

Klaus Richter, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xii+355 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-884355-9

In the early 20th century, two Baltic Sea ports, Danzig and Memel, were considered as belonging to the same economic space. The distance between these ports, in a straight line, was 214 kilometres, back then, just as it is now. A hundred years ago, in 1921, this distance could be covered by the most advanced means at the time: the nam plane from Danzig would land in Memel three hours later, with a 30-minute break in Königsberg. Today, unlike 100 years ago, the most common form of transport between the two ports is the automobile. It takes eight hours, to cover a distance of over 700 kilometres. The reason for this dramatic change is the appearance of the Kaliningrad Oblast, one of the outcomes of the Second World War. This Russian semi-enclave outside the European Union and the Schengen Zone is wedged between Lithuania and Poland; but driving all the way round it would still probably take less time than taking the shorter 295-kilometre route through Kaliningrad and the two border control posts, even with all the necessary documents in order before the journey.

Klaus Richter's new book reminds us how a whole string of similar, and sometimes even more radical, obstructions to transport and communications appeared in the large European region stretching from the Gulf of Finland in the north to the Carpathians in the south. This occurred when the imperial order collapsed, and a whole collection of nation-states emerged in the borderland between the former Habsburg, Hohenzollern and Romanov empires. This transformation, a direct result of the First World War, has long been known by historians, and has attracted a great deal of discussion. However, Richter's book helps us look closer at the economic and social changes arising from this upheaval. The main argument in the book is that the East Central European region fragmented after the Great War. Even though this argument, too, is not at all new, and has been discussed by contemporaries, Richter's book is probably the first to discuss the issue in so much detail, and from so many angles. Somewhat reminiscent of Karl Polanyi's *magnus opus*,

the book sees an obvious fact, the emergence of nation-states from the rubble of the former imperial order, from the point of view of the loss of the significance of the pre-Great War roads and networks and the (self-)isolation of markets, and as a rearrangement of trade flows and groups wielding economic power.

The author defines the East Central European region in a rather unusual way. The book's sub-heading and introduction explain that he has in mind Poland and the Baltic States. Finland, which was also frequently referred to as a Baltic country in the period between the two world wars, is not discussed. He looks only at Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Regardless of this, the book also looks at some eastern areas of Germany (Pomerania), East Prussia, and the free city of Danzig, which were not in either Poland or the Baltic States. Thus, what should and should not be included in the book appears to be based mostly on the author's own arbitrary choice.

Richter first of all defines fragmentation as the breaking up of interaction in the area, calling it, and perhaps exaggerating a little, 'the most evident consequence of the war [...] to most Europeans of the interwar period' (p. 2). He states: 'I use the term to describe a gradual process of breaking and reconfiguring networks of economic, political, social, and cultural exchange' (p. 3). In the introduction and the six chapters of the book, Richter analyses the influence of the war and the postwar territorial reconfigurations on the integrity of regions. The first chapter is about how the war caused the break-up of links that existed at the beginning of the 20th century, and Germany's initiatives to reconfigure these links so that they would be of benefit to the Kaiserreich. In the next two chapters, the author shows how the national governments that formed after the war used the control of movement, repatriation and citizenship as measures to homogenise the territories attributed to them, and the challenges that arose from the appearance of borders in places where they had never existed before. The book continues to discuss how at first (after the war) Germany tried to assume economic dominance in the former western provinces of Russia, but that soon its most serious rival in the region became the United Kingdom. Richter shows how nation-states at least tried to compensate for the role in trade that had been played prior to the war by the western provinces of Russia as a location for the concentration of raw materials. However, the road towards commercial independence was rather complicated for the nation-states. This was in part due to the fact that lines of communication along natural trade arteries, the rivers Daugava (Western Dvina),

Nemunas (Neman, Memel) and Vistula, broke down. Insurmountable political obstacles formed between prewar regions supplying raw materials, and the ports where the raw materials had been transported to before the war. When governments of the new political entities took control over former imperial ports, new railways had to be built. The book mentions the most prominent example of the Magistrala Węglowa, from Upper Silesia to Gdynia, but readers would have benefited from analogies with the smaller-scale projects that Lithuania also had to implement, connecting Šiauliai with Klaipėda (formerly Memel), and Latvia, which built a new line from Jelgava (Mitava) to Liepāja (Libava). The book ends with a chapter about how nation-states implemented and legitimised the re-allocation of lands.

Richter offers a rather detailed overview in his book, especially of the economic changes that unfolded in the region, something which has indeed been missing in academic writing. When writing the history of the First World War and its results in East Central Europe, historians have only recently made initial attempts to go beyond the established national narrative framework.¹ This book not only joins these earlier attempts; it also focuses the reader's attention on the economic and social history of the Great War and its results in the region, which has yet to be written. Thus, by covering international processes and actors, and offering a fresh look at the economic changes, Richter's work is a welcome addition to those who in a way challenge the accepted national narratives of the Great War in (Central and) Eastern Europe, each with its dominant public figures, politicians and wars of independence.

What we see in the book is a detailed study, which will be of prime interest to those who are knowledgeable about the topic and the period. The author substantiates many new statements, which are either raised for the first time in historiography, or are applied for the first time to the broader region. For example, he argues convincingly that, when searching for the source of their disregard of the principle of the inviolability of private property of which the executors of land reform have often been accused, we should not look to Estonian or Polish extremism, but instead examine the countless cases of requisitions under the German occupation, which 'loosened attitudes towards rules and norms around private property that had been in effect before the war' (p. 301). The land reform itself that was implemented in the region was not actually

¹ See, for instance: W. Borodziej, M. Górny, *Nasza wojna*, Vols. 1–2 (Warszawa, 2014, 2018).

as radical or exceptional as it was made out to be in the interwar years, especially by those who suffered the after-effects.

Undoubtedly, many of the claims in a work of such a broad scope can be discussed further. For example, in my opinion, the author seems to have been overwhelmed by the rhetoric of the period under discussion. He looks on and presents fragmentation not just as a period of disintegration. In the introduction, he undertakes to show who exploited and benefited from 'the rupture of commercial flows, of migration routes, and of social networks' (p. 3). Richter devotes a great deal of attention to this in the book: we can only admire his efforts to analyse a whole swathe of actors at different levels. However, I hesitate to agree that he has managed to distance himself from portraying these actors in their respective national vestures, which is so characteristic in the rhetoric of the period under analysis (1915 to 1929) in the book. When depicting the post-imperial situation, the author sees those who benefited as being the titular nations of the new states, and those who experienced injustice and even discrimination as national minorities. However, if the results of land reform in the post-imperial states affected a large part of the new titular nations more or less equally, then the question of what is actually known about those who benefited from the changes to the railway network and the appearance of new ports within the boundaries of the new nation-states is worth exploring further. For example, the fact that in the 1930s, Klaipėda finally became Lithuania's main foreign trade port undoubtedly benefited both traders and industrialists in the Klaipėda region. But these are hardly ever considered as representatives of the titular nation in Lithuania. Also, in the book the author reaches the conclusion that 'the states became the most important economic actors in the region, while the private sector, hoping for a return to a liberal pre-war order, was sidelined' (p. 31). This conclusion, especially if we understand that the entire nation is not necessarily hidden behind the term 'state', also prompts a reconsideration of who benefited. After all, under the authoritarian conditions in all four states discussed in the book, the 'state' was 'requisitioned' by one leader and a network of people who were loyal to the ruling party. Even though the network usually consisted of representatives of the titular nation, it was only a small portion of those representatives who were involved in each respective network. Thus, the picture painted in Richter's book about those who benefited is still too general and simplified; the discussion about the recipients of these benefits should probably continue. Of course, it is to Richter's credit that it will now be possible to expand this discussion.

While inaccuracies and unevenness by no means dominate in the book, there are nonetheless a few cases to mention. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk did not regulate administrative reconfigurations between Lithuania and Courland, as the author claims (p. 119). They were more of an indirect outcome of the treaty, pursuant to which the war administration in Ober Ost implemented even more reconfigurations on the grounds of ethnicity. For example, some of the lands inhabited by Polish speakers around Suwałki and Augustów were removed from the territory of Militärverwaltung Litauen in 1918.²

The episode about the representation of the smallness and temporary nature of the new states (pp. 141–149) does touch on important issues in the transformation of East Europe's image, but presenting the Soviet perspective in the book would have given a more complete picture. In the postwar period, Poland and the Baltic States were portrayed in the Soviet Union as being unreliable and dangerous dwarf-like neighbours, who were incapable of making independent decisions and were ultimately weak. This is precisely why communist propaganda depicted them as hives of the 'white terror' and bastions of 'international fascism', which enemies could use in an attack against the Soviet Union by the 'imperialist coalition'. At the end of the book, Richter shows German revisionism as if it were an attempt to overcome what was considered fragmented from a German perspective. Yet the Soviets also fostered revisionism, which was also encouraged by attempts to overcome that in which they saw fragmentation.

One or two other examples of inaccuracies relate directly to Lithuania. Ludwig Sochaczewer was the editor of the *Memeler Dampfboot* newspaper, and not the 'director of the city's Board of Merchants' (p. 239). The Klaipėda military operation in January 1923 was not carried out only by Lithuanian 'paramilitary units' (p. 237), but also by soldiers who served in the regular army. The land expropriation in Klaipėda in 1937, which Richter describes in his Conclusions (p. 307), was never actually implemented: the law on expropriation was revoked in early 1939. Lithuania planned the construction of a port in Šventoji in 1921. The project was meant to be very similar to the one in Gdynia, but the annexation of Klaipėda changed its implementation. So relating the start

²For more on this, see: Verwaltungs-Bericht der Militärverwaltung Litauen (Bezirk Nord) für die Zeit vom 1. Oktober 1917 bis 31. März 1918. 8. Druckbericht. [Kowno, 1918], pp. 5–6. Cf. V. Safronovas, 'Zum Wandel des räumlichen Begriffs „Litauen“ im deutschsprachigen Diskurs während und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg', *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte*, Bd. 10 (2015), pp. 109–135, especially pp. 118–125.

of the construction of the port at Šventoji in 1925 to the understanding that Lithuania was incapable of structurally reforming its exports via Klaipėda is perhaps not quite correct (p. 242).

Even though the author's arguments and examples are not convincing in all cases, much like his choice of sources for spotlighting one issue or another, this by no means undermines the main value of his book. He covers a whole assemblage of aspects of the political, economic and social history of East Central Europe. The book expands on the idea of fragmentation, and takes a new look at the history of the region in the early 20th century. Richter has used a wide range of sources in different languages, from archives in Poland, Germany, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Switzerland and the United States. While not without its shortcomings, this impressive work should serve as an important point of reference in the historiography of Poland and the Baltic States.

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