

# “For it’s a jolly good cola”

## The slow Coca-Colonization of Denmark after 1945.

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When the American century began in earnest after 1945, Coca-Cola became an important symbol of the American mass consumer society and, more broadly speaking, of the American Way of Life. This naturally created magnificent market opportunities for the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Company but it also meant that the soft drink could serve as a focus point for Anti-American interests. One well known example is France where a motley crew of interests joined forces in the late 1940s in order to block Coca-Cola from the French market. Prominent in this alliance were wine growers and other beverage producers but also left-wing intellectuals and Communists who saw Coca-Cola’s successful penetration of foreign markets as just one example of American imperialism. “Are we being Coca-Colonized?” the Communist newspaper *L’Humanité* asked rhetorically in 1949 coining a phrase that caught on and is still in use in France and elsewhere. The French campaign against Coca-Cola failed, however. Although a law passed in 1950 enabled the government to ban Coca-Cola, the government fearful of American boycotts of French imports never used this option.

The concept of coca-colonization never made it into the Danish language but anti-Coca-Cola interests were successful in keeping the Danish market closed for the American soft drink for almost 15 years after World War II. Coca-Cola was first introduced in Denmark in 1935 but production came to a stand still because of the world war, and after the war sugar rationing blocked the re-introduction of the drink. However, in 1953 sugar rationing was lifted and the Coca-Cola Export Corporation had high hopes for the development of the Danish market. These hopes came to nought as Danish breweries and soft drink producers persuaded the conservative-liberal government to introduce a special tax of cola-drinks from April 1953. While the general tax of soft drink was 0.12 krone per litre, the cola-drink tax at 1 krone per litre was more than eight times higher making cola drinks as expensive as beer. This was the official rationale of the tax as the government (and breweries) argued that cola-drinks would crowd out beer and thus result in declining revenue from the beer tax – although the underlying motive was clearly

protectionist. The tax, introduced in haste as part of a larger tax package, was passed by the Danish parliament without much debate. The only outspoken opposition was raised by the small Georgist party who was against the tax from a temperance position. The representatives of the small Danish communist party also voted against the tax laws but their arguments focused on the point that indirect taxation was socially unbalanced and they did not comment upon the cola-tax element. In Denmark, the symbolic position of Coca-Cola as an American icon played no role at all in 1953. In fact, the parliamentary spokesman for the governing Liberal Party was not quite sure if the cola drinks originated in America.

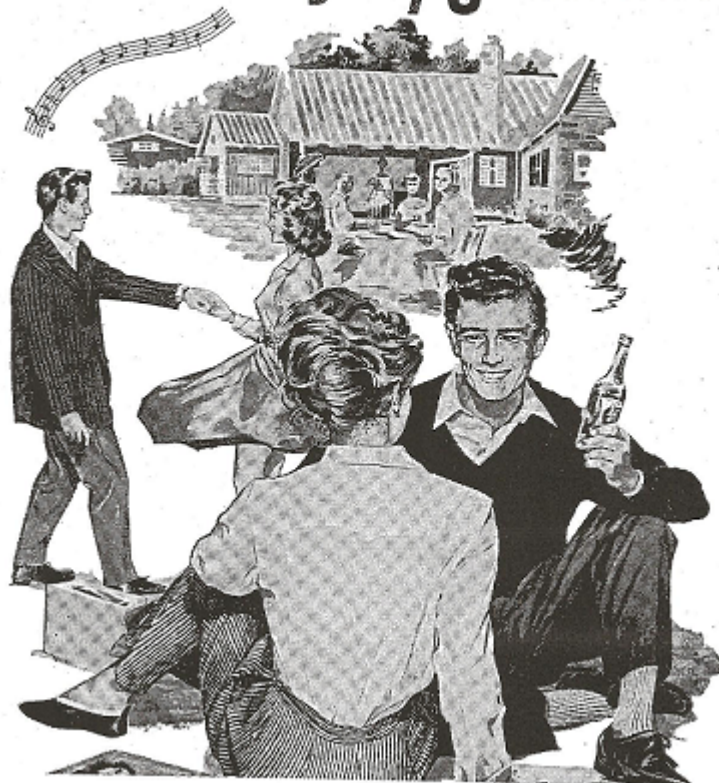
Unsurprisingly the Coca-Cola Company protested against the tax. First through their Danish representative, the attorney Thorvald Mikkelsen but when it became evident that the tax would not go away, in early 1954 the company contacted the State Department which led to an official American complaint against the tax. Without success, however, as the Danish government riposted that the tax was not protectionist as all cola-drinks were subjected to it. Coca-Cola Company kept raising the issue, both through their Danish representative and through the American Embassy, and in 1957 the opposition against the tax became more vocal as the Liberal Party – now in opposition to a Social Democratic government - came out against the tax in the Danish *Folketing*. Coca-Cola Company tried to use this new momentum by sending vice-president Alexander Makinsky to Copenhagen. Here he told the press that Denmark was the only country outside the Iron Curtain where Coca-Cola was not available thus adding the Cold War dimension to the issue in Denmark. The 1957 attempt to get the tax lifted failed but the Coca-Cola interests kept up pressure by lobbying both government, political parties and the press, and late 1958 the tax was rescinded. This was much to the chagrin of the Danish beverage industry whose arguments for the tax now included claims that the Coca-Cola Company used business methods foreign to Denmark, and that cola drinks were “unnatural” and “foreign to the Danish mentality.”

The Danish producers won six months of respite as the special cola tax was to be abolished with effect from 1 July 1959. After initial misgivings 18 major breweries and soft drink producers, lead by the giants of the industry, Carlsberg and Tuborg, decided to take up the challenge from Coca-Cola and start the production of a Danish cola drink, the Jolly Cola. Jolly Cola was a clear copy-cat of “the real thing”. It was

controlled by a newly established company Dansk Coladrik A/S and the 18 participating breweries acted as bottlers of the drink while quality control and marketing were in the hands of Dansk Coladrik. This business model was evidently based on the one developed by the Coca-Cola Company. In the advertisement materials for the new local cola, national overtones were totally absent. Quite the contrary, one of the first slogans was in English – “For it’s a jolly good cola” – and the image in the ad showed a group of young people that would have seemed more at home in the United States than in rather provincial Denmark. A key sales pitch for Jolly Cola was that it was “the large cola” as it was marketed in standard Danish soft drink bottles containing 25 centilitres whereas the Coca-Cola bottle contained only 6 oz. As the price was the same, Jolly Cola was simply a better buy.

Announce A

**-for it's a jolly good cola**



*Draft of the very first advertisement for Jolly Cola, 1959 (Courtesy: Vestfyens Bryggeri).*

When the tax was lifted on 1 July 1959, Denmark witnessed what contemporaries called “the cola war”. Sales figures indicate that the Danes had been waiting for cola drinks impatiently. In July about 15 million bottles of cola drinks were sold (This figure should be compared to the 40-50,000 bottles sold annually in previous years). Sales of beer and other soft drinks remained stable putting paid to the fear that cola drinks would crowd out beer. In the first month of “the cola war”, Jolly Cola outsold Coca-Cola by 50%. However, Coca-Cola gained market shares over the next year or so, and when sales stabilized by 1960, sales of the two competing colas were more or less equal. In the following years the market share of Jolly Cola dropped slightly, but it managed to remain at about 40% until the late 1980s.

The success of a local cola in the competition with Coca-Cola is unique in a European perspective. Elsewhere, local colas had failed miserably as was seen in both Norway and Sweden in the early 1950s, or been reduced to a cult drink as was the case with the German Afri-Cola. How can the success of the Danish Jolly Cola be explained? First, Jolly Cola was the product of a very well-organized beverage industry with a highly developed national infrastructure. From day one of the cola war, Jolly Cola was available in the remotest part of the country. Compared to this, the Coca-Cola bottlers were newcomers. The firm Wilian & Madsen that had the bottling contract for the western part of Denmark could only start a production almost a year after July 1959. DADEKO who was the bottler for eastern Denmark, including Copenhagen, was more efficient but had only bottling capacity for supplying the greater Copenhagen area in the early phase of the “cola war.” This helped establish Jolly Cola as the acquired taste for many Danes even when Coca-Cola penetrated the market. It is also evident that the producers of Jolly Cola had a strong knowledge of the local market which they used successfully in their marketing campaigns. Although the “large cola” argument might have been inspired by Pepsi-Cola’s slogan of the “full 12 oz.” from the American “cola war” in the inter-war years, it was an efficient argument in a country where the Golden Age of high economic growth had hardly begun by the late 1950s. A striking characteristic of the Jolly Cola advertisements is that they never played the national card but used the connotations with leisure and youth that had been successfully developed by the Coca-Cola Company, first in the domestic market, then later internationally. If the Danish breweries had fought the entry of Coca-Cola in the Danish market tooth and nail for most of the 1950s, they proved

very adept in copying their American competitors once Coca-Cola finally arrived in Denmark.

Thus the Coca-Colonization of Denmark came late.

Furthermore, in Denmark Coca-Cola was predominantly seen in economic terms. The debates on the Atlanta soft drink were never linked to debates on America. Tellingly, the Danish Communists voted against the cola tax only four years after their French comrades had coined the concept of Coca-Colonization. Over time this changed. Using Coca-Cola as short hand for America and especially everything wrong with America had become rather common place by the 1970s when the prominent Social Democrat, Mogens Camre, demanded “a total showdown with the Coca-Cola culture that is breaking down our social norms.”

For more on the very slow Coca-Colonization of Denmark after 1945, see Klaus Petersen & Nils Arne Sørensen, “Tørstens allerbedste ven. Cola’ens Danmarkshistorie fra 1930erne til 1960’erne”, published in *Historisk Tidsskrift* (Copenhagen), 108, 2008, pp. 427-476.