Political discourse in the Baltic states is marked by debates on the past as much as on the future. The 1980s drive to break from the Soviet Union, driven by an overwhelming sense of historical injustice, began with small ‘calendar demonstrations’ marking significant dates in Baltic history. Key domestic and international disputes are based on contested interpretations of history. This is particularly visible each spring in Latvia. On 16 March a shrinking number of Latvian Waffen SS Legion veterans, along with several hundred nationalist supporters, march from the historic Dom Church in the Old Town of Riga to the towering Freedom Monument, the symbol of Latvia’s independent statehood. There they are confronted by counter-demonstrating Russophone ‘anti-fascist’ protesters. A few months later, on 9 May, the positions are reversed as Latvia’s Russophone community celebrates Victory in Europe day (which marks the end of the Second World War for the Soviet Union) at the Soviet-era Victory Monument. Protesting Latvians accuse participants of honouring totalitarian communism. There is no common ground between the two groups. History lives, breathes, provokes and mobilises Baltic publics to an extent almost unimaginable in neighbouring Western European democracies.

Evidently, a study of the Baltic states’ political systems must begin with a discussion of the complicated and contentious history of the region. Rather than duplicate the many available excellent comparative and single-country histories of the Baltic states, I will sketch the broad sweep of comparative Baltic history and focus on the controversies that touch and shape the political systems of modern Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The first section briefly considers the geography and climate that shaped the comparatively late modernisation of the region and then discusses the emergence of Baltic national movements in the nineteenth
century. The next part covers the First World War, the collapse of the Russian Empire and the following vicious battles for autonomy and independent statehood. The third part covers the rise and fall of the democratic inter-war states. The fourth part discusses the Second World War and the three brutal occupations that it brought. I then deal with the impact of four decades of sovietisation. Finally, I consider the emergence of opposition to the Soviet regime in the second half of the 1980s and the successful non-violent revolutions that led to the re-emergence of independent, democratic Baltic states in August 1991.

1.1 Three nations survive and awake

Geography and the relatively small size of the Baltic nations, located at the eastern edge of the Baltic Sea, explain much of the turbulence of Baltic history. Samuel Huntington (1996, p. 159) defined the Baltic states–Russian/Belorussian border as the ‘eastern boundary of western civilization’. While Huntington gives an overly simplistic vision of a complicated, multi-layered and bitter cultural history, he does capture the geographic vulnerability of the small Baltic nations, located in a flat, boggy, forested and sparsely populated region fought over by larger, more powerful neighbours for more than eight hundred years. 3 This history also explains why the languages, the key to the construction of the three Baltic nations, survived. This is the ‘Windy Land – a zone where conquerors alternated sufficiently often, so that their languages could not take root[,]... inadvertently gave the local language breathing space’ (Taagepera, 2011, p. 126).

In the early thirteenth century the territory that makes up much of modern Estonia and Latvia was conquered by Teutonic Knights, shielding the clerics, missionaries and merchants that accompanied them. The order was also charged with eradicating the pagan customs still practiced by the indigenous people, who had started settling in the region around 11,000 BC, and with protecting the new native converts to Christianity. This is the bitter-sweet beginning of European culture encroaching on the peoples of the area and the eradication of the indigenous Baltic societies that were already organised into hierarchical, actively trading communities. It is also what Aldis Purs (2012, p. 25) has described as the ‘opening salvo of the “700 years of German oppression” myth’ that nationalists use to account for the late emergence of the Baltic nations. On the one hand, this is the moment at which the Baltic states began their long and slow integration with the ideas, economies and politics of the European continent to the west, south and (later) north. On the