War and Peace in the Political Culture of Scandinavia in the 20th Century
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"political systems are grounded in cultures ... present day international relations are therefore by definition also intercultural relations ..."
Adda Bozeman

Introduction

Scandinavian historians are usually more concerned with differences between their countries and peoples than with similarities. In the tradition of Thucydides, Montesquieu, and Tocqueville, political culture has moreover tended to be conceived in terms of national characteristics. For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall take as my point of departure a broad conception of culture, vaguely defined as the ideas, norms, and values that still seem common to the peoples of Scandinavia in their thinking about war and peace.

As small, militarily weak and ethnically fairly homogenous liberal democracies, living within internationally recognised borders, it should come as no surprise that the three Scandinavian states to be considered here should seek to promote peace and disarmament in their relations with the outside world. Already before the beginning of the twentieth century Denmark, Sweden and Norway were in the forefront of states that worked to strengthen international law, and in particular neutrality, as means of preventing war or at least their involvement in armed conflict.

In 1906 the young scholar Halvdan Koht, later to become a renowned international historian and Norway’s Foreign Minister, published a modest-looking little book with a title that translates as “The Idea of Peace in Norwegian History.” The subtitle of the book, more accurately reflecting its contents, was “Norway in the growth of international justice”. Koht's central message was that the small democratic countries had a particular mission as spokesmen and pioneers for a peace built on justice and not on power. His attempt to interpret Norwegian history, right from the formation of the mediaeval Kingdom, as an endless quest for peace, is hardly convincing. But he clearly had a point when referring to Norway’s promotion of neutrality and arbitration treaties from the end of the 19th century.

In the closing passage he expressed the hope that Norway, together with its Scandinavian neighbours and Switzerland, would become the source from which peace among the peoples should spread through the rest of the world. “Peace and justice provide the safest shield for lands and peoples, and the people that make peace their purpose will thereby have gained an honourable place in the history of the world.”

This “credo” can in many ways serve as a common denominator for the legacy
of attitudes with which all three Scandinavian states faced the problems of war and peace as they entered the twentieth century. The basic idea for all of them was that "a peaceful world offered the best conditions for the continued existence of the small state." They had come to that realisation by quite different roads. The history of Swedish imperialism in the 17th and 18th centuries had for a time left lingering ambitions to play the role of at least a middle power in European politics, based on Swedish leadership of the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway. The impending dissolution of that Union, however, put paid to those ambitions. Instead, the threatening presence in Sweden's neighbourhood of Imperial Russia compelled acceptance of the more traditional stance of a minor power, seeking protection from great power ambitions in an international system based on law instead of on military strength. Denmark's international position was even more precarious, as it was entirely defenceless against its German neighbour to the south. Avoidance of war was therefore seen as the only chance of survival. Norway's situation was a different one, in that the country felt reasonably safe under the umbrella of British naval power. The main threat was that it might get dragged into a war between Great Britain and either of the two other great powers mentioned. Again, therefore, the country looked to a strengthened international legal regime as its first line of defence.

The emphasis in Koht's book on the arbitration treaties, as well as his account of Norway's successful effort to achieve a peaceful dissolution of the Union with Sweden, show a clear recognition that action and not just words was needed if Norway was to set an example for other states to follow. But Koht was no pacifist - in fact he resigned as chairman of the Norwegian Peace Association when in 1902 it voted to condemn even defensive wars against an external attacker.

The turn of the century also saw a resurgence of Norwegian neutralism. In part this was the old wine of isolationism in new bottles, nourished by suspicions that the Swedish King's pro-German leanings might involve the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway in foreign adventures against Norwegian interests. But the containing idealism was a new feature. The status of neutrality had experienced a remarkable growth during the nineteenth century. Relative peace and prosperity reigned in Europe, and economic liberalism favoured the expansion of trade without barriers of state interference. This, together with the rise of a neutral great power, the United States of America, provided a favourable climate for the development of a coherent legal neutrality doctrine. One important milestone was the Declaration of Paris in 1856, which consecrated the old but never before universally recognised rules for the protection of neutral trade in wartime: namely immunity from capture of enemy cargo on neutral ships and neutral cargo on enemy ships.

All three Scandinavian countries also saw important advantages for their trade in the strengthened legal status of neutrality, although this was tempered on Sweden's part by an occasional hankering after a middle power role. In Norway Johan Sverdrup, leader of the liberal "Venstre" party and Prime Minister, played a key role in promoting a balanced foreign policy.
Minister from 1884, had in 1883 formed an association of parliamentarians to promote the idea of neutrality. In 1898, in the course of preparations for the coming Hague conference on international law, the Norwegian Parliament urged King Oscar II of Sweden and Norway to work for the neutralisation of the United Kingdoms. In the following year the new “Venstre” Prime Minister, Johannes Steen, used an Inter-Parliamentary Union conference in the Norwegian Capital to advocate a status of permanent neutrality for Sweden and Norway. Their geographic situation favoured such a solution. It would also, he thought, be in the common interest of the great powers if Scandinavia could be excluded from the contests of power politics. Of course, an internationally recognised status of permanent neutrality would also ease the burden of fulfilling the duties that accompanied the rights of neutrals. In 1900 all the Norwegian political parties had permanent neutrality as part of their election platforms. Then, in 1902, a unanimous Parliament asked the Cabinet to open negotiations for the permanent neutralisation of Sweden and Norway. The proposal got nowhere, however, due to a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the idea in ruling Swedish circles, where a permanent neutrality status guaranteed by other powers was seen as unworthy for a proud and independent nation. But in practice the foreign policy of all three Scandinavian states, as the years of the First World War were approaching, would remain one of non-participation in alliances in peacetime, with the aim of preserving neutrality in time of war.

The interwar period
The success of the three countries in preserving their neutrality through the First World War suggested that they were on the right foreign policy track. Yet the transformation of the European order after the end of that war, and the establishment of the League of Nations, posed a problem. Was membership of the League compatible with formal neutrality? The burden of economic and military sanctions, to be imposed by the League against states starting wars of aggression, was in principle to be shared among the member states, and it would obviously be unfair to allow some states simply to opt out of such an obligation. In the event they all – now also including Finland – joined the League. In practice, it was assumed that the burden of participating in military action against an aggressor would be carried by the great powers. The smaller powers might, on request and after consultation, have to grant free passage to forces engaged in such action, and would be obliged to take part in a blockade or other economic sanctions imposed by the League. But seen from the Scandinavian corner of Europe the danger of such involvement seemed fairly remote.

The League gave the minor powers an unprecedented opening for their voices to be heard on matters of international politics. Like many others, Norway and Sweden did not hesitate to make use of that opportunity. Based on what has been called a “small-state philosophy”, which saw the minor powers as guardians of higher moral standards in the conduct of international affairs, Norway’s representatives in the League organs became strident advocates of the role of international law in solving disputes.
between nations. “Right instead of might” was the watchword. The reign of what Norway’s Foreign Minister Løvland in 1905 had referred to as “the European warrior states” should give way to an international order in which conflicts would be resolved in an orderly and peaceful manner. As a “satisfied” status quo state, with no traditional or natural enemies in its neighbourhood, and no explosive internal cleavages that might threaten its integrity and cohesion, Norway’s spokesmen in the Assembly seemed to suggest that all would be well “if only the others were like us.” As J.L. Mowinckel, one of the towering figures in the small circle of the Norwegian foreign policy establishment, said in reporting back to Parliament from an Assembly session,

no one can suspect us of having any selfish or special aims or interests. It is known that we for our part speak from a quite objective love of peace, and from a belief that there is among the peoples a growing feeling of what is right.

During the interwar period Norway’s record as a pioneer for the peaceful settlement of international disputes continued to rest on a succession of arbitration treaties. The other great issue, for both Sweden and Norway, was disarmament. In the words of a Swedish historian:

To a small state in a world of great powers, a policy of disarmament makes eminent sense. It is in the interest of the small power to strive for an “equalisation” of power in its vicinity, if possible by emasculating the powerful. Disarmament, arms control, collective security, any means of establishing agreed-upon international procedures that can substitute “right” for “might” – all such formulas are attractive to the small state, or at least to the small “satisfied” state with no territorial ambitions or claims on others.

But such a policy has also been seen as “a somewhat naïve attempt to affect other states by setting a good example.” In Norway’s case, its far-reaching unilateral disarmament, although presented as a peace-building effort, had other reasons: the widespread feeling that the World War had been “the war to end all wars”, the absence of identifiable external threats to Norwegian security, and the Labour Party’s view of the military as a weapon against the working class.

Yet Norwegians tended to view their country as a standard-bearer for peace, proudly pointing to Fridtjof Nansen’s efforts on behalf of the League of Nations during the famine years in the Soviet Union and in the resettlement of refugees after the Greco-Turkish imbroglio. The fact that the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize was entrusted to Norway – to a committee selected by Parliament – was also regarded as a tribute to Norway as a peacemaker. As for the Nobel Peace Prize, recent historical research has focused on the awards prior to the Second World War as a reflection of Norwegian foreign policy. That they reflected the ideals that Norway hoped would prevail in international affairs, is clear. In fact the list of laureates 1901-1938 suggests a conception of peacemaking as principally the province of mostly since-forgotten idealist thinkers and writers, with only a sprinkling of practitioners such as Theodore Roosevelt, Austen Chamberlain, Aristide Briand, Gustav Stresemann – and Fridtjof Nansen.

It was the gradual erosion of the League of Nations’ will and capability to stem the aggressors that compelled the Scandinavian states to face the possibility
of the use of military means for safeguarding their security. Here their answers differed, ranging from the Finns’ determination to defend their newfound independence to the utmost, to the Danes’ conviction that it was “neither desirable, nor on the balance likely – except in extremis – that there could be any question of using military means for the preservation of Danish security policy interests.” In between was Sweden, which – albeit without feeling particularly threatened – still retained a conviction that a military defence capability was a necessary deterrent against aggression. Hence there was a continued Swedish commitment to general disarmament together with efforts to strengthen collective security, but also a program of national rearmament and efforts to build regional security by attempting to create a Nordic “sanctuary”.

In Norway’s case the decline of the League of Nations coincided with the advent to power of the Labour Party. Its anti-military stance seemed firmly established, and the trust in British naval power as a sufficient deterrent against aggression from other great powers was widespread through the whole political spectrum. Thus it was only from 1937 onwards that the Labour government agreed to fairly substantial extraordinary budget allocations for defence. This was a response to increasingly dire warnings from the military authorities about the miserable state of the country’s armed forces. The Commander-in-Chief of the Army in the autumn of 1937 had described the army as without comparison the worst trained and most poorly equipped in the whole of Europe. The Admiralty Staff painted a similar picture as regards the navy, and emphasised the consequent danger that Norway might be unable to prevent acts of war within her maritime territory, whether in the form of one party’s warships attacking its enemy’s ships, or if Germany should seek to obtain naval bases on the Norwegian coast.

The only political party that showed some enthusiasm for the demands of the military was the Conservative “Høyre” Party. The other major opposition party, the Liberals, or “Venstre”, supported the government’s line. With former Prime Minister J.L. Mowinckel as their principal spokesman on foreign affairs, the Liberals did not share Labour’s ideological aversion to the military. Instead, they put their faith in the traditional protection that British naval superiority in the North Sea provided against incursions from any other power such as Germany. As late as in May 1939, at a secret session of the Storting, Mowinckel claimed that with its much weaker navy now than in the First World War, Germany could not hope to maintain an air or naval base on the Norwegian coast against British naval power. In this view he was supported by no less an authority than the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, Admiral Henry Diesen. In a newspaper interview earlier that year he said that anyone wishing to seize a point on the coast had to be master of the seas, and if he was then he had no need to do so. That danger was therefore “highly exaggerated”.

**From World War to Cold War**

Of the four Nordic countries, only Sweden was able to preserve its neutrality during the Second World War. Finland, having been attacked by the
Soviet Union in December 1939, was a co-belligerent with Germany against the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944. Denmark and Norway were invaded by Germany in April 1940, but whereas Denmark surrendered without offering any resistance, Norway fought a two-month campaign with the aid of the Western alliance. Then, with the home country under occupation, the government sought refuge in the United Kingdom and carried on the armed struggle as a member of the Grand Alliance.

Those different experiences were bound to make their mark on the attitude to war and peace in their political culture. In Sweden it strengthened the conviction that the maintenance of non-alignment required strong defence preparedness. In Finland, an undiminished determination to preserve its independence had to be tempered by the realisation that to do so required accommodation to the demands of a non-confrontational coexistence with the Soviet Union. The Norwegians and the Danes, however, realised that their security would henceforth depend on a combination of a national defence effort and assistance from the Western Great Powers.

At first, during the 1950s, questions of war and peace had little direct impact on political culture in the Scandinavian countries. The people seemed to accept that the tensions between East and West made it necessary to build up a strong military preparedness. In Norway, opinion polls showed a clear acceptance of the need for a strong defence effort, and support of Norway's membership of the Atlantic Alliance remained solid throughout the Cold War. The Soviet Union was seen as the greatest threat to world peace and to Norwegian security, although many retained the traditional suspicion of great power politics as such. Overall, the political culture of Scandinavia retained a traditional scepticism towards great power politics. In the case of Norway, Johan Galtung in a study of opinion polls found that while there was a strong bias in favour of the western powers, there were nuances: There was a general scepticism towards great powers, including many critical attitudes towards the United States – in some cases the assessments of the US and the Soviet Union were almost symmetric. Attitudes towards the Soviet Union also had many positive features. There was moreover no unconditional approval of all western countries: much scepticism prevailed towards Germany and France. For Denmark too “the fear of abandonment and the quest for protection” had motivated the decision to join the alliance, and those motives continued to hold sway against the traditional small-power fear of losing one's freedom of action in an alliance dominated by great powers. At the same time there was in all three Scandinavian countries strong support for the United Nations, and a very favourable attitude towards the active participation of their countries' military in UN peacekeeping.

Sweden's determination to remain non-aligned made it a special case. Although it would ultimately have to rely on assistance from the Western powers in case of Soviet aggression, the absence of any alliance commitment meant a proportionately greater national defence build-up. And as soon as the Soviet Union developed nuclear weapons, Sweden faced the question of developing its own
nuclear deterrent. It was not until the early 1960s that the Swedish government finally relinquished that option. In the meantime a protest movement against nuclear weapons, that not least was directed against Sweden's own nuclear option, had gathered important support within the ruling Social Democrats. This put Sweden in the curious situation that even while pondering whether to become the world's fourth nuclear power, Swedish Foreign Minister Östen Undén began to make his mark at the United Nations as a prominent spokesman for disarmament, including nuclear disarmament. On the face of it, Swedish advocacy of disarmament meant a continuation of Swedish inter-war policy. But there was a difference: Disarmament had now become "a policy almost exclusively directed at others".15

In the two Scandinavian Nato member states the economic burden of military expenditures, and the political burden of a commitment to an increasingly militarised alliance, began to surface from the late 1950s. The opposition was not so much against the alliance as such — a clear majority in both countries remained steadfast in their support of Nato membership. It was only from the beginning of the 1960s, however, that protest movements became an increasingly prominent aspect of Scandinavian political culture. Nuclear weapons were a principal target, in Norway beginning with protest marches against nuclear tests that raised the spectre of widespread contamination of the atmosphere. Norwegians' fears in that respect were enhanced as the Soviet Union moved their bomb tests to Novaya Zemlya in the Barents Sea, a few hundred kilometres from Norwegian territory. On 30 October 1961, the tests reached their climax with the detonation of a 50-megaton "Superbomb".

It has been said that through those campaigns the young generation entered the political arena for the first time. Their protest movement was not pacifist by nature, and, although dominated by the left wing of the political spectrum, their leaders made strenuous efforts to show that the campaign had all countries with nuclear weapons as their target. Yet in Norway the Socialist Peoples' Party, formed in 1961 by members of the left wing of the ruling Labour Party, soon became a standard-bearer for neutralist sentiments, with "Norway out of Nato" as one of their slogans. Later in the 1960s America's war in Vietnam came to dominate as the target for the protest marches, followed in the early 1970s by the strident and ultimately successful movement against Norwegian membership of the European Communities (or the Common Market as it was usually called).

Through the rest of the 1970s solidarity with the Third World, and campaigns to save the environment, dominated the agenda of popular protest. But at the end of that decade protests against nuclear weapons again took centre stage, now directed for the most part against US and Nato plans to equip Western Europe with medium and short-range nuclear missiles as a counter to Soviet deployments of the SS-20 missile. This time women's organisations and religious groups were also mobilised, and the movement had the support of many voters at the centre of the political spectrum. In 1979 a well-organised campaign began under the slogan "No to nuclear weapons", which in a short time gained 100 000 members.
Their petition in favour of a Nordic nuclear-free zone and against nuclear weapons on Norwegian soil even in wartime gathered half a million signatures — about one-eighth of the population. The turmoil in Denmark was even more intense. For almost a decade from 1979 Denmark’s relationship with Nato was, according to a Danish historian, “crisis-ridden”: The country experienced “an escalating security debate spearheaded by a burgeoning peace movement.”

There is no denying that Scandinavian scepticism towards the great powers and great power policies was admixed with a tinge of their own moral superiority, an attitude which led the Swedes in particular to entertain ideas about their country as a “moral great power”. In practical politics, a certain “missionary impulse” was manifested in all three countries’ advocacy of development aid to the Third World, and their efforts to strengthen the role of the United Nations. In addition, grassroot feelings about the futility of a never-ending arms race, and revulsion against the spectre of a war fought with nuclear weapons, were strong, and soon compelled the governments of the two countries that were members of Nato to seek to influence their allies in favour of a reduction of cold war tensions. In Denmark the opposition resulted in forcing the government to append footnotes of reservation to aspects of policy declarations from the councils of Nato. The Norwegians, on the other hand, whose territory was strategically more exposed, concentrated on persuading Nato to combine assurances of military assistance with a policy that was meant to reassure its Soviet neighbour of the strictly defensive purpose of the alliance. Only when East-West tensions reached a new pitch, during what has come to be known as the “second Cold War”, from the late seventies, did Norway reach the brink of becoming another “footnote country”.

In fact, during the early 1980s, the policies of the three Scandinavian countries seemed to converge in a way that had not been seen since the 1920s. Partly spurred by the coming into power in Sweden of the government of Olof Palme in 1982, with its formula of “an active peace and disarmament policy”, but also inspired by a strong tradition of opposition to nuclear weapons, the three countries came close to forming a united anti-nuclear-weapons front. The salient feature was the proposal for a Nordic non-nuclear zone, originally proposed by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s, and renewed by Finland’s President Urho Kekkonen in 1963. The idea, in Kekkonen’s view, was to keep the area outside of international tensions. If it had been realised, it would have been a remarkable completion of a circle originating in the efforts of the interwar period of insulating the Nordic area from great power confrontations. But Norway’s and Denmark’s need to demonstrate solidarity with their Nato allies in the end carried the day.

Postscript
Scandinavian positions toward the war/peace conundrum in the post-cold war period has hardly been touched upon by the historians. What can be attempted here is therefore not more than a journalistic sketch of some salient features. The first crossroads came with the first Gulf War in 1991. Public opinion
in Scandinavia was divided as to what should be their countries' response to US calls to join the coalition against Saddam Hussein. While Iraq's invasion of its small neighbour was roundly condemned, the prospect of actually participating in a war in the Middle East presented a major moral hurdle. The problem presented itself in its most acute form for the two Nato members Denmark and Norway, torn between their reluctance to take up arms "out of area" and their need to show solidarity with their allies. In the end they did participate in the military campaign, albeit on a very minor scale. The Persian Gulf, after all, was "a far away country of which we know very little" - to paraphrase Chamberlain's comment about Czechoslovakia in 1938.

The next crossroads was former Yugoslavia - still "out of area" in Nato terms, yet much closer to home. Here Denmark and Norway got involved right from the beginning, since the intervention of foreign military forces was initially a United Nations peacekeeping affair and therefore well in line with Scandinavian traditions of support for the UN. After heavy Scandinavian participation in UNPROFOR, in which Sweden was also included, the engagement of their forces continued through the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, beginning with IFOR and carried on through SFOR. The relative lack of internal opposition to the presence of their forces in a warlike situation can be explained by the gradual transition from peacekeeping to peace enforcement with UN authorisation, although under Nato auspices.

The third - and rather more problematic - crossroads was Kosovo, and the war against Yugoslavia. Norwegian participation in that war was a hotly debated issue, and the government's dilemma is aptly illustrated by the Prime Minister's refusal, at the time, to refer to Nato's action as "a war". Only this year has he publicly admitted that he should, in fact, have used that word to describe what the Norwegian forces were being committed to. The public opposition subsided for a while, influenced by images of Serbian atrocities, but re-ignited at the sight of Nato aircraft bombing infrastructure targets in Serbia itself, involving civilian casualties. But the majority of the Norwegian public remained firm in its acceptance of the participation of Norwegian forces, in numbers eventually reaching 7000 men in KFOR plus a flight of fighter-bombers operating out of an Italian airbase.

The fourth crossroads was Afghanistan. When Nato member countries were asked to contribute forces, in the aftermath of the US-led war against the Taliban, both Norway and Denmark answered the call, providing small detachments of special forces as well as fighter-bombers operating together from a Kirgizstan airbase. Opposition from elements of the left wing flared at the news that Norwegian aircraft had actually dropped bombs, killing people on the ground. But on the whole Norway's still continuing participation in that war appears to have been accepted by the public.

The fifth, and so far the last, crossroads came with the question of participation in the restoration of peace and order in Iraq. While both Denmark and Norway now have small detachments of army engineers in the country, the debate is still about the wisdom of such participation. Parties on the left of the political spectrum point to the fact that
Norway was against the US/UK invasion of Iraq, since it was not sanctioned by the United Nations, and hence have called for the withdrawal of the Norwegian soldiers there. But the government has stood firm, pointing to the work of the army engineers as being aid to the Iraqi people.

In all, the five crossroads sketched here suggest that the post-cold war period may turn out to be of considerable interest for a study of the developing Scandinavian attitudes to the war/peace conundrum. Few would ten years ago have predicted that our forces would be participating in wars or warlike activities in areas that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be said to be a contribution to the territorial defence of the Scandinavian homelands. How that transition has come about promises to be a fascinating case study in the evolution of Scandinavian political culture.

Notes
1 This paper was first presented at a workshop in Rome in September 2003, organised by Universita degli Studi Roma Tre, on “War and Peace in 20th Century Political Culture”. Quotation from Adda Bozeman, Politics and Culture in International Relations (New Brunswick, NJ 1960) p. 5–6.
2 Halvdan Koht, Fredstanken i Noregs-soga: Noreg i den samfukkelega retsvôkstaren. (Oslo 1906).
4 Ibid., loc.cit.: “Sweden resigned from international power politics and adjusted herself to a position among the other small powers of Europe.”
5 On Norway see in general my book Norway’s Foreign Relations - a History (Oslo 2001).
6 The most detailed – and highly critical – study of Norwegian attitudes to international politics in the period is Nils Ørvik, Sikkerhetspolitikken 1920–1939: Fra forhistorien til 9. april 1940. (Vols 1–2, Oslo 1960–61).
7 As quoted in Odd-Bjørn Fure, Mellomkrigstid (Oslo 1996), p. 189.
11 Ole Karup Pedersen, Udenriksminister P. Munchs opfattelse af Danmarks stilling i international politik (Copenhagen 1970), p. 583. This book is the most profound and complete study of Danish foreign policy in the interwar period.
12 Bo Huldt, op. cit., p. 37.
14 Nikolaj Petersen, "Denmark's Fifty Years with

15 Bo Huldt, op. cit. pp. 46–7. But see also the pathbreaking study by Wilhelm Agrell, Alliansfrihet och atombomber (Stockholm 1985).

16 Nikolaj Petersen, op. cit., p. 286.

17 See e.g. Ann-Sofie Nilsson, Den moraliska stormakten (The moral great power) (Stockholm 1991).
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