

THE BALTIC REGION IN U.S. WESTERN CIVILIZATION TEXTBOOKS

Gordon R. Mork
Purdue University

History textbooks in the United States have been much criticized recently, and not without reason.¹ Nevertheless, they appear to be essential to the teaching of new and complex subject matter. American students usually encounter non-U.S. history systematically for the first time as advanced high school or beginning college students. They welcome a comprehensive textbook, and very few instructors would try to teach the course without one.

This essay will review five major textbooks on "Western Civilization," as well as one self-consciously "global textbook," in order to determine the scope and nature of the treatment of the Baltic region, i.e. all areas bordering on the shores of the Baltic sea. How much coverage do they have of the countries and peoples that border the Baltic? How accurate is the information? What are the interpretive themes? What improvements might one wish for, and expect, in the treatment of the subject?

These questions are not merely of academic importance. As we enter the 1990s the areas bordering on the Baltic have been regularly in the news in the U.S. and around the world. It is vital that students, and those who teach them, have accurate and well balanced textbooks at hand as they seek to learn about this region and its peoples and to bring historical understanding to contemporary problems.²

The Books

Each of the books reviewed here is a major effort, written by well known history professors at prestigious institutions and published by established commercial textbook publishers. They all (except one that is brand new) have gone through several editions. In addition to the authors, there are staffs of editors and other authors to review the work and provide study guides, teachers' manuals, and test materials. They are attractively printed with many pictures and maps, and run from 700-1150 pages. They range in cost from \$40 to \$50 each. In short, these books all represent substantial investments, for those who write them, for those who produce and sell them, and for those who buy them. (Sales figures are not publicly available.) One could add another three or four books to the list, but only

¹ See the exchange between John Anthony Scott and Gary B. Nash in *AHA Perspectives*, May/June 1991.

² Thanks to Inta Carpenter of Indiana University and to Janis Gaigulia, who have called to my attention a study on the treatment of the eastern Baltic countries in textbooks, *Report of the New Jersey Governor's Commission on Eastern European and Captive Nation History*, by Thaddeus V. Gromada, July, 1989, 40 pp. A welcome addition to the literature is John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Longman, 1991).

with diminishing returns and without affecting the outcome of the study appreciably.

Here are the books:

Robert R. Palmer (Yale) and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (6th ed., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984). First published in 1950, this book defines the "modern world" as Europe and the world as it has been touched by European culture since the Renaissance and Reformation. It tends to emphasize political, diplomatic, and intellectual history.

Robin W. Winks (Yale), Crane Brinton, John B. Christopher, and Robert Lee Wolff, *A History of Civilization: Prehistory to the Present* (8th ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992). First published in 1955 with Brinton (Harvard) as principal author, it is now undergoing revision under the direction of Winks. The earlier editions emphasized political, diplomatic, and intellectual history, but new emphases on social history are becoming evident.

John P. McKay (Illinois), Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society* (4th ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991). This book makes social history the core of the text, emphasizing the lives of ordinary people as well as high politics and the actions of the elites.

Donald Kagan (Yale), Steven Ozment, and Frank M. Turner, *The Western Heritage*, (4th ed., New York: Macmillan, 1991). First published in 1979, the book emphasizes the emergence of Western society, the development of constitutionalism, and the importance of both religion and science.

Mark Kishlansky (Chicago), Patrick Geary, and Patricia O'Brien, *Civilization in the West* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). The newest of the books under review, it seeks both to make the lives of ordinary men and women central to the book and to give a new emphasis to Eastern Europe.

William H. McNeill (Chicago), *A History of the Human Community: Prehistory to the Present* (3rd ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990). Written by the best known advocate of a global (as opposed to "Eurocentric") history of civilization, it covers more time and space in fewer pages than any of the other books reviewed here. Thus Asian and African history is emphasized for its own sake, rather than just for what it contributes to "Western" history. Global in concept, this book is not just one in which non-Western chapters are added on to a Western civilization book. As might be expected, this approach makes necessary the sacrifice of many details that the author does not see as essential to his story.

A systematic content analysis of these books reveals several preliminary conclusions:

A. The Baltic as a topic in and of itself is not prominently treated in any of the texts, and it is virtually ignored by two of them.

B. The books tend to look at countries (i.e. nation-states), and they emphasize the larger countries over the smaller. Prussia/Germany and Russia/USSR loom large in the textbooks, though some of the treatment of these countries is irrelevant to the Baltic region. Poland is treated frequently, while Latvia is mentioned rarely. Sweden holds a middle ground.

C. The books that emphasize social history deal with the Baltic and the Baltic states less frequently than the books that emphasize political and diplomatic history. The one book that seeks global coverage ignores the Baltic region.

Except for the McNeill, with its global approach, the books have many similarities in the content of their coverage. The Baltic area is mentioned in treatments of the Teutonic Knights and the Hanseatic League. It is treated prominently in the chapters dealing with the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years' War; Denmark and Prussia are mentioned, but the role of Sweden is correctly recognized as particularly important during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Each of the books devotes significant attention to the rise of Brandenburg-Prussia and the leadership of Peter the Great in Russia, and the Baltic region is important in both these stories. Poland and Lithuania are linked in the early modern period. The partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century are treated in some detail, including at least one map in each case; the reestablishment of the Polish state in the twentieth century is welcomed. Each of the books devotes special attention to the founding of the independent states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the Eastern Baltic region after the Russian Revolution and World War I, and their subsequent loss of independence during and after World War II. The Cold War and the development of movements toward freedom along the Baltic beginning in the late 1980s are treated substantially in each of the newer books.

None of the book explicitly sees the Baltic as a region with common interests, themes, and problems. Indeed, many American students are so poorly informed on geography that they confuse the BAL-tic with the BAL-kans until the difference is explained to them. Those students who do have some general notion of the area, often think narrowly in terms of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, rather than in terms of the entire Baltic from West to East.

It is true that time and space are limited in survey texts and courses, and the capacity of students to absorb and understand complex material is not infinite. Nevertheless, the books would do well to treat regions like the Baltic, instead of just states, to help students comprehend modern history.

Poland occupies a key position in treatments of northeastern Europe. The Poles as an ethnic group, and the Polish state in its various forms, have played a vital and instructive role (and often a tragic one) in modern European history in general and in the region in particular.³

On the whole, the treatment of Poland in these books is fair and balanced, pointing out both the failures of the Polish aristocracy to modernize the state in the period before the partitions and the struggles of the Poles to establish a viable and independent state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In some cases, however, there might be a tendency to see the Poles simply as heroes and martyrs, rather than to examine more critically their place in the history of the region.

None of the books gives a very clear picture of the complexity of the ethnic issues in the Baltic lands, i.e. the strife caused by the competition among ethnic groups living within the boundaries of any given state at a given time. Indeed, the books tend to mislead students, by implying through maps and descriptions that the ethnic groups of the Baltic area live in neatly divided national states, all the Danes in Denmark, all the Swedes in Sweden, all the Poles in Poland, all the Russians in Russia, and so forth. Actually, of course, the opposite is true. Much of the chaos and bloodshed that the Baltic region has seen has been caused by the geographic mixing and the movements of ethnic groups. American textbooks try to point out this source of tension when discussing the problems of the Balkans, but they do not sufficiently emphasize it for the Baltic region.⁴ This omission is

³ Among the most popular American authors is James A. Michener, whose historical novels have done much to influence the world view of the American reading public. His book *Poland* (New York: Random House, 1983) was particularly timely, published as the Poles were developing their own independence in the 1980s.

⁴ For example, Kagan's map (p. 1149), "The Real Nations in the Center of Europe" after 1945, shows Hungarians and Germans in Romania, Turks in Bulgaria, and something of the ethnic segmentation of Yugoslavia, but (aside from Germans in the new Poland) it does not deal with similar ethnic mixing in the Baltic region. A new set of five maps has been added to show border changes for Germany, 1914-1990, but it has serious inaccuracies, and makes no attempt to relate political to ethnic geography (p. 1131).

McKay, though it emphasizes social history, ignores the social impact of ethnic overlap in the Baltic almost entirely; it mentions that predominantly German Danzig was placed within the Polish tariff lines (p. 885), but neither its maps nor its text deal adequately with the social and political significance of the attempts to create (or recreate) nation-states in mixed ethnic areas.

Winks has a full color map (p. 633) "Nationalities in Central and Eastern Europe about 1914," that shows well the overlapping of German and Poles, Germans and Danes, and Swedes and Finns, but there is no hint at the significant numbers of Jews in Poland or Baltic Germans in Lithuania, Latvia, or Estonia at that time.

Kishlansky, with its sensitivity to both Eastern Europe and social history, might be expected to be somewhat better than the other books. Four color maps address the nationalities question: (1) Jewish migrations (p. 768), (2) Linguistic groups in the Balkans (p. 812), (3) Linguistic groups in Austria-Hungary (p. 819), and (4) European Migrations after World War II (p. 939). Only two of these show the Baltic region, and they barely hint at the problems involved.

McNeill, with its world-wide scope, should perhaps not be expected to deal with the details of population mixing in the Baltic area; but one might expect some attention to the general problem of

particularly important, because without an understanding of the mixed population issue many of the other social, economic, political, and military questions cannot be reasonably addressed.

The books do not point out clearly certain facts that might be politically embarrassing to groups in the United States that enjoy strongly positive reputations. For example, the consensus of historical interpretation in these books is clearly that Germany was the aggressor in World War II and that Stalin aided and abetted Hitler through the 1939 pact. But the fact that Finland was allied to Germany in World War II, and the reasons for that alliance, were not made clear.⁵ The fact that local antisemitism in Baltic areas conquered by the German armies was an important factor in the Holocaust is passed over in silence, leaving the Germans to bear that burden of guilt alone.⁶ Although Stalin is blamed for crushing the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the books do not make clear that the U.S. government never formally recognized Soviet annexation of these countries during or after World War II, so U.S. responsibilities toward Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are left unclear.⁷

This disinclination to discuss controversial issues is particularly upsetting because all the books are written by scholars and published by private firms for use in college and university classes (though they are sometimes used in advanced

attempts to achieve nationalistic goals in mixed population areas, and the Baltic region would have provided an excellent example. Unfortunately his treatment is unnecessarily simplistic (pp. 623/624 on Hitler as a "fanatic nationalist" who appealed to the "right of national self-determination," a concept that McNeill does not discuss in sufficient depth). His map (on p. 622) ignores the relocation of the Danish-German border after World War I and gives Memel to Germany already in 1923.

Palmer has a map "Languages of Europe" (p. 441) that clearly implies that overlapping and intermixing of ethnic/language groups does NOT affect the Baltic region, except for Swedes along the coast of Finland. Yet the best attempt to show the complexity of the ethnic mixing and border shifting is in Palmer, (p. 328), a series of maps of Poland from 1772 to 1950, showing how the borders have shifted to the west, and giving some understanding of the ethnic groups within the various boundaries; the maps show the languages spoke in the area as Polish, Lithuanian, Lettish, White Russian, Ukranian, and German, and the caption adds that "Yiddish was spoken by the large scattered Jewish population."

⁵ Kishlansky (p. 906) has a map with both Denmark and Finland colored brown, under "Axis control." The maps in Palmer (pp. 810-811), Winks (p. 815), McKay (p. 950), and Kagan (p. 1044) are more accurate, showing Finland as an Axis ally and Denmark as Axis-occupied territory. Yet the texts do not explain the Finnish position, beyond brief references to the "winter war" of 1939/40.

⁶ Many Americans were amazed and confused when persons recently accused of World War II war crimes were immigrants to the U.S. from Eastern European states, rather than Germans. See Allan A. Ryan, Jr., *Quiet Neighbors: Prosecuting Nazi War Criminals in America* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), which describes cases of several Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians, as well as more well known figures like John Demjanjuk.

⁷ Note how carefully President George Bush's statements treaded the line between supporting Mikhail Gorbachev and expressing vague support for freedom in the Baltic states. For comparison see *Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Communist Aggression and the Forced Incorporation of the Baltic States into the U.S.S.R. Third interim report of the Select Committee on Communist Aggression. House of Representatives, Eighty-third Congress* (Washington: Govt. Print. Off., 1954).

courses in secondary schools as well). They therefore are not beholden to governmental guidelines (let alone censorship). The books ought to be better.

Prospects

I would like to be able to close on a note of optimism, suggesting that the inadequacies of the textbook treatments are likely to be repaired in the near future. But I fear that is not the case. There are two reasons for this:

First, the "new" social history, which provides the foundation for books like the McKay, tends to ignore individual countries and peoples and make broad generalizations based on social and economic groups. Countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, therefore, are rarely named. Instead, we find much interesting material on northern and eastern Europe in general, such as birth rates, the place of women in society, the lives of the serfs, and so forth. The "older" history, which stressed wars and treaties, at least had the virtue that smaller countries were mentioned whenever those wars and treaties affected them. Generations of younger historians who emphasize social history, and those whom they teach, may lose track of the smaller states and peoples entirely.⁸

Secondly, traditional courses and books are often criticized for being too "Eurocentric." As people in the United States come to recognize, quite correctly, that the age of total domination by people of white skin is over, more educators are calling for a history that treats the entire globe rather than just Europe as the area of "our" origins.⁹ Correct though this may be, one runs into the problems of

⁸ The Kishlansky book sets as its goal both to emphasize the lives of common people and to give us a greater understanding of Eastern Europe. Its sections on the early modern period in the Baltic go beyond the standard treatments of the rise of absolutist Prussia and Russia and the decline of Medieval Poland, to emphasize the importance of Sweden and the struggle over the eastern and southern shores of the Baltic (pp. 465-480, with color maps on pages 466, 469, 471, 477, and 478). There are family trees showing the Jagiellon monarchy of Poland and the Swedish house of Vasa, indicating the interrelationships. Yet the book could have done much more very easily. The maps and text switch back and forth between references to "Danzig" and "Gdansk" without explaining clearly that the two are names of the same city, or explaining the implications of the use of the differing forms. Danzig was a "German town" of the Hanseatic League in the later middle ages (p. 307), but Gdansk was a "Polish Baltic port" in the sixteenth century (p. 467). A box inserted in the text on "Bias in Place Names," such as used by Winks (p. 273) on differing forms of Napoli/Naples, would be very useful here. It could address the problem of which name to use in the textbook of the 1990s but more importantly show how shifts of names reflect the idea that "the victor writes the history." On Gdansk/Danzig see Herbert S. Levine, *Hitler's Free City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). The Kishlansky textbook also indicates something of the ethnic mix and the sufferings of the common people; there is a picture of a Livonian peasant (p. 470), with the comment that Livonians were a Finnish people conquered by Ivan the Terrible and then later by the Swedes. By the twentieth century, however, the "Livonians" have disappeared from the book without explanation.

⁹ See the lead article in *Time* magazine, July 8, 1991, "Whose America? A growing emphasis on the nation's 'multicultural' heritage exalts racial and ethnic pride at the expense of social cohesion."

time and space. If Africa and Asia must get as much textbook space and classroom time as Europe, then areas like the Baltic may receive but little treatment indeed.¹⁰ The McNeill textbook illustrates this problem.

I would suggest that such deemphasis is neither inevitable or desirable, even if the social and multicultural historians gain in influence. If the Baltic is treated as a region, rather than as a list of larger and smaller states with constantly shifting boundaries, its story is worthy of inclusion even under the pressures of politically correct curriculum revision.

Historically, the peoples of the Baltic region have suffered under various forms of economic, military, and political exploitation. Swedish, Russian, and Germanic empires have come and gone. Common people have toiled as serfs in the fields and as factory hands in industrializing economies; sometimes they have been controlled by the aristocracy, sometimes by the state, sometimes by private entrepreneurs. The Baltic peoples have known both the exultation and the disasters of political systems that were highly centralized and of those that were decentralized virtually to the point of anarchy. Nationalistic leaders have promised their peoples freedom and glory, leading them to temporary victories and ultimate tragedies. Ethnic groups have sometimes lived side by side in productive harmony; sometimes they have fought each other bitterly.

In recent years, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden appear to have solved their national and economic problems and achieved prosperous and stable democracies, but they still have to contend with the social problems of a "postmodern" society, problems that are not easily put to rest. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania still have to determine how their reestablished national independence will affect their relationships with the larger states of the region. Along with Poland and Russia, they must develop new ways of political and economic organization, now that orthodox authoritarian Communism has proven impractical.

The Germans and the Russians must determine ways to live peacefully with each other and with their less numerous neighbors. Within each of the states of the Baltic region the social stress among ethnic and religious groups must be dealt with, hopefully in constructive and positive ways. Old ideas of forced assimilation (or bloody "final solutions") have proven disastrous for all concerned.

Surely by studying the history of the Baltic region there are lessons to be learned by Americans of every social and ethnic group. And the same may be said of history students around the world.

¹⁰ One way to keep up on the debate, including primary and secondary education as well as higher education, is in *Social Studies Review: A Bulletin of the American Textbook Council*, published by the American Textbook Council, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 518, New York, NY 10115. See for example, "The Multiculture Watch," in its Spring 1991 edition, 10-11.