

Syttende Mai During the War

For more than 150 years Syttende Mai has been celebrated as a salute to tolerance and national unity. The day is truly a declaration of love to Norway's most important values of peace, freedom and equality. But how was the day celebrated during the German occupation?

The German authorities were quite clear over what this democracy-oriented national holiday meant for Norwegian loyalists, and put in place measures to fight and punish any rabble-rousers.

On the first Syttende Mai after the German invasion, all celebration or display of the flag was banned by the Germans. The flag was used as a visual protest against the occupation, so the Germans kept issuing new orders to solve the problem. Singing the national song was forbidden and any flags had to be hidden away.

In 1941, Syttende Mai was declared to be a normal workday in Norway, but it was nonetheless decided to allow flags to be flown from poles...but not at half mast, as many Norwegians decided to do as an expression of the country's tragic situation under German rule. Afterwards the Germans instituted dozens of new restrictions on the flag. In effect, it became forbidden to carry or wear the flag or its colors. In larger cities, this meant that Syttende Mai was most commonly commemorated indoors.

And so the situation persisted through the war. Next to the king's monogram the flag was among the most important symbols of a free Norway, and the Germans fought an endless war against the obstinacy of the Norwegians. As the Germans enacted more and more restrictions, people started using more subtle symbols, like paper clips and nisse hats.

It comes as no surprise then that the Syttende Mai celebration of 1945 -0 just a few days after the German surrender – became an explosion of joy in the national colors in those feverish spring days.

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