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978-0-521-83372-1 - A Concise History of the Baltic States

Andrejs Plakans

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A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE BALTIC STATES

The Baltic region is frequently neglected in broader histories of Europe and its international significance can be obscured by separate treatments of the various Baltic states. With this wide-ranging survey, Andrejs Plakans presents the first integrated history of three Baltic peoples – Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians – and draws out the common threads to show how it has been shaped by their location in a strategically desirable corner of Europe. Subordinated in turn by Baltic German landholders, the Polish nobility and gentry, and then by Russian and Soviet administrators, the three nations have nevertheless kept their distinctive identities – significantly retaining three separate languages in an ethnically diverse region. The book traces the countries' evolution from their ninth-century tribal beginnings to their present status as three thriving and separate nation-states, focusing particularly on the region's complex twentieth-century history, which culminated in the eventual reestablishment of national sovereignty after 1991.

ANDREJS PLAKANS is Professor Emeritus at the Department of History, Iowa State University. His previous publications include *The Latvians: A Short History* (1995) and *Historical Dictionary of Latvia* (second edition, 2008).

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Fragment of *Carta Marina*, 1576. This famous “sea map” of northern Europe, created in Rome by the Swedish cleric Olaus Magnus, uses no borders in its depiction of the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea.

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To
Eamonn and Alexander

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PREFACE

The story of present-day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania must begin not at the time when countries bearing those names appeared on the European map, but when a group of stateless peoples settled permanently on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea during the fifth and sixth centuries AD. At that time, to the south, the Roman Empire had already dissolved and, in what was to become France, the Merovingian and Carolingian kings were trying to form a successor state. Much later, in the medieval period, only one of the Baltic seacoast peoples – the Lithuanians – succeeded in creating a state of their own; the other two – the Estonians and Latvians – lost such political leaders as they had by the end of the thirteenth century and until the twentieth remained subordinated to German-, Swedish-, and Russian-speaking landowning aristocracies. The Lithuanians too lost their medieval state through a voluntary union with Poland that created a commonwealth in which the Poles became the dominant force politically and socially. Only after World War I did cartographers redraw their maps of Europe to include Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as independent nation-states. Twenty years later, they had to rework them again because the three countries were absorbed by the Soviet Union in 1940 and became soviet socialist republics. The redrawing exercise was not repeated until 1991, when the USSR collapsed and the three Baltic states resumed their independence. The political history of the eastern Baltic littoral thus contains far more discontinuity than continuity, many more years of war than years of peace, many more regime changes than periods

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of stable governance, and much more destruction than uninterrupted growth. The task of forming a coherent story from this fragmented history is a difficult assignment, and the achieved coherence is more likely to reflect the viewpoint of the historian writing the story than a coherence inherent in the past itself. Others would synthesize the history of the region differently.

Although political discontinuity appears to be the single most important facet of Baltic-area history, several themes recur throughout all periods and together provide some degree of continuity. These themes are location, language, statehood, leadership, and fragmentation; they appear in different variants and guises throughout the entire thousand-year period covered in the book. They will not be explored in equal detail in every chapter, and the chapters closest to our own day will do them greater justice. The book is a survey of limited length of a very long stretch of historical time, and the recent centuries contain more usable and reliable information about the peoples who in the twentieth century established the three Baltic states. As will be seen, for most of their history the Estonians, Latvians, and, considerably less so, the Lithuanians, remained, as individuals, mostly hidden from view. They themselves left only a sparse written record, and contemporary accounts written by the scribes of the political rulers of the region referred to the subordinated littoral peoples most often with various collective nouns (for example, peasants, serfs, non-Germans). Thus, for many centuries only a few of the subordinated emerged as unique individuals with names and fully documented life experiences. The “democratization” of the historical record began in the eighteenth century; by the nineteenth, evidence about people on the lower rungs of the social scale became a flood; and by the twentieth, people of all backgrounds – of high birth or low – could potentially be part of the historical narrative as full-fledged historical actors. The later chapters of the book thus cover a shorter time span because these centuries contain more usable and detailed evidence about all the inhabitants of the littoral.

The first chapter of the book deals with a long stretch of historical time from the end of the ice age in the eastern Baltic littoral and the first appearance of human settlements to about the year 1000, when the populations of the region had stabilized enough to be mentioned

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by chroniclers as permanent residents. Chapter 2 takes up the arrival into the area of crusaders and merchants from western Europe, intent on Christianization and territorial conquest in a process some historians have referred to as the area's "europeanization." In these medieval centuries the region became bifurcated, with its northern part (the later Estonian and Latvian territories) becoming the Livonian Confederation governed by German-speaking political elites and the southern area (the Lithuanian territories) emerging as a unified and expansionist state governed initially by Lithuanians themselves. Chapter 3 considers the eastern Baltic littoral in the early modern period (1500–1800) as it experienced the secularization of the remnants of the crusading orders, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, and the changes wrought by the littoral's becoming a component of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire, and the Russian Empire, in chronological order. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with the region as a "western borderland" of the Russian Empire from the mid-eighteenth century to World War I. Various features of modernity – agricultural reform, urbanization, industrialization, nationalism, and population growth – arrived here through the opportunities and the constraints created by Russian imperial policy, as the empire sought to bring itself up to western levels. Chapter 7 examines the political, economic, and cultural consequences of the national independence that the three peoples acquired during the period of World War I, as a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics replaced the Russian Empire. It was during the interwar decades (1920–1940) that parliamentary democracy in the Baltic republics lost out to authoritarianism, as similar political transformations affected nearly all of the new states of the European east. Chapter 8 surveys the Baltic republics as constituent parts of the USSR (1940–1991) after their occupation and annexation by the Soviet Union during the course of World War II. Here the short-lived occupation of the region by the Hitlerite Third Reich during the war will also be considered, this episode having as one consequence the simplification of the nationality composition of the Baltic region through forced emigration and genocide. Chapter 9 describes the post-Soviet years after 1991 when political independence returned to the Baltic littoral following the collapse of the USSR and as

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Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became members of the international structures of a new Europe. A listing of suggested readings primarily of English-language materials forms the last section of the book.

The author would like to express his gratitude to the many people who helped in the creation of this book. Barbara S. Plakans not only provided insightful counsel about the contents but also reshaped and improved the book's first draft with her considerable editing skills. The Interlibrary Loan staff of the W. Robert Parks Library at Iowa State University helped obtain materials from other libraries. The gathering of the many illustrations characteristic of the "Concise History" series in which the book appears was facilitated by the following colleagues and friends: Toivo Raun of Indiana University; Vita Zelče of the University of Latvia; Alfred E. Senn, Professor Emeritus of the University of Wisconsin; Jānis Krēsliņš, Jr. of the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm; and Peter Wörster of the J. G. Herder-Institut of Marburg, Germany. The author thanks them all. In Riga, Latvia, welcome assistance with illustrations was also provided by Uldis Neiburgs of the Occupation Museum in Riga; Viesturs Zanders of the Baltic Central Library; Guntis Zemītis of the University of Latvia's Institute of History; Anita Meinarte of the Latvian National Museum; and Z. Ciematniece of the Riga City and Maritime Museum. The book would have been poorer without their help. Finally, I am particularly grateful to my editors at Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson, Helen Waterhouse, and Chloe Howell, for their guidance and especially for their patience over the several years during which the book took shape.

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