

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aldis Purs. *Baltic Facades: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1945*. Contemporary Worlds Series. London: Reakction, 2012. Maps. 203 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86189-896-8.

Reviewed by Elo-Hanna Seljamaa (University of Tartu)

Published on H-SAE (February, 2013)

Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik



## Deconstructing and Constructing the Baltic

“This account is ideal for the reader looking for an introduction to the Baltic States that is engaging, slightly unorthodox and iconoclastic and ultimately comments as much on how we are all similar as it does on how the Baltic states are different. This account, therefore, is far from ideal for the reader looking for certainty and precision in discussing specific people, events or dates” (p. 16). So characterizes Aldis Purs his most recent book on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Purs has written or contributed to several scholarly studies of Latvia, and he is careful to point out that *Baltic Facades* is not aimed at Baltic specialists, but rather at “curious travellers” and “concerned citizens” (p. 7). The volume gives an overview of politics, the economy, and cultural trends in each of the Baltic states since 1945, placing these developments in a longer historical perspective and demonstrating their distinctiveness. At the same time, Purs argues that the challenges faced by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, especially their simultaneous desire to be part of a larger whole and to celebrate their uniqueness, are symptomatic of a universal postmodern search for identity. Drawing on this idea, he describes the Baltic states as “the canaries in a twenty-first century coalmine”—“examples of much of what will define the twenty-first century globally” (p. 183).

The book consists of an introduction and six chronologically structured thematic chapters. In line with the target audience of nonspecialists, references and a full bibliography have been omitted in favor of suggestions for further reading, mostly in the field of history. The

volume is illustrated with three maps: Europe, designating European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries, in 2011; Lithuania in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and finally the Baltic region between 1920 and 1991.

Purs begins with an insightful deconstruction of the Baltic concept. Largely a category imposed on Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from without, the term “Baltic” hides as much as it informs and possibly says more about the ignorance of its users than about the countries and peoples labeled “Baltic.” According to Purs, there is “little tangible Baltic identity on the ground” and no shared past apart from the unhappy experiences of the twentieth century (p. 11). Consequently, historians have, at least until very recently, struggled to produce integrated historical accounts of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, while analyses by political scientists and economists tend to suffer a short shelf life. Despite these thoughtfully formulated criticisms, Purs claims that the Baltic concept “can still produce insightful observations” and proposes “a broad, sweeping gestalt-like approach,” the core idea of which “revolves around how Balts identify and place themselves within their nation-state, region and continent” (p. 12). The author describes this as “the body politic,” bending the well-known metaphor to mean “maladies plaguing a state”: “The Baltic body politic can be defined, using this metaphor, as suffering from body dysmorphic disorder or—in layman’s terms—a preoccupation with perceived defects in its physical features” (p. 13).

Body politic is no doubt an intriguing starting point, one that nails down the acute sense of self-consciousness observed also by some other scholars of the Baltic. For example, Sigrid Rausing, who in the early 1990s conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Estonian countryside, has described Estonians as “masters of understatement” for their ability to treat as ordinary Western goods that at the time were not only new and unfamiliar but also wildly expensive by local standards. Rausing argues that Estonians’ “studied indifference” served them as a means to try to pass as “normal” people on a par with Westerners or, better still, as Westerners.[1] In a similar vein, the Soviet era has been commonly described in Estonia as a period of abnormal rupture, and all three Baltic states are obsessed with demonstrating their distinctiveness from other former republics of the Soviet Union.

Regrettably, Purs buries the concept of body politic after the introduction. I found myself looking for and missing it time and again, especially in chapter 2, which covers World War II and the Soviet political system from Stalinism to the 1980s. Among other issues, Purs discusses the Holocaust in the Baltic republics and how this topic has been treated in and by the post-Soviet Baltic states. He acknowledges that “the roles, responsibilities and guilt of the majority are far more difficult to appraise,” but argues also that “none of the three states has entirely come to terms with the murder, with local participation, of one of their component, historic communities” (p. 57). According to Purs, “most Latvians and Lithuanians find it difficult to discuss the Holocaust and Latvian and Lithuanian participation without raising tenuous links to Soviet occupation and the persecution of Latvians and Lithuanians” (p. 58). I wish the author had discussed these observations from the perspective of body politic, because the difficulty he identifies signals tensions between how the Balts identify themselves within their respective states and Europe and how powerful external actors see them and expect them to behave. Moreover, the “tenuous links” between Nazi atrocities and the Soviet occupation raised by Lithuanians, Latvians, and, no doubt, Estonians point to ways in which Baltic and several other Eastern and Central European states seek to challenge and modify established European or Western narratives of the Soviet Union in World War II.[2]

Sovietization is another topic where the concept of body politic might have yielded valuable novel insights. Purs explains in the same second chapter that the “bulk of the Sovietization in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania occurred during Stalinist rule,” meaning the nationalization of private property, the introduction of the ruble, col-

lectivization, and the implementation of command economy (p. 72). Though inseparable from these economic reforms, the Sovietization of minds, everyday life, and cultural practices was a considerably longer and more complex process, which perhaps could only begin after downright terror had ceased. Body politic as defined by Purs seems to be also a matter of details, embodied routines, and contextualized performances; the study of it calls for ethnographic methods attuned to the particular and the repetitive as well as for close readings of culture texts. Looked at from this perspective, it is partly for methodological reasons that the full potential of the concept of body politic remains unrealized in this book. The truly enjoyable and refreshing introduction creates expectations for an account with a twist that the rest of the book does not always meet.

Chapter 1 (“Historical Background”) begins with what little is believed and known about the earliest inhabitants in the region and succeeds admirably in the task of compressing the next almost eleven thousand years into less than thirty pages. Purs demonstrates how Estonia and Latvia went through many of the same developments at the same time, while Lithuania was in a different situation. It was not until 1800 that most of the lands of the present-day Baltic states belonged under a common-Russian-ruler, but even then they were not ruled uniformly. All three were fortunate in exploiting the international crisis to achieve statehood in 1918 but failed to preserve it when new conflicts burst out. As discussed above, the historical narrative continues in chapter 2, the title of which—“Potemkin Republics”—ties in with the title of the volume and the concept of body politic. Purs states in the chapter introduction that the history of the Baltic countries “from 1940 until 1991 is largely the history of three Potemkin Republics” where “the chasm between the facade and conditions on the ground was at its deepest” (p. 49). The Soviet occupation of 1940 followed largely the same pattern in each of the three states, as did the German occupation. Among topics explored in this chapter is the legitimacy of Soviet rule or rather lack thereof. Purs asks “how could a state that was considered illegitimate by the majority of its inhabitants, and that pursued policies considered antithetical to Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian national identities, build some measure of support and legitimacy?” (p. 65). An important aspect to keep in mind in this connection is that the sense of illegitimacy is not static. Epp Anus has recently suggested that Soviet rule in the Baltics began as occupation but developed over time into a colonial relationship.[3] This approach provides new oppor-

tunities for understanding locals' collaboration with the regime and their agency. Purs points out, too, that local elites "played a more central role in initiating and directing the Sovietization of their republics than was initially believed" (ibid.). The next chapter, "Soviet Union to European Union," begins nevertheless with the familiar narrative about Balts' continuous resistance to the Soviet regime. Once Soviet leaders realized that the system of planned economy was failing, they faced the dilemma of enacting economic measures without provoking political and social unrest. Glasnost was meant to facilitate reforms, but gave rise to a backlash against the regime as a whole. Purs describes the activities of the Popular Front in each Baltic republic and collaboration between them: "the popular movements in Soviet Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, although always focused on local developments, also took on the character of a Baltic movement, perhaps for the first and only time in their history" (p. 88). For some reason there is no mention of Citizens' Committees, the main rival of the Popular Front in Latvia and Estonia, even though competition between these two popular movements is of crucial importance for understanding the radical citizenship policies and other nationalist measures of state and nation building in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia.

Chapter 4 demonstrates Purs's expertise in the sphere of the economy and the region as well as his skill of generalization. Some overlap with previous chapters' historical accounts is unavoidable and ensures furthermore that this section makes an enjoyable read on its own. He argues convincingly against the claim, used widely in the Baltic states, that Soviet planners sent migrant labor into Soviet Estonia and Latvia with the intention of changing the ethnic makeup of these republics. Purs's account of the interwar period is equally compelling. He writes that political calculations trumped economic ones with mixed consequences: state support for smallholding agriculture turned the previously explosive landless poor into shareholders of the new state, but the state's growing power in economic matters had also "the unintended consequence of easing some Soviet and Nazi economic policies during their initial occupations" (p. 124). Purs suggests furthermore that the depression in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the early 1930s deserves more attention. As in other small states, the Achilles heel of economic development in the Baltic states has been access to capital. The most recent solution provided by the European Union and foreign private banks has come with its own downsides and bubbles that burst with dramatic consequences.

Chapter 5 takes a look at the emergence of ethnic identities as well as at developments in the field of culture—music, art, sports, literature. Purs describes how ethnic identity became slowly and gradually detached from social and, to some extent, religious identity. Excursions into art, music, and literature refer to particular authors and their works to exemplify broader trends. I am confident that Purs, an expert on Latvia, teaches me new things about that country in this section of the book. However, his sometimes incautious statements about Estonia—a country I know well from my own research—makes me uncertain as to whether he is similarly imprecise in his handling of Lithuanian culture. For example, Purs writes that "the Estonian painter Kristjan Raud may be the earliest example" of an artist "successfully accommodating the distinctive message of Estonian ... life in a modern oeuvre" (p. 165). However, Raud (1865-1943) is known first and foremost for his drawings and reached the peak of his career only between the two world wars; it was his twin brother Paul (1865-1930) who excelled at painting.<sup>[4]</sup> The final chapter, "Prospects," reflects perceptively on opportunities awaiting the Baltic states and the Baltic identity in the light of current political, economic, and demographic developments and challenges, including the outmigration of professionals and laborers alike. Purs points to signs "of a political environment that belittles consensus-building and compromise," especially in Latvia and Estonia, which struggle with ethnic divisions (p. 181).

Concerning the book as a whole, I accept and respect Purs's disclaimer of specific numbers, dates, and names; because of this choice, the book is indeed easy to read. However, abstaining from details can become counterproductive, especially when writing for an audience of nonspecialists. For example, references to population decrease and increase or comments about "tens of thousands" refugees and deportees say little unless readers are able to put them into perspective. In other words, *Baltic Facades* is not Baltic for dummies, but, as Purs makes clear in the introduction, it is also not for Baltic specialists. I puzzle over the claim that this book offers "a slightly unorthodox and iconoclastic" treatment of the Baltic. If unorthodox means proving Baltic unity wrong, this characterization is spot on. However, Purs seems to be also in an implicit dialogue with nationalists in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, debunking their claims and theories. To be able to recognize these allusions and to appreciate the author's insightful analysis, one has, again, to have previous knowledge about the region and to be familiar with some of the stereotypes that

the book skillfully deconstructs. It follows from this that *Baltic Facades* can be recommended to Baltic specialists and nonspecialists alike. Neither “touristy” nor excessively academic, it might be well filling a gap in existing literature on the region.

## Notes

[1]. Sigrid Rausing, *History, Memory, and Identity in Post-Soviet Estonia: The End of a Collective Farm* (New

York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 150.

[2]. Eva-Clarita Onken, “The Baltic States and Moscow’s 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (2007): 23-46.

[3]. Epp Annus. “The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 43 (2012): 21-45.

[4]. Mai Levin, *From One Century to the Next: Kristjan and Paul Raud* (Tallinn: Art Museum of Estonia, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sae>

**Citation:** Elo-Hanna Seljamaa. Review of Purs, Aldis, *Baltic Facades: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1945*. H-SAE, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37078>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.