

Den yderste grænse: Danske frivillige i de baltiske uafhængighedskrige 1918–1920, by Mikkel Kirkebæk, København, Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2019, 532+680 pp., 600.00 kr., ISBN: 9788711915899

Mikkel Kirkebæk's handsomely presented two-volume work on the participation of Danish volunteers in the Baltic wars of independence (1918–1920) is certainly one of the more impressive studies of these wars to have emerged during their recent centenary. In many ways a fresh and unconventional look at the confusing events that unfolded in the Baltics in the aftermath of the First World War, Kirkebæk's book would be a useful reading to anyone with more than a passing interest in this period. After giving a brief overview of its contents, I will try to explain why I think that this is the case.

The first volume of the two is dedicated to the political and ideological aspects leading up to the Danish volunteers' arrival and stay in Estonia. In addition to a substantial introduction and literature review, it includes an overview of Baltic history prior to 1918, which would probably be most useful to a Danish reader with little prior knowledge of the subject. This is followed by a detailed account of the "Baltic crisis" in late autumn and winter of 1918 that saw the end of the German occupation and the immediately following advance of the Red Army seeking to reconquer these territories that had been lost through the – now invalid – Brest-Litovsk peace treaty.

As the Baltic nationalist elites scrambled to seek help abroad, considerable pressure was put on both Allied and Scandinavian governments to try to stop the spread of the Bolshevik revolution westwards. The war-weary Entente and neutral Scandinavia, however, were both unprepared to fully commit to such a cause, the gravity of the threat notwithstanding. As they had to strike a delicate balance between deterring the spread of the revolution and maintaining the support of their own working classes, the western governments were operating under considerable domestic and foreign political constraints. In the end, the Baltic politicians and their foreign allies managed to enlist only limited naval support and material help from the UK, and to initiate a likewise limited effort to recruit volunteers in Sweden and Denmark – an effort hampered by the constant lack of funds and vocal counter-campaigns organized by the Scandinavian left-socialist parties.

The various plans pertaining to the recruitment of volunteers, the attempts to put the enterprise on a financially (somewhat) secure footing, and the activists' efforts in dealing with both lack of

official support and the troublesome left-wing protesters form the bulk of the first volume. However, it also looks at the formation of the volunteer corps, the arrival of the Danish volunteers to Estonia and their impressions of the situation as they went through their sped-up military training. The two, in my opinion particularly interesting final chapters of the first volume take an analytical look at the composition, cohesion, and morale of the Danish volunteer unit, taking into account the social background of the volunteers, and their varying motivations to enlist which had ranged from ideological anti-Bolshevism to the urgent need to run away from the Danish police.

The second volume of the two is dedicated primarily to the events of the war itself and the various ways that the Danish volunteers participated in them. Again, there is a strong social historical focus on the war experience of the volunteers, the aspects of which included, e.g. their image of the enemy, their views about their often dismal everyday serving conditions, and of course also everything that could be grouped under the term “brutalization” – various war crimes committed by the volunteers, their tense relations with local civilians, and the internal conflicts between the volunteers themselves. Moving from Estonia to Latvia to Russia, the Danish volunteers, some of them only teenagers, went through a journey in more ways than one, often emerging transformed by what they had experienced in the “wild east.” We also read about what happened to them afterwards: the author has dedicated the whole second half of his second volume to the aftermath of all these events, covering the interwar period and the Second World War. The book concludes with reflections on how the story of the Danish volunteers has been treated in various historiographical (and, by extension, political) traditions, and, finally, what it can tell us about the use of volunteer forces, as well as the security situation in the Baltic states and the Baltic Sea region today.

Kirkebak’s book, although not the first book-length study of its subject matter, is by far the most detailed and thorough work of scholarship about the Danish volunteer units in the Baltics. Its fundamental strength is ensured by the impressive amount of archival research that the author has conducted across a multitude of languages, countries, and memory institutions: a dedicated detective work that has allowed him to unearth a rich store of either previously unknown or underutilised primary sources, which range from letters and diaries to a wide variety of official documents and journalistic accounts. Even more significantly, he has succeeded in weaving his

research findings into a well-integrated narrative that is both factually enlightening and a pleasure to read – often in a very human way.

Furthermore, this two-volume work is an exemplary case study about the often-overlooked role that was played by foreign volunteer contingents in the Baltic wars of independence and the Russian Civil War. It is extremely well-rounded work of history, covering a multitude of political, military, social, and cultural aspects relevant to the circumstances of the recruitment of the Danish volunteers, their war experience in Estonia, Latvia, and Russia, and, not least, their post-war fate and the various ways that their often traumatic service informed their choices later in life. For the scholars interested in the Finnish and Swedish units that fought in the same wars, Kirkebæk's book provides a very useful basis for comparison, but even more importantly, an inspiration and a role model to follow.

Finally, as perhaps already suggested by the book's title (*den yderste grænse* meaning something like “the uttermost frontier”), which alludes to the eastern Baltic region's perceived role as the bridgehead against the onslaught of Bolshevism and other oriental “perils,” it is a story of a certain kind of borderland and therefore also an exercise in transnational history writing. With exemplary skill and tactfulness, the author brings together several historiographical traditions in a well-balanced way that engages with all of them, but does not, at the same time, fall prey to any of their blind spots. While certainly “Danish” in his approach and point of view, Kirkebæk is far from uncritical of the moral failures and the political and cultural prejudices of the Danish volunteers, while also rejecting the crass left-wing dismissal of them as somewhat unlucky agents of international imperialism. He is also sensitive to the contemporary Baltic point of view, characterised by hopes and fears for national independence, which was quite distinct from the international anti-Bolshevik opinion that tended to inform the beliefs of Danish activists about what these wars were really about.

To sum up, I cannot recommend this book highly enough, and it is my hope that its readership will not be limited by its Danish language. Estonian and Latvian publishing houses would do well to see value in publishing it in the respective Baltic languages as well. Similarly, an English translation, or at least a summary, could serve well historians and military history hobbyists alike.

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