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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

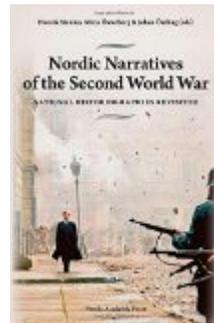


Henrik Stenius, Mirja Österberg, Johan Östling. *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War: National Historiographies Revisited*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2011. 176 S. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-91-85509-49-2.

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How does one examine the experiences and historical perspectives of five geographically proximate countries that do not share similar experiences of World War II? How does the Second World War fit into the national narrative of Nordic countries? How should historians consider the role of countries that neither won nor lost this war according to those countries' interpretations of it? What is the value in historians comparing five countries that claim distinct experiences and interpretations of the war?

At a 2007 seminar at the Nordin Institute in Helsinki, five scholars began to engage questions about Nordic experiences and narratives of World War II. Subsequent conversations among this original group and other scholars resulted in the seven essays comprising this edited collection, a slim volume that is the first English-language book to present the national narratives of Nordic countries in relation to each other and to primarily Western European historical narratives. The structure of *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War* resembles an extended conference panel, with an opening overview by two of the original seminar participants; chapters on each of the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden); and a concluding essay that presents the previous six chapters in a broader interpretive context. The five national chapters share similar frameworks, reflecting how the scholars' conversations with one another informed their analyses of national narratives.

Contributors point to several important questions in their essays. For example, how all-encompassing are the classifications of "World War" and "Nordic"? Many

European countries' national narratives were shaped by World War II and the Cold War, but was this the case for Nordic countries? Did continental European reinterpretations of wartime experiences influence Nordic interpretations of World War II? Specifically, did the German *Historikerstreit*—the debate between West German historians about whether the Nazi past should be understood within the context of twentieth-century totalitarianism and as a response to the Russian Revolution and the Soviet gulag system, or whether such an interpretation extols the Nazi period and the conditions that led to Nazi leadership—lead to similar questions regarding Nordic nations' actions and their leaders' decisions during World War II?

Critiques, sometimes subtle and sometimes strident, about the methodologies and subjects of social and cultural histories emerge within the essays. The authors show a preference for political history and focus on narratives that encompass the nation's experience, rather than narratives of groups or communities. There is little discussion, for example, about the impact of postwar oral history projects or survivor accounts on national narratives. Finally, the influence of nonprofessional historians and new media on historical interpretations is an issue that the authors raise to readers indirectly.

In their introductory chapter, the three editors situate the Nordic narratives within a broader pattern of continental European narratives about World War II. Four themes emerged from the initial 2007 seminar, and this text's framework builds on these "tensions" (p. 10): security policies during and after the war; the question of who can participate in foreign policy decisions; the end

of the Cold War and the so-called moral turn in historical studies of World War II and the Holocaust; and the distinct experiences of the five Nordic nations. The authors of the five country chapters interpret the framework generally by first describing the national narratives of World War II and identifying the war participants, historians, writers, and politicians who shaped the initial and subsequent interpretations of the war. The authors next look at any challenges to the dominant national narrative and the influence of a “moral turn” in addressing issues of collaboration with Nazi Germany, the Holocaust, and the treatment of native Jews. Finally, the role of new media in creating narrative sources and commemorative acts is engaged to varying depths. There is a common thread of explaining wartime decisions by individuals and nations in terms of self-preservation, with a mixed apologetic and hesitatingly defensive tone for citizens who relied on a survival instinct during the war. Given the distinct national narratives and cultures of historical memory in these countries, unevenness across the middle chapters is understandable. Indeed, it reinforces the overwhelming conclusion that there are similarities and differences across the histories of the Nordic region.

Bo Stråth’s concluding chapter synthesizes the preceding five chapters, critiques the framework established in the first chapter, and places these national and regional narratives in a broader (but not completely) European continental context. He first identifies the start and end of the Cold War—1945 and 1989—as false book-ends or focal points for research trends. Given the way in which the generation of 1968 questioned historical pasts, he notes that the start of such challenges to the dominant narratives of World War II in fact preceded the fall of Communism and end of the Cold War. Pushing readers to consider how myths become a historical medium, he raises the question of “why symbols and myths so often emerge in the framework of the nation and become *geschichtsmässig*, carriers of history” (p. 152). Stråth notes the postmodern influences blurring the distinctions between history, myth, and memory, but condemns history (and indirectly, by extension, its professionals) for moving toward memory in studying the past. His crisp analysis of what some call “the memory turn” leads to his presentation of the postwar Germanys as a better model for understanding how national narratives developed in postwar Europe. Stråth concludes his essay by noting the ongoing tension between individual remembering or

memories and collective or national memory. His warning that symbols and their interpretations can overtake facts in the shaping of new narratives acknowledges the shift in history toward constructing a past rather than discovering an unknown past. After reading the last chapter, one wonders how the writers of the previous six chapters responded to Stråth’s essay and whether they could or will revisit their interpretations. Unlike a conference panel, the authors of the first six chapters do not have the opportunity in the text to engage directly with Stråth’s points. Perhaps this was the intention, encouraging readers and scholars to continue to engage these frameworks and issues beyond the book.

Nordic Narratives of the Second World War is a solid starting point for those outside the Scandinavian field looking to include Nordic perspectives on World War II, national narratives, and memory construction. The book raises larger questions about nation-states and twentieth-century national myths, and individual essays to varying degrees seek to push historical interpretations to larger questions of the role of national histories in current historical writing. Given the ongoing concerns about the threat to professional historians’ authority in an age when access to archival and historical texts is expanding with digitization and Internet access, readers may find the underlying question of who has the authority to present and interpret the past as another way to engage with this text. The book’s format might, however, be discouraging for nonspecialists, in part because the contributors assume differing levels of audience familiarity with Nordic national narratives, histories, and popular culture.

Disappointingly, the text lacks an index as well as a list of works cited, although each chapter includes endnotes. Bibliographic information about films, novels, official commemorative websites, and museum exhibits, in addition to visual sources that may be more accessible to those without Scandinavian language skills, would have been a welcome addition. A handful of distracting grammatical errors and phrases with missing words should have been caught in the editing process. Nonetheless, for an English-language introduction to Nordic issues of national memory and history intended for scholars studying modern Europe in a broad scope, the global nature of World War II, and the development of national historic narratives in the twentieth century, *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War* is a text that achieves its goal.

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