

D. G. Kirby. *The Baltic World 1772-1993: Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change*. London: Longman, 1995. \$56.00, textbook, ISBN 978-0-582-00409-2.



Reviewed by Steven T. Duke

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In this volume David Kirby, a Professor of Modern History at the School of Slavonic Studies of the University of London and author of numerous well-received books on Scandinavian history, endeavors to survey the last two centuries of northern European history. Although the term "Baltic" is often used in relation to the so-called Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Kirby employs the term to embrace virtually every state that touches on the Baltic Sea. Thus, this work considers the history of Denmark, Sweden (which included Norway until 1905), Finland, Germany (before 1871 the emphasis is on Prussia), Poland, and Russia, in addition to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This book also serves as a companion volume to the author's previous work entitled *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period: The Baltic World, 1492-1772* (Longman, 1990).

Kirby divides his 440 pages of text into two main sections, with 1917-18 serving as the dividing line between the "Age of Empire" (during which "the Russian empire dominated the Baltic region") and the post-World War I era (in which empires collapsed, new national states emerged,

and "Russian hegemonic claims in the region were revived by the Soviet Union") (see page 9). Kirby concentrates primarily on political developments (particularly on "high politics") in the region, with discussion of economic, social, and cultural issues scattered throughout.

It is important to note that this book's greatest strength—its focus on making comparisons and contrasts between different countries—is also its greatest weakness. Kirby makes great efforts to make comparisons of political and other developments throughout the region, many of which are insightful; yet these comparisons are often done in a way that requires the reader to guess about the objects of these comparisons, as antecedents are sometimes missing or unclear. Because educated guess-work is necessary throughout the book, this reviewer feels that the volume is more appropriate for graduate students or advanced undergraduates with an in-depth knowledge of the region than it is for students in an introductory survey course.

Kirby indicates that the struggle between feudalism/ particularism and modernism/rationalism

defines northern Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Efforts on the part of rulers such as Count A.P. Bernstorff of Denmark, Gustav III of Sweden, and Frederick William III of Prussia to introduce social and economic reforms or to systematize the functioning of their realms often met with stiff resistance from the nobility and even from townspeople and peasants. In fact, corporate structures "remained essentially intact" (p. 57) in many areas throughout this period, particularly with regard to the privileges and influence of the nobility. This period also witnessed the frequent redrawing of political boundaries, as Finland, Poland-Lithuania, Pomerania, Norway, and Slesvig-Holstein (Kirby's spelling) were seized or annexed by various military powers in the region.

Kirby attaches several labels to the period from 1848 to 1918, calling it the "era of nationalism," the "age of imperialism," and an "era of change." The two most important developments during this period were arguably the consumer revolution ("the greatest revolution of the modern age," p. 168) and attempts in Germany and Russia to assimilate minority populations. In this regard, it is instructive to note that Germany's efforts to assimilate its Danish minority in North Slesvig and its Polish minority in East Prussia were strikingly similar to efforts by the Russian government in the empire's Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian and Finnish provinces.

Such assimilationist policies generally backfired, Kirby argues, because they encouraged local national identities to develop. Economic growth and increased social mobility also stimulated the development of national identities and weakened the power of the central government in local areas. Yet non-Russians and non-Germans were not uniformly opposed to governmental policies, for many saw the social and economic benefits that came through adapting to central policies, even if it meant learning another language or moving out of their homeland to seek education or employ-

ment. Incidentally, it was often national-minded individuals living outside linguistic or state boundaries who were most noticeable in promoting national movements and preserving national cultures; for example, Lithuanian books and newspapers printed in the Latin alphabet were smuggled into Lithuania from East Prussia at a time when such materials were illegal in the Russian Empire.

The goals of local nationalists in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland were realized with the creation of five independent states following the Bolshevik seizure of power in October/November 1917, the withdrawal of German troops in late 1918, and the resulting civil wars and wars of independence. But independence was not a foregone conclusion, and Kirby does a good job detailing the dependence of Baltic nationalist hopes on outside influences and a certain amount of good fortune. In addition, each of these nations was internally divided and emerged independent only after the bloodshed and civil strife that followed the German withdrawal, including the battles against Soviet forces. Of course, the author is quick to point out that the social disorders that accompanied the First World War and its aftermath were common throughout Europe, and that although Sweden emerged from the war years relatively intact and unscathed, the threat of social revolution was taken seriously there at the time.

Social turmoil and political uncertainty continued throughout the interwar era, yet Kirby indicates the economic strides made in the 1920s and 1930s had a greater long-term impact on Scandinavia and the newly independent states. Land reform and the rapid growth of a broad-based agricultural sector were accompanied by the development of timber industries and industrial concerns. Although quick to point out that the patterns of economic development in the region were uneven, Kirby believes that economic growth and social policies often did more to shape the identity and future of these states than did in-

dividual politicians or political parties. He also points out that the world-wide depression of the early 1930s imposed greater difficulties on the people of Denmark and Sweden than on the population of Finland and the three Baltic states.

Kirby goes on to describe the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in 1939; the agreements forced upon the three Baltic states in September-October 1939 to give Soviet troops access to their territory; the Winter War between Finland and the USSR in 1939-40; the annexation and incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union in June-July 1940; the occupation of the Baltic region by German troops from 1941 to 1944; and the reincorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1944. The author provides less coverage of the occupation of Denmark by German troops and Sweden's struggle to maintain its neutrality in the war, although he does recount the "recovery," "resurgence," and "consolidation" of the "affluent welfare states" in Scandinavia during the post-war era (Chapter 13).

Kirby's analysis of the five decades of Soviet rule in the Baltic region is also rather sketchy. In the end, he gives credit for the restoration of Baltic independence to the election of reformers to positions of leadership in the local Communist Parties' apparatus, the weakness of pro-Soviet forces in the republics, the determination and unity of the Baltic peoples in the face of pressure from Moscow, and the support of Russian President Boris Yeltsin—both before and after the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the historiography on northern Europe. Kirby employs an impressive array of secondary literature in virtually every language of the region to buttress his analysis, although he rarely comments explicitly on historiographical debates and only then in footnotes. The select bibliography, while arranged by major topics, is incomplete, thus requiring the reader to search the footnotes to find specific historiographical references and

information. Yet despite a tendency to make temporal leaps, sometimes jumping entire decades, in the drawing of comparisons, the author has written a thoughtful survey of northern European history that will inform our understanding of the region for years to come.

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