

Yves Plasseraud, *Les États Baltiques des Sociétés Gigognes*. Brest: Armeline. 2006. 2nd Edition. 451pp. Index, bibliography, appendices. ISBN 2-910878-23-6 (paperback).

Yves Plasseraud's substantial text contains a tremendous amount of information about the history of the Baltic States. It is a little ironic, therefore, that the three page introduction is actually one of the most provocative sections of the whole book. Here the author manages to 'hit' a number of important 'nails on the head' in quick succession. Persuasively he argues that the Baltic region should be of special interest to anyone wanting to know about the management of relations between minorities. It is a region in which 'indigenous' Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians have long rubbed shoulders with members of dispersed groups, not least Jews, Karaimes, Russians, Poles, Swedes and Germans. At various times, different nations (often ones representing numerical minorities) have been in the ascendancy, running territories with different priorities and framing 'liberty' in different ways. Likewise, over the centuries various national groups have experienced different kinds of 'national awakening' which necessarily brought consequences for the relations between themselves and others. Today, things are no less interesting, particularly since Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians are barely majorities in their 'own' states. In fact they are confronted with Russian minorities which effectively have local independence and a sometimes strident 'parent' state in very close proximity.

Plasseraud is quite right, therefore, that this region can be viewed a 'laboratory' for questions to do with nationality politics. (p.7) It is also true that, at a time when the Baltic peoples are researching their own national identities, it is absolutely vital to look at the historical record and draw appropriate conclusions. (p.8) The author's

contribution to this project is structured more or less chronologically. Beginning with what amounts to an 'Ancient History' of the Baltic peoples, the text progresses predictably through the periods of German invasion and the creation of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Unsurprisingly, it spends a good deal of time examining the national independence of the three Baltic States during the inter-war period, before dashing through the Soviet years and then devoting the last 150 pages to the world since 1990. Plasserau's work consistently is engaging - readable and informative in equal measure. It should be said that the publisher has done a good job too. The book comes complete with a nice variety of colour plates as well as black and white photographs illustrating places and personalities alike. Consequently *Les États Baltique* does manage to convey the atmosphere of the place under discussion.

Naturally we can 'nit-pick' about the text. For instance, the promise of the introduction is not quite delivered in full measure. There is always a bit of a tension between the author providing a general study of the Baltic States and his desire to discuss specifically themes relating to nationality. Consequently, from time to time we are left wanting to know more than he tells us. Plasseraud could have spent a bit longer discussing Peter the Great's confirmation of the rights of the German nobility. The history of the Jews also contains so much that is fascinating (e.g. their protection under the Grand Duchy versus the 'apartheid' promoted by Catherine the Great) that it seems to escape a completely satisfying summary.

This is also the case when it comes to trying to understand the interactions of Jewish and non-Jewish groups. One of the undoubted highlights of Plasseraud's work is its discussion of Jewish intellectual approaches to 'cultural autonomy'. The author should be commended for introducing the ideas of, say, Vladimir Medem and Simon Dubnow, to a general audience. What remains less certain, however, is the impact of

such authors on non-Jewish thinkers. For example, how exactly did their ideas inform Estonia's famous cultural autonomy legislation of 1925? To what extent were important non-Jewish activists who favoured cultural autonomy actually motivated by Dubnow and Medem? Or were they much more motivated by different traditions? What's more, given that (as Plasseraud knows well) ethnic Germans were particularly active in bringing about the Estonian law, it may be (for example) that entitling a section of the book 'The Jews: the champions of cultural autonomy' risks being a bit misleading. (p.129) Still, the very fact that Plasseraud makes us want to know more about the intellectual overlap between Jews and non-Jews really should not be a cause for criticism: it is actually a service in its own right.

It is, perhaps, also worth mentioning that Plasseraud is a bit hasty in the way he deals with some of the ethnic Germans involved in the Estonian cultural autonomy project of 1925. Werner Hasselblatt has a page devoted to his work here, but actually the motives of this individual are a bit difficult to pin down. Unfortunately even in the 1920s it is unclear if his interest in cultural autonomy spoke more of humanitarian concern or nationalism. If the author threatens to step on the odd 'landmine' here, however, perhaps this also reflects the fact that the history of cultural autonomy is only in the process of being worked out even today.

So the balanced judgement has to be that Plasseraud's book comes 'highly recommended'. Students and general readers alike should welcome it as an evocative, stimulating and intellectually interesting introduction to one of Europe's too frequently neglected regions; academics should welcome the volume of material that Plasseraud has made available too.

Martyn Housden, University of Bradford.