of the dominant national narrative. Dahl was editor of the leftist periodical *Kontrast* between 1965 and 1969. Nic. Stang, author of a critical essay which was published in *Kontrast* in 1966, was Dahl's father-in-law and belonged to the same leftist circles. Terje Valen, author of *De tjente på krigen* (1974), which shed a critical light on Norwegians who profitted from businesses during the occupation, was politically active in the Maoist AKP party in the 1970s. This was also the case with Lars Borgersrud, who began his critical scrutiny of the Norwegian officer corps and their role during the invasion and ensuing occupation [See, e.g.: Borgersrud, 1977]. The Norwegian Communist Party (NKP) also engaged critically with what they saw as the dominant national narrative in a book published in 1975 [See: NKP, 1975].

topic of Norwegian fascism, Stang explicitly questioned the widespread notion of a heroic people in instant and unified resistance against the German occupier. According to him, it had been difficult to convince other Norwegians to participate in resistance activities during the initial months of the occupation, although he acknowledged that this had gradually changed after September 1940 [Stang, 1966, p. 62].

1966 also witnessed what appears to have been the first significant debate on the resistance movement's response to the arrests of the Jews, foreshadowing much later controversies. Reviewing three books about the Holocaust in the daily *VG* – which was founded by members of the resistance in 1945 – author and former resistance activist Ragnar Kvam claimed that Norwegians had failed to assist the Jews during the arrests and deportations of 1942–1943 [Ragnar Kvam, “De tause tilskuere”, *VG*, 21 November 1966]. Kvam's review, in turn, sparked a heated discussion between resistance veterans Leif Borthen and Tore Gjelsvik. While the former defended Kvam and called the “Home Front's” initial response “an utterly embarrassing chapter”, the latter held that the accusations were unfounded and maintained that resistance groups had done what they could under extraordinarily difficult circumstances [Tore Gjelsvik, “De tause tilskuere”, *VG*, 25 November 1966; Leif Borthen, “Den spontane reaksjon”, *VG*, 26 November 1966; Tore Gjelsvik, “Ikke en kjeft hjalp noen –!”, *VG*, 29 November 1966; Leif Borthen, “Men hvorfor fikk det da skje”, *VG*, 30 November 1966].

A few years later, the young historian Hans Fredrik Dahl, in an anthology on Norway and the occupation, launched a more general attack on what he saw as national myths of the war. Dahl called for a broader and more transnational approach to the period, adding that this implied that significantly less attention would be devoted to the “relatively weak and few resistance cadres” [Dahl, 1974, p. 12]. In a chapter called “six myths of the occupation”, which was originally written in 1969, Dahl challenged the notion of a resistance movement that arose instantly in 1940 and the idea of a unified people in heroic struggle against the occupier. Dahl was also the first to address the striking tendency to ignore the tragic fate of the Jews and foreign, primarily Soviet, prisoners in Norway [Dahl, 1974, pp. 175–189].

From the 1980s, Dahl was joined in his critique of the dominant interpretations of the past by fellow academic historians and others. Up until this stage, the critique had mainly addressed general biases in historical writing and popular memory. By now, the resistance movement had increasingly become the main target of critical scrutiny. Most notably, the old assertions that the “Home Front” had abandoned the Jews started to reappear with growing frequency and intensity, along with claims that even “good Norwegians” had enriched themselves on the Jews' misfortunes and that their neglect and misdeeds had been concealed post-war [See, e.g.: Senje, 1982; Bull, 1985, p. 116; Ringdal, 1987, pp. 242–245; Nils Johan Ringdal in *Dagbladet* [Norwegian daily], 4 March, 16 March, and 20 March 1987].

The second aspect is related to the abovementioned trend toward thematic expansion. Arguably the most striking tendency in this respect was the growing

willingness, among scholars, history students, documentary authors, and journalists, to explore the history of the *Nasjonal Samling* and its members. There were multiple manifestations of this tendency. Already in 1969, researchers at the University of Bergen initiated a large-scale survey of former members of the *Nasjonal Samling*, paving the way for subsequent publications on Norwegian and European Fascism [Most notably: Hagtvet et al., 1979; Danielsen and Larsen 1976; for more information on the so-called Bergen project, see: Sørensen, 1989a]. During the early 1970s, the first masters dissertations on the subject were completed at the universities of Oslo and Bergen [See, e.g.: Bruknaap, 1972; Dahl, 1972; Blindheim, 1974]. In the late 1980s, prominent representatives of the younger generation of historians called for a stronger focus and the adoption of new perspectives on the *Nasjonal Samling* [See, e.g.: Sørensen, 1989a, pp. 52–53; Figueiredo, 1995]. By the early 1990s, Nazi collaboration could no longer be considered a neglected topic¹. The tendency was also evident in popular books and the mass media. The most prominent example of media coverage was the TV documentary *I solkorsets tegn* (In the sign of the sun cross), which sparked significant controversy when broadcast on national television (NRK) in 1981. Leaning heavily on interviews with former members of the *Nasjonal Samling*, the documentary provided the group with a rare opportunity to disseminate their version of history to a national audience [Ringnes, 1981; Baltzrud 2004].

These new and more favorable conditions enabled the SS volunteers to reach out to the public with their counter-memory. Already in 1972, the former SS-Sturmbannführer Frode Halle succeeded in having an edited volume on Norwegian participation in the Waffen-SS produced by one of the country's established publishers. He even convinced the retired general Wilhelm Hansteen, whose military record included service as Norway's Chief of Defence during the war, to write a reconciling foreword [Halle 1972].

Only a few years later in 1977, what may be considered the first academic monograph on the topic appeared. Entitled *Nordmenn under Hitlers fane* (Norwegians under Hitler's banner), the book was written by Svein Blindheim, a well-known veteran of the resistance and the SOE [Blindheim, 1977]. In retrospect it is striking to what extent Blindheim embraced the SS volunteers' apologetic narrative. Although far from ignoring the volunteers' Nazi worldview, the book stressed exactly those motives that were emphasized by the SS veterans: anti-Communism, patriotism, and the sympathy for neighboring Finland. As a result, the author went too far in downplaying the significance of National Socialist ideology as a source of motivation for those who volunteered [Sørli, 2014, pp. 284–285]. Even more striking was Blindheim's insistence that the Waffen-SS was an ordinary military organization which had not been involved in any more crimes than the Allies; in effect, it was an acquittal of the volunteers' complicity in Nazi atrocities [Sørli, 2014, p. 285]. In subsequent decades, these flawed perspectives permeated numerous books and articles. Hence, if the volunteers had ever played the

¹ Thus, academic historians had by now published biographies or thematic monographs on key actors and aspects of the *Nasjonal Samling* [See, e.g.: Sørensen, 1989b; Ringdal, 1989; Dahl, 1991; Dahl, 1992].

role of the villains in Norwegian memory in the early post-war years, by 1990 they had, at least to some extent, succeeded in promoting an image of themselves as young, adventurous patriots who had fought a noble war against Communism in the east [Sørli, 2014, pp. 285–288].

ROLE REVERSAL? 1990–2020

The process towards a more diverse and self-critical memory gathered momentum from the 1990s, reinforcing some of the patterns that had become apparent in preceding decades. Hence, the “Home Front” continued to lose the rather sacred status it had enjoyed during the early post-war period and faced growing criticism. Simultaneously, the SS volunteers and other former Nazi collaborators were met with increased sympathy and understanding. During the latter half of the 1990s, it was, if not literally, as if these trends were about to culminate in a role reversal, at least in the sense that the “Home Front” was increasingly assigned the role of the villain, whereas the SS volunteers frequently emerged as honorable victims of injustice and suffering.

Taking the “Home Front” first, two major trends are discernable in the period after 1990. First, the attention devoted to Norway’s resistance in historical writing and public debate continued to wane. This is not to say that the resistance topic or the heroizing tendencies of the patriotic memory disappeared completely from the public sphere. Ritualistic idealization of the nation’s resistance efforts and specific resistance groups and actors remained an important element in public ceremonies and commemorations not least in connection with anniversaries of the Second World War. The same applies to many popular movies, TV series, and non-scholarly history books [See, e.g.: *Max Manus*, 2008; *Den 12. Mann*, 2017; Christensen, 2005; Ulfstein, 2016]. However, in terms of historical research, organized resistance has been displaced as a central topic related to Norway’s war experience. In fact, since the publication of the multivolume work *Norge i krig* (Norway at war) in the mid-1980s, resistance has not featured as a major topic in any of the large-scale research projects devoted to the Second World War¹. Whenever the resistance topic has received significant attention in the national news media, the angle is predominantly critical, often triggered by the publication of sensationalist accounts.

¹ Since the 1980s, five major research projects have dealt exclusively with Norway and the Second World War. This includes projects involving more than two researchers for at least two years: (1) “Å overkomme fortiden” (transl.: to overcome the past), UiO, 1999–2004, which dealt with a number of aspects related to the legal reckoning, (2) “Nordmenn i Waffen-SS” (transl.: Norwegians in the Waffen-SS), The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, 2006–2014, (3) “Organisation Todt i Norge under 2. Verdenskrig” (transl.: Organisation Todt in Norway during the Second World War), NTNU, 2011–2017, (4) “Demokratiets institusjoner i møte med en nazistisk okkupasjonsmakt: Norge i et komparativt perspektiv” (transl.: Democratic institutions facing Nazi occupation: Norway in comparative perspective), The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, 2012–2016, (5) “In a World of Total War: Norway 1939–1945”, UiT, 2016–2022. The resistance topic is touched upon in some of these projects, but it has never constituted a defining element.

Secondly, there has been a growing trend towards questioning, criticizing, and – sometimes – ridiculing the role and conduct of the “Home Front”. From the second half of the 1990s, it became increasingly common to assume that a dominant patriotic master narrative had shaped and distorted the Norwegian public’s understanding of the war. In fact, it became commonplace to iterate the rather conspiratorial claim that historical writing on the Second World War had been controlled by former members of the resistance or historians with close ties to these circles, illustrated by widespread references to “The official war history”. Not uncommonly, the critical perspective was accompanied by explicit claims or more implicit and hazy insinuations that Norway’s resistance efforts had been unimpressive. Examples of satirical mockery in books and TV series also testifies to this trend [See, e.g.: Bomann-Larsen, 1990; Otto Jespersen/Trond Kirkvaag, “Vonde år”, satirical sketch as part of the TV series *Trotto Libre*, first aired on NRK in the fall of 1996]. The critical approach to the government-loyal resistance (and the narratives associated with it) became one of the most defining features of Norwegian war memory.

A striking manifestation of this trend, and a particular strain of the critical approach, became evident during the second half of the 1990s. Partly bringing attention to hitherto neglected aspects of the occupation, authors of popular documentary books began launching direct attacks against the resistance movement’s conduct during the war. The first major attack came with the publication of Egil Ulateig’s book *Med rett til å drepe* (With license to kill) in 1996¹. Among the book’s key arguments was the claim that hostilities between Nazi Germany and Norway ceased with the formal capitulation of the remaining elements of Norway’s armed forces in the north of the country in June 1940, thus rendering resistance activities after that time violations of international law [Ulateig, 1996, pp. 51–78]. Based on this and further quasi-legal arguments, the author came to the conclusion that liquidations of denouncers and other collaborators carried out by Norwegian resistance groups had been unlawful and should be considered war crimes. He also found that the number of liquidations was significantly higher than previously assumed [Ulateig, 1996, pp. 97, 143].

Unsurprisingly, the book triggered fierce reactions. In fact, the publisher was forced to withdraw the book from sale – not once, but twice – and a revised version later appeared under a different title [Moland, 1999, p. 7; Ulateig, 1999]. Yet in contrast to what seems to be a widespread belief, the book was not systematically and unambiguously dismissed by academic historians and other critics [See, e.g.: Tore Pryser, *VG*, 30 December 1996; Hans Fredrik Dahl, *Dagbladet*, 3 December 1996]. Moreover, it was not the fierce response to the book’s general interpretations that convinced the publishing house to withdraw the publication, but rather a number of documented errors related to specific liquidations [Moland, 1999, p. 7].

¹ The questions raised in the book had partly been conveyed to the public before, but without triggering significant debates [See, e.g.: Andenæs, 1948; Inger Cecilie Stridsklev, “Likvidasjoner i Norge 1941–45”, *Aftenposten* [Norwegian daily], 14 February 1996; “Slakter rapport om likvidasjoner”, *VG*, 18 February 1996; Arnfinn Moland, “Likvideringer under 2. Verdenskrig”, *Aftenposten*, 1 March 1996].

With the publication of a scholarly examination of resistance-related liquidations in 1999, public debate on this specific issue faded [Moland, 1999]. Yet the critical approach and the arguments associated with it continued to be reproduced by other critics in the following years. For example, the inspiration from Ulateig was evident when writer Erling Fossen in 2008 caused controversy by referring to Norway's resistance efforts as "deplorable", questioning its legal and moral status ["Motstand glorifiseres", *Aftenposten*, 13 December 2008]. Despite Fossen's main arguments being dismissed by most scholars and commentators, public reactions once again confirmed that the critical message resonated among segments of the Norwegian public, including prominent academic historians [See, e.g.: "Har skapt et glansbilde", *Klassekampen* [Norwegian daily], 23 December 2008].

From around the turn of the millennium the character of the critique changed markedly. Whereas the critical voices of the 1990s had questioned the actual significance of the resistance movement as well as its conduct and its role in the post-war reckoning, the post-millennium critique was increasingly concerned with another issue: its alleged abandonment of Norway's Jewish population and its supposed efforts to conceal this omission after the war.

Though largely ignored for several decades after the war, the fate of the Jews and the active participation of Norway's police forces in the 1942–1943 arrests became one of the major issues in the public debate regarding the Nazi occupation. Accusations against the resistance for abandoning the Jews had surfaced before, but mostly without triggering any major controversies¹. An early indication that the issue was about to attract keen interest both among experts and the wider public came in 2006–2007 with a debate on the role of police official Knut Rød, who had played a key role in the arrest and deportation of Jews in the Oslo area in 1942. Due to the testimonies of former members of the "Home Front" who claimed to have been protected by Rød during the occupation, he was acquitted for his role during this period. While the media coverage and debate in 2006–2007 centered on Rød's personal role and the treatment of the case by the Norwegian justice system, other questions lurked beneath the surface, including why prominent members of the resistance rallied behind Rød during the trial and afterwards. This was interpreted by some as an indication of the efforts to obscure "Home Front" passivity or even cases of complicity in the arrests [See, e.g.: *Morgenbladet* [Norwegian weekly], 24 November, 1 December, and 8 December 2006; *Dagbladet*, 14, 18, 21 February 2007].

However, it was only in 2018 that claims concerning the abandonment of the Jews by the "Home Front" sparked a significant national controversy. In the book *Hva visste hjemmefronten?* (What did the Home Front know?), journalist and author Marte Michelet argues that prominent members of the resistance had received warnings from well

¹ An exception was the aforementioned debate in VG in the fall of 1966. For examples of later references to the issue in books and in the media, see, e.g.: [Gerd Beneche, *Dagbladet*, 6 April 1979; Sveri, 1982, pp. 349–350; Nils Johan Ringdal, *Dagbladet*, 20 March 1987].

informed German and Norwegian officials prior to the arrests of the Jews. Despite these warnings, members of the resistance concealed the information and did little to assist the Jews. Those who *did* assist the Jews to escape, were often motivated by financial gains. According to Michelet, the response reflected deep-seated and widespread anti-Semitic sentiments within the resistance movement and Norwegian society at large [Michelet, 2018].

Michelet's book received huge attention, was praised by most reviewers, and became an award-winning best-seller ["Historiekrigen", *Aftenposten*, Special issue, 19 December 2018. On the author's award and nominations: Ingunn Økland, "Feil på feil på feil", *Aftenposten*, 8 June 2021]. However, it also met with criticism from academic historians, including some of Norway's leading experts on the Holocaust ["Historiekrigen", *Aftenposten*, Special issue, 19 December 2018]. In 2020, three of these experts published a thorough evaluation of the book, arguing that its main theses rested on misinterpretation, misrepresentation, and manipulation of the source material [Berggren et al., 2020]. There is no doubt that the book suffers from serious flaws, but the extent to which some of its main theses are still plausible remain a matter of controversy. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, the book, the huge attention it received, and its overwhelmingly positive reception among non-scholarly commentators, testify to the dramatic shift in Norwegian memories that have occurred over the past thirty years. If criticism of the "Home Front" remained rare and triggered overwhelmingly negative reactions during the 1980s and early 1990s, this had changed dramatically by 2020. By now, the "Home Front" often appeared more like a villain than a hero in public discourse on the war.

In stark contrast to this trend, the approach to the Waffen-SS volunteers turned increasingly positive during the initial stages of this period. As already noted, an apparent receptiveness to the counter-memories of Waffen-SS veterans and other former adherents of the *Nasjonal Samling* was evident throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This process culminated with the publication of several memoirs and documentary books during the 1990s and early 2000s. Although diverse in many respects, this body of literature shared a distinctive apologetic character. As in Blindheim's pioneering work, sympathies with Nazi ideology were often downplayed as a motive for joining the Waffen-SS. Similarly, the ideological character of the Waffen-SS, including the centrality of Nazi indoctrination, received little or no attention. The same applied to the volunteers' internalization of Nazi ideas and values. Most striking of all was the tendency to emphasize the purely military aspects of the volunteers' experiences, either explicitly denying complicity in any atrocities or giving the impression that their complicity was a mere exception. Another recurring pattern was the tendency to present the volunteers as victims. Thus, these accounts typically gave the impression that most Norwegians joined the Waffen-SS with the best intentions and without any idea of the actual ambitions of the Nazi regime. Once realizing they had been deceived, it was too late, and they had to go through "hell on earth" on the Eastern Front. Some even had to endure the harsh realities of Allied

prisoner of war camps, while many more allegedly suffered grave injustices as part of the post-war legal reckoning and subsequent social exclusion [See, e.g.: Steenstrup, 1989; Johansen, 1992; Arneberg, 1993; Gervik, 1994; Ugelvik Larsen, 1995; Ulateig, 2002; Borgir, 2004; Ulateig and Brenden, 2005; Jordbruen, 2006; Bryne, 2007; Veum, 2009]. The fact that some of these perspectives were expressed in a wide selection of documentary and academic accounts as well as in interviews with presumed experts, suggests that they gained significant acceptance [Dahl et al., 1982, p. 96; "Frontkjemperne vil bli hedret", *VG*, 9 July 1993; Larsen, 1995; Bryne, 2007; Ellingsen, 2011].

Although many Norwegians were receptive to the counter-memory of the SS volunteers, it undoubtedly faced rejection from others [See, e.g.: Nils Rømming, "Hitlers villige norske bødler", *Dagbladet*, 28 December 1996]. It also seems highly likely that approval was conditional. From around the turn of the millennium, public attention switched markedly to the volunteers' relations to Nazi ideology and crimes. In 2005, following a news story on national television (NRK) about the possible participation in atrocities by Norwegian SS volunteers, the government commissioned the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies to carry out an extensive research project on the subject [Odd-Bjørn Fure, Rolf Hobson, and Matthew Kott, "Hva skjedde med frontkjemperne i øst?", *Aftenposten*, 3 September 2005]. Through a series of publications, the research team subsequently concluded that Norwegian SS volunteers had not only internalized Nazi ideas and values to a great extent, but were, in many cases, complicit in the crimes of the regime [Emberland and Kott, 2012; Sørli, 2015]. Similar conclusions were reached by amateur historians and TV documentarists [Ulateig, 2006; Westlie, 2008; NRK *Brennpunkt* [TV documentary], 1 October 2013; Jackson 2014]. Within a decade of the new millennium, the apologetic narrative of the SS volunteers was relegated to the margins of Norwegian memory. Illustrative of this trend was the author Egil Ulateig, arguably the most ardent defender of the volunteers in the early 2000s, who published a highly critical book in 2006 [Ulateig, 2006].

However, reactions in the wake of the contested TV series *Frontkjemperne* (front fighters), which was aired on NRK in the spring of 2021, raise the question of whether at least aspects of the apologia still resonates among segments of the public. While harshly criticized by most reviewers and experts for reproducing myths of the Waffen-SS, the series received impressive viewer ratings and was defended by some historians and commentators¹. This contradictory response indicates that many Norwegians continue to perceive the volunteers primarily as young, misguided patriots, and anti-communists, even if the approach is hard to reconcile with extant research. On the

¹ Among those can be mentioned: Geir Ulfstein, "Tiden er kommet for å høre frontkjempernes versjon", NRK Ytring (<https://www.nrk.no/ytring/tiden-er-kommet-for-a-hore-frontkjempernes-versjon-1.15449403>, retrieved on 5 October 2021), 10 April 2021; Vegard Sæther and Knut F. Thoresen, "På tide å svare om Frontkjemperne", *Aftenposten*, 22 April 2021; Lars-Erik Vaale, "Hva vi tror og hva vi vet", *Vårt Land* [Norwegian daily], 17 April 2021; Baard H. Borge, "Frontkjemperseriens forurettede kritikere", *Nordlys* [Norwegian daily], 10 May 2021.

other hand, it remains inherently difficult to assess both the extent and exact character of this sentiment. On balance, available evidence seems to suggest that while many are inclined to sympathize with the volunteers on a human level and to attach some credence to their version of history, few are prepared to accept the SS veterans' counter-narrative without reservations.

As an additional remark it should be mentioned that the TV series triggered an official response from Russian authorities. Claiming that the series represented "a falsification of our common history", the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs unsuccessfully urged Norwegian authorities to disapprove of the film [<https://www.nrk.no/norge/hard-kritikk-mot-dokumentaren-frontkjempere-fra-rusland-1.15459329>, retrieved on 6 August 2021]. In other words, what started as a domestic controversy soon gained an international dimension, even if it would be a grave overstatement to talk of an interstate "memory war".

EXPLAINING THE SHIFTS

How can these shifts in the Norwegian memories of resistance and collaboration be explained? At a general level Norwegian memorialization of the war and occupation reflected broader trends in Western Europe. This was the case with the emergence of patriotic memory in the early post-war years, but also with its incipient decay in the 1960s and 1970s, which paralleled developments in, inter alia, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands [Lagrou, 2000, p. 15]. In order to explain the gradual shift towards a more diverse and oscillating memory culture, it seems natural to refer to the generational factor combined with the more radical intellectual and political climate of the period – in addition of course to the passage of time itself. Whereas the war generation had for the most part internalized the patriotic narrative in its basic form, the new and younger generation that entered adulthood from the 1960s, shaped as it was by different experiences and the radical ideas of the time, was probably less amenable to this interpretation of the past.

Even if the shift occurred in several Western European countries at approximately the same time, there were national variations. For example, the shift in Norway was more profound than in neighboring Denmark [Bryld, 2007, p. 102]. In other words, it is necessary to complement the transnational explanation with specific national circumstances. In the Norwegian case it is interesting to note that some of the individuals who formulated alternative and critical approaches to Norway's wartime history, had already reached adulthood before the occupation, and some of them were even active in the resistance [See, e.g.: Nic. Stang and Svein Blindheim]. On the other hand, the more systematic critique of the patriotic narrative was initially formulated by Hans Fredrik Dahl, who was born in 1939. Overall, generational belonging appears less important than ideological leanings. As for the latter, the novel and critical perspectives to the war were primarily developed by people with links to leftist

circles, not least milieus that rejected Norway's foreign policy, including the country's NATO integration¹.

Keeping to the specific Norwegian context, it is also necessary to take account of oppositional memories. Since the war, the counter-memories of "out-groups" such as adherents of the *Nasjonal Samling* and the communists had been lurking beneath the surface. From the 1970s, these groups became increasingly active in promoting their oppositional narratives, in part due to more favorable conditions as the memory of the war became more diverse. This, in turn, affected the dominant interpretation of the past, as demonstrated in the case of the SS volunteers.

Norwegian memory continued to be shaped by events and controversies as well as wider cultural trends in Western Europe and beyond. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a boom in what is often referred to as "relativist" approaches to the Second World War, illustrated by the German "*Historikerstreit*", the so-called Icebreaker controversy, and David Irving's publications. To understand the growing receptiveness toward arguments and approaches that emanated from the milieu of former Nazi collaborators as well as the critical turn in the approach to Norwegian resistance, it is vital to take into account the impact of such perspectives at the time².

A parallel and partly related trend was the increased influence of constructivist, or "postmodernist", ideas. The emergence of these ideas brought a critical approach to national myths and narratives, including those pertaining to the Second World War. More specifically, they introduced the aforementioned notion of a dominant patriotic memory that had served integrational purposes and left certain groups and geographical areas excluded from, or misrepresented in, the dominant interpretation of the past [See, e.g.: Eriksen, 1995]. The impact of postmodernism can be inferred from the frequent and sometimes explicit use of approaches and concepts associated with this cluster of ideas, and it can be argued that they reinforced the tendencies of the 1990s in two ways. Firstly, it made scholars, journalists, authors, and the general public more likely to be critical of the "Home Front" and traditionalist approaches to the war. Secondly, it made the same groups receptive to, if not uncritical of, the SS volunteers' politics of memory. Thus, it was often a short way from questioning the narratives of the elites to becoming susceptible to the supposedly suppressed counter-memories of marginal groups.

¹ For example, Nic. Stang, Hans Fredrik Dahl and Svein Blindheim can all be linked to such milieus.

² Hans Fredrik Dahl was the most illustrative example of this influence during the 1990s, as he, in his commentaries in *Dagbladet*, repeatedly ascribed credibility to prominent representatives of the "relativist" camp, including David Irving [See: Fure, 1996]. Egil Ulateig may serve as a further example. In his book *Med rett til å drepe* (1996), he gives the impression that Stalin's Soviet Union committed crimes that were equally as horrific as Hitler's Germany, and that the Western Allies were not much better than the two dictatorships. He also embraced the so-called *Präventivkriegsthese*, maintained by, inter alia, Russian publicist Victor Suvorov and presented in his book *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (1990) [Ulateig, 1996, p. 78; see also: Ulateig, 2002, pp. 97–98].

A further trend in Western thinking with profound implications for Norwegian memory was the increasingly powerful notion of universal and irrefragible human rights. This trend helps to explain the increasingly apparent focus, particularly evident in both research and public debates from around the turn of the millennium, on human suffering, injustices, and victims, as well as on the perpetrators and their ideologies. In the beginning, the growing focus on individual suffering probably had similar effects to the relativist and postmodernist trends, since the SS volunteers could be interpreted as victims of both the harsh realities of war and injustices of the post-war period. However, as the human rights-oriented discourse became increasingly concerned with the Holocaust and victims of Nazi crimes from the late 1990s and early 2000s, it affected Norwegian war memory in at least two ways. Firstly, the critics of Norway's resistance gradually came to be concerned less with what they saw as the resistance movement's illegal status and passivity as well as their crimes and injustices against Norwegian collaborators, and more with its alleged abandonment of the Jews. Secondly, the approach to the SS volunteers turned strikingly critical, tending to stress their ideological commitment and complicity in Nazi crimes rather than their young age, supposed good intentions, and wartime and post-war hardships. This should not merely be attributed to the general influence of abstract ideas and values, but also to the more specific impact of international historical research and public debate, most notably the increasingly critical engagement with the role of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS in the crimes of the Nazi regime [Sørli, 2014, p. 293]. If the SS volunteers had ever harbored any hopes of playing the role of heroes in the national memory, the impact of these developments put an effective end to this dream.

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