

The Baltics and Geopolitics

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THE RUSSIAN FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE declassified archival materials related to the British and American response to what was going on in the Baltics in the 1940s.* The documents shed light on the key military-political issues of the time and the way they were discussed in the documents of other countries. They help readjust, to a great extent, certain political assessments by comparing them with the conclusions made by the forces directly involved in the struggle against Nazism. These conclusions were made in the classified documents intended to formulate the national security priorities. The nations depended for their security on their ability to stand up to the aggression unleashed by Hitler Germany.

As distinct from the French or British empires that spread far and wide across seas and oceans, the Russian Empire was a territorially compact unity; it extended its territory to preserve itself as a state and to protect its legitimate national interests as well as create a vast single economic expanse. Russia's history of standing up to foreign invaders - Swedes, French, and Germans - proved this beyond doubt. Without a safety belt in the east, west, and south Russia would have hardly survived as a territorially integral state.

The geopolitical challenges know no ideological or political limits; they dominate everything that the ruling regimes of all social formations were, and are, doing. Since time immemorial the Baltics remained part of the German "Drang nach Osten" ideology. Russian troops first entered the Baltics in 1223 when the local people invited Prince Viachko to defend them against the Order of the Brothers of the Sword. It was there that the first Russian had been killed in the same way as several centuries later the Estonian who served the model of the Bronze Soldier perished. Estonians and Letts will probably start looking for

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* *Pribaltika i geopolitika. Sbornik dokumentov (1935-1945)*. The Archive of the Foreign Intelligence Service. For office use only (the documents were declassified according to the established procedure).

what remained of the princely host in their lands.

Geographically, the Baltics is a transit territory, which Germans, Poles, and Swedes in all sorts of military-political combinations crossed to attack Russia. The territory of what is now known as Estonia became part of Russia after the Northern War that ended in the Peace of Nystad; other Baltic regions joined Russia under other international legal documents.

In 1940, the Soviet Union had to resort to certain preventive measures to cut down the contact line between the Red Army and Wehrmacht and to push the state border to the west as far away from the country's largest military-industrial and political centers as possible. As a result of domestic developments Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined the Soviet Union according to the decisions of their highest state structures.

According to the document dated by January 1942 obtained through intelligence channels President of Czechoslovakia Eduard Benes said to Smollett, a highly placed official of the UK information ministry: "Since the Russians do not carry out the policy of national oppression I believe that we should agree to Soviet sovereignty over the Baltic countries."

The Soviet Union, as a federal state that included union republics, was one of the founders of the United Nations Organization. It was in this capacity and in this territorial format that the world community accepted it. It signed the U.N. fundamental documents and numerous multisided and bilateral treaties the participants in which never doubted our country's territorial configuration. What do those who talk of "occupation" mean? At all times terms should be used sparingly - this is doubly true of such sensitive field as politics. Otherwise this might breed suspicions that certain forces are trying to revise the results of World War II (registered by the Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences of the victors of the war against fascism) within the frameworks of new military-political blocs.

No matter how much the ruling Baltic regimes loathe their past they cannot and should not manipulate with the generally accepted concepts and facts at whim. Russians, too, do not like many things in their history yet never allow themselves to forget them. In a frenzy of Russophobia one can describe the Riga ghetto (in which national specifics made life even less bearable than in the much wider known Warsaw ghetto) and the Salaspils concentration camp as short of educational institutions; one can indulge oneself of exhumation that has been already dismissed as "state vandalism" and pay pensions to those who served in the SS like this is done in Estonia. This cannot alter the past - this merely throws into bolder relief the moral degradation of those in power in certain countries. This brown mud will disappear with time to allow the citizens of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania now divided into the higher and lower races very much according to the Nazi habits, to live normal lives without desecrating the graves of those who fell in struggle against fascism.

The anti-fascist struggle of the United Nations and the peoples of the anti-Hitler coalition is one of the brightest pages in the history of mankind. It

turned out, however, that those who served in the SS could be rehabilitated - this is done in Estonia and Latvia even though the International Tribunal in Nuremberg described SS as a criminal organization with the obvious legal results. The institutes of united Europe and even the UN should start paying more attention to this.

Since their very first days in power the Nazis were readying themselves to a war against the Soviet Union: to finally achieve world domination, they had to enslave its peoples. The Soviet Union, in its turn, was readying itself to rebuff aggression and to find allies.

Who would have profited if before June 22, 1941 the Baltics had been turned into the Ostsee General Governorship to let Wehrmacht move to the shelling distance of Leningrad? It was a life-and-death struggle; the future of our country and of Europe was at stake. We bought the victory with millions of lives of Soviet people.

Later generations should at least demonstrate understanding that any regime when confronted with an imminent threat of war should assume responsibility for the future and do everything possible to strengthen its ability to oppose the eventual aggressor. The Baltics and the destruction of much of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir (near Oran on the Algerian coast) by a Royal Navy task force on 3 July 1940 happened to be such cases. In this sense we are not different from the Brits, Americans, French and all other nations who defended their countries.

Power can be criticized; its past actions can be condemned not matter how futile are such condemnations. Criticism and condemnation should be aimed not at imagined faults but at deliberate inaction or irreparable errors: K?nigsberg (the old Slavic town of Krolivats) that in 1758 had been briefly captured by Russia only to be ceded to Prussia or the sale of Alaska to the United States in the 19th century for a mere trifle as the most pertinent examples.

In 1807, Emperor Aleksandr I signed a secret treaty with Napoleon in Tilsit to postpone the war: Russia gained five years of peace to build up its army; it fought the Patriotic War to stop the power-hungry French emperor and his army. After 1939, we lacked these five years yet what the Soviet Union and its allies had done led to the victory over fascism and liberation of Europe.

Two world wars unleashed by the Germans demonstrated that in Europe there were two military-strategic zones each of them being the target of the German command: the western zone that included Belgium, Holland, and Luxemburg and the eastern one - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In the west the fascists trampled on the sovereignties without a shade of doubt; in the east a similar move was cut short by the Soviet Union that forestalled it.

Starting with the mid-1930s, Soviet agents supplied the Soviet intelligence service with varied information and documents about the German plans of attacking the U.S.S.R. These preparations included, as one of the most important elements, involvement of other states so as to tap their mobilization potential and

gain control over their territories. The Baltics was regarded as a region of key strategic importance.

The Soviet leaders were informed that Latvia was engaged in secret talks with Germany and that Estonia had already reconciled with an inevitable Anschluss. It became known that the Germans insisted on a submarine base in Estonia; that Latvia was ordered to become a Germany-orientated country while the Lithuanian military were prepared to accept German occupation. The Nazis obviously considered the Baltics as a toehold for their armies.

Germany was pressing with increasing insistence into the Baltic countries' politics and economics; it was nurturing the plans of drawing them into bilateral and multilateral alliances and blocs. The Soviet leaders tried to slow down the process: in 1936, they even invited heads of the general staffs of the three countries to Moscow for consultations; in 1937, Foreign Minister of Latvia Vilhelms Munters well known for his sympathies to Germany visited Moscow where he had a long talk with Stalin.

Those who like to hold forth about the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop pact tend to ignore the fact that by that time, August 1939, the talks with the British and the French had failed because neither capital wanted a final document while the Poles had refused to let Soviet troops cross to their western border. The Soviet Union was on the brink of another Munich. Germany overran Poland: this was how World War II started; the Baltics was another obvious target. In the captured Baltics Wehrmacht would have fought outside Narva, in dangerous proximity to Leningrad, not to the west of Kaunas (as this happened soon after June 22 1941). The fate of Leningrad blockaded but not captured at the high cost in lives could have been different had the German tanks attacked it on the move, pressing from a very short distance. Moscow would have become another target of the powerful Army Group North.

The national interests ignored in 1940 could have echoed in 1941 as a catastrophe. All influential figures of the anti-Hitler coalition were well aware of this as the declassified archival documents confirm.

The Soviet troops moved into the Baltics played the decisive role in what happened on the Soviet-German front later: the Soviet Union gained two and a half months to build up Leningrad defenses. The German troops on the offensive were considerably weakened: Totenkopf, one of the most battle worthy SS armored divisions, lost 60 percent of manpower in the Baltics. This prevented the onslaught of the powerful German Baltic group (over 30 divisions, half a million soldiers and officers) on Moscow. We now know that London was closely following what was going on: the threat of Operation Sea Lion that meant invasion of Britain remained very real.

Nothing that happens in our countries today should interfere with sober assessments of the past foreign policy moves, or, rather, with the efforts to ensure security of the country and its people. Russian people condemn the mass repressions; they were as resolutely condemned at the official level. Repressions were

a more or less permanent feature of Russian life, at least under Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great yet nobody condemns them for conquering Siberia and the Caspian coast as well as for "cutting the window on Europe" to borrow a poetic image or joining the Baltic areas to Russia.

In fact, with World War II raging and in an absence of an anti-Hitler coalition the Soviet Union had no choice but to move its troops into the Baltics. The very fact that Wehrmacht had to deploy its troops much further to the west was of key importance not only for the Soviet Union but also for all anti-fascist forces. Confronted with the tragic question "to be or not to be" Europe, and the Western democracies, had to accept the replacement of the pro-German regimes in the Baltic countries with new political forces and their joining the U.S.S.R. as a hardly palatable yet inevitable imperative.

The West, and the British who were aware of much worse possibilities had to accept the Baltic developments. The return of the territories that until recently had been part of the Russian Empire was not seen as an exorbitant price Great Britain and the world paid for being rescued from German fascism. Some time ago the Foreign Ministry published the telegram dated 19 July 1941 sent by the Soviet Ambassador in London Maysky in which he informed that he had handed in Stalin's personal letter to the British premier. The Soviet ambassador pointed to a very significant detail: Churchill had agreed with Stalin's comment that the German army would have been in a much better situation had it been forced to fight at the old rather than the new borders and added that he fully understood the Soviet policies at the initial stage of the war.

On 19 April 1942, the State Defense Committee, Stalin and Molotov received information from London supplied by a Soviet agent about a talk of his source with Hopkins, a prominent American politician and President Roosevelt's personal advisor. When asked whether he had handed the U.S. president's personal letter to Churchill in which the Americans recognized the right of the Soviet Union to join Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the presidential advisor answered that he had already seen to it and pointed out that if the Russians wanted the Baltics after the war they would get it yet, he added, the Americans would hardly publicly acknowledge their consent.

A secret memorandum dated 28 January 1942 which the British Foreign Secretary Eden sent to the cabinet members said that for purely strategic reasons it was in the British interests to let Russia settle in the Baltics, which would allow it to compete with Germany on the Baltic much more efficiently than it could do after 1918 when left with Kronstadt as its only sea outlet.

At the early stages of the Great Patriotic War the State Defense Committee regularly received from the Soviet intelligence overviews of reports that touched on a wide range of military and political matters as presented in classified documents supplied by Soviet agents stationed abroad. The Baltics was by far a prominent issue - the countries involved in the war effort obviously took the Soviet move for granted.

It followed from the intelligence report that reached the members of the State Defense Committee in October 1943, on the eve of a conference of foreign ministers of the U.S., U.K. and the U.S.S.R. that the Americans when talking about a desirable plebiscite in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia meant to say that Britain and America needed it to save face. The intelligence report referred to information received from New York that said: "The State Department talks about the plebiscite being absolutely confirmed that the results will be favorable for the Soviet Union because all anti-Soviet elements were exiled to Siberia, the nationalists destroyed by the Germans while the peasants will vote for the Soviets."

When discussing the rout of fascism and the post-war world order the Soviet Union's Western allies regarded its moves in the Baltics as natural both from the political and military points of view. On 17 April 1945, when the victory was only three weeks away, the Foreign Office research department compiled a classified report about certain historical trends of Russia's foreign policy, which said, among other things, that the Soviet western borders that had taken shape by 1940 did not result from territorial claims - they had merely reached the historically justified strategic and geographical limits.

P.S.

I PERSONALLY find the "Baltics and Geopolitics" contribution by General of the Intelligence Service Lev Sotkov very interesting at least for two reasons.

First, the author is my old friend with whom we studied together at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations. We spent six years of our youth studying hard and enjoying life.

In 1954, we organized a strike to protest about an absurd decision taken by somebody at the very top to disband our graduate class for the "simple" reason the country allegedly did not need foreign relations experts.

Time has shown that our efforts were not wasted: the state could use skilled diplomats and experts in all sorts of issues that together are called world politics and international relations. The Intelligence Service needed intellectuals. Lev Sotkov served with distinction - this I know for sure even though the details remain secret.

The subject of this publication is directly connected with my own life: less than twelve months before 22 June 1941 my father, a young major, was transferred to Kaunas, the then capital of Lithuania. By that time everybody knew that Germany would soon attack the Soviet Union.

Our Russian school looked at a synagogue and a Jewish school, its pupils, neatly dressed boys and girls came to play and always said: "You, Russians, are lucky ones. When Germans come they will murder us all."

Their information proved accurate.

The country that was frantically readying for the war and it missed the attack; we got out of Kaunas by sheer miracle; my father lost in the tragic

carousel of war lived to see the Victory.

I know for sure that the few days the Germans spent to cross Lithuania and the Baltic lands cost them dear: our troops recovered, panic subsided. Real fighting began when the Germans, having crossed Lithuania, entered Byelorussia.

They reached Moscow by winter frosts, at which the Russians had already entrenched themselves.

Leningrad survived because the Germans approached it from the Baltics, the territories to be occupied at the cost of lost lives and, even more important, time.

Still there are questions that remain unanswered: Why did the attack take us unawares? Why did concentration and attention lack at the very top?

In his recently published Minnoe pole politiki (The Minefield of Politics) Academician Yevgeni Primakov, patriarch of Soviet and Russian politics, scholarship, and the Intelligence Service, has offered his opinion and supplied relevant documents to support it.

The truthful and reliable information that reached Stalin from the intelligence sources was mixed with deceptively soothing reports coming among other sources, the Soviet resident in Berlin A. Kabulov in particular, who insisted that Germany presented no threat and that Hitler was looking in other directions. Academician Primakov has confirmed this with facts.

The main thing is: Moscow's geopolitical moves in the Baltics prompted by political realities were absolutely logical. They helped the country to withstand and win.

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