When Marte Michelet’s book came out last autumn, it caused considerable controversy. In the ensuing debate, Second World War historians and families of resistance fighters, as well as Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and their descendants, rose to speak.

In Michelet’s book, many Norwegians saw an attempt to taint the memory of highly respected members of the resistance. Historians criticised her for treating historical sources sloppily and for making bold claims that were insufficiently backed up by evidence. Not least, she was accused of having written a condemnatory, moralising history that reflects little understanding for the predicaments in which the members of the resistance found themselves. What exactly triggered these strong reactions?

Michelet’s key argument is that some leading figures within the civilian resistance movement Hjemmefronten were informed about the German plan to deport the Norwegian Jews months in advance, yet did not act upon it. They presumably received warnings from two sides: from their contacts in the German military resistance, Helmuth James von Moltke and Theodor Stelzer, and from their informants inside the Norwegian state police. An interview conducted in 1970 with the former Norwegian SOE agent and resistance hero Gunnar Sønsteby by the historian Ragnar Ulstein represents the linchpin in her argument. In this interview, a recording of which still exists, Sønsteby stated that the Hjemmefronten leadership learned about the action against the Jews three months before it was implemented: «Ja, vi kom borti dette tre måneder før dette ble iverksatt, og da var det vår hundre prosent oppfatning at jødene ville bli tatt i Norge.» [“Yes, we stumbled across it three months before it was put into effect, and then we understood one-hundred per cent that the Jews in Norway would be rounded up.”] (p. 156).

They did not, however, share this information with the wider public through broadcasts or illegal newspapers, for example. Nor did they warn the Jews about the danger they were in or take action to help them out of the country. Asked later why they had done nothing to prevent the Jews from being arrested, all members of the Hjemmefronten, including...
Sønsteby, posited that they had been completely taken by surprise when the order for the mass arrest of all male Jews leaked out.

Michelet thus accuses the Hjemmefronten of nothing less than having abandoned the Norwegian Jews at the point that their lives were in immediate danger. She criticises the Hjemmefronten leaders for forging the heroic myth of the resistance and their informants inside the police who had done their utmost to warn and help the remaining Jews out of the country. Part of this myth was to lay the blame for the Jews’ deportation partly on the Jews themselves, suggesting that they had been unwilling to heed the warnings.

With this book, Michelet aims to set the historical record straight. She seeks to demonstrate that it was not the Hjemmefronten who rushed to the rescue of the Norwegian Jews in autumn 1942, but Norwegian and German individuals who largely acted of their own accord. According to the author, it was a circle of friends around the expatriate German businessman Wolfgang Geldmacher and his Norwegian wife Randi Eckhoff who were the first to warn and hide Jews in Oslo when they obtained information that a mass arrest of Jewish men was planned for 26 October 1942.

Michelet asks important and uncomfortable questions: Why did the Norwegian resistance and the government in exile show so little interest in or empathy for the Jews in Norway, despite having ample information about the measures taken against the Jews all over Europe? Why did neither call upon their countrymen to protest against the mass arrest or provide support to the persecuted Jews, as they had done with other Norwegians in danger, such as teachers or students? And finally, why did the Hjemmefronten act so late, only springing into action after the first deportation and even then, as Michelet suggests, reluctantly and half-heartedly?

Hva visste hjemmefronten? is designed as an investigative piece. Adopting this format, it begins with the story of a meeting in a café during which an informant puts the author on the trail. Whether one likes this form of history telling or not, Michelet certainly knows how to keep an audience interested. She writes well and does not get caught up in detail. This benefits the flow of the narrative, without a doubt. However, it glosses over evidence that would have added nuance to the picture and thereby weakened her argument.

The monograph is largely organised chronologically and divided into 23 main chapters of varying length, plus a foreword, prologue, and epilogue. The focus is on the period between the start of the German occupation and the last deportation transport on 25 February 1943. The last two chapters discuss the post-war period and the Hjemmefronten’s influential role in constructing the national memory of the Second World War. The author relies primarily on secondary literature and on interviews conducted by the historian Ragnar Ulstein in the 1970s. His interview with SOE agent Gunnar Sønsteby is awarded a whole chapter.

The book can roughly be divided into three parts: The first sketches the historical context, the roles of key Hjemmefronten members and their German military contacts, as well as their social and ideological background, including their views on Jews.

The middle part outlines the information flow between the Norwegian resistance, their contacts in the German military, the exiled government in London and the Norwegian legation in Stockholm. It aims to demonstrate how much the key players knew about the ongoing and planned actions against the Jews. Michelet argues that their unwillingness to take a stance or spread information about the dangers the Jews faced was result of several factors: anti-Jewish stereotypes paired with a genuine lack of interest in the fate of the Jews. Strategic considerations also played a role, since there was a fear that standing up for the Jews would provoke negative reactions in the Norwegian population.
The third part of the book focuses on autumn 1942, when many of the Norwegian Jews were arrested and deported to Auschwitz. It describes various rescue operations and discusses the helpers and their motives. It also reflects on the reactions of the government in exile and the Norwegian legation, drawing particular attention to the latter’s negative attitude towards Norwegian Jews in Swedish exile. Chapter 12 has a central place as it examines Sønsteby’s statement that the Norwegian resistance leaders knew about the planned actions against the Jews as early as summer 1942. Given that Michelet builds her argument upon this remark, it is understandable that much of the debate revolved around the question of whether Sønsteby’s recollections can be trusted. Most historians are dismissive, arguing that he must have misremembered. They make a point that other members of the resistance denied having received any warning, and that even Sønsteby himself had provided contradictory information. For some historians, the question of when exactly the Hjemmefronten received knowledge of the planned measures against the Jews is relevant to establishing whether the Nazi leadership in Berlin issued the orders, or whether the decision was taken locally. For others, the date is more of ethical relevance, for if the Hjemmefronten had really been informed in time to respond, their inaction would be morally questionable.

Unfortunately, the narrow focus of the discussion on whether Sønsteby was informed in summer 1942 distracts from other important issues. Whether his claim is correct or not, it does not change the fact that a concerted rescue operation was set in motion very late, more than a month after the mass arrest of Jewish men and only after the DS Donau with 529 Jews on board had left for Auschwitz on 26 November 1942. Michelet’s book suggests that even then the Hjemmefronten leadership committed itself only half-heartedly to the Jewish rescue. It left the perilous task of smuggling Jews over the border into Sweden largely to the initiative of idealistic amateurs, as well as to what she describes as profit-hungry entrepreneurs. In addition, it closed most of its rescue routes for Jews after the capture of a Jewish couple threatened to expose members of the Hjemmefronten.

She interprets the Hjemmefronten’s inaction as a consequence of established anti-Semitism, which was common in Norwegian society long before the Nazis came to power. Even though the number of Norwegians who desired a ‘removal’ of the Jews were in a minority, many considered Jews as second-class citizens who did not count as ‘proper’ Norwegians. It is for this reason, Michelet argues, that the Norwegian Jews and the impending actions against them simply did not appear on the exiled government’s and the Norwegian resistance’s radars. Consequently, they hardly ever addressed the plight of the Jews, let alone called upon their compatriots to help the Jews or protest against the measures taken against them, deeming it unwise to appear as their protectors. The fact that the Jews in Norway had only few defenders (Michelet names Bishop Arne Fjellbu as one example) made them easy prey for the Nazis’ exterminatory goals.

Hva visste hjemmefronten? is written with a broad Norwegian audience in mind. Michelet neither acknowledges nor engages with developments in international Holocaust research, perhaps assuming that this might deter the general reader. However, by situating her study within a broader European context and scholarly debates, Michelet could have shown that the Norwegian case was far from unique in German-occupied Europe. This goes for the widespread negative attitudes against Jews that impeded their timely rescue, as well as for the suppression of the particular Jewish experience in the construction of national myths after the war. Moreover, studies on the Holocaust in Poland, France or Yugoslavia have shown

that the presence of strong resistance groups had little correlation to the survival rate for Jews.2

About 15 years ago, a similar controversy erupted in Germany over how much the German military resistance knew about the mass slaughter of Jews that took place in the wake of the attack on the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. The finding, that many high-ranking officers in the resistance knew about the mass shootings from a very early stage, but acted with considerable delay or not at all, was met with disbelief and countercriticism. The revelations were interpreted as another attempt to tarnish the memory of the military resistance. Those who felt that they had to defend the military resistance against the criticism found it difficult to reconcile the principled standards the resistance espoused with evidence that pointed to the proliferation of anti-Semitic views within the aristocratic circles of the German military.3

Michelet has also been accused of passing judgement on the past without understanding the historical complexities and the specific predicaments that the protagonists faced. The accusation of moral history writing is indeed a difficult one. While historians – and journalists – strive for utmost objectivity, they are also allowed to pass judgement about the past or the actions of historical actors. This goes especially for the history of the Holocaust.

But history is complex. Human beings, their actions and motives, are multifaceted and often contradictory. It is the historian’s task to make sense of this complexity and explain why humans act in a specific way. Michelet, however, paints with a broad brush. In her desire to make Norwegians face up to an uncomfortable truth, she makes sweeping arguments, paying little heed to nuances or to factors (some might say evidence) that would complicate her reasoning. Whether the mistakes she was criticised for are negligible, or amount to scholarly dishonesty, is a matter of perspective.

More serious in my opinion is Michelet’s dualistic view of history. Her argument builds upon friend-foe categories. She describes Moltke and Stelzer, as well as the German expatriate Geldmacher, as unequivocally positive figures. In contrast, her presentation of the leadership of the Hjemmefronten and the Carl Fredriksens Transport, which smuggled several hundred Jews over the Swedish border in November and December 1942, is more critical. Michelet offers a particularly scathing and, probably in the eyes of many, unfair criticism of the network known as Carl Fredriksens Transport and one of its main organisers, Alf Pettersen. She argues that a considerable number of helpers, not least Pettersen, were primarily motivated by material gain and took advantage of the perilous situation the Jews found themselves in by pressing them for money and valuables.

For Michelet, helpers were either motivated by idealism, or by greed. In reality, however, altruistic feelings could exist side by side with a desire to be materially compensated for the high risk involved. She concedes as much on page 264. Some helped Jews to escape over the border, despite having misgivings about Jews in general. Harald Welzer reminded us that anti-Semitic prejudices «do not lead directly to murder»4; nor do they, one could

add, preclude the willingness to lend support to individual Jews. Motivations and minds are complex, as are experiences. While some Jews spoke, and speak, highly of their helpers, others who had been pressed for large sums of money felt, quite rightfully, indignant that their helpers exploited their situation.

The fact that Jews were the only group asked to pay for being helped over the border is unjustifiable. Yet, in branding all those who took payment for smuggling Jews into Sweden as «svindlere, profitører og utpressere» [«swindlers, profiteers and extortionists»] (p. 338), Michelet makes a crass oversimplification. Whether those helpers who took payment deserve credit for participating in the highly risky rescue operation is a matter of opinion. The fact remains that far fewer people would have been rescued from Nazi persecution if they had been forced to rely entirely on idealistic helpers.

This lack of differentiation frustrates the historians and antagonises many readers. At the same time, Michelet has to be lauded for challenging dominant narratives. She is not the first to point out the presence of anti-Semitic views in the Hjemmefronten or to criticise some of the helpers’ surprising lack of understanding for the predicaments the Norwegian Jews faced in autumn 1942. Yet, due to its uncompromising style, Michelet’s book is the first to effectively initiate a broad public debate. Hva visste hjemmefronten? is a well written and gripping account of a society that – preoccupied with its own struggles – abandons the weakest. As such it is also highly topical. It is to be hoped that the debate that Michelet’s book has sparked encourages more people to acknowledge the Holocaust – and anti-Semitism – as an integral part of Norwegian history and not something that is only remotely connected to the national experience.