

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Ihalainen, Pasi

Title: Scandinavia and the great powers in the First World War

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © Taylor & Francis, 2020

Rights: In Copyright

Rights url: <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC/1.0/?language=en>

Please cite the original version:

Ihalainen, P. (2020). Scandinavia and the great powers in the First World War. *First World War Studies*, 11(1), 98-99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2020.1848017>

998 words

Book review for *First World War Studies*

Scandinavia and the Great Powers in the First World War (New Approaches to International History), by Michael Jonas, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 231 pp., (hardback), PRICE, ISBN-13: 978-1-350-04635-1.

In this volume, Michael Jonas sets Northern European experiences of the First World War in a compact and accessible manner in an international context, exploring the relationship between great powers and smaller while de-nationalizing history by re-internationalizing it. Jonas is right to state that “the historical relationships of the region to the surrounding powers are often and almost pathologically read through the prism of national historiography” (p. 2). Narratives of exceptionalism and tendencies to concentrate on the supposedly shared national narrative while ignoring others remain strong in the Nordic countries.

Unlike Patrick Salmon’s survey *Scandinavia and the Great Powers, 1890-1940* (1997), this single-authored anthology provides explorative essays on a variety of interrelated themes that have not been that much discussed in international literature. Jonas explores the complex and often very differing relations between Northern European states and Britain, Germany and Russia as well as relations between the said states. He approaches Northern Europe both as a historical region and as nation-states (especially Denmark, Finland and Sweden) with special relationships with the parties of the war. His comparative history integrates aspects of the transnational and cultural turns as applied in new political history.

The chapters address themes such as the foreign policy strategies of Britain, Germany and Russia in Northern Europe, differing perceptions and practices of neutrality, royal diplomacy during the war, responses to the war by activists and a leading intellectual, and the role of the question of the possession of Åland in attempts to create a new international order. While

theses vary between the chapter, each addresses relationships between the great powers and the Northern European states. While some of the themes are rather traditional, concerning foreign policy and strategy, decision-making processes and diplomacy and imperial policies versus small-state neutrality, Jonas does bring in new perspectives.

Jonas skilfully explains the very different perspectives to the war in the geographically vulnerable Denmark (which had lost a war and territory to Prussia in 1864), Norway (which still had tensions with Sweden in the aftermath of the separation of 1905 and was generally regarded to belong to the British sphere of influence) and the geographically more favourably located Sweden (which enjoyed institutionalized neutrality but tended to pursue policies favourable to Germany). Jonas relativizes the Swedish narrative of a small state successfully working for peace and internationalism by emphasizing pro-German and legalistic tendencies and the role of activism. He also points at changes that were taking place *in* Sweden as the political say of the right was weakening during the First World War. He reminds of the continuing significance of the monarchy in international relations, especially in the fields of symbolic and ritual representations, including neutrality discourse.

Welcome is also Jonas's challenge to teleological interpretations of isolated Finnish history as he contextualizes the process of Finnish independence in relation to Russian imperial history during the war. Unfortunately, he does not discuss the early-modern legacies of Lutheranism and the Swedish law as fundamental factors separating Finland from Russia as 'the West' within the Empire. Unlike Jonas suggests it has been generally recognised by Finnish historians that the idea of full independence only emerged gradually during year 1917, though there is no denying the tendency to view such a development as inevitable.

In the case of Georg Brandes, a Danish intellectual, Jonas demonstrates the complexity of being an 'impartial' thinker during a world war. As a whole, the book reinforces the existence

of Western (Denmark and Norway) and Eastern Scandinavia (Finland and Sweden) with highly divergent interests. Danish and Norwegian choices for Britain as opposed to Germany, and the Finnish and Swedish idealization of Germany as opposed to Russia as the cultural other are well explained. Furthermore, Jonas illustrates how traditional great power politics was being transformed into a new international system in the case of Åland.

While Jonas spends a lot of space exploring personalities, spaces and ceremonies and does mention the importance of discourses, dialogues and conversations in passing, his cultural turn has not progressed to any linguistic or discursive one so that meanings assigned to political key concepts and their transfers between the great powers and the Northern European countries would have been considered. Both in the case of Finland and Sweden, competing conceptualisations of democracy and parliamentarism in British, German and Russian political discourses and related political polarization in domestic constitutional debates closely connected to foreign policy might have been relevant to consider. Jonas's chapters on the monarchs, activists and intellectuals suggest that such entangled history of small states and great powers is relevant (see a special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 2/2019). The analysis of ceremonies, too, could proceed further to analysing the cultural trajectories in the content of the *lantdagsspsalm*, for instance (p. 103). Misleading is the description of the February/March Revolution in Helsinki as an "anti-Russian uprising" (p. 106) when the uprising took place among Russian soldiers and the Finns were mainly wondering what was going on.

Scandinavia and the Great Powers in the First World War is targeted to historians interested in international relations beyond the usual great power politics. It is to be hoped that this book inspires Scandinavian and Finnish historians to view their national narratives in a comparative and transnational context. The most obvious audience can be found among international historians outside Scandinavia. Comparisons with Northern European countries

help German historians to better understand some developments in German history and may work as an eye-opener to Anglophone readers uncritical of 'the Nordic welfare states'. The book can also serve a course in political history at an advanced master level, bringing imperial and national histories together and demonstrating the value of exploring the complex and entangled nature of the past, particularly in periods such as the age of the First World War.

Pasi Ihalainen, University of Jyväskylä