



Why 7000 Children Had to Die

Second World War: The Cruel Fate of German Refugees in Denmark

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(dpa/fis) A new study about the deaths of more than 10,000 German refugees in Denmark shortly before and after the end of the Second World War has startled the public of this Scandinavian country. The discovery that the refugee casualties from 1945 to 1949 included more than 7,000 toddlers and babies who were denied not only adequate rations but also any and all medical aid was described by the Copenhagen newspaper *Politiken* as "shocking and inhumane".

Equally bad, the newspaper said, is the "massive repression of awareness" of the refugees' fate in Denmark, since to date the Danish have considered it common knowledge and a point of national credit that the 200,000 to 250,000 people who fled to Denmark from the advancing Soviet troops had been accorded highly decent treatment.

Senior physician Kirsten Lylloff has taken a closer look at this myth. Studying history is her hobby, and she had become curious about the great number of graves of German babies and children in a cemetery in Åalborg where she used to live. When she spent six months gathering information, the relevant archives were readily opened to her. The amateur historian was all the more surprised to find numerous shocking statistics and reports, which had never been mentioned in standard historiography to date. And this despite the fact that the time of German occupation of Denmark from April 1940 to May 1945 is more thoroughly researched than any other historical period.

At first, the refugees - 85 percent of them women and children - had been quartered in schools or meeting houses; then, in 1945, 142 camps were set up for these people. The Danish civilians were strictly forbidden to have any contact with the German expellees.

Lylloff's research has shown that **in 1945 alone, 13,492 German refugees died in Danish refugee camps. More than 7,000 of them were children under five years of age;** most of them died of malnutrition and dehydration and - according to Lylloff - of "perfectly curable" illnesses such as stomach and intestinal infections and scarlet fever. But until 1949 the Danish medical board, as well as the Red Cross, consistently denied the refugees interned in these camps any medical assistance.

"How can one consider babies and toddlers to be enemies?" Kirsten Lylloff counters the argument, routine at war's end, that the Germans were enemies regardless of their age. Jørgen Poulsen, the present Secretary General of the Danish Red Cross, commented on this new study: "It hurts to read this. I hope that we've grown smarter by now." The Copenhagen medical board also stated that the refusal of all pleas for medical attention in those days "cannot be justified, no matter how good the excuses."

Medical board spokesman Torben Pedersen nonetheless joined historians in warning against drawing rash conclusions. He says that after five years' occupation by National Socialist Germany, with a world war and ever-worsening reports about the systematic destruction of the Jews, the political mood in Denmark performe played a powerful role in determining the attitude towards German refugees.

However, according to Kirsten Lylloff's findings, there was also a pragmatic consideration to the merciless attitude the Danish authorities took towards the refugees: "The medical board stated officially that helping German refugees would harm Denmark's relations with the Allies."

In fact, at the war's end Denmark found it very difficult to dissuade the victorious powers from classifying it as "collaborator". Instead of offering armed resistance, like its Norwegian neighbors for example, the government at Copenhagen had surrendered without a fight to the German Wehrmacht in 1940 and placed their country at Hitler's disposal as a willing supplier of foodstuffs for the Wehrmacht. In return, Denmark was treated relatively mildly by the occupiers and was spared any involvement in the war itself.

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