



Public power in Europe : studies in historical transformations / edited by James S. Amelang, Siegfried Beer
(Thematic work group. States, legislation, institutions ; 1)

320.94 (21.)

1. Società e Stato - Europa 2. Europa - Storiografia I. Amelang, James S. II Beer, Siegfried

CIP a cura del Sistema bibliotecario dell'Università di Pisa

This volume is published, thanks to the support of the Directorate General for Research of the European Commission, by the Sixth Framework Network of Excellence CLIOHRES.net under the contract CIT3-CT-2005-00164. The volume is solely the responsibility of the Network and the authors; the European Community cannot be held responsible for its contents or for any use which may be made of it.

Volumes published (2006)

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www.edizioniplus.it - Section "Biblioteca"

ISBN 88-8492-401-4

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The Baltic Question in the Twentieth Century: Historiographic Aspects

EERO MEDIJAINEN

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Teaduslikud uurimused, dissertatsioonid, monograafiad, ajakirjad, artiklid ja samuti populaarteaduslikumad tutvustused, ülevaated, reisikirjeldused, mälestused, turistidele mõeldud kirjutised jne, mille pealkirjas või sisus esineb sõna Baltikum (Balti) saab eesmärkidelt ja tähenduselt klassifitseerida üsna erinevalt. Lihtsaim põhjus selle sõna kasutamiseks tuleneb geograafilisest alast (ruumist) või piirkonnast. Märksõnaga Balti tähistada ka ajalugu kõige üldisemas tähenduses ehk kõike, mis on mainitud ruumis aja jooksul juhtunud. Varjatult taandub niisugune lähenemiseviis siiski poliitilisele ajaloole. Balti võib tähistada erinevaid tegevusalasid, inimesi, institutsioone, protesse, üksiksündmusi jms, mis on kuidagi seotud tänapäeval eksisteerivate Balti riikidega ja seal juhtunuga.

Eraldi tuleks peatuda Baltikumi kui omaette regiooni mõiste arengul ning peamiselt viimast puudutaval historiograafial. Mõnikord võiks kahelda, kas näiteks uurimused, mis seostuvad nii või teisiti Balti merega ja tema ümber toimunuga ajas, on ikka ühtlasi Baltikumi ajalugu. Või on see pigem ja eelkõige kaubanduse, laevanduse, kalanduse jms merega seotud tegevuse ning sellise tegevuse mõnede eripärade ajalugu ühes konkreetses piirkonnas. Sel juhul pole reeglina kahtlust, mida mõeldakse Baltikumi all. See mõiste tähistab suuremaid sadamaid ja nende tagamaid (ka riike kui vähem olulisi tegureid), mis Balti- (Lääne- või mõnes piirkonna keeles ka Ida-) mere ja saartega.

Diskussioon teemal – mis ja miks moodustab Balti regiooni, algas juba I maailmasõja eel ja ajal. Samasse aega kuuluvad ka esimesed katsed nn uut Euroopat vähemalt mõttelise tervikuna kujundada ja neisse otsingutesse mahtusid plaanid tulevases Läti-Leedu, Suur-Soome, Soome-Eesti ja Eesti-Läti-Soome ning veelgi enam riike (rahvaid) ühendavate liitude otsingud, mõttelised konstruktsioonid ja isegi konkreetsed tegevusplaanid niisuguste plaanide realiseerimiseks. Veel varasemad kavad XIX sajandist, näiteks Eesti-Soome tulevasesst ühisriigist, jäid üksikute haritlaste unistuste ja kindlasti mitteametlikule tasandile.

Esimesed olulisemad uurimused Balti küsimuse teemadel rõhutasid, et probleemi näol on tegemist millegi enama kui vaid merega seotuga. Balti küsimuse ajaloo algust on otsitud ajast, mil need alad hakkasid mängima teatud rolli maailma asjades. 1970. aastate teisel poolel (taas)elavnes väljaspool annekteeritud Baltikumi teoreetiline arutelu teemal, mis ja miks moodustab selle regiooni. Arusaadavalt olid siin aktiivsemad Soome ja Saksamaa ajaloolased, kuigi ilmselt erinevatel põhjustel. Enamik ajaloolasi ja politolooge ei lepi tänapäeval ainult formaalsele ühisosale toetumisega ja seepärast võiks ühe suurema grupina eraldada uurimused, mis pühendatud just nimelt sisulise ühisosa, ühise ajaloo, isegi ühise

identiteedi otsimisele või koguni selle identiteedi kujundamise katsetele. Mõnigi kord viidatakse taoliste katsete puhul ajaloolase ja varasemale (kuigi mõnikord ka ebamäärasele, ebaolulisele või välisele) kokkukuuluvusele. Balti küsimusega seotud historiograafias oli siinsete ajaloolaste endi töödes kuni viimase ajani suurem rõhk riiklusega seotud olulistel mõistetel – iseseisvus, suveräänsus, riiklik julgeolek, sõjaline (hard) jms julgeolek. Taoline üldtendents seletub väikerügi eripära, aga ka teatud ajalooliste traditsioonidega ning poliitiliste ideoloogiliste vajadustega ja eriti vajadusega 1939-1940. aastal toimunud mõtestada. Ühte Balti küsimust kui niisugust pole siiski olemas, aga me leiame terve rea ulatuslikumaid – üldisemaid ja konkreetseid küsimusi erinevatest perioodidest XX sajandist, millele ilmselt pole võimalik üheselt vastata. Seega ei moodusta Balti küsimus mingit omaette nähtust, sama võib kinnitada erinevate riikide ja piirkondade ja regioonide kohta.

Käesolev artikkel valmis ETF granti nr. 5484 raames.

The Baltic question as an object of historical study can be hypothetically treated on the basis of the following dichotomy. On the one hand, we can examine what has been written about the history of the Baltic, how it was written, and how inquiry, points of emphasis, subtopics, and interpretations of the Baltic question have changed over time. This would give an overview of the historiography of the Baltic question. On the other hand, we can view history itself as a process that took place in the past: as problems, periods, topics, and individual issues in history connected in one way or another with the Baltic. Like the definition and nature of history itself, the classification would be hypothetical. History as a phenomenon and what is studied, and how history is written – these are generally inseparably connected; Baltic history is certainly no exception. Scholarly studies, dissertations, monographs, journals and articles – as well as popular science literature, overviews, travel literature, and memoirs – whose title or content contains the word ‘Baltic’ or ‘Baltic States’ (*Baltikum*) can be classified in quite a variety of ways.

THE BALTIC AS A SYMBOLIC BACKGROUND

‘Baltic’ can denote various fields of activity, people, institutions, processes, individual historical facts, events that are in some way connected to the Baltic States that became independent in the 1991. This gives the basis and justification to speak also of Baltic climate, geography, flora, fauna, art and art history, journalism, science and the history of science, economy and economic history, certain social processes, the background on which the processes developed, and much more. The word Baltic seems to sell better in the headlines of endless publications devoted to the promotion of tourism, economy, market-relations, enterprising, etc., in the Baltic area. A positive common denominator can be found in anthologies and other publications that are devoted to seafaring, trade, culture (generally the visual arts) or the growth of science in the region and usually treat periods earlier than the 20th century. Such a classification is in itself based a priori on statehood and power and assumes that this is a relatively permanent state

rather than a temporal prism through which some other phenomenon is viewed. Yet it does not look more closely at the development and change of statehood, institutions, legislation, power-relations, or the development of international relations in the Baltics.

ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA (KALININGRAD?) OR BALTIC STATES

A separate category might be created for the numerous treatments of the Baltic States and/or even the political and social history of these countries that are published in the same volume, but contain individual histories and have no other connections besides an adjoining sphere and the fact that they examine phenomena and processes – whatever they may be – that took place in what are now the territories of the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania). Such publications, representing history, culture, political science and social science and disciplines that are directly or indirectly tied to these branches, may contain such words as Baltic, Baltics, Baltic States, Baltic countries, Baltic studies, Baltic question in their titles. In some cases the common denominator in such studies is relatively limited. Some of these works may consist of three independent parts – the individual sections pertaining to the Baltic States are clearly distinct from one another. In some extreme cases, such publications may be published in the form of one volume, but the page numbering may be separate. For example, an overview of the developments in the Baltic States in the last ten years published in 2002 consisted of three separate books (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) of which each had separate page numbering, no doubt intentionally so¹. The authors of this publication followed attempts, which increased in the late 1990s, to emphasize the different identities of the three Baltic States.

In some cases, historical overviews of the history of the Baltic States may be compilations of each country's historiography and the authors may be the same people who write overviews of each individual Baltic state's national history². As a rule, such publications consist of individual articles that have relatively little in common, and deal with a particular overlord or ruler, conquest, war, conflict, occupation and related circumstances – generally tending to have a negative overtone or aspect. To a certain extent, the motif of heroic martyrdom (suffering) is characteristic of the history of the Baltic States.

BALTIC GERMANS AS PROMOTERS OF COMMON HISTORY

The works of numerous historians and jurists of Baltic German origin are devoted to the history of the Baltic States and especially to the role of the Baltics in a broader context (international relations, major European events, development of the rule of law, etc.) and to the profiling of many individual accounts and to emphasising the importance of individuals. Of the best-known 20th-century writers, I would place Georg von Rauch and Boriss Meisner and their students and colleagues in this category³.

It must be said that it is primarily due to historians of Baltic German extraction that interest in the Baltics has persisted in Germany and that this has provided a role model and source of encouragement to others and had a substantial influence on historiography in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and even in Finland. The serial publications *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, *Baltisches Jahrbuch*, *Acta Baltica* etc, have been important for many decades. *Zeitschrift für Ostforschungen* changed its name for historical and ideological reasons in 1995 and expanded its range to cover *Ostmitteleuropa* studies. The new title does a better job of describing the main trends in the articles it publishes. Most historians and political scientists are not satisfied with only a formal common denominator approach and thus we could identify as a separate larger group works that are devoted to the search for a content-related common denominator, a common history, even a common identity or that even attempt to form such an identity. Sometimes, in the case of such attempts, reference is made to history and historical commonality, albeit a vague and extraneous one.

THE BALTIC SEA – A UNIFYING FACTOR IN HISTORY

One possibility is to proceed from a particular sphere, field or geographical region. In such a case, the keyword *Baltic* can be used to denote history in the most general sense. Such an approach still comes down implicitly to political history.

The concept of Baltic Sea expanded after World War I to denote the nascent small states that developed in the former Estonian, Livonian and Courland districts. In discussing Baltic history, it would be appropriate to stress that, before 1918, the historical common denominator could indeed only be found in the former provinces of Estonia, Livonia and Courland⁴. Previously a common denominator was almost completely lacking, whether linguistic or cultural, religious, or economic or related to sovereignty or law. Nevertheless, we can discern certain attempts at cooperation – in other words, a common denominator – in examining the history of the Russian Duma, as well as in studying the activity of émigrés from Russia's western provinces in Europe and North America etc.⁵ This naturally does not hinder the creation of a certain common identity today through conferences and publications that treat earlier history but bear a title referring to a common denominator⁶.

The notion of the Baltics as an important factor in Europe or even in the world is a fairly widespread one.

The first major studies on topics of the Baltic question still stressed that the Baltic question was something more than just a sea-related issue. When Walter Kirchner attempted in 1954 to find the origins of the Baltic question, he stressed that the history of the “Baltic Question” is not merely the history of the Baltic Sea. He affirmed that neither is it the history of Denmark, Sweden, Finland or even the former Russian Baltic provinces. For Kirchner, the history of the Baltic question began when these areas began playing a certain role in world affairs. He likewise did not rule out the potential comparison of the Baltic region to such areas as Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Rhine Val-

ley in terms of influence. He warned that the “Baltic Question” should not be confused with the topic in history of *dominium maris Baltici*⁷. Kirchner analyzed the rise of the Baltic question and its history up to the 16th century.

Pertti Luntinen (re)opened a second trend in approaching the Baltic question with his study from 1974-75. Luntinen focused on the independence of Norway and uncovering the international background of the treaty signed by Denmark, Sweden, Germany and Russia in 1908 under which the powers undertook to preserve the status quo in the Baltic Sea and likewise the North Sea. A similar obligation was taken separately under treaty by Denmark, France, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands⁸.

Since the late 1970s, dispute as to the extent and definition of the Baltic region was seen as escalating everywhere. It continues on the level of general research centers as well as in particular think tanks, projects, conferences, monographs and articles to the present day. The discussions became especially lively in the 1990s in connection with the restoration of the independence of the Baltics and the concurrent opening of archives, and the increase in the interest of researchers and historians in the region everywhere in Europe and in more distant countries.

In addition to Germany, strong centers of Baltic historical research have traditionally been located in Turku, Finland – we can even speak of a “Turku school” of thought – and elsewhere in Finland. On the other hand, numerous centers and researchers should be highlighted in Great Britain, Canada, Sweden and the US, not to mention the attempts by the Baltic States to found stable investigation centers, departments and even new universities which would focus on Baltic themes on the background of studying and teaching European and world politics.

BALTIC AREA – THE CHALLENGE FOR A NEW EUROPE

The discussion on the topic of what forms the Baltic region and why, began to a certain extent before and during World War I. The same era marked the first attempts to shape the so-called new Europe as a whole, at least conceptually, and also accommodated plans for a future Latvia-Lithuania, and more so, a Great Finland, Finland-Estonia and Estonia-Latvia-Finland and other hypotheses and conceptualized constructions. Earlier plans, such as the idea of a future Estonian-Finnish commonwealth, were the stuff of salon discussions between individual scholars and certainly remained on an unofficial level. Better known were the meetings between Estonian and Finnish academics around the time of the first Estonian song festival in Tartu (1869) and the lively subsequent interchange up until the gaining of independence. If any serious importance was ascribed to these encounters and what was discussed there, it was rather based on the notions of some provincial officials or landholders of Baltic German origin, vague fears or even specific malicious accusations and reports to Russian authorities. At the same time, it is not certain how much such accusations laid at the doorstep of Estonians or Latvians – that they were tending toward separatism – contributed to the spread of such a way of thinking in the Baltic provinces. It is

not clear to what extent the position was adopted before 1917-1918 that the Baltic States could have an independent role in practical politics as intermediaries between East and West⁹.

Starting in autumn 1917, such discussions already took the form of specific decisions, propositions and documents. This meant the need to specify what areas (countries) would be included under the term Baltics. Along with independence of the three Baltic States, discussions started with politicians, cultural figures, historians, jurists and economists and businessmen, and they have not abated to the present day¹⁰.

Up until World War II and to a lesser extent, even during the war, such discussions proceeded from the assumption that the future region would be made up of (small) nation-states which would give up a certain amount of sovereignty for the common weal. Naturally, the meaning of "small state" in the regional, European or world scale, is quite variable¹¹.

Such discussions are interesting and necessary, but discourse about what basis the *discussions* and *plans* for the Baltic as a new kind of construction contributed to the development of Estonians' national identity and sovereignty or independence, seems a bit of an exaggeration¹². The national awakening of Estonians and Latvians and the changes in their political awareness were not in principle different compared to that of the Finns, for instance.

REGION-BUILDING AND THE BALTIC

Separate treatment should be devoted to the development of the term Baltic as a region in its own right and to historiography that pertains primarily to the latter. *Region-building* draws on significant theories of international relations and specific common institutions – take for instance the Baltic Assembly created in the early 1990s and the Baltic Council or the existence of many other institutions outside the Baltic States, first and foremost in Germany¹³.

In going down this path, it must be pointed out that changes and deconstruction of the Baltic image took place in the late 1990s. Actions toward this aim stemmed on one hand from Lithuania, where there was more talk of Central Europe; on the other hand, opinions were expressed in Estonia on a high level that Estonia was one of the Nordic countries¹⁴. Such talk abated somewhat during accession to the European Union and NATO, mainly due to the fact that the topic lost its salience amid foreign policy considerations. It is more difficult to identify and substantiate any particular feeling of Baltic commonness in the mentality or attitudes of the populace of the Baltic States¹⁵.

In some instances there should be skepticism as to whether studies that are connected in some way or another to the Baltic Sea and surrounding events are still the history of the Baltics. Some works may be primarily tied to the history of commerce, shipping, fishing on some other maritime activity and to certain special aspects of the activity in one specific region. In such cases, there is generally no doubt as to what is meant by Baltics.

This term denotes major harbors and their hinterlands (including the countries) that border the sea and islands situated in the Baltic *Sea*. The sea goes by different names in the languages of the nations inhabiting its shores (hence Estonians with their “Western Sea” [*Läänemeri*], the Finns with their “Eastern Sea” [*Itämeri*], yet it is still the same body of water separated from the North Sea by the Danish straits. The history of shipping and commerce on the Baltic Sea has been thoroughly studied, primarily its history in the Middle Ages and more recently (Hanseatic League cities, on the background of relations between the Baltic and the Low Countries and other relationships). A separate topic is the development of naval military power and the relationships between – and interests of – the navies of the major powers on the Baltic throughout history up to the 20th century¹⁶. As mentioned above, in the late 1970s, the theoretical discussion outside the annexed Baltic region (again) developed on the topic of what forms the region and why. Understandably it was the Finnish and German historians who were more active in this, each most likely for different reasons. In the case of Finland, it can be assumed that that it would be difficult to include Finland in the Baltics in the narrower treatment of the latter. A nation-centered approach, which was the prevalent tendency in Finland as well, required one’s own history to be connected to the subject of study, in this case to Baltic themes. The University of Turku’s professor Kalervo Hovi has presented a comprehensive article on researchers in Finland and elsewhere in Scandinavia who have dealt with the history of the Baltic States over several generations¹⁷.

In the opinion of quite a number of German historians, it was not ideologically correct to use the term *Ostseeraum* to translate the Baltic area. That is why the name of the periodical was changed as mentioned and the term *Ostforschung* was abandoned. Alternatives known from the interwar period emerged – the Baltic and Scandinavian states or the Baltics and the Nordics; even Baltoscandia. The last term was touted by geographers Edgar Kant in Estonia and Kazys Pakštas in Lithuania. Thus similar discussions in the interwar period were livelier on the eastern shores of the Baltic and then, in the 1970s, a kind of reawakening took place.

As another possibility, a geographical term that was somewhat removed from the conceptualization of nation-state and sovereignty was proposed in accordance with the investigative methods characteristic of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The new term *Nordosteuroopa* proceeded foremost from the internal considerations of German historians and a new approach. There was an attempt immediately to invest this approach with a region-creating content. Subsequently, there was an attempt to give the region a so-called historical justification through the writing of a new Baltic history. In addition to some Finnish and German historians, the search for a *North Eastern Europe* was joined by David Kirby and other British scholars. For Kirby, the *Baltic world* was tantamount to Europe’s northern periphery. In a study completed in the early 1990s, he tried to explain the distinctness of the region from the rest of the Russian empire and espoused a view of Baltic sovereignty as a questionable but nevertheless possible renaissance of history¹⁸. Nor would Estonian historians appear to oppose such an approach of connecting the Baltics and the Nordics, at least not in the title of a publication¹⁹.

Now the level of theorizing has reached the point that it is possible to contrast the terms *North Eastern*, *Northern*, *Nordic*, *Baltic Sea area*, *East Central*, and *Eastern Europe* and look for a common denominator from history or the present day as well as from different walks of life²⁰. It is especially significant and tempting (and no doubt indirectly favored by financial interests) to abandon the so-called nation-centered approach and create a broader identity. It would also be in harmony with more general political and economic endeavors to engage Russia positively, at least its northwestern regions. A separate challenge is of course posed by the problems related to Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad is associated with historical, legal, economic and above all, security-related issues. It represents a serious challenge for the whole region, regardless of how narrowly or broadly the region is seen²¹.

SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY: KEYWORDS OF THE BALTIC QUESTION

The greatest difference between the eastern and western shore of the Baltics undoubtedly lies in the greater emphasis ascribed to sovereignty (nation-statehood) in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and also by some Finnish historians. Accordingly, there is also a greater emphasis on terms connected to sovereignty – independence, sovereignty, national security, military and other types of security. Such a general tendency can be explained by the special character of small states, the methodological and theoretical gap, and by certain historical traditions and political-ideological necessities.

In what follows, I will touch on some of the more important topics and problems or the so-called open or key questions dealt with by Baltic historians and which find resonance more frequently in the eyes of the greater public, the local media, and so on. This is not a chronological approach. Rather, I will attempt to chart the extent of the interest and significance of the issue. This approach will inevitably remain subjective.

A one-of-a-kind event in the history of international relations and European and world history in the 20th century – the loss of independence of the Baltic States, and to an even greater extent, the restoration of independence – has given rise to a whole series of varied explanations interconnected with the general history of international relations as well as with the domestic problems of individual great nations.

First of all, the so-called big question will initially not be answered – whether the restoration of Baltic independence became a reality thanks to international law, thanks to non-recognition policy and the right to self-determination (violation of that right and later redressing of it). Or was restoration of Baltic independence tied to internal processes in the Soviet Union, a loss or significant weakening of sustainable power successfully taken advantage of in the Baltics and throughout Eastern Europe? This leads to more significant questions regarding the end of the Cold War and even of the role of the Baltic States in the end of that war. Naturally one question rears its head right away: did history teach anything as to which path the Baltic States would choose in the future?²²

Similarly, the question remains open – how did the whole Baltic question stay so salient and powerful for so long? I am referring to the 50 years after the Baltic States were annexed. Should we be grateful to the Cold War, the power struggle in international relations and the skilful activity of many diplomats and ex-politicians from the Baltic States, above all in the US, Canada etc?²³ Or did the Baltic question remain salient first and foremost due to law and justice – thanks to international law, which did not recognize the violent changes on the territory?²⁴ If both were important aspects, we cannot avoid an analysis on which was the primary one; whether both aspects were necessary to the same extent throughout the entire period of annexation; how decisions were made in particular and who personally took the decisions and shaped the opinions. Baltic scholars were likewise initially in exile and now have returned in increasing numbers to the scene to study, describe and analyze how the annexed Baltics were actually subjugated to foreign power, the various forms of the resistance movement, repressions as well as the social, cultural and political adaptation that occurred. Special state foundations have been established for this purpose, with funding allocated. Numerous conferences and publication of corresponding papers help ensure an international level of research²⁵.

A FATAL YEAR: 1939/1940

Going back in time, it can be said that the most salient and still most central Baltic problem in the 20th century was (and at least for historians, will continue to be, far into the future) what happened in 1939-1940 and why. This question has been treated through various approaches and on various levels. Here I deliberately turn to the opinions or research-based views of Estonian politicians and historians, or else the subject would become too vast. When asking what was going on in those years and why, we could probably systematise potential answers in a variety of ways.

One way is to divide the responses according to their geographical (geopolitical) range. Thus we could distinguish explanations which primarily proceed from internal-political processes in the Baltic States. Then we could place an emphasis on the Baltic States - Soviet (Russian) relations and further, on a context of more extensive international relations. It is certainly possible to link together all three dimensions; however, as a rule, one of them is still slightly more predominating and decisive. According to the second way, the responses could be grouped into schemes borrowed from politologists or theoreticians of international relations. The reasons for the 1939-1940 events would then be either: a) associated with the activities or non-activities of people, individuals (politicians, military etc.); b) associated with states (a state) and their interests and needs (e.g., demands for security) – then, among other things, they depend on the regime, ideology, parties et al; c) associated with the system, understood as international relations, world politics, also movements or “-isms”, connected with world outlook (or even the features characteristic of an empire as a system).

Certainly, there may be exceptions in which case an opinion depends on attitudes, values and convictions, related primarily to definite organisations (institutions) that a

particular individual represents. Estonian academician Peeter Tulviste, a supporter of integration into EU and NATO, noted during the debates in this connection, “Thus we achieve that other countries contribute to our defence more more than we ourselves ever could. There is another emotional argument for paying for the umbrella. We all know (my emphasis – E.M.) what happened in 1939-1940. Now, imagine yourselves in Siberia, knowing that if more money had been spent on national defence (one of the main arguments why Laidoner said that it was hopeless) then (...)”²⁶.

This citation clearly expresses a belief that we all know what happened in 1939-1940, but hopefully does not designate some kind of general, unique historical consciousness that is characteristic to the citizens of the Baltic States. If the latter existed, it is certainly richer, more varied and controversial.

Thus the arguments related to the years 1939-1940 can today be successfully used for fictitious proof of opinions even if they are drastically different or controversial. There is nothing special about this, of course. History has always been used to justify politics, even if under the motto *historia est magistra vitae*. A few more opinions are worth discussing to illustrate the background and causes of what happened in 1939-1940. They became particularly numerous in the press and public talks during the debates on integration into EU and NATO as well as when Baltic States became involved in the Iraqi events.

STEREOTYPES IN ESTONIA

Two stereotypical models could be mentioned first: we were too alone and too weak. Conditionally, based on the reasons for being isolated, we could divide the model into two more categories. We were isolated because the neutrality idea was twisted (exhausted, degenerated) and it was an inevitable condition of Estonia, proceeding from the prior history and there was only bitter fruit to pick²⁷. Estonia was too isolated from her neighbors and from the rest of the world, she had given up attempting alliances with other countries, first of all with Latvia, Lithuania and Finland or she had even rejected attempts to form alliances. We could have remained solitary also thanks to the then Estonian administration, particularly to the former president Konstantin Päts or to the *weak* commander-in-chief Juhan Laidoner who ordered not to choose sides²⁸.

On the other hand, we could point to those who believe the events had a slightly wider context and find that in the 1920s-1930s not only the ideas and actions of Estonian politicians but also of those in Europe revealed a great naivety and the conviction that no war would ever break out²⁹. Such an underestimating attitude towards the politicians of those years apparently feeds the self-confidence of today’s politicians as well as their belief that one can and must learn from history.

Hereby one would not wish to oppose historians and politicians. Again, it seems extremely naïve, incompetent or deliberately demagogical when the politicians take advantage of history and opine that

Hitler did not turn into the most ruthless dictator of the last century overnight. He strengthened his dictatorship and prepared for war for long years under everyone's eyes. There were a few political clairvoyants who warned against the dangers of the Nazi regime but they preached to deaf ears. Fearful indecisiveness, short-sightedness and at places intra-state considerations kept the then states of the League of Nations from interference and counteracting Hitler when it was still possible. Can history repeat itself? Or perhaps it would more correct to ask – have the 60 years since the last war been a sufficiently long period to let history repeat itself?³⁰

In case of such demagogical statements an answer is not even expected to the questions – if, how, by whom and when Hitler should have been counteracted. Was there really any kind of international force that should have and could have interfered with Germany's internal affairs in the 1930s according to practice in the world today? Which democratic state or institution should have taken on itself the honour of launching World War II?

SOVIET RUSSIA AND 1939/1940

In trying to systematise somewhat historians' views on the events of the 1939-1940 it has to be admitted that historians are and in their professional role must be more thorough in their studies and therefore they do not confine themselves to pointing to one all-explanatory reason. They approve a complex approach that takes into consideration all possible explanations as natural. On the other hand, a few most important causes can be brought forth to explain why in the years 1939-1940 our destiny took such a shape that our independence was lost.

There is no need to review what in recent years has been thought about presidents or high commanders of the Baltic States in 1939/1940. This is a path well trodden by historians both from Baltic and other countries. It is a level which regards an individual, concrete politician or military-man as the primary factor and proceeds from the conviction that, eventually, this is the man that makes history. Another path proceeds from the level of state, be it only in the Baltic or in the Soviet Union, or else in the interrelations of the two states. In that case a number of versions of explanations are possible:

- 1) The first version proceeded from the official Soviet-period viewpoint that Soviet foreign policy did everything possible to save the *status quo* and peace in Europe. It incriminated other countries (England and France) for the failure of these attempts and only then Moscow was forced to conclude an unpleasant but inevitable agreement with Hitler. The version works mainly in Russia but there are a few western authors who also subscribe to it. By this version Moscow kept in mind global or at least all-European interests – as possibilities to keep the peace in the region.
- 2) The second version points out that the primary foreign-policy interests of the Soviet Union involved creating conflicts among western powers just because of the forthcoming world revolution. Such a peculiar *idealistic* theory was focused on by Soviet Russia immediately after the Bolsheviks seized power. In the 1920s the proposed world revolution had no success, minor revolts with this aim in mind were organ-

ised in a number of countries but they failed. Later the idea was left in the background but in “1939 a number of basic conceptions of a somewhat supplemented idea of world revolution were ready for use”³¹.

- 3) The third version includes steps taken to guarantee the state (national?) security interests of the Soviet Union. This conception is based on the principle of a well known theory of international relations, claiming that in the 1930s Moscow proceeded from *realpolitik* considerations. Thus the Soviet Union did not so much consider keeping the peace as observing the interests of the state.
- 4) It is quite possible to link together the last two interpretations. Thus these versions are supposed to complement each other. According to that *realpolitik* vision there was no particular difference between the redistribution schemes of the Bolshevik country and those of the western powers. The establishment of the League of Nations and the Bolsheviks’ world occupation idea there were substantially very similar from this point of view. Behind the first idea were the United States of America, France and the UK, behind the second – the Soviet Union³². A similar scheme does not distinguish between the western powers, including them all in a hostile encampment respect to Moscow, or it proceeds from the vision of international relations which was apparently prevailing in the Soviet Union in the 1920s-1930s.
- 5) According to the fifth version there was no difference between Stalin and other dictators in the 1930s. In this version national interests or the idea of world occupation remain on the background but the dictator’s desire for occupation and domination power rise to the forefront. All the rest (national security or the idea of world revolution) can be considered as means to satisfy those indefinite, not fully perceived wishes.

For empirical historians it is sometimes rather complicated to specify their attitudes and the basic structure of their own world vision, particularly when those who write on similar topics seem deliberately to avoid references to each other’s works. A topic can be approached from an entirely Estonian-centred point of view and so the strength of an internal opposition and value judgements but not international relations can be observed. Sometimes not referring to another’s ideas can be very eloquent and can specify what one or another historian values most, allowing us to suppose what kind of historical vision or consciousness is represented or disseminated. The first way would be to approach the question by the individuals involved – by elucidating the role and significance of presidents, governments, individual cabinet ministers, military personnel and politicians in the events of 1939-1940. There is a high level of interest in such an approach in both the Baltic States themselves and abroad³³.

The other level is the state level, where Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and others appear as independent states, but also to a certain extent as personified regional actors. Aspects better known such as those from the realist school of international relations would be a basis in this case. Important terms are national, the colliding interests of small and large states, balance of power, military and economic cooperation, military and economic

alliances, geopolitics. Thanks to Soviet traditions, importance is ascribed to various foreign policy orientations said to have been prevalent in the Baltics in the 1920s and 1930s, the relatively rapid changes in these orientations are emphasized as are, especially, the deleteriousness of various orientations to mutual cooperation. In raising such a historiography to the forefront, it must not be forgotten that as a rule, Baltic cooperation could only be written about in the Estonian and Latvian Soviet Socialist Republics in terms of an activity inimical to the Soviet Union³⁴.

The topic of the so-called Baltic Union can be reduced to a subtopic in its own right. The birth of a plan, developments, various meanings and, understandings were tied to cooperation between the Baltic States and of course to the Baltic Entente signed in 1934, the nature and the further development of the entente and opening of its role. Ascribing particular importance to opportunities for Baltic cooperation can be highlighted as decisive in international relations³⁵. On the other hand, there are authors who see the cooperation attempts of the Baltic States as coming to naught³⁶.

A third level would cover the place and role of the Baltic question above all against the background of the development of international relations in Europe and the world. As a rule, the Baltic topic becomes somewhat extraneous in this case, a part of other processes. At the same time, it cannot be ruled out that the Baltics as a region did nonetheless have a significant place and meaning in the international negotiations that took place in summer 1939 and ultimately in the outbreak of World War II³⁷. Historians' debates intertwine with political, legal and other problems in Baltic-Russian relations that are still salient today and it would be possible to further classify literature on the subject into subgroups according to various criteria and points of emphasis.

A SPECIAL CHAPTER ON THE BALTIC QUESTION - EMERGING INDEPENDENCY

The birth and solution of the Baltic Question at the close of and after World War I – in other words in 1917-1920 – could be posited as a separate field. It is possible that this period is the one most abundantly covered by literature and that the greatest number of different subtopics and narrower issues can be found here.

In attempting to put the most general issues into words, we reach a set of problems related to the philosophy of history – for example, the problem of determinism, or to what extent the restoration of Baltic independence was tied to the preceding history and what were the most important developments.

Confirmation can be found on the level of school textbooks that without the experience of the 1905 revolution in Russia, the Baltics would not have been able to become independent, that this was an essential precondition. The significance of the national awakening is often stressed, as are much earlier events in history that lay the groundwork for independence as one culmination of the development of the history of these nations.

On the other hand, we find treatments of international relations that allow us to conclude that the independence of the Baltic States was possible only in a very brief span of

time that followed the outbreak of civil war in Russia and Germany's defeat in World War I. Europe was not ready for Baltic independence and the destiny of the Baltics depended more on individual influences, ad hoc needs and interests in the region. Corresponding literature can, similarly to works on the events of 1939-1940, be divided among at least three different levels. Debate about the role and significance of one or another level is not likely to abate any time soon. The end of World War I has remained to an increasing extent the province of historians, but certain problems – borders, nationality, returnable assets – are still salient issues today.

In summary, it can be said that there is no single Baltic Question as such, but we find a whole series of more extensive, general and concrete questions from the various periods of the 20th century, to which it is not possible to provide one unequivocal answer. Thus the Baltic question does not make up a separate phenomenon; the same can be said about the various countries as well as the regions.

NOTES

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