

*Nordic Narratives of the Second World War: National Historiographies Revisited*, ed. by Henrik Stenius, Mirja Österberg & Johan Östling, Nordic Academic Press: Lund, 2011, 173 pp., ISBN 978-91-85509-49-2.

During the twentieth century, the Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – shared much in common in their societal developments. Yet the histories of these countries in the Second World War were very different. Denmark and Norway were occupied by Germany in 1940–45; Sweden remained neutral throughout the conflict; Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union in 1939–40 and 1941–44 and finally waged war against the German troops in Northern Finland in 1944–45. Iceland, a country in personal union with Denmark, was occupied by the Western powers and first declared its independence as a sovereign republic in 1944. Furthermore, also the post-war foreign policies of the countries differed remarkably, with Denmark, Iceland and Norway being among the founding members of NATO, Sweden and Finland remaining neutral, but the latter's foreign political position strongly influenced by the need to regard the Soviet interests in the region.

This is the setting of similarities and dissimilarities introduced to the reader of *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War*. The introductory chapter is followed by case studies on the national historiographies of the Second World War of each Nordic country. The book is concluded by Bo Stråth's important contribution on the Nordic historiographies of war in the wider European context.

Although it is impossible to mould the Nordic war narratives into a single form, the chapters of the book reveal a similar pattern in the ways these countries have first constructed and then critically reassessed their wartime pasts. During the immediate post-war decades, the dominant narratives sought to legitimise the foundations of the post-war states and stressed the national unity of each country in 1939–45. In Denmark and Norway this meant

emphasizing the national resistance against the Nazi rule. In Finland the Continuation War of 1941–44 alongside Germany was depicted as a separate Finnish endeavour to secure national sovereignty. In Sweden the wartime policies towards Germany were seen as skilful ‘small-state realism’ laying the foundations for the post-war foreign policy. In Iceland the foreign occupation had actually expedited the country’s independence in 1944. Consequently, the role of occupation and war for this process was played down to narrate the independence as an Icelandic achievement.

From the 1970s onwards the second generation of historians started to question these patriotic narratives. The troubling issues of wartime collaboration, domestic Nazism and the Holocaust were now brought to the research agenda. Yet the paradigmatic change in the Nordic war narratives took place only at the beginning of the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union with all its consequences. The authors of the book characterise this change as the *moral turn*, which led the war years to be critically reassessed from the perspective of universal ethicality and human rights. From now on, the scholars’ attempts to build historical syntheses on the wartime complexities were often overshadowed by morally-laden or outright moralistic representations of the past made by the non-academic actors in the history and memory culture at large: politicians, journalists, documentarians, non-fiction authors, public commentators.

This is the general trend, although the national emphases and viewpoints of the moral turn varied considerably from one Nordic country to another. Whereas the rather uniform post-war interpretations had served to legitimise the status quo of each country’s foreign policy, the new post-Cold War era led to a radical re-evaluation of the different political alternatives and to a general democratisation of foreign policy. Furthermore, the seeming triumph of Western liberalism in the 1990s and the new interventionist foreign policies have tempted also Nordic politicians to use the Second World War as a morally warning example

of succumbing to totalitarianism. Finally, the intensification of the European integration process has created a need to find a common war narrative, on which to construct a contemporary European identity.

The chapters of the book are compact and readable. Some concepts employed, such as the hegemonic narrative, methodological nationalism, identity politics and the ‘postmodernity’ of the new interpretations, would have deserved a more in-depth discussion. Synne Corell’s chapter on the ‘nationally framed’ Norwegian case is the most analytic one regarding the relation of history-writing to national identity. The book’s clear focus on the interplay between the foreign policy and the war narratives is interesting and justifiable, but it has the consequence of seeing each country in question as a rather monolithic memory community and of emphasising the politically instrumental nature of memory and history over the more complex generational, psychological and cultural factors at play. For this reason I liked Johan Östling’s inclusion of the Swedish counter-narratives to his chapter. At the moment, when the historians are more and more interested in making transnational comparisons instead of writing strictly national histories, compilations such as *Nordic Narratives of the Second World War* are of great value.

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