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IMPLICATIONS OF THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE OF THE BALTIC STATES

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Definition

Most non-Baltic observers are only vaguely aware of the many ways the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are three distinctly different nations. The Estonian language is close enough to Finnish that television viewers watch Finnish TV wherever they can receive a signal. Estonia, like Finland, has had important historic ties to Sweden. Latvia has a language related to Lithuanian, but it has few historic ties to that nation; instead, its culture, like Estonia's, reflects German and Hanseatic influence. Lithuania, in contrast, is historically connected with White Russia and Poland. As a result, as long as we talk about the *three Baltic states*, we know that we refer to relatively small (but not tiny) nations which have a shoreline on the Baltic, a pride in being part of *western* civilization, and the unhappy experience of having been repeatedly conquered by Russians and then ruled oppressively. However, whenever we add Finland and Sweden to the definition of *Baltic States*, we immediately encounter difficulties in defining Lithuania's Baltic character.

The first major difference is religion. The Lithuanians' steadfast adherence to Roman Catholicism is to be understood as a declaration that they are not Russians (who historically are Orthodox Christians, more recently [officially] atheists). It also means that Lithuania is not part of the German/Scandinavian religious system either. Instead, for centuries the religious orientation has been to Rome (traditionally via Cracow). The second difference is language. Historically, educated Lithuanians spoke Latin and Polish, then Russian, French, and German; they rarely spoke Latvian or Estonian. In turn, few educated Latvians and Estonians spoke Lithuanian.

Medieval History

The three nationalities have rarely worked together effectively. In the Middle Ages, before the crusader conquest in the thirteenth century, Estonians dominated the various peoples who later amalgamated into Latvians, and the Lithuanians lorded over all of them. In the early thirteenth century, the Estonians were conquered by Danish crusaders, the Latvians by German crusaders; after the great Estonian Uprising of 1343, the Danes sold Estonia to the local branch of the Teutonic Knights. Although efforts were made by the earliest of these foreign rulers to co-opt the native nobility and make them into cooperative vassals (as was done in Mecklenburg and Pomerania), eventually German nobles, burghers, and artisans came to exercise all significant political and economic power — with significant regional differences beyond the scope of this essay. In contrast to these developments which tied Estonians and Latvians to western markets, western religious ideas, and western governmental institutions, during these same years the Lithuanians not only repelled crusader advances (with courageous exploits of arms such as are celebrated in the opera, "Pilėnai") but expanded north to Russian Pskov and Novgorod, east to the gates of Moscow, and south as far as Kiev and Lublin. Thus, for critical centuries Lithuania looked east, not west.

The great pagan rulers of Lithuania offered religious tolerance to all their subjects, thus reconciling Russian and Ukrainian boyars to their rule and attracting Jewish immigrants, German merchants, and Tatar mercenaries. Paganism officially came to an end in 1386 when Grand Duke Jogaila married the Polish heiress, Jadwiga. However, Jogaila and his successors tolerated the existence of pockets of paganism and protected their Orthodox subjects. Consequently, many Lithuanians

were lukewarm Catholics at best until the Counter-reformation. Calvinism and other Protestant sects flourished briefly at the midpoint of the sixteenth century before being suppressed.

In retrospect, we can see how heavily the odds were stacked against the survival of the loosely organized Polish-Lithuanian state. To the west it faced populous, more industrialized German states; from the south came the onrushing Turks. Then, while the Polish kings were preoccupied with those threats, the Grand Dukes of Moscow began to gather in the various Russian states. By the mid-point of the sixteenth century, Ivan IV (the Terrible) had taken so much land from the Lithuanians and Tatars that he could title himself, *Tsar of all the Russias*. The Lithuanian leaders needed Polish military aid so desperately that they reluctantly agreed to the 1569 Act of Union. Their concessions to the Poles, especially in the sphere of religion, were controversial at the time and became more so as time passed. As a result, some modern Lithuanians regard this Union as the historic mistake of the nation.

Lithuania, far smaller in population and less advanced in the arts and sciences than Poland, was to lose its greatest minds and greatest leaders to the attractions of the Polish language and culture: some Lithuanian nationalists have not yet forgiven Poland for its oppressive attraction and for a tendency to regard all Lithuanians as wild primitives. Mickiewicz became the greatest of the Polish poets, but his most popular poems extolled the virtues of pagan Lithuania. Pilsudski committed the ultimate treason for many Lithuanians — in 1920 he tore his native Vilnius from the newly independent Lithuania and made it part of Poland. Stalin's unilateral restoration of Vilnius to Lithuania was not popular with Poles. Among the unhappy consequences of this long strained relationship have been ethnic conflicts in Chicago, less enthusiasm for a Polish pope than outsiders expect, and a cooler relationship between the Polish and Lithuanian governments than would be desirable.

After Ivan the Terrible destroyed the crusader state in Livonia the ultimate victors were the Swedish and Polish monarchs and the Livonian German nobility. The Swedish army defended Livonia for a century, but its devastating forays through Poland undermined Lithuania's ability (and willingness) to fight when Peter the Great made his drive to the sea. Before the century was out the lands comprising modern Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were conquered by Russian armies. Their separate historical paths had finally merged—in a common experience of exploitation and oppression.

The era of independence

Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland became independent when Russia collapsed in defeat and civil war during the First World War, but their cooperation in the wars for independence was minimal. Instead, the three southern Baltic states fought in a bewildering sequence of separate alliances with Russian communists, Russian conservatives, Germans, German para-military units, and, finally, Britain and France. Universal exhaustion, Lenin's cold-blooded practicality, and the West's desire for a *cordon sanitaire* to protect Europe from the infection of Bolshevism won the Baltic states their independence.

In 1934, the Baltic states joined in the *Baltic Entente*, but this defensive alliance was utterly ineffective when the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 delivered them into the hands of the Soviet Union. Finland, in contrast, fought valiantly and retained its political independence. One lesson drawn from the Finnish example for application today is the necessity of resisting any reassertion of Soviet control — blood sacrificed today will redeem the nation later by validating the claim to sovereign independence.

It is often forgotten that the Baltic peoples did take up arms in 1941 and continued to resist beyond 1945. Lithuanians continued their armed resistance until 1953 and the last guerrilla came out of his forest hideaway in 1990.

The United States never recognized the legality of the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states. The American government continued to recognize the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian ambassadors who remained in Washington, D.C. However, in recent years disarmament negotiations aimed at ending the Cold War and withdrawing American forces from Europe were more important than the Helsinki Accords which (in the minds of some) began the movement for freedom in Central and Eastern Europe.

Russians and Balts

Although Russia ruled the Baltic states for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, no Russian ruler ever understood how to govern them. Russian bureaucrats relied on rules of thumb such as believing that only the German Balts were of importance in matters of politics, economics, and culture in the two northern states—the wishes of the Estonians and Latvians could be safely discounted—and that the Lithuanian nobility was sufficiently estranged from its national roots

that some families could be considered Russian (or Ukrainian) and others Polish. As a result, tsarist officials concentrated their efforts at Russification on the Lithuanian commoners. They met with opposite results from those desired—the Lithuanians clung all the more firmly to their Roman Catholic faith, their language, and their land. Russification in the north was moderated by the cultural domination of the Germans. That, however, ended with the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. Moreover, it would hardly have made any difference to Joseph Stalin, whose regime was rarely noted for humanity, moderation, or common sense. His propaganda justified whatever policies were decreed as necessary for the modernization of the state on behalf of an international proletariat.

In order to accomplish the goals of a communist ideology (such as fraternity of all peoples, opportunity regardless of race, sex, or national origin) which stood in stark contrast to the police state reality, Soviet officials chose a less overt route toward Russification than the tsarist bureaucracy had followed: while proclaiming to the world that they were encouraging the survival of local cultures and languages, they adopted economic and educational policies which encouraged the use of Russian. The problem faced by the communist administrators was not uniquely Soviet: every large state sees an advantage in having a common language for its citizens. Consequently, in most large states minorities must choose between preserving their language and culture or learning a world language as an entree to the best educational institutions and technical training institutes. Threatened minorities often strive to escape this dilemma by providing their own national universities and institutes. In the case of the Baltic states, these institutions could be created only after achieving political independence or true autonomy.

Gorbachev and Bush

Gorbachev ignored the aspirations of the Baltic peoples as the outdated dreams of a handful of nationalist radicals who were probably fascists to boot. He accepted the common stereotype of Balts as docile peoples who were somewhat more westernized than the populations of the other Soviet republics. (The western orientation is true, but it is easy to exaggerate its importance: for most of the post-war period the Baltic states have been deliberately isolated from the west, with the exception of the "Vodka Ferry" between Helsinki and Tallinn, and the other republics are not as backward as is often thought.) Gorbachev believed that the Balts would eagerly seize the economic opportunities inherent in *Perestroika*. He was counting on the Latvians to save communism once again, as the Latvian Riflemen had saved Lenin at a critical moment in the Revolution. However, Gorbachev had never visited the Baltic states personally until the fall of 1989, when he hurriedly flew to Vilnius in an attempt to persuade the Lithuanian man-in-the-street that the declaration of sovereignty was a dangerous and foolish dream. His failure can be attributed to a profound lack of understanding concerning the true wishes of the Baltic peoples.

Bush seemed equally at a loss for a Baltic policy which could support the ideals of democracy and national self-determination. As President of the United States, he first of all had to be concerned with removing the Soviet army from Germany, Poland, and the Federation of Czechs and Slovaks. Secondly, he wanted to support democratic reforms in the Soviet Union. Such policies, if successful, would end the night-mare of nuclear war which had haunted the world for four decades. The desire of the Baltic peoples, including most Baltic communists, for national independence threatened both goals by undermining the credibility of the architects of reform, especially Gorbachev. Therefore, no matter how much Bush sympathized with the Baltic peoples in 1989 and 1990, American national interests dictated a *hands-off* policy.

That the American national interest had been invested in Gorbachev was no secret to the Baltic leaders, but they could not wait for the five or seven years Gorbachev requested, after which the proposed amendments to the Soviet Constitution might allow them independence. First of all, they knew that Gorbachev's chances of surviving in power that long were slim. They also had reason to believe that the proposed amendments were more likely to impede secession than aid it. Why should they wait, when they could see the Soviet empire disintegrating in Central Europe, the Caucasus, and in Afghanistan. This very moment, like that in 1918-1920, might be the only opportunity to get out.

Delay could have been fatal. The Baltic peoples faced worsening demographic situations: at the current rate Latvians and Estonians would be minorities in their own countries within a few years. Modern Russification had become a brutal policy, but its effectiveness was evident: Russian-speaking workers from other republics were being transferred to the Baltic states, while local university and technical school graduates were assigned jobs in other republics. The Soviet strategy was to emulate the American experience (as they understood it), so that in the course of time, everyone would come to use Russian as the primary language. Estonians and Latvians were already outnumbered in some cities; and only the Lithuanians formed a solid ethnic community.

The importance of ethnic identity had never been completely suppressed in the Baltic states. Moreover, it had been reviving steadily in Latvia and Estonia since the early 1980s, partly because of problems in the educational system (which was sharply divided into local and Russian language tracks) and it took on additional urgency after 1985 when ecological concerns arose. But it was the Lithuanians' swift move toward independence in 1989 which caused the northern states to commence their *singing revolution* — mass movements which emphasized the native culture overtly, thus reinvigorating national consciousness in Latvia and Estonia.

Gorbachev had hoped to use the Baltic nations as models of *Perestroika*, thereby saving communism from its internal decay. When he saw his mistake, he changed course immediately, subsequently allying himself with that odd mixture of old-fashioned communists, frightened bureaucrats, authoritarian colonels, and Russian nationalists. He abandoned the heart of his reform program and allowed a show of force in efforts to repress the most dangerous liberal and nationalist movements. Fortunately for the Baltic states, the reform movement had spread so widely and so deeply throughout the Soviet Union, that Gorbachev could not proceed toward repression along the time-tested lines of party decrees. He had already lost the key elections in the Baltic states. In order to remove the new Baltic leaders from power could only be done by declaring himself dictator openly. Such a step would likely provoke civil war throughout the Soviet state.

Limited in his choice of tactics by a numerous liberal opposition, Gorbachev acquired additional constitutional powers while making a selective use of KGB units, Interior ministry Black Berets, and Red Army terror. He tried threats, then began mobilizing people who might well fear for their future in independent Baltic states — especially the Russian immigrants who refused to assimilate. These techniques were not new; and they had worked before. However, this time, tank columns rumbling through the capital and the seizure of centers of communication failed to intimidate the people. Nor did the economic blockade achieve its purpose, partly because he underestimated the degree to which the Soviet economy was integrated, partly because of Lithuanian resourcefulness in acquiring raw materials from other secessionist-minded republics — and the crowds of patriots refused to be intimidated. Similarly, the efforts to mobilize the Russian-speaking peoples in all three Baltic states, warning them that they would become a persecuted minority, failed: the February 1991 referendum indicates that many Russian-speaking citizens voted for independence. The March referendum, with its confusing language (a Yes vote was for preserving the Union and instituting democratic reforms at the same time), was hardly an overwhelming endorsement of Gorbachev's regime.

Throughout this entire experience, we see evidence of close cooperation among the three Baltic states. Also there was support from other republics: Georgia, of course, but also from the Ukraine, where the independence movement was not yet clearly ascendant. Most importantly, Russian reformers who yearned for democracy and a freer market understood that if Gorbachev and the hard-liners succeeded in crushing the Baltic independence movements, he would do the same to them. Consequently, many reformers, with Boris Yeltsin at their head, openly favored independence for the Baltic states. Meanwhile, "Russian-speaking" immigrants were moving into Lithuania, many of them Jews fleeing the growing potential for pogroms which in the past so often marked Russian nationalist movements.

Reform and the Balts

The agonizingly slow progress of the reform movement was the best hope of the Baltic states for ultimate independence. The United States did little beyond efforts to curb the hard-liners activities. The Bush administration concentrated its attention on the Gorbachev reforms and refused to make any statement which might weaken his position. This is understandable: the primary American interests were in central Europe — Poland and Germany — and in reducing the danger of nuclear war. In contrast, the Baltic had no important resources, relatively few strong ties to the American people (the largest communities are in Chicago), and business saw little incentive to invest in nations of two to four million people whose work habits have been destroyed by five decades of Stalinism — we dare not forget how badly the social fabric has been eroded, to what an extent incivility and boorishness have become a part of daily life. Lastly, American foreign policy reflected caution even about symbolic acts, lest these be perceived by future Soviet leaders as betrayals of solemn understandings not to undermine one another's vital interests: President Bush wanted future Russian leaders to feel assured that American policy would not blow wildly and unpredictably in the winds of change. This did not even change after the August coup: while Boris Yeltsin and the Europeans recognized Baltic independence, President Bush continued to talk about "problems."

As of this moment it appears that the *Coup Klutz clan* did Russia and the Baltic a great service: Independence for Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia came not as an escape from tyranny and oppression but as part of a democratic revolution in Russia. August 1991 gave Boris Yeltsin a moral foundation to negotiate with the Baltic states that no earlier Russian ruler ever possessed. Moreover, the Balts are in an excellent position to assist him: they know the language and culture of the Soviet Union; they have technical training and expertise; they have some ties to the west which could once again allow them to transfer goods and technology from Russia to Scandinavia, Germany, and England. Lastly, once freed from the present oppression, they might find they have more in common with their great neighbor than they have ever acknowledged. History is not without its surprises.

The success of the Baltic states in dealing with this new Russian depends greatly on the decree that regional planning is instituted among the Baltic states, including Finland. Small steps can be very effective in making great changes possible. For example, laws requiring that all public servants have to be able to speak both the native language and Russian practically disqualify any short-term immigrant from public employment in any Baltic state. (In South Africa such a law delivered the country into the hands of the Afrikaners.) However, such laws can have the adverse effect of undermining the advice which everyone seems to be offering the Balts: *work together*. Yesterday, when the threat was real, it was easy to agree to work together; tomorrow, when better times arrive, it will be all too easy to fall back into old habits; and if

communication among Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians is hindered by linguistic regulations, it will not be effective. Possible regional ventures would be a Baltic Olympic team (a Latvian-Lithuanian basketball squad would be likely to bring home a medal,) a common tariff policy, shared responsibilities for coast guard services and transportation, and educational policies (especially to avoid duplication of expensive services).

There are two contradictory forces at work in the world. The one is for each ethnic group to seek its own identity and its own homeland; the other is to unite in larger unions. The task of all peoples, the Baltic peoples included, is to find a means of achieving both of these goals at once. Economic and political units which are no larger than a few million persons will find the future difficult. The historical experience of the Baltic peoples in cooperating with one another provides only a small foundation on which to build a larger political and economic structure; that foundation must be enlarged.

Planning for cooperation will not be easy: it runs against the experience of generations, the dreams of patriotic poets, and a certain amount of self-interest. However, it must be done. The real enemy of the Baltic peoples is not Gorbachev or the hardliners, but their own past. Such an enemy is not dangerous when faced. It is even less a threat when one turns one's back on it and looks to the future.