

It's early in the morning on March 20, 1942, in Hamar, in Nazi-occupied Norway. Haakon Holmboe, a teacher at the Hamar Cathedral School, is roused from his slumber by a knock on the door. It's the local police, and they tell him to pack a bag and get ready to leave.

Just under two years earlier, Hitler's troops stormed into Norway, quelling conventional armed resistance in a matter of months.

Since then, more than 300000 German troops have been stationed in the country. Their job is to secure the country's 1200 km long coastline and ensure the continued transport of iron ore from Swedish mines to the northern Norwegian port of Narvik.

At the same time, a puppet government headed by Nazi sympathizer Vikdun Quisling is busily trying to turn Norway into a satellite of Germany. Haakon's arrest is part of this effort.

He is just one of the 1100 Norwegian teachers who will be arrested in the coming days by the Quisling government. Not long after, they will be deported to prison and different work camps to face months of torture, starvation and hard labor.

At least one will die.

But why?

What threat could a bunch of Norwegian teachers pose to the Nazis and their dream of an Aryan Nation? As the teachers' arrests suggest, a lot.

**Nancy:** I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you're listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Today, I'm going to tell you the story of one of the largest successful non-violent resistance movements in recent history — the refusal by Norwegian teachers to indoctrinate their students into the Nazi way of thinking.

It's a story about teachers being transformed into activists who have to adopt espionage techniques to spread the word about how to respond to the Nazi threat.

There are train station meetings with stealthy exchanges of messages hidden in matchboxes, hasty phone calls on lines that may or may not have been bugged, and underground cells that churn out newsletters for careful, secret distribution.

There are work camps in northernmost Norway, where teachers are forced to build roads in the cold, dark of the winter in thin clothes, almost no food, and little more than their bare hands.

But most of all, it's a story about bravery in the face of impossible odds, and in the face of a highly uncertain future.

After all, no one knew who was going to win the war. The Norwegian population had no idea if they would be occupied for decades, maybe longer. This is not as improbable as you might think. Norway had only won its full independence from Sweden in 1905, and was previously a part of Denmark from 1524 to 1814.

And it's a testament to the teachers themselves, who first and foremost put their students' welfare ahead of their own, sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

So... how did they thwart Quisling?

To answer this question, I have with me two guides.

**Martin:** My name is Martin Øystese. I'm assistant professor in the Department for Social Science at the Institute for Teacher Training at NTNU, in the history field.

**Unni:** I'm Unni Eikeseth, and I'm an associate professor at the Department of Teacher Education here at NTNU.

**Nancy:** In 2022, Unni and Martin collaborated on a a three-part Norwegian-language podcast describing the teacher's successful fight against the Nazis. This podcast episode is based in part on that.

I asked Martin to set the stage for what led to the teachers' arrest.

**Martin:**

The Nazi Germans come to Norway in 1940, but it takes two years before we get the Quisting government led by Vidkun Quisling. And the first thing he does, or the new government does in 1942, is to make two laws, both concerning the control of youth. One says that the youth should all be a part of a Norwegian equivalent to the Hitler Jugend, the organization for youth in Germany. The other one states that all teachers should be members of a new teacher's union with very close ties to the Norwegian National Samling, which is the equivalent to the Nazi party in Germany.

**Nancy:** Martin says this first action by Quisling's was part of a larger plan.

**Martin:** Quisling wants to prepare the ground for a corporate government, a government with very close ties to different parts of the industry and the different workers unions and so on. And he starts with the teachers. He starts with the teachers probably because by getting the teachers on board, it will give him a contact network that will spread to the farthest reaches of the country. And it would also be a

good channel for the government to influence youth, and thereby controlling what the youth will learn and securing that they know the values of Nazi ideology.

**Nancy:** This is something the teachers will come to oppose — a decision that will test their will in ways they couldn't have imagined.

**Nancy:** The teachers' opposition wasn't simply a reaction to the Quisling government.

**Unni:**

Norway at this point had some teachers who had actually been working in Germany in the years before ... and they had been seeing what was going on there.

**Unni:**

One of these Norwegian teachers with experience from Germany was Einar Høigård.

**Nancy:** Høigård had moved to Hamburg, Germany in 1934 to teach Norwegian language and literature at the University of Hamburg. This was just a year after Hitler came to power. Høigård saw how Hitler made major changes in the way German students were educated. For one thing, the curriculum was changed to prioritize physical education and make it more like military exercises than what was more commonly offered in schools. Racial studies were made compulsory. And then there was the Hitler Youth, the Hitler Jugend.

**Unni:**

Well, they saw that the German government was using this youth organization, Hitler Jugend, to get control over the youth.

So when the Germans took over Norway, they were sort of prepared and they sort of knew what might be coming.

**Nancy:** It begins slowly, first, in February, 1941, before Quisling is in power. The Norwegian Minister of Church and Education sends a letter to all principals in Oslo. The letter orders them to take all pupils to an upcoming exhibition about the Hitler Youth.

Einar Høigård and his colleagues react quickly. Høigård especially has seen how this indoctrination has worked in Germany. He knows the National Samling wants to turn Norwegian children and youths into good Nazis, and to do that, they need to control the teachers. So the teachers refuse. The Ministry responds by threatening to fire the teachers. While no one is fired, the teachers are fired up.

**Nancy:** The teachers realized that they had to stand together, and present a united front to the Nazis. But to do that, they need to spread the word.

**Martin:** For the teachers, it was important to get information out and get it out in a way that was easy to understand, because it was a question of time.

So they come up with four points that they want all teachers to adhere to. And the first one is that every teacher deny demand of membership in, or loyalty to the National Samling, the party. The second one, deny every attempt on spreading of propaganda in the school. Third, deny every order from non-competent authorities, so authorities not directly linked to the school structure. And lastly, deny every demand of cooperation with the NSUF, which is the youth organization of the ruling party.

**Nancy:** Einar Høigård had a hand in this. He and his colleagues start printing an illegal magazine, called Norsk Skole. They use this in part to spread the word about the four points all teachers should cite as they resist the government.

**Nancy:** The teachers knew they needed as many of the country's 14000 teachers to sign on to this plan. This was a little trickier than you might think. The Germans have been in power for more than a year. Norway is a long country with many remote villages and towns. How are they going to reach all those teachers without being stopped by the Nazis? Here's where the spy stuff comes in.

**Martin:**

It's a very impressive feat to actually get the word out because it's in a period where most of them have second thoughts when it comes to using the telephone, because they think that it might be someone listening at the other end.

So they do it in different ways. They have contacts in different places, and they send people out with messages, sometimes written with invisible ink, sometimes hidden in match boxes.

**Nancy:** So the teachers manage to organize and spread the word about the four points. Then, on February, 1, 1942, Quisling is formally sworn in as Prime Minister. Just 4 days later, he passes the laws requiring the teachers to join a new Norwegian Teachers' Union, and the requirement to support the Nazi Youth Front. Høigård organizes teachers in the Oslo area to oppose these laws. In Hamar, Haakon Holmboe has taken a similar role.

The passage of the two laws is the turning point. The teachers need to be more proactive. They secretly come up with language that all teachers should use when they refuse the Quisling government's demands. The language basically says that joining Quisling's new Norwegian Teachers Association and supporting the NSUF, the Nazi youth organization, goes against the teachers' conscience and terms of employment.

LETTER: I declare that I cannot take part in the education of the youth of Norway along those lines which have been outlined for the National Samling Youth Service, this being against my conscience. According to what the Leader of the new teachers' organization has said, membership of this organization will mean an obligation for me to assist in such education and would also force me to do other acts which are in conflict with the obligations of my profession. I find that I must declare that I cannot regard myself as a member of the new teachers' organization.

**Nancy:** This letter was secretly sent out on the night of the 14th of February.

**Martin:** It's kind of like a spy movie. They send it out to contact people at different places. And it's their job to spread it into the local schools in order to have as many people as possible informed about the situation. It's a massive success ... because even though they don't use the phone, they manage to spread the word to most parts of southern Norway, even though there are some examples where they don't get the word in time.

**Nancy:** Only 6 days later, on 20 February, thousands of teachers from all over Norway have sent in letters to the Ministry of Church and Education stating the same thing: They cannot join the Teachers Association and they cannot support the Nazi youth organization. The exact number of letters is unknown, but it was thought to be as many as 11,000 letters, out of a total of 14,000 teachers.

The letter campaign takes Quisling and his government by surprise. The fact that the teachers managed to organize a shared response in such a short time shows that the teachers have strong leaders and good communication channels.

**Martin:**

I do think that Quisling probably expected some backlash, but he didn't expect what came, which was a massive protest, which also had support from parents and from the church as well as other parts of society.

**Nancy:** The government responds three days later. Any teacher who does not withdraw their letters of refusal by March 1 will be fired. The government also closes all the schools for a month, under the feeble excuse that there is a lack of fuel.

March 1 comes and goes and the teachers hold out.

Then comes the knock on Haakon Holmboe's door.

**Martin:** It all comes to arrests of more than a thousand teachers from all over the country. The teachers are at first put in local prisons. ....Then they're sent to a prison

outside of Oslo called Grini, whereas the people in the middle part of Norway are sent to a place outside of Trondheim. And there they, again, get a chance to sign the documents that will ensure them their freedom, according to the government. Many teachers are afraid of the consequences, but they choose to stand their ground.

**Nancy:** And for the first few months, the imprisoned teachers were treated reasonably. They had enough to eat, and the work they had to do was tolerable. Virtually all the teachers hold out — just five sign the papers that Quisling wants everyone to sign.

And then, on April 1, the 570 teachers held at Grini are loaded onto cattle cars for transport.

When the teachers boarded the cattle cars, they were terrified they would be shipped to Germany to a concentration camp — or to be executed.

So when the cattle cars head north, they are relieved.

That relief will be short-lived. The trains take them to Jørstadmoen, where they meet up with teachers sent there from Hamar. Now there are 686 teachers at this camp. Quisling, with the support of Reichskommissar Josef Terboven, is determined to break them. Thus begins what the teachers come to call “torture gymnastics”.

**Martin:**

At Jørstadmoen, they get up at seven in the morning, and they only get off at seven in the evening. And during this time they have gymnastics and they have forced labor. The gymnastics can be to crawl through the snow. Sometimes they have to crawl with their hands on the back. The forced labor can be to move snow from one part of the camp to another part of the camp, and that without getting any tools for the job. So they use planks that they find, they use cups, they use plates, whatever they have at hand. They get an hour and a half break during the day. But during this hour and a half, they're allowed to sit, but not to lay down.

So, in all of this, maybe the worst part of this isn't the actual work, but many of the teachers, they don't wear anything other than what they wore when they were arrested. So there's no chance of changing clothes. And they're walking around in 30 centimeters of wet snow. So they don't have any chance of getting dry. And in the evenings they only have about an hour to make a fire before the fire has to go out. So it's, it's cold, it's wet, and there's very, very little food they get during this period.

**Nancy:** Haakon Holmboe is one of the prisoners at Jørstadmoen. He speaks German, so he is forced to act as a translator for the Nazi guards and administrators who are holding the teachers captive. After several days at the camp, the teachers are

called in to see if they will end their resistance to Quisling's demands. Most refuse, but some few give in.

On Saturday, April 11, the teachers are assembled again. Five hundred will be sent to the north, although they don't know that yet.

They are sent by cattle car to Trondheim, to be shipped north to Kirkenes, a small town on the border with the then Soviet Union. It was a terrible journey.

**Unni:** They're transported in the ship, from Trondheim and up to Kirkenes. Normally the ship is only certified for 250 passengers, but here they have almost 500 teachers, with very little possibilities go to the toilet. And this is just part of demoralizing people.

**Nancy:** It's not just the situation on the ship that is terrifying for the teachers — the journey itself could be quite dangerous. There were mines along the coast, and British airplanes could swoop out of the sky at any moment and bomb the ship.

**Unni:** And the teachers at this point many of them now, they want to sign this letter because they just see that this is really, really horrible. And they're in a very dangerous situation.

**Nancy:** In fact, the teachers do tell their German guards that they want to agree to Quisling's demands. But nothing comes of it. It's still not clear why.

**Martin:**

Yeah. It's a mystery. Maybe it's because Quisling wants to punish them. We know that Quisling at this point is really angry with the teachers. Their protest has already cost him great damage to, I won't say to his reputation because that was never very good, but to his project.

So I think the teachers who say that now they could sign, they do so a little bit out of solidarity because are so many people getting seriously ill on board the ship that they want to end it. They fear that several of them will not survive this journey, both because they're sick, but also because there are many mines along the coast. So it says something about the conditions of onboard this ship that they decide now is the time to give up this fight.

**Nancy:** But once the ship sets sail, the teachers realize that for whatever reason, Quisling has not accepted their decision. They are terrified. When the boat docks briefly in Tromsø, in northern Norway, someone has managed to get a hold of a newspaper. There Reichskommissar Josef Terboven attacks the teacher's resistance movement and calls their action a strike:

*"Attempting to strike, however, is the same as disturbing public peace and order, and thus threatens Germany's interests, especially those of the German armed forces. The matter is therefore no longer solely a domestic Norwegian issue, and I am, as before, obligated to uphold and ensure the interests of the German armed forces in Norway. That I am prepared to fulfill this duty with all the necessary firmness and determination, should be absolutely clear."*

**Nancy:** But on April 25, something unexpected happens. Just as the ship with the imprisoned teachers leaves Tromsø, a letter is sent to all the school boards across the country. The circular, from the Ministry of Church and Education, says the law about the Norwegian Teachers Association has been widely misinterpreted.

**Martin:** The circular says that membership in the new teachers' union is not a political membership. It says that it was never meant to be. And it's also a big misunderstanding.

So for the teachers, it's a victory for them. They can, in all practicalities, go back to their work and do pretty much the same thing as they did earlier.

Quisling loses this war on the teachers, but he tries to sell it in as a victory by saying that, oh no, this has all been a misunderstanding from the, from the get-go, it was never meant to be linked to the political party, it's just a misunderstanding. So he tries to say that it wasn't our fault that it came to this, but it is a victory for the teachers.

**Nancy:** Still, the teachers are not freed. And now more than ever, they are determined to resist — even though Quisling has essentially given in to their resistance.

**Martin:**

Yes, so they travel to Kirkenes, which is in the northeastern most part of Norway on the border to Russia, or at that time the Soviet Union, which is where one of the front lines of the war is. They are there probably of two reasons. One, they're out of the way of the most central part of the Norwegian resistance. But it's also a very important part for the Germans, it's where a lot of their supplies come in to support the frontline. And there's a lot of ships coming in and the teachers are put to work. Many of them work at the harbor, whereas others are set to build a road.

**Nancy:** These are teachers, of course, not dockworkers or manual laborers. On May 6th, the worst happens. Even though it's May, it's still full on winter in Kirkenes. The teachers are unloading a ship, winching heavy pallets out of the hold. Seven men are in the hold, the rest are outside. Suddenly the load that is being winched up breaks free and plummets into the hold.



**Unni:**

One of the teachers, Olav Hole, falls down and the other teachers that he's been working with, they can see that he's bleeding from his head. And so they cry for help. Some German officers comes and send him to the hospital. But later the same day they're told that he has died.

**Nancy:** Not only that, the teachers' living conditions are truly terrible. They are eventually moved from the barracks where they are first housed to a camp which is made out of cardboard. The months roll by, the teachers toil and no one is set free.

By the end of July, the oldest and sickest are told they can go home but only if they sign.

**Nancy:** It's a weird situation. Remember, in April, Quisling's government completely backed off on what the new Norwegian Teachers' Association actually required teachers to do. When it was first implemented, it would have bound the teachers to indoctrinate their students into Nazi ideology. The April announcement essentially removed that requirement. There's no risk for the teachers to sign.

**Martin:** Among the teachers that are in Kirkenes, there are still some teachers that say that they shouldn't sign anything that comes from the National Samling. But they agree that they will make a decision together. So they hold a meeting and they decide that they should sign. And when they, the majority decides this, they all end up signing it.

**Nancy:** Nevertheless, they still don't get sent home.

**Martin:** The reason why they have to wait is probably because it's not on the top of the agenda to get the teachers home. Now pretty much everyone is just waiting, which is the situation the government can live with.

It also takes quite some logistics to get all these teachers transported from the very north of the country to the south. And it's not an option to give them the same treatment that they gave on the way up. So therefore the teachers have to wait. Only in late August, the first ship sails, and then it's the first part of the group gets to go

**Nancy:** The waiting for the teachers who remain is agonizing. Haakon Holmboe, who has been able to send letters to his wife Lotte, wrote to her on Oct. 31, still uncertain when they will be able to leave.

*Since my last letter, the cold has really set in. The past few days have been between 15-20 degrees, and it's undeniably quite chilly. We've now started to use the heater at night, and then we're reasonably comfortable. But as soon as the warmth*

*subsides, it's cold in the tent, and the walls and ceiling are frosted all the time. For us here in the tent, most of us being accustomed to sports and having good equipment, it's almost fun to live like this, but it's unfortunate for many others, especially the elderly and less capable. The long sessions from 6:30 AM to 7:00 PM without entering a warm room, sometimes without food, are quite tiring when you don't have warm hands and feet. Surprisingly, not many people are feeling unwell, definitely none seriously. ... Sometimes I dream about the Jøtul stove and how wonderful it would be to have it here.*

**Martin:** The last group only gets to leave in the beginning of November. They have to wait for a suitable ship. And there's probably also an element of Quisling not minding them being punished some more.

**Nancy:** But in the end, they won. Quisling himself acknowledged how damaging the teachers' opposition was for his government in this speech.

*"It is you teachers who are to blame for us not having a Riksting. It is your fault that Norway today has not become a free and independent kingdom. You teachers have ruined everything for me!"*

**Nancy:** The story of the teachers' fight against the Nazis reached far beyond Norway's borders. Norwegians in exile, particularly in the UK, talk about the teachers and their bravery on radio broadcasts. The Norwegian King mentions them in his 17th of May speech in 1942 at the Coliseum in London, where he says:

The recent abuses against the church and schools fill us with disgust and anger. There will come a day of reckoning after this, and every German must then be held accountable for all the inhumane acts he has committed against defenseless people.

Across the Atlantic, Franklin D. Roosevelt encourages the world to note Norway's bravery a speech on Sept. 16, 1942, celebrating the first lend-lease warship being given to the Royal Norwegian Navy.

*"If there is anyone who still wonders why this war is being fought, let him look to Norway. If there is anyone who has any delusions that this war could have been averted, let him look to Norway; and if there is anyone who doubts the democratic will to win, again I say, let him look to Norway."*

**Nancy:** So for both the teachers overall and Norway as a country, the teachers' bravery and willingness to fight for what they believed in was a victory.

But what did this victory mean for the individual teachers?

Haakon Holmboe, the teacher who was arrested in Hamar, arrived home to his wife and three children at the end of November, 1942, free at last. He continued his resistance work and was arrested again towards the end of the war. He died in 1980, a successful teacher, author and historian, at the age of 75.

The picture wasn't so rosy for Einar Høigård, the teacher who spent time in Germany before the war and was among the first to mobilize teachers to oppose Quisling's plan.

Høigård never was arrested with his fellow teachers, and continued to work as a central figure in the resistance movement against the Nazis.

But his efforts made him an increasingly important target, and in November, 1943 he was finally arrested. The Nazis knew by now that he knew a lot, and likely tortured him. Given the secrets he knew, and the brutality of his captors, he must have seen only one way out. On 25 November, 1943, he got his chance, when he was inadvertently left alone in the heavily guarded State Police offices in Oslo.

Høigård went out to the stairwell, and on the landing between the third and fourth floor of the building, he removed his hat and glasses, opened a window and jumped.

The teachers' fight against Nazism is history, it's true, but the fight to keep schools open and free for all kinds of expression is equally relevant today.

The only question we have to ask ourselves is are we brave enough to fight for that freedom.

**Nancy:** I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you've been listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

My guests on today's episode were Martin Øystese and Unni Eikeset, both of whom were essential to the excellent Norwegian language podcast, *Lærarkrigen mot Quisling*. Thanks to them and to Randi Lillealtern for letting me use their podcast as the basis for this episode. Thanks also to Steinar Branslet for voicing Haakon Holmboe, Vikun Quisling and Josef Terboven. And finally, thanks to the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation for supplying the sound file with Franklin Roosevelt's "Look to Norway" speech, from September 16, 1942.

If you want to know more about the history discussed in this episode, check out our show notes. And if you've enjoyed today's show, consider leaving us a review. Sound design, and editorial help from Historiebruket. Thanks for listening.