

**Kari Alenius, Saulius Kaubrys: Balancing between National Unity and „Multiculturalism“.** National Minorities in Lithuania and Finland 1918–1939. (On the Boundary of Two Worlds, Bd. 47.) Brill Schöningh. Paderborn 2022. XII, 264 S., Kt. ISBN 978-3-506-79278-5. (€ 99,—)

Attempting to balance between democratic institutions and cultural/linguistic diversity has been—and continues to be—an important challenge for states since at least the nineteenth century. In particular after the Peace of Paris (1919) created or expanded a number of new would-be “nation-states” in East Central Europe, this complex issue came to the European forefront. The volume under review presents an interesting, novel, and well-documented study of two such new states and their “national minorities”: Lithuania and Finland in the interwar period. The very different nature of these states and their “national minorities” (a problematic but probably inevitable term) makes this research all the more pertinent for anyone interested in ethnicity, politics, and the “national question” in the twentieth century.

The two republics that emerged in the aftermath of World War I, Finland and Lithuania, had considerably diverse political and historical precedents. Finland had long (since the Napoleonic Era) enjoyed some form of autonomy as a Grand Duchy attached to the Russian Empire. “Lithuania,” on the other hand, had not existed as a political or administrative unit since the early modern period. For this reason, the borders of Finland were far easier to delineate—they existed already as the borders of the Grand Duchy—than those of Lithuania which had to be set down after armed conflict with Poland and Soviet Russia.

Similarly diverse were the “national minorities” resident in both states in this period. In Finland, the ruling class traditionally spoke Swedish—as exemplified by the most famous Finnish politician of the period, Marshall Carl Gustav Mannerheim. The Swedish-speaking minority made up for its numerical weakness by its cultural/political power and wealth. However, this elite also exhibited considerable political enlightenment (and far-sightedness) already under Russian rule in coopting and cooperating with the Finnish-speaking majority. Thus, in Finland, the ruling class was itself a “national minority”; the numerical strength of non-Finns in the interwar state was also very small relative to the situation in Lithuania.

On the territory that was to become the Republic of Lithuania in 1919, there resided a number of national, cultural, and religious groups ranging from Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, Karaites, and Tatars. In urban areas, Lithuanians never made up a majority in 1919—though this would change by 1939. Further complicating the situation was the fact that, under Russian rule, no local group (St. Petersburg was never successful in creating a stable local Russian community) enjoyed the trust of the central government. For this reason, all local national groups were viewed with considerable misgivings by St Petersburg: the Jews as potential revolutionaries, the Poles as disloyal and frivolous, and the Lithuanians suspect due to their Catholic faith. Worse yet, the one major city of the region, Wilno (Vil’na, Vilnius), claimed throughout this period by Lithuania as its capital, was seized by the Poles in 1919 and never relinquished until the 1939 Soviet invasion.

The authors of this study weave together these two diverse stories and “nation-building” projects with considerable sophistication. While not denying the diverging economic, historical, and cultural make-up of these two states, they argue convincingly that the basic problem of peacebuilding—possibly in the long run even integrating—national minorities in these two republics ran on parallel tracks. After a short historical introduction, they consider (in different chapters) demography, politics (in particular whether rights for minorities should be considered a right or a privilege), education, “Economic and Social Diversity,” and religion. As one would expect, the chapter on political aspects and debates of the “minority problem” is by far the longest chapter, taking up nearly half of the entire book. Let us consider these topics consecutively.

As far as demography went, the percentage of non-Finns and non-Lithuanians in these states changed little in these decades. In both republics, the relative percentage of Finns

and Lithuanians rose, but not enormously. One very important change in demographic neglected here is the considerable rise of the ethnic Lithuanian urban population 1919–1939. However, here the authors are hindered by the fact that only one census was actually carried out in Lithuania during these years (in 1923). This chapter provides good fundamental statistical information about national minorities in both states.

As mentioned, the chapter on law and politics/policies toward national minorities makes up nearly half of the book. Here the authors provide a wealth of information in particular about parties that represented national minorities both at the local and at the state level. For Lithuania, we are also given a good deal of specific information about the social/demographic backgrounds of elected representatives of various nationalities in different towns. The author then goes on to consider public associations set up by Germans, Poles, Russians, Latvians, and Jews in interwar Lithuania before considering various aspects of Lithuanian government policy toward its national minorities. While much of this is not new (in particular regarding the relations between the Lithuanian government and its Jewish citizens), this overview provides a useful snapshot of these important policies.

The legal situation in Finland for non-Finns was rather different. Here, all citizens (regardless of religion and native tongue) were guaranteed equal rights and—most notably—the official state languages were both Finnish and Swedish. As one would expect, a good deal of this section is devoted to the controversy over the Åland Islands' Autonomy which made its way to the League of Nations in the early 1920s. The authors then go on to consider in some detail the politics of Swedish-minority parties, in particular the Swedish People's Party (SFP), and argues that despite some fiery speeches in the press and parliament, actual policy toward Swedish speakers (and, conversely, the demands of the SFP and the Swedish-speaking community) were actually fairly moderate. The author concludes this section by considering the smaller minority groups such as the Sami (Lapp) and others in the north, Jews (around 1000 in the entire country), and Russians.

Education is a crucial issue for any modern state and was a particularly complicated challenge in these republics. However, the challenge was all the greater in Lithuania where a considerable percentage of the total population (nearly one third) was illiterate at the beginning of 1923. In Finland, primary education was both mandatory and guaranteed in both Finnish or Swedish, so the real issue became access (in Finnish) to higher education. In Lithuania, education was less universal and in practice non-Lithuanian groups had to support their own schools.

Social and economic status reflected the diversity of national minority communities in these states. In Lithuania, Jews tended to work in trade while the Lithuanian state—as the author shows with several statistical tables—clearly favored ethnic Lithuanians for state employment. In Finland Swedish speakers remained statistically privileged throughout this period but the author describes other minorities like Sami and Roma (and refugees from Russia) as “deprived.”

In both interwar Lithuania and Finland, freedom of religion was guaranteed. But in Finland the Lutheran Church dominated among both Finnish and Swedish speakers and at least nominally even included the minor Finnish Roma community. Orthodox believers made up around two percent of the population with non-Christians an even smaller group. In Lithuania the level of religious diversity was considerably higher. Some 8 per cent of the total population was Jewish with a considerably higher presence in urban areas. While some 90 per cent of the population professed the Catholic religion, this figure included both Poles and Lithuanians. Unfortunately, the author does not consider this issue but limits his discussion to Jews and the limited Orthodox, Lutheran, Karaite, and Muslim populations.

For anyone interested in the policy and practice of governing diverse ethnic-linguistic-religious populations, this volume is highly recommended.

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