Forgotten Pages in Baltic History. Diversity and Inclusion, ed. M. Housden, D. J. Smith, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011. VII, 332 p. ISBN 978-9042-033-15-3

Turning over the forgotten pages of the history of the Baltic countries¹

Already, the catchy title of the book suggests that it will make public what was once known and important, but is now forgotten. Not only the undeniable scholarly expertise of the compilers of the book and the other authors, but also the solid content of the publication, ensure that the sonorous title will not remain an ordinary trick to make the book popular. Both Bradford University historian Martin Housden and his colleague Professor David J. Smith of Glasgow have many years of experience in the scholarly history of Europe between the two world wars. Moreover, both have produced more than one publication on the Baltic countries, their historical memory, cultural identity, and research on national, ethnic or religious minorities. We also do not have to introduce the other authors to scholars of the first half of the 20th century. Here, we will meet colleagues from the Lithuanian Institute of History (Rimantas Miknys and Darius Staliūnas), and from the universities of Szczecin, Turku, Heidelberg, Tartu and other European-level scholarly institutions. The book consists of 14 articles written by 16 authors, dealing with the peripeteia of the history of the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and in some cases Finland and Poland) in the period 1918–1945.

The publication discusses chronologically the approach of the Baltic Germans to Finnish autonomy in the composition of the Russian Empire (Frank Nesemann),² the intersection of the Lithuanian and Polish national movements at the juncture of the 19th and 20th centuries (Rimantas Miknys and Darius Staliūnas),³ the exclusivity of the Latgale region of Latvia (Andrejs Plakans),⁴ the unrealised ideas of the unity of the Baltic States at the

¹ *Forgotten Pages in Baltic History. Diversity and Inclusion*, (eds.) M. Housden, D.J. Smith (Amsterdam/New York, 2011).

² 'A Special Baltic German Understanding about Finland's Autonomy in the Russian Empire? Count Fabian Steinheil as the Governor-General of the Grand Duchy of Finland (1810–1823)'.

³ 'The „Old“ and „New“ Lithuanians: Collective Identity Types in Lithuania at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries'.

⁴ 'Regional Identity in Latvia: The Case of Latgale'.

Buldury Conference (Marko Lehti),⁵ the efforts of the League of Nations to consolidate peace and ensure stability in the postwar 'hot spots' of the Baltic countries that were being established (Martyn Housden),⁶ a review of the life and work of Paul Schiemann, and the change and importance of former historical evaluations in the life of a modern state (Michael Garleff).⁷ In addition to Schiemann, the leaders of other national minorities are analysed, in Latvia Werner Hasselblatt (Jörg Hackmann),⁸ in Estonia Ewald Ammende and Mikhail Kurchinski (Martyn Housden and David J. Smith), and innovations in their activities and ideas are presented.⁹ The collection of articles also deals with the causes and consequences of the entrenchment of the Latvian authoritarian regime (Valters Ščēbrinskis).¹⁰ In the book, we find a sophisticated article about the approach of the German troops to the occupied Baltic States in both the First and the Second World War (Joachim Tauber).¹¹ We will find an opinion that Stalin's crimes in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia cannot be called genocide (Erwin Oberländer).¹² The book raises the question of whether today's Baltic historians are ready for broader discussions evaluating the controversial pages of the history of these countries (Eva-Clarita Pettai),¹³ and are also asked what past of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia is remembered today and what is forgotten (David J. Smith).¹⁴ Finally, the book discusses the current relationship between the identity of the Baltic States (through the example of Lithuania) and the historical experience (Leonidas Donskis).¹⁵

The compilers of the book dedicate it to their teacher, Professor John Hiden (1940–2012), a famous scholar at Glasgow and Bradford universities, who devoted the greater part of his academic career to the Eastern

⁵ 'The Dancing Conference of Buldury: A Clash of Alternatives'.

⁶ 'Securing the Lives of Ordinary People. Baltic Perspectives on the Work of the League of Nations'.

⁷ 'The Historiography of Paul Schiemann'.

⁸ 'Werner Hasselblatt on Cultural Autonomy: A Forgotten Manuscript'.

⁹ 'A Matter of Uniqueness? Paul Schiemann, Ewald Ammende and Mikhail Kurchinskii Compared'.

¹⁰ 'Leaders, Divided Society and Crisis. The Coup d'État of 1934 in Latvia, Its Causes and Consequences'.

¹¹ 'The View from the Top: German Soldiers and Lithuania in the Two World Wars'.

¹² 'Soviet Genocide in Latvia? Conflicting Cultures of Remembrance of Stalin's Policy, 1940–1953'.

¹³ 'The Convergence of Two Worlds: Historians and Emerging Histories in the Baltic States'.

¹⁴ '“You've got to know History!” Remembering and Forgetting the Past in the Present-Day Baltic'.

¹⁵ 'The Unbearable Lightness of Incessant Change: The Predicaments of Modernity in Lithuania'.

policies of Weimar and Nazi Germany, and, of course, to the foreign and domestic realities in the interwar Baltic States. There is no doubt that he is one of the most famous researchers of the history of the Baltic States in 1918–1945 outside the region concerned. It was Hiden who raised from oblivion and made relevant the activities of Latvia's German Paul Schiemann in 1918–1940 fostering the cultural, political and legal life of Baltic Germans and other national-religious minorities. The forgotten and perhaps somewhat controversial personality of Schiemann and his ideas are one of the key ideological pedestals supporting this publication.

A collection of articles about the Baltic countries *in corpore*, also even about one of them individually, is still an innovative topic in today's scholarly community in Lithuania. This is determined not by the lack of any specific scholarly potential in the country, but by the specific past of the Baltic States: on the current map, we can see a geographically continuous region that in the past was not territorially identical to the present, and culturally not as homogeneous; therefore, the historical map of the Baltic States is not so specific and clear. Nevertheless, the book is consistent and contextual, and problems of integrity and a deep approach to the problematic issues of the pasts of the designated countries are viewed not only from their own, but especially from foreign belfries.

In this country, collections of articles, even though they are popular among researchers and publishers, are still rarely thematically of high quality, with loose and hastily prepared works (often without quality control, throwing together articles with little relation with each other, for the completion of a project or to gather academic points). Meanwhile, in this publication, separate themes, it seems, sometimes with no common denominator, sit together in a single story rather well each time, complementing each other with every new page. While there are some interruptions in the narrative, the experience (the national revival, and domestic economic, social and even cultural situations) of Latvia and Estonia is significantly different or of another kind to that of Lithuania, the general storyline is maintained. We cannot overlook new scholarly approaches, views taken by the authors of the book, letting us wipe away the dust from the already, it seems, known and analysed topics, as well as the ability to set out convincingly, not only for scholars, but also for the non-ordinary reader-nonprofessional, who is interested in historical processes. So, the information in the book can easily reach not only a narrow circle of scholars, but also the wider public in the same way. In this case, the strong points of properties of English-language historiography are revealed, the situation of wobbly 'history for historians' in professional Lithuanian history.

The book is based on the the simple (maybe a bit naive?) historical formula, announcing that in 1918–1920, the quite vibrant and progressive governments of the newly created Baltic countries and their leaders offered many hopes, but later, influenced by the economic downturn and

the bad totalitarian examples of Europe, renounced their democratic ideas, and also turned on to the path of nationalism. This was due not only to a change in the internal policies of the countries in the 1930s, but also to the dual experience of the Baltic States during the Second World War. The experiences of the wartime, postwar, and even today's societies of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are described not only as understandable and clearly balancing on the scales of the injured/adapted, but also the hardly discussed presence in their ranks of collaborators and murderers. In the opinion of some of the book's authors (Erwin Oberländer and Donskis), the quandary in evaluating the problems of this past period is also that the vast majority of current Baltic societies look at their interwar regimes, due to the experiences of Soviet oppression, through rose-coloured spectacles, not allowing them to get rid of certain stereotypes, determining the closure in the role of the disadvantaged and in the grips of suffering.

Nevertheless, reading the book consistently the feeling is suggested that the same authors did not avoid the snares of a certain stereotypical thinking, the slickest of which is the danger of the historian's omnipotence towards the past, or of the teleological narrative. The totality of the articles of the second part of the book retains the coherence of the whole narrative only because the principle of its formation is supported by advance knowledge of the historical results from which the individual studies do not lean on. In this way, the idea emerges in the pages of the book that the Second World War and the catastrophe of the Baltic countries were inevitable, determined to some extent by the development of the domestic policies of these countries. The desire of the authors to foster the ideas of a free, democratic and open society in today's narratives of history, or the social-humanities sciences, is completely understandable and justified, and even their searches in earlier narratives, but the attempts to construct interpretations of the past on the basis of these values are unreliable. The moral condemnation of the regime of Smetona hardly explains the occupation carried out by the totalitarian state. And one should criticise the undemocratic governance of Smetona not only because we now live in a democratic society.

We can mention other rough edges of the book (also mostly in the second part). The title announces the disclosure of 'forgotten' pages of history, but we should not undervalue the works of Baltic historians, in which some of the sins attributed to them (withdrawal, closeness, ethnocentrism, etc) were redeemed a long time ago. Meanwhile, we should speak more moderately about the existence of the same flaws in society. The experience of totalitarian regimes and coping with their effects are often a much more confusing and complicated process than may appear at first glance. Thus, in the second part of the book, there is more discussion about the current societies of the Baltic States that are inclined to localise and keep within the separate country the distributed cult of suffering and pain. This

is a valid criticism, in particular its targeting of the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian inclination to emphasise the uniqueness of their totalitarian experiences, but perhaps we should not criticise the same localisation of the pain (through taking the easily adaptable and hard-to-throw-off label of ethnocentrism), but the inability to combine the totalitarian experience beyond national interests. Here, the example of the discussed book fits perfectly: although it is difficult to talk about the exceptional experience of the Stalinist crimes in Latvia or other countries with a similar fate, this does not in any way mean that the crimes themselves were not exclusive, and looking at the geography of the crimes a little more broadly, the magnitude of the other crimes are shown, and other policies become clearer. We have to agree with the criticism of Oberländer, directed at the strategy of Soviet genocide research, based on the concept of 'we also suffered' or 'we did not suffer less' (to measure suffering in itself is a very strange idea), from which follows the cynical method of the calculation and comparison of victims. However, the efforts of the same author to expose the hunters of the Red genocide can be criticised, using the same methodology used by its supporters, a kind of accounting of the victims of the crimes of the totalitarian regimes using the explanation of one or another concept, genocide, terror, crime, and so on. Most scholars in the Baltic States investigating Soviet genocide, terror, or something else, already for a long time have not taken such comparative approaches (some of them never did).

The book also unfolds the rather more fashionable than balanced statement that the authoritarian regimes of the Baltic region are not evaluated critically in the latest historiography of the Baltic States. However, it is difficult to imagine that any members of a recognised department of history of these countries could, for example, declare that the authoritarian coups saved 'from something' and steered the development of the state in a much more sophisticated direction. It is true that the historians of the Baltic States evaluate the regimes of their countries not as an expression of the integral anti-democratic evil of Europe (along with the Nazis and Fascists), but as part of the twists in the general processes, national movements and historical development of Central and Eastern Europe. So, we are dealing not with the localisation of the historical consciousness, but with the setting of common standards by which we can measure overall history, and the (intractable) problems arising. The region's history cannot be written without resolving the question of whether National Socialism is compatible with Communism (through the common denominator of totalitarianism) or nationalism. From the decision of this issue also follows any kind of diagnosis of societies about the extent to which they are affected and influenced by specific experiences; for example, can we

talk about the impact of authoritarianism in the same way as we can talk about fascism or socialism? The compilers of the book have only reached the threshold of this issue.

In summary, the first half of the book should be evaluated as excellent and innovative historical research, and the second as a great incentive for new evaluations and discussions that are still missing.

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