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Iben Bjørnsson, "Negotiating Armageddon: Civil Defence in NATO and Denmark, 1949-59," *Cold War History*, 23:2 (2023): 217-238, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2022.2123915>

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The fear of nuclear war has once again become a pressing topic for politicians, policymakers, academics, and the general population following the Russian Federation's unprovoked invasion of the Ukraine in February 2022. The deeply interconnected topic of "civil defence" and "emergency shelters" against nuclear attacks has therefore also regained prominence in public debates after many years of stagnation after the end of the Cold War. A search on Google Trends shows an immense and sudden increase in interest in the topics of "nuclear war" and "emergency shelters" in the period from February to April 2022.¹ Curiously, according to Google Trends, the Scandinavian countries are some of the few places in the world where the interest in "emergency shelters" is higher than for "nuclear war." These countries—Denmark, Sweden and Norway—also had some of the largest coverage of emergency shelters during the Cold War, providing "protection" for a large percentage of the population (234).²

However, the end of the Cold War also carried with it a change in policy in several countries. As the risk of nuclear war seemed less and less likely, a gradual dismantling of nuclear shelters and other civil defence initiatives occurred. In Denmark, the law for emergency shelters was revised in 2002, halting the construction of new shelters.³ The reasons stated were that the current geopolitical landscape seemed not to demand the construction of more shelters, and that the current number of shelters was sufficient to provide adequate protection. In the months following the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, the Danish population was dismayed to learn that this extensive shelter network that had been built up during the Cold War was in

¹ Google Trends, "Subject: Nuclear war, Subject: Emergency shelters", *Google Trends*, retrieved 14. July 2023, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=%2Fm%2F096h3,%2Fm%2F0298qf&hl=da>.

² Peter Bennesved, *Sheltered Society: Civilian Air raid shelters in Sweden – from idea to materiality, 1918–1940 and beyond*, (Malmö: Universus Academic Press, 2020) PhD Dissertation, <http://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1475546/FULLTEXT01.pdf>, 23; Peer Henrik Hansen, Thomas Tram Pedersen and Morten Stenak, *Den Kolde Krigs Anlæg*, (Kulturstyrelsen, 2013), https://slks.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/kulturarv/fysisk_planlaegning/DKKA_baggrundsnotat_v8.pdf, 76

³ Indenrigs- og sundhedsminister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, "2002-03 - L 109 (som fremsat): Forslag til lov om ændring af lov om beskyttelsesrum", *Folketinget*, 5. december 2002, http://webarkiv.ft.dk/?/Samling/20021/lovforslag_som_fremsat/L109.htm.

disrepair, offering protection for “only” 75 percent of the population, provided, of course, that the shelters were still usable and operational.⁴

Iben Bjørnsson shows with her article “Negotiating Armageddon: Civil Defence in NATO and Denmark, 1949-59” that the concern with civil defence and in particular emergency shelters against nuclear attacks in Denmark is not a new phenomenon, but rather a long-standing national interest that has been ongoing since at least the Second World War. Integrating national and international archival sources from various Danish ministries and public institutions that worked on civil defence, as well as NATO archives, Bjørnsson highlights unexplored transnational interactions and circulation of knowledge, expertise, and people from the supranational NATO-level to the national debates here exemplified by post-war Denmark. Bjørnsson’s article is a comprehensive overview, offering important insights into the integration and lack of integration between NATO as an institution and its member states in the area of civil defence in the case of an all-out nuclear war during the early Cold War. Bjørnsson skillfully integrates the various archival materials to form a coherent narrative taking place in different political and diplomatic arenas concurrently.

“Negotiating Armageddon,” as well as Bjørnsson’s previous contributions to the study of civil defence,⁵ is part of a new strand of Cold War Studies that started before the Russian attacks on the Ukraine, but whose relevance has only grown since February 2022. This new scholarship is concerned with civil defence and civil emergency planning in different geographic and temporal contexts, as well as the interactions of knowledge and power between different international organizations and national bodies that tried to conceptualize and meet the imagined nuclear war.⁶ This new era of civil defence research has greatly expanded and deepened our understanding of this part of the Cold War experience, refocusing the area of interest from whether or not civil defence was effective in its stated goals (217) to the affective, material, and imagined character of civil defence in the face of nuclear war scenario making.

Bjørnsson’s main question in “Negotiating Armageddon” is whether Denmark’s entry into NATO had any effect on Danish civil defence planning. In answering this question, Bjørnsson also outlines the contours of the “early civil defence cooperation in NATO” (217). The history of Danish civil defence and NATO are parallel stories, as both the Danish Civil Defence Organization and NATO were founded in 1949, with Denmark as a founding member. Danish civil defence planners and thinkers, in particular the Civil Defence Director Arthur Dahl, were in a more or less constant knowledge deficit, and were reliant on the United States as the supreme power in NATO and as the arbiter of information regarding nuclear weapons. Dahl, recognizing the challenge of collecting information and knowledge not just for Denmark but for many

⁴ Laura Marie Sørensen, Astrid Fischer, Line Gertsen and Maiken Steen Frederiksen, “Store lokale forskelle: Se, om der er plads til dig i beskyttelsesrummet”, *DR Nyheder*, 4. April 2022, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/store-forskelle-saa-mange-pladser-i-beskyttelsesrum-har-din-kommune>.

⁵ See: Iben Bjørnsson, “Order on Their Home Fronts: Imagining War and Social Control in 1950s NATO”, in Marie Cronqvist, Rosanna Farbøl and Casper Sylvest eds., *Cold War Civil Defence in Western Europe: Sociotechnical Imaginaries of Survival and Preparedness* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84281-9_2 [hereafter *Cold War Civil Defence in Western Europe*]: 25-52; Iben Bjørnsson, Rosanna Farbøl, and Casper Sylvest, “Hvis Krigen Kommer: Forestillinger om fremtiden under Den Kolde Krig”. *Kulturstudier*, 11:1 (2020): 33-61, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/ks.v11i1.120780>; Iben Bjørnsson, “Stands tilløb til Panik?: Civilforsvars pjecer som social kontrol” in Marianna Rostgaard and Morten Pedersen eds., *Atomangst og civilt beredskab: Forestillinger om atomkrig i Danmark 1945-1975*, (Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2020): 65-102.

⁶ For some recent English language scholarship, see: Rosanna Farbøl, “Prepare or Resist? Cold War Civil Defence and Imaginaries of Nuclear War in Britain and Denmark in the 1980s”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 57:1 (2022): 136-158, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220094211031996>; Rosanna Farbøl, “Urban civil defence: Imagining, constructing and performing nuclear war in Aarhus”, *Urban History*, 48:4 (2021): 701-723, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926820000590>; Marie Cronqvist, Rosanna Farbøl and Casper Sylvest eds., *Cold War Civil Defence in Western Europe*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84281-9>; Casper Sylvest, “Pre-enacting the next war: the visual culture of Danish civil defence in the early nuclear age”, *Cold War History*, 22:1 (2022): 79-102, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2021.1874932>.

smaller nations, hoped to set up collaboration within NATO to facilitate the exchange of knowledge for civil defence (220). Dahl's wish was granted— though seemingly without his involvement—when by 1952 NATO founded the “Committee on Civil Organization in Time of War” with a subcommittee, “The Civil Defence Committee” (CDC), that promised to exchange information and set up common standards for civil defence action (221).

Despite the promising prospects of such a central organization for cooperation for the NATO members, issues persisted. The mandate of the CDC was continuously debated, as internal strife between the national representatives made any collaboration a complicated process. The CDC member states had widely different visions of the scope and extent of their national civil defence initiatives, making any common arrangement through NATO difficult and raising the question of what areas of civil defence could be coordinated across national borders, and how this could be done (222). The issue of funding was also central: civil defence was consistently underfunded, lacking behind military financing that took precedence (222, 223, and 229).

Bjørnsson identifies the advent of the hydrogen bomb (the H-bomb) by the early to mid-1950s as a turning point for civil defence within NATO. Up until this point, the creation of sheltering networks and infrastructures had been the stated goal in many countries, but the enormous explosive power of H-bombs, the release of radioactive fallout,⁷ and a re-orientation within the US and by extension NATO towards an (over)reliance on nuclear weapons signalled new realities for many (225). Evacuation, rather than the construction of shelters for the population to seek refuge in, became the primary civil defence tool in the US, which also influenced NATO policymaking (228). However, some member states, like Denmark, wished to continue their shelter programmes, arguing that the rapid technological advances in missile systems made any hope of urban evacuation illusory; a NATO group working on evacuation plans in 1957 estimated that if a war broke out between the Soviet Union and NATO, Europe would have two to five minutes warning to carry out any evacuation (228), an impossible task. Even though the evacuation guidelines of the CDC were also adapted in Denmark, Dahl continued to fight for the build-up of shelters within the CDC and in talks with US representatives (229-230).

While plagued by disagreements, the CDC did allow the member states to congregate in a form where they could exchange information and which paved the way for bi-national agreements and exercises between individual nations (224 and 236). However, on the whole, the CDC seems to have been quite an inefficient body. Bjørnsson's article can be described as an analysis of a series of well-meaning but dead-end policy suggestions in both the national and supranational sphere (220-221, 222, and 231). Indeed, the CDC as an organization that was set up to exchange knowledge, prepare guidelines, and work out common standards across the NATO countries faced many difficulties. The member states' different geographies, histories of civil defence, and conflicting national interests hamstrung most efforts. The US, as the hegemonial power, repeatedly resisted getting overly involved in the details of civil defence planning despite many invitations from the Europeans to do so (231 and 237). This hesitation by the US to get overly embroiled can be seen as an artefact of the US approach to civil defence: To a large degree, individual citizens were left to care for themselves and construct their own shelters, which Bjørnsson also mentions (233). This stands in stark contrast to the more universal welfare societal model of Denmark, in which the protection of the population was seen as a more natural extension of the state's obligations to the citizenry, who in turn were conditioned to act “rationally” in the event of an attack.⁸

Bjørnsson's article should be commended for taking on the difficult task of making sense of both Danish national interests as well as those of NATO and the US, where several initiatives seemingly went nowhere

⁷ See also Casper Sylvest, “Nuclear fallout as risk: Denmark and the thermonuclear revolution” in Johan Östling, Niklas Olsen and David Larsson Heidenblad eds., *Histories of Knowledge in Postwar Scandinavia: Actors, Arenas and Aspirations*, (London: Routledge, 2020), 21-38.

⁸ See also Marianne Rostgaard and Ivan Lind Christensen, “Modernitet, velfærdsstat og den Potentielle Atomkrig efter 1945”, *Kulturstudier*, 1 (2023): 124-144, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/ks.v2023i1.137999>, 133.

and the actors themselves were often undecided for the best course of action. Bjørnsson's writing gives the article a lively sense of discovery and make it an enjoyable read.

Even so, some aspects of Bjørnsson's approach in the article are open to criticism. First, Bjørnsson highlights mechanics by which smaller states within NATO historically have been able to negotiate national interests within the organization (219-220). A central aspect that Bjørnsson brings forth is the role of "superior knowledge" as a way to exert power and influence. While this knowledge aspect is demonstrated throughout the article, a discussion of the specific national and international actors, what Heidenblad and Östling have previously termed "knowledge actors," is lacking. These actors do not necessarily produce knowledge themselves, but locate and translate it, so as to be relevant in a given social or historical context.⁹ An archetypical example of this actor category is Dahl, who features prominently throughout the article. Dahl was in a constant uphill battle to secure access to reliable and proper knowledge, in order to implement his vision of a systematic network of nuclear bomb shelters in the Danish national context. Conceptualizing this actor category further could have been fruitful and would fit in well with Bjørnsson's knowledge approach.

Secondly, while the article's central question—whether NATO influenced Danish civil defence planning—is aptly demonstrated in several ways, the reverse is less obvious. Bjørnsson highlights that smaller member states of NATO could influence the "NATO agenda" in a variety of ways to achieve certain goals (220). Denmark, as a smaller nation, attempted to influence the NATO agenda on civil defence also by inviting the US to further integrate in and with civil defence within the alliance. Bjørnsson showcases this again through Dahl, who on several occasions through both his CDC and US connections attempted to highlight the utility of shelters as a civil defence tool, even if his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful (230-231). In fact, the power of the US within NATO seemed dominant, and, as Bjørnsson shows, the CDC never produced any actionable guidelines, leaving the individual countries to seek out their own solutions (235-236). At least in this area, the ability of the smaller member states of NATO to influence the agenda is not wholly clear.

These considerations should not detract from the many valuable insights of "Negotiating Armageddon." The article represents a break with the national focus of many civil defence studies (218), and clearly demonstrates the complex history of the many actors, institutions and nation states who attempted in the post-war period to negotiate and prepare for the imagined nuclear war. Bjørnsson begins her article by stating that her wish is not to offer an exhaustive and definitive piece on intergovernmental interactions on civil defence during the cold war, but to open the door for others to continue this research in other contexts and with other actors (218). This is a laudable ambition, and Bjørnsson's article is an inspiration for others to carry this mantle.

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⁹ David Larsson Heidenblad and John Östling, "Efterord: Nordisk kunskapshistoria inför 2020-talet," *Kulturstudier*, 2 (2019): 198-202, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7146/ks.v10i2.118023>, 201. See also the recent volume *Knowledge Actors* wherein this actor-category is further expanded and explored. Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad and Anna Nilsson Hammar eds., *Knowledge Actors: Revisiting Agency in the History of Knowledge*, (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2023).