

Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 251 p. ISBN 978-0-230-01940-9

Born in Canada, a University of Toronto graduate who completed a history PhD in London, Andres Kasekamp, who is currently working at the University of Tartu, faced the daunting task of preparing in the English language a short review of the past of three countries situated on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. Modern Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are the after effects of the geopolitical changes and of three different national self-determinations in the early 20th century, having had most similarities in the 20th century. In the earlier period, the term ‘Baltic States’ was hardly applicable in general. Up to now, there have been many cultural differences in the societies of the three states. In addition, Lithuania had statehood in the 13th–18th centuries, while Latvia and Estonia became political actors only after the First World War. Considering all this, one could say that the book published in the ‘Palgrave Essential Histories’ series will further strengthen in the English-speaking environment the partially incorrect approach towards the three states on the Baltic Sea as a single historical region, the ‘Baltic States’. This is an approach characteristic of large countries, whatever they may be, the US, Germany or Russia, and every historian satisfied with such a perspective of the mental map, and undertaking the task of writing the history of the ‘Baltic States’, has again and again to resolve the various dilemmas of what constitutes this construct in different historical epochs. For example, in the interwar period, Finland was also usually attributed to this region.

The Kasekamp book, published in 2010, was also translated into the Polish language in 2013¹. So in this review, one has to ask the question, what will not only an English-speaking, but also a Polish-speaking audience learn about the ‘Baltic states’ from this book? In the introduction, the author writes that ‘This book provides a concise survey of developments, on the territory comprising the present-day countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the end of the last ice age to the present’ (p. viii). Indeed, the book consists of eight chapters, arranged in chronological order; however, half of them (the greater part of the volume of the book) are devoted to the period after 1917. As the author is a researcher of 20th-century issues, such a structure of the publication is not surprising. In addition, the great attention devoted to the last century, it seems, will also likely be associated

¹ A. Kasekamp, *Historia państw bałtyckich* (Warsaw, 2013).

with the specifics of the 'Palgrave Essential Histories' series – in its printed historical overviews of various countries, the 20th century always attracts special attention. The author ends his narrative with issues from 2009.

The Kasekamp narrative is correct, touching the region's most important historical events. As the author himself noted, while preparing the book 'The greatest challenge has been to write an integrated, comparative history, rather than the parallel histories of three separate countries' (p. x). In many parts of the text, the different social and political subjects of the region are actually compared, and their similarities and differences are revealed, although it would perhaps be too bold to say that Kasekamp's review is 'comparative history'.

The whole narrative is characterised by a degree of wandering between political, social and economic history. The first chapter 'Europe's Last Pagans' is the history of the first inhabitants, tribes and their conquest, presenting the Lithuanian tribes as the only ones that managed to resist the conquerors, to unite and to achieve statehood. The second chapter 'Lithuania's Expansion and Medieval Livonia' provides the political history of Lithuania and Livonia, with a fragmentary description of social relations, more applicable to Livonia. The third chapter, devoted to the period 1561–1795, is actually the political history of 'wars and rulers'. In the chapter of the book devoted to 'The Long 19th Century', not only political, but also social changes are included, but for the greater part the chapter is a narrative about the formation of national cultures, national movements and the policies of the Russian Empire. Wider angles, into which, in addition to political and social, economic and cultural changes are included, are characteristic of the remaining chapters.

One could say that in writing about the 20th century, the author takes the position of an advocate of the Baltic countries' version of history, i.e. he shows understandings and evaluations of 20th-century events which prevail in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. An extraordinarily large area here is devoted to discussing the progress that occurred between the wars, the history of the abolition of independence, of the terror, the deportations and extermination of the population. The book tries to explain what the expectations of the inhabitants of the 'Baltic states' were, and the logic of the actions during the Second World War, and a large part of chapters VI and VII is, of course, devoted to demonstrating the various forms of opposition to the regime and protest exhibited in 1940–1991. Most clearly, the legitimisation of a hegemonised version of contemporary history is provided in chapter VIII, which not only has the title 'Return to the West', but also a section 'Return to Europe'.

Knowing the English, German and Estonian languages, the author relies in his book essentially on literature only in these languages. For Kasekamp, as for any other author, this had to be a bit of a problem, because far from all the major investigations by historians in Estonia, Latvia and

Lithuania in recent decades are published in these languages. Not knowing the Latvian and Lithuanian languages, the author was unable to gain access to the latest research. However, one could not fail to notice that in the preparation of the book, many articles and even books by historians and archaeologists from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia published in the last few decades in English and German are also absent.

The lack of access to relevant literature hindered the author in rare cases when the book discusses different historiographical assessments. For example, p. 25 states that historians in Lithuania and Poland are still quarrelling over the importance of the Union of Krėva, although a consensus on this issue seems to have been reached in recent decades. Similarly, on p. 44, in discussing the Union of Lublin, it states that 'Polish historians have mostly celebrated the Union as a milestone for the flowering of the Polish state, while Lithuanian historians have usually bemoaned the Union as heralding the eclipse of Lithuania'. This division of historians is hardly still relevant, and the author in this case is likely to have been misled by the book by the cultural scholar and poet A. Tereškinas, published in English, to which a reference is made. Later, on p. 64, commenting on the 1791 constitution of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, Kasekamp writes that 'It also ended the dualistic nature of the state, eliminating Lithuania's independent status', although the 20 October 1791 amendment of the constitution is usually evaluated as a means for the maintenance of this status.

The insufficient absorption in individual problems and historiography becomes clear in not fully measured assertions. The Jewish 'Pale of Settlement' in the Russian Empire did not include all of the former territory of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, as the author states on p. 73, because the Kingdom of Poland was not included within its borders. Jews in the USSR were not the only group that was allowed to emigrate from the country (p. 160), because, for example, at the end of the 1950s, former German citizens were also allowed to leave the USSR. Jonas Basanavičius was just one of the several initiators of the newspaper *Auszra*, but not the only one (p. 82). Kasekamp basically explains the participation of local residents in the Holocaust on p. 135 by the 'double genocide' theory (Jews were killed because they were communists, executors of the Soviet occupying authorities and of the deportations), which has been criticised for a long time. Equally precipitate is another sentence in which Kasekamp provides one of the reasons, in his opinion, for the partisan resistance to the Soviet regime in Lithuania in 1944–1953: 'Only in Lithuania had there been any notable organised resistance during the Nazi occupation, and it was relatively easy for the partisans to reorient themselves to fighting the other occupier' (p. 142).

Although in the greater part of the book the author, as already mentioned, provides a rather correct narrative, in places, excessively reduced statements still occur. Such, for example, is the whole sentence on p. 39:

‘The Protestant Reformation against the practices of the papacy was launched by Martin Luther in Saxony in 1517.’ One could also probably argue with the author’s evaluation that ‘after the death of Stalin in 1953 [...] Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian societies had been psychologically pummelled into submission and a permanent state of fear’ (p. 147).

In conclusion, one can say that for the reader not knowing anything about the so-called three ‘Baltic States’, Kasekamp’s book will be a good guide for a first acquaintance. The narrative presented in this guide would have been much stronger if there had been greater attention to works by historians from the three countries, and to individual historiographical issues. Kasekamp’s narrative is dominated by political history, but this does not reach the level of a multi-national history. However, for those who continue to seek to understand the eastern edge of the Baltic Sea as the ‘Baltic States’, this book will provide an initial understanding of the fact that the region of the ‘Baltic States’ is far from being an integral formation that only had historical similarities.

Vasilijus Safronovas