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Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered

Olga Jerjomina
Witten/Herdecke University, Germany

Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered
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Ethnic Relations in the Baltic Reconsidered draws on a collection of works that together provide a comprehensive view of developments in the ethnic relations of the Baltic states over time, both within multiethnic empires and as independent states. Edited by Bradley Woodworth, Violeta Davoliūtė, and Darius Staliūnas, the volume spans from the mid-nineteenth-century Russian Empire to contemporary geopolitical developments, such as the crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While the book's primary geographic focus is the Baltic region, it extends beyond this scope to bring a comparative perspective, for example, in the chapter authored by Ronald Grigor Suny which juxtaposes the transition in the Baltic and Caucasian republics following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, seeking answers to why the independence path in the two regions unfolded so differently. Such comparative reach allows the Baltic dynamics to be situated within broader post-imperial patterns, and to understand what made the Baltic case distinctive from other former Soviet states.

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AUTHOR:
Olga Jerjomina
Witten/Herdecke University, Germany
olga.jerjomina@uni-wh.de

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The book is organised into five sections: the first four present empirical research on ethnicity in the contexts of identity; local and national governance: the aftermath of navigating post-empire state formation; and ethnic-based violence. The final section moves beyond empirical cases to critically engage with the field of ethnic relations in the Baltic region itself, raising honest questions about what remains understudied, how research approaches have evolved, and what constitutes the discipline's current focus. First, Toivo U. Raun discusses the less-explored aspects of ethnic relations in the Baltic region, for example, cooperative or contrasting connections among the Estonian-Latvian and Lithuanian-Latvian intellectual and elite communities in the historical context, as well as the influence of demographic factors, given the scarcity of reliable census data from the nineteenth century. Next, Vello Pettai examines post-1991 studies of ethnic relations, primarily in Latvia and Estonia, tracing the shifts within the research field and the ongoing interplay between individual-level attitudes and institutional dimensions.

Across the chapters, ethnic relations are examined in multiple dimensions, from micro-level agency to state governance and institutional engagement. A reader is offered personal stories of religious actors, soldiers, or common people, with individual-level perspectives illustrating ethnic identity as inherently hybrid and fluid rather than fixed, reflecting a common constructive interpretation of ethnicity in opposition to the primordialist view that it is assigned by birth. Irina Paert's study of Russian Orthodox clergy in the Baltic provinces demonstrates this vividly: personal epistolary narratives show how clerical figures were simultaneously embedded in Russian imperial structures and in local Estonian communities, without fully belonging to either. The lived perspectives are complemented by the history of smaller grassroots initiatives, providing collective examples of ethnic-based associations or narratives reflected in local newspapers, such as Latvia's *Jaunākās Ziņas* or Lithuania's *Tiesa*. In his study on voluntary associations in the Baltic region, Jörg Hackmann reveals how these collective spaces channelled interethnic entanglement, allowing for both intensified interethnic contact and a shift towards ethnic pillarisation – a process of vertical segmentation.

Beyond individual and collective experiences, the book discusses the institutional dimensions of ethnic relations. Klaus Richter proposes looking at economic nationalism as an instrument of ethnic governance exercised through economic policy, and not as a set of macroeconomic protectionist or liberal measures. He illustrates, with the example of Latvia and Lithuania, how state policies systematically reconfigured the economic balance between titular ethnic groups and minorities by acquiring assets belonging to ethnic minority populations during the Great Depression. Karsten Brüggemann's study of Soviet nationalities policy offers a contrasting dynamic, arguing that Soviet internationalism, through its investment in titular national cultures and the creation of trans-Baltic intellectual networks, in fact prepared the institutional foundations for the popular fronts that drove the Singing Revolution and independence movements. A common limitation in studies of ethnic relations is that the experiences of ethnic groups and the governmental policies toward them are often studied independently, creating a false impression that the two exist separately. This volume

overcomes that tendency, presenting a holistic picture of the interdependent relationship between minority populations and the state that governs them.

One of the key topics that reappears throughout the volume is the problem of contested identities and the navigation of conflicting loyalties among ethnic groups. The book's broad temporal scope highlights that the issue does not appear exclusively in a single period. Instead, as Catherine Gibson's research shows, the problem of 'in-betweenness' arose, for instance, among *poluvertsy* in the 19th century – a group of religiously converted people who differed from their co-ethnics. A modern parallel can be found in Mārtiņš Kaprāns' study of the Latvian Russophone minority, whose reluctance to take a solid position on Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reveals how 'in-betweenness' can manifest today too as a socially conditioned position, rooted in cognitive dissonance and competing identity pressures. Notably, this hesitancy is not uniform: it is further differentiated within the community by various socioeconomic factors, suggesting that minority positions are internally complex rather than monolithic. Separated by more than a century, both cases challenge the assumption that ethnic minorities constitute coherent collectives with uniform shared positions. Instead, they reveal that minority communities are fractured by competing loyalties and internal differentiation, making any generalised claim about minority identity oversimplified.

The volume will be of value to a wide range of readers. Scholars who are already familiar with the Baltic states will find fascinating empirical details and less-evident perspectives challenging common expectations about the region. For those approaching Baltic studies for the first time, it provides an extensive introduction to the region's history and politics, which is receiving heightened attention in European security debates. Finally, scholars of ethnic relations and minority studies more broadly will benefit from the book's analytical depth and empirical rigour, demonstrating how established theoretical frameworks find application in often overlooked contexts of the Baltic states.