Baltic battleground

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Between 1940 and 1944, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were caught in a brutal tug of war between Hitler and Stalin, with successive occupations deepening the social and emotional mutilation inflicted by the previous one. Warfare, deportations, prison camps, mass executions, the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust, forced emigration and flight, the intimidation of survivors, all ravaged the some six million people living in this region. Only in the 1990s, after the re-establishment of independence, could the survivors and their descendants even begin to study the nature and consequences of that grim decade when they could not control their own history.

And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.
Disorder, horror, fear and mutiny
Shall here inhabit, and this land be call’d
The field of Golgotha and dead men’s skulls.

Shakespeare, King Richard II, iv, I, 140.

The fifth decade of the twentieth century was a time of storm, stress, and suffering for the peoples of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. In the single generation since they had emerged onto the European map after World War I, they had made great progress in forming modern, self-conscious nations. Then, as a battlefield of World War II, they together fell under successive foreign occupations: Soviet occupation in 1940-1941, Nazi Germany 1941-1944, and then a second Soviet occupation that extended on for more than two generations. These occupations built on one another, each deepening the social and emotional mutilation inflicted by the previous one. Warfare, deportations, prison camps, mass executions, the horrors of the Jewish Holocaust, forced emigration and flight, the intimidation of survivors – all ravaged the some six million people living in this region. Only in the 1990s, after the re-establishment of independence, could the survivors and their progeny even begin to study the nature and consequences of that grim decade when they could not control their own history.
The purpose of this essay is to sketch the three republics' common experience in World War II and immediately after. The essay does not pretend to offer a complete history. Its major emphases are on the nature of Soviet rule and on the origins of the Holocaust.

The Baltic republics’ “time of troubles” formally began on 23 August 1939, with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. In a secret protocol, Germany and the Soviet Union divided eastern Europe between them, assigning Latvia and Estonia to the Soviet zone and leaving Lithuania to Berlin’s care. On 28 September 1939, a second agreement gave most of Lithuania to Moscow but left the southwest part of that republic to Germany. In June 1940, the Soviet Union ignored this last provision when it sent troops into Lithuania, and on 10 January 1941, Germany accepted a cash payment of 7.5 million dollars to give up its claim to the disputed territory. The Soviets essentially could do what they wanted in the Baltic.

With this free hand, the Soviet government, in September and October 1939, forced the republics to sign “mutual assistance” pacts that provided for Soviet troops to be stationed in each state. In June 1940 Moscow demanded that the republics reorganize their governments and that they accept additional Red Army troops within their borders. Barely seven weeks later, the USSR Supreme Soviet accepted Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In their time, Soviet historians argued that the presence of Soviet troops had simply enabled Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians to decide their own destiny and to carry through “simultaneous revolutions”. In fact, Moscow’s special agents, who arrived in the baggage of the Red Army, had directed “revolutions from above” that had incorporated the republics into the Soviet party-state long before they were formally incorporated into the governmental structure of the USSR.

The party-state

[The Communist Party] is the vanguard of the working people in their struggle to strengthen and develop the socialist system and is the leading core of all organizations of the working people both public and state.

Constitution of the USSR, 1936

To understand the work of those agents - Andrei Vyshinsky in Latvia, Andrei Zhdanov in Estonia, and Vladimir Dekanozov in Lithuania - it is necessary first to consider the nature of the Soviet regime itself in the 1930s and then to examine the Soviet programme for carrying revolution abroad in 1939 and 1940. The first concerns the decision-making structure that Soviet authorities brought to the Baltic, and the second lays out the measures and procedures for the process of incorporating new territorial acquisitions.

The Soviet state was a “party-state”: the party wielded absolute power; the state administration, as V. I. Lenin and his successors built it, was “an instrument” in the hands of the party. After the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, Lenin had created a new type of administration in which the Communist Party constituted the sovereign authority,
higher than the constitutionally defined governmental administration. This can be conceived of as two pyramids, one inside the other. The larger, outer pyramid represented the structure of the party; the smaller, inside pyramid represented the structure of government as defined by the constitution, “The Stalin Constitution” of 1936. Josef Stalin ruled the Soviet Union in the 1930s without the benefit of a formal post in government; his position as the First Secretary of the Party, at the apex of the greater pyramid, gave him his power and authority.

In 1940 Stalin’s agents reproduced this system in each of the Baltic republics. Most observers thought that the local constitutional structure, even as it changed in July and August, represented the decisive arena of action, but as in Moscow, constitutional officers received orders and instructions from their superiors in the party structure. [1] Once established in power, the Communist Party First Secretaries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, wielded authority far superior to any constitutionally defined office. At the same time, the party structures were parts of the larger structure of the All-Union Communist Party.

In all three Baltic republics Moscow’s representatives operated according to the plan of action drawn up by the Politburo – an institution of the Communist Party and not the Soviet government – to incorporate the lands taken from Poland in the fall of 1939. There, under the protection of the Red Army, local Communists divided the territory into a Belarusian and a Ukrainian section and established “a new revolutionary order.” Provisional administrations in Belostok and Lviv arranged the elections of “People’s assemblies”. As prescribed in the Politburo’s orders, the key issues in the election campaigns were the establishment of the Soviet order, the incorporation of western Ukraine into the Ukrainian SSR and of western Belarus into the Belorussian SSR, land reform, and the nationalization of banks and large industry. [2]

The Soviet intentions of annexing the land taken from Poland were clear from the start, but in the Baltic republics the authorities chose to act more cautiously and carefully. In a somewhat analogous situation, in 1920 Soviet Russia signed a peace treaty with the Caucasian state of Georgia, and the following year Soviet troops overthrew the Georgian government to establish a Soviet Socialist Republic. As the situation unfolded, Lenin had advised, “I ask you to remember that the internal and international situation of Georgia demands from the Georgian Communists, not the application of the Russian pattern, but the skilful and flexible creation of a distinctive tactic based on the greatest compliance with all kinds of petty bourgeois elements.” In practice this should involve “a slower, more careful, more systematic transition to socialism.” The Soviet occupation of Georgia in fact proceeded more harshly, but the tactic of temporary compromise for the sake of masking revolutionary goals constituted a fundamental weapon in Soviet foreign policy. [3]

The party-state, the plan for “people’s assemblies”, and “a slower, more careful, more systematic transition to socialism” – these were the fundamental points in the programmes which the three Soviet agents carried into the Baltic in 1940.

**The “Simultaneous Revolutions”**

For a revolutionary […] the main thing is revolutionary work, and not reform – for
him reform is a by-product of revolution. Therefore in revolutionary tactics under a bourgeois regime, reform becomes a weapon to break down this regime.

J. V. Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*

Upon settling in the Baltic capitals, the three Soviet agents – Vyshinsky, Zhdanov, and Dekanozov – immediately brought the Baltic states into the fold of the Soviet party-state, carefully separating temporizing public reform policies from their longer-term revolutionary plans. Amid rampant rumours that the Soviet Union intended to annex the three states, they organized in each republic a “People’s Government”, headed by non-Communists. Finding acceptable candidates, to be sure, could take time; as Latvian Prime Minister Augusts Kirchensteins told an American diplomat a week after the coming of the Red Army, “Several cabinet posts remained vacant because no candidate acceptable to the Soviet authorities could be found”. [4] Behind the scenes Moscow’s agents worked to strengthen the local Communist Parties and to help the parties take over their societies’ repressive forces – neutralizing the police and the military while gaining control of security forces and organizing people’s militias.

The new leadership in all three republics emphatically denounced the former authoritarian regimes, spoke of the desirability of close and friendly relations with the Soviet Union, and called for land reform, while at the same time insisting on their respect for private property and for individual peasant landholding. As Lenin had suggested twenty years earlier with regard to Georgia, they avoided making radical policy statements; an American diplomat in Riga reported, “At mass meetings of labour youth, speakers warn against premature demands which will obstruct the cause and insist that all activities contrary to the directives of the new government and the Communist party are harmful.” [5] The governments’ seemingly moderate programmes raised hopes and expectations among many that the Soviet Union would perhaps be satisfied with organizing the Baltic republics along the lines of the Mongolian People’s Republic.

Following the Politburo’s directives concerning the territories taken from Poland, the local Communist Parties systematically collected political power in their own hands. While undermining established institutions, this involved creating new organizations and institutions, mobilizing social and cultural support for the new regime, and restructuring the educational system to control the socialization of the young. When analyzing public reactions, Soviet commentators usually claimed the unreserved support of workers and poor peasants. Since the so-called middle peasants, or smallholders, might have feared the call for land reform, the new governments protested their opposition to the collectivization of agriculture. They tried to mollify small businesses by declaring that they recognized the right to earned property, but they fully expected opposition from larger businesses and factories. They calculated that their moderate economic programme would make it difficult for potential opposition to organize itself because it could not see the regime’s ultimate goals.

At the beginning of July, the authorities in all three republics announced the creation of new parliaments to be elected according to Soviet election practices – with just one single slate of candidates. After the elections had then produced their planned results,
the sessions of the new legislatures proclaimed the establishment of Soviet Socialist Republics. With that the governments began to act more forcefully, enacting policies they had originally denied, such as nationalizing the land, banks, and large industry.

In this new aggressive spirit, the governments employed violence and even terrorism against their perceived enemies. In Latvia and Estonia, where the former leaders, Karlis Ulmanis and Konstantin Pats, had remained at their posts, the Soviet authorities had temporized. In Lithuania, where the former dictator Antanas Smetona had fled the country when the Red Army moved, they struck more quickly and forcefully: on 11 and 12 July, just before the new elections, they arrested a number of former Lithuanian political leaders and immediately deported many of them into the Soviet Union. After the proclamation of the Soviet order, the authorities promptly arrested and deported Ulmanis and Pats. Gloating that the former ruling circles were “trembling”, awaiting “punishment for their misdeeds”, the new rulers calculated that such forceful action against “enemies of the people” would intimidate and silence less daring antagonists.

The fact that the three Baltic states were still formally independent when the authorities began deporting Baltic citizens into the interior of the Soviet Union underlines the interpretation that the Soviet party-state had already incorporated the three Baltic republics. In addition, even before the elections of mid-July, the Soviet State Bank was making claims on Baltic gold reserves in Great Britain and in the United States. The votes of the “People’s Assemblies” was only a minor formality in the process of the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states.

At the beginning of August, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR agreed to the annexation of the three “Baltic Soviet Socialist Republics”. Soviet premier Viacheslav Molotov declared that the Soviet Union was retaking territory that the western powers had torn from it in 1919-1920, but Soviet historians henceforth insisted that the three states had experienced simultaneous and spontaneous socialist revolutions. These revolutions were of course simultaneous and synchronized to the point of holding elections on the same days and even designating in advance that Lithuania should be the fourteenth Soviet republic, Latvia the fifteenth, and Estonia the sixteenth. But they were hardly spontaneous. When the Lithuanian “People’s Assembly” met on 21 July, it echoed the Politburo’s order of October 1939 by adopting as the first questions on its agenda: the establishment of the Soviet order, requesting admission to the Soviet Union, land reform, and the nationalization of banks and large enterprises. [6] At the same time, what in fact were Moscow-directed and enforced revolutions from above were already cultivating a seed bed of fear, hatred, and violence.

**A dysfunctional society**

Anti-Semitism is growing extraordinarily. This is happening not just among the peasants but also among the workers.

Lithuanian security report, 21 July 1940.

The Soviet authorities proclaimed equality for the people and for all nationalities, but
under the title of the “class struggle” they also brought governmental violence, dividing
the society according to Marxist economic-social analyses into exploiters and exploited.
As practiced in Stalin’s time, this policy meant identification of class enemies, more
emphatically called “enemies of the people”, together with arrests, deportations, and
executions. It stimulated conflicts between individuals and groups and at the same time
presented itself as the sole arbiter that could settle these conflicts and maintain order.

The independent Baltic republics had been essentially “national states”, each dominated
by the major nationality in its population, and the new Soviet regimes proclaimed
simultaneous national and class revolutions aimed at destroying the old regimes and
“denationalizing” the republics. To develop new elites, they looked especially to the
minority nationalities. They expected some support from the local Russians, but they
expected and sought nothing from the Germans, whom they allowed Nazi Germany to
“repatriate”. In Lithuania there was a significant number of Poles, especially in the
Vilnius region (which Moscow had turned over to the Lithuanians in 1939), ready to
support policies that would undermine the position of the Lithuanians, but the Soviet
authorities feared that too many of those same Poles nurtured dreams of restoring Poland
within its boundaries of 1939. For Soviet purposes, the Jews offered the greatest
potential.

In 1940 Jews constituted an estimated 8 or 9 per cent of Lithuania’s population, some 5
per cent of Latvia’s, and less than 1 per cent of Estonia’s. In the 1930s, the Jews in all
three of the republics had concerns about the development of extreme national groups,
but the Jews of Lithuania seemed to be the most dissatisfied with their social and
economic conditions – perhaps because they had originally expected the most. They
argued that the Lithuanians had reneged on promises of national and cultural autonomy
made at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and they objected to programmes that
aimed at strengthening the social and economic power of ethnic Lithuanians. Despite
their concerns, however, the Jews in the Baltic countries, according to Dov Levin, “were
better off than in other eastern European countries such as Poland and Romania”. [7]

Whatever memories they had of the former authoritarian regimes, the Jewish
communities at first reacted to the new regimes favourably. Levin declared, “Upon the
establishment of Soviet rule the Jews felt much greater physical security than previously.
They were also greatly relieved by the cancellation of all restrictions and discriminatory
measures that had been in effect against the Jewish minority.” An émigré in the
United States spoke more enthusiastically, exclaiming “Under Russia we were free.” Ben-
Cion Pinchuk put it more cautiously: “Pogroms and Nazi terror, not enthusiasm for
Communism, were the dominant forces that drove the Jews towards the Soviets.” (The
American envoy in Lithuania characterized Soviet policy as “tolerant of but not friendly
to” the Jews.) Ironically, this acceptance coincided with the deportation of significant
numbers of Jews from the Belarusian and Ukrainian territories seized from Poland. [8]

The twin Soviet goals of national and class revolution, however, soon aroused more mixed
feelings. In Lithuania, state security agents reported that while younger Jews showed
great enthusiasm for the new social order, older, more conservative and more propertied
Jews looked with some trepidation at the prospect of “class revolution” and just hoped
that the new government could survive and not have to yield to a more radical
programme. (According to Levin, Jews owned 57 per cent of the industrial plants
nationalized in 1940 by the Soviet Lithuanian government and 83 per cent of the businesses.) Nevertheless, as Zvi Gitelman has declared, “Despite misgivings about the Bolsheviks’ militant atheism, their persecution of Zionism, and nationalization of property, many Jews welcomed the Red Army as a liberator.” [9]

Young Jewish men seemed particularly enthusiastic about the new order, and a number of writers have spoken of young Jews rebelling against their own heritage and the culture of their elders. As Jan Gross depicted the allure of the Soviet programme, “those for whom institutions, practices, and customs of traditional Jewish life felt oppressive […] welcomed the change. They sensed that the new regime offered an easy way out of the confining limitations of the Jewish community. Not exclusively by the so-called opportunities afforded Soviet citizens but also, perhaps primarily because under the impact of Sovietization the social control mechanisms of the Jewish community were so swiftly and utterly destroyed.” Zvi Kolitz spoke more harshly of “the Jewish members of the NKVD, imbued with the self-hating spirit of the evsektsiia (Jewish sections in the All-Union Communist Party).”[10] At any rate, the Soviet regime sharpened divisions within the Jewish communities.

The Jews who supported the new regimes gained an unprecedented prominence in public life in all three Soviet republics. Levin, for one, explained this as a natural development: “The appointing of Jewish functionaries at all levels of the state apparatus no doubt derived mainly from pragmatic considerations […] [I]t was possible to use the services of members of the Jewish intelligentsia who were attached to pro-communist bodies such as MOPR and Kultur Lige.” Zvi Kolitz declared, “There is no doubt that the Jewish communists in Lithuania, whose number was estimated at 900 out of 2500 were very active in expropriating properties and in the choice of the deportees. They were helped by Jewish members of the NKVD, who arrived together with the Red Army.” According to Levin, “There is no doubt that Jews constituted close to half, if not more, of the membership in the komsomol organization” (Communist Youth League). government [11]

Young Jewish men obviously felt a new empowerment, and on the streets they asserted both their own new public rights and their understanding of government policies.

The majority populations who had dominated the public in the Baltic republics now perceived the Jews as the new executive elite that was enforcing the destruction of the social institutions of the national states, and anti-Jewish sentiments intensified. As Dov Levin described the situation in Latvia, “The conspicuous position of Jews in the new regime and its political and administrative apparatus caused the Letts to identify the whole of the Jewish community with the hated Soviet regime.” According to Zvi Gitelman, in the eyes of the Lithuanians, “Jews who welcomed the Red Army were seen as traitors”; Aba Gefen, a survivor, declared that Lithuanians viewed “the loss of independence as a national tragedy, and they could not understand why their Jewish fellow citizens, who had lived well in Lithuania, rejoiced at the destruction of their state.” An American diplomat who visited Soviet Lithuania in March 1941 reported “a strong, anti-Semitic feeling in the whole country, and the new regime is usually described as the ‘Jewish government’.” [12]

While the repressive actions of the Soviet regime – arresting, deporting, and even executing “enemies of the people” – stimulated the growth of a culture of violence built on fear and hatred, pro-German propaganda worked to turn such popular resentment into a call for vengeance against the Jews. A Lithuanian group in Germany, the Lithuanian
Activists Front (LAF), proclaimed that “one must create in the land a heavy atmosphere against the Jews so that no Jew could even dare to think that in the new Lithuania he could have even minimal rights and the general possibility of making a living. The purpose is to force all Jews to flee Lithuania together with the red Russians.” Lithuanian commentators have argued that such propaganda did not call for killing Jews, but a proclamation issued in Berlin in March 1941 – it is not clear exactly by whom – “declared that on the day of reckoning Lithuania’s traitors could hope for forgiveness only if they could prove that they had each eliminated [likvidavo] at least one Jew.” [13] The Jewish population of Lithuania as well as of Latvia became the target of strong anti-Soviet passions and emotions, and Jews had all the more reason to fear the prospect of German invasion.

The tensions in the Baltic area reached new intensity in June 1941, when the Soviet authorities carried out mass deportations in all three republics. (In January 1941, an American diplomat in Berlin had predicted mass deportations sometime in the spring.) By this time, the Soviet regime had expanded its definition of “enemies of the people” from individuals to economic classes, to specific occupations, and to religious and social groups. No nationality escaped; the deportations carried away proportionately more Jews than Latvians or Lithuanians; few of the deportees ever returned to their homelands. Some trains stood several days in the stations holding their human cargo in cattle cars while awaiting departure orders, and frightened, angry relatives could only grieve and sorrow, swearing some sort of vengeance. Rumours that the authorities planned an even larger scale deportation at the end of the month intensified both the rage and the fear in the republics. [14]

In subsequent years, the various national groups nurtured different memories of Soviet rule and of the deportations. Jews who survived the experience have suggested that, in view of the anti-Jewish violence in Lithuania and Latvia in the summer and fall of 1941, the deportees were the “lucky” ones. For Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians who mourned the loss of friends and relatives, the deportations marked the culmination of a year of torment and suffering. The year of Soviet rule had inflicted shattering damage on the social fabric that had sustained peoples in the Baltic.

The German occupation

The State is real, the individual is wicked;
Violence shall synchronize your movements like a tune, and Terror like a frost shall halt the flood of thinking.

W. H. Auden, Journey to a War

On 22 June 1941, barely a week after the massive arrests and deportations in the Baltic, the region became one of the first battlefields of war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and it immediately witnessed the horrific development of the Holocaust. The Soviets had gloated about the fear they had inspired among “enemies of the people”, and while fleeing before the advancing Germans, Soviet officials executed a number of political prisoners. Fueled by stories of this new violence, anti-Soviet emotions exploded...
in a bloodlust intensified by Nazi-inspired images of frightened “Jewish-Bolsheviks” running to escape popular retribution. In all three republics local activists attacked retreating Soviet troops, and the violence also targeted civilians identified with the Soviet regime. This demand for vengeance quickly led to a wave of mass killings of Jews regardless of age or sex.

Most authors agree that the experience of the Soviet occupation probably constituted the strongest factor in the explosion of violence against the Jews in the Baltic. There had been tensions between Gentiles and Jews in the region before 1940, but in Ezra Mendelsohn’s words, “Anti-Semitism was certainly present, though it was not, by East European standards, too oppressive”. As Azreal Shochat wrote, “The special ferocity which the population demonstrated toward Lithuanian Jews during the Holocaust was undoubtedly the outcome of the very complex political situation created by the Soviet occupation in 1940 and 1941.” The Soviets had disrupted the old social order and had raised the level and expectations of violence in all three Baltic republics. The communists had, to be sure, controlled that violence, maintaining a state monopoly on its exercise, but the deportations of 14 June, together with the Soviets’ execution of prisoners as they fled the region, contributed the final sparks to the piles of emotional timber. [15]

In the anomie in the wake of the Red Army’s flight, the violence quickly spread, in a pattern identified by Charles Tilly as passing “from scattered attacks to coordinated destruction to opportunism”. [16] Analysts differ sharply concerning the actual start of the killings: were they spontaneous or did the Nazis inspire and direct them? The incoming Nazis encouraged the first popular violence against the Jews; special units, Einsatzgruppen, who were among the first invading forces, had the task of stimulating local collaborators to attack and kill the Jews. The Nazis then took control and systematized the killings on a more massive scale. Propaganda identified the Jews as the most important local supporters of the Soviet order. “Only the Bolsheviks and the Jews were the masters”, declared one booklet published in Lithuania in 1941, “we were at the bottom with no rights” [mes tebuvome paskutiniai pastumdeliai]. Whether spontaneous, misled, or calculated, the killings constitute a horrendous chapter in the history of the Baltic region. [17]

For most Jews in 1941, there was no escape. When Jews tried to flee Lithuania ahead of the German invasion, Soviet guards at the eastern border of “Soviet Lithuania” and “Soviet Latvia” at first refused them passage and forced them to turn back. The returnees then faced accusations that they had tried to flee because of their association with the Soviet regimes. The Nazi regime adopted its “final solution”, calling for the destruction of the Jewish people, in January 1942, but a number of authors have seen its roots in the killings in the Baltic in 1941.

The Nazi authorities in “Ostland”, as they called the occupied Baltic together with Belarus, ruled through an unsure collaboration and competition of military, police, NSDAP party officials, and civil authorities that involved a mass of contradictory aims. The Nazis wanted to destroy the Jewish communities and to kill off the Jewish population, yet they drove the Jews who had survived those first terrible months into ghettos, where they planned to profit from them economically. And then they still carried out mass executions.
In contrast to Soviet rule, the Nazi administrations manipulated and exploited local nationalist sentiments. The local majorities at first welcomed liberation from the Soviet yoke, but the new occupation brought more suffering and threats. Some Nazi commentators spoke of building a human defense wall for the Reich by deporting locals and settling Germans in their place, and at the same time they recruited support among the local populations. The occupation authorities took over enterprises “nationalized” by the Soviets and at the same time demanded gratitude from the population for having rescued them from Bolshevism. Like the Soviet officials before them, Nazi occupation authorities demanded that the local populations prove that they were “worthy” of being ruled by the invaders. And like Communist rulers in the Baltic, the Nazis aimed at winning obedience by instilling fear. From the viewpoint of the local populations, Nazi occupation policies became a package of forced labour, executions, deportations, and death camps.

Resistance developed, but it is extremely difficult to discuss “resistance” and “collaboration” satisfactorily in academic terms. It is easy enough to use the terms “quisling” and “partisan” as the antipodes, but “resistance” and “collaboration” as terms have highly charged emotional connotations that hinder general agreement on their meanings. One person might consider that mental reservations concerning the demands of official ideology constitute “resistance”; some may even argue that it is possible to “resist” from a position within an oppressive system. At the other end of the spectrum, some insisted on defining resistance as physical action, arguing that anything less constituted “collaboration”; the Jewish man or woman risking life by fighting as a partisan sometimes considered Jews who stayed in the ghettos to be “collaborators” – they should have joined the partisans. In the middle, many simply hoped that no one would notice them.

In 1941 and 1942, the German Wehrmacht appeared invincible; after the Soviet victory in Stalingrad in 1943, the course of the war changed. As the Red Army moved westward, the question of the future of the Baltic states assumed more urgent proportions. In each of the countries, local political leaders formed organizations that they hoped could develop into governments – the Latvian Central Council, the Supreme Committee for the Liberation of Lithuania (VLIK), the National Committee of the Estonian Republic – but neither Nazis nor Communists would accept such thoughts.

The post-war fate of the Baltic States was a major, but “unofficial” subject of controversy at the Moscow and Teheran conferences in the autumn of 1943. The Soviet Union insisted that this was an internal Soviet question and that there existed no “Baltic problem”; the western powers, particularly the United States, refused to recognize the Soviet claim, although they considered the reoccupation of the Baltic region to be a fundamental Soviet war aim. Insofar as they would discuss the matter, Soviet spokespersons insisted that the three Baltic “parliaments” had “requested” annexation, and in any case, as heirs of the Russian Empire, these spokespersons declared that this territory should have become part of the Soviet realm already in 1917-1921. The subject was finally left off the official agenda of the victorious powers, and Soviet propaganda intensified: both Johannes Vares and Justinas Paleckis, the chiefs of state of Soviet Estonia and Soviet Lithuania respectively, published articles distributed throughout Europe, insisting that the Baltic peoples had chosen their course and that this, in Vares’s words, promised “a prosperous happy future within the brotherly family of the Soviet peoples”. [18]
In the summer of 1944 Soviet troops were again in the Baltic region, and the Baltic peoples experienced their third foreign occupation in five years.

**The second Soviet occupation**

Anyone who wants to carry on the war against the outsiders, come with me. I can’t offer you either honour or wages; I offer you hunger, thirst, force marches, battles and death.

Attributed to Giuseppe Garibaldi

During the war, the Western powers had nurtured hopes that they would not have to face a Baltic problem at the end of conflict. In 1940, the United States had refused to recognize the Soviet annexation of the three republics and dissuaded the British Government from recognizing the act. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, this policy of “non-recognition”, as it came to be called, became an encumbrance on the relations between the members of the “Grand Alliance”, as Winston Churchill called the anti-Nazi bloc. Some hoped that perhaps the Soviet Union would not reincorporate the territories or at least it could find some peaceful way to win the acceptance of the local populations – but that was not to be.

Evidence of Soviet intentions mounted steadily. In October 1943, J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the American FBI, notified the US Department of State that Soviet intelligence was investigating how Baltic émigrés in the United States were maintaining contacts with people still in the Baltic. The Soviets, he added, were also interested in why the United States military organizations were training individuals in the study of Lithuanian language. “It has been indicated that similar information is desired regarding Estonians and Latvians,” he concluded, “inasmuch as our confidential source advises that the USSR intends to take over Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.” [19]

The Western powers were nevertheless surprised when Baltic citizens, whom the Germans had forcibly moved to central Europe as forced labour, objected to being returned to Soviet rule. A flood of refugees from the Baltic in the last months of the war added to their numbers. Classified as “Displaced Persons,” “DPs” in Baltic lore, these people eventually settled in various parts of the western world and formed a continuing lobby urging that the western powers maintain their policy of “non-recognition” of the Soviet incorporation of their homeland.

Soviet leaders had in fact never swerved from their claim on the region. During the war, as they planned their return to the Baltic, they even created new institutions in anticipation of the postwar era. In 1944, for example, officials in Moscow created the Lithuanian sports organization Zalgiris, named for the Lithuanian name for the region in which Lithuanian and Polish forces had defeated the Teutonic Knights in 1410. When the Soviet army returned to the Baltic in 1944-1945, the Communist Party had its cadres ready to rebuild Soviet administrations.

In contrast to their reception in 1940, this time the Soviet authorities met open
opposition. Moscow had to commit Soviet forces to the pacification of the region. (The Western powers made some effort to help and encourage the partisan resistance. [20]) The fighting was heaviest in the first year or two after the destruction of the Third Reich, but with time, the Soviet authorities crushed the resistance. The Soviets organized “people’s defenders” among the local population – Lithuanians called them stribai, a contraction of the Russian istrebiteli (destroyers); Latvians knew them as iznicinataji. The Soviets then insisted that the fighting represented “civil war” and not “resistance to foreign rule.” The fighting and tactics were cruel and inhumane, and one Lithuanian estimate suggested that the person joining the partisan resistance in 1947-1948 had a life expectancy of perhaps six months. The Soviet authorities again resorted to their ultimate weapon with recalcitrant populations – deportations. The major deportation of Lithuanians took place in May 1948 (over 40 000 and then 29 000 more in March 1949), of Latvians (43 000) and Estonians (20 700) in March 1949. [21]

The Soviet policy of deportations obviously aimed at undermining the self-identity of the nations targeted. In her time, Anna Louise Strong, the troubadour of the Soviet takeover of Lithuania in 1940, had described the Soviet deportation of Lithuanian leaders as a step toward what she considered the beautiful merger of all peoples of the Soviet Union into one great nation. Lithuanians frequently quote Mikhail Suslov, for a time Stalin’s viceroy in Lithuania, as saying that there would remain a Lithuania but no Lithuanians. The Nazi regime had sought to destroy the Jewish nation, and it had considered the forceful dispersal of the Baltic nations. The Soviets dreamed of dissolving the Baltic nations into a greater Soviet nation. [22]

By the early 1950s, the Soviets believed that they had wiped out the last pockets of resistance. Nevertheless the continued unrest in the Baltic populations may well have been the reason for the Soviet Union’s decision to reject the request of the International Olympic Commission for permission in 1952 to route the Olympic torch relay from Greece to Helsinki up the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. [23] Soviet officials did not want foreign visitors to witness the developments and problems in the Baltic republics. Stalin’s death in 1953 marked a turning point in the history of the Soviet system. His successors protested their loyalty to Lenin, but with time, as they became aware of the developmental problems in the authoritarian Soviet system, they experimented with relaxing some of its more objectionable characteristics. This soon provided the Balts with space in which to reassess their identities, and the Soviet regime discovered new springs of resistance within the societies that it had created and dominated. Soviet police reports expressed concern about the infiltration of official institutions by individuals who had “bourgeois nationalistic” sympathies; in the latter 1950s, for example, the Soviets purged the administration of the university in Riga. At this same time, republican Communist Party leaders feared the possibly disruptive consequences of Moscow’s decision to allow individuals deported to Siberia to return to their homelands. The development of new forms of resistance in each of the Baltic republics still awaits complete historical investigation.

The Baltic republics played a major role in the ultimate collapse of the Soviet system. In the last days of the USSR, more than one Russian commentator speculated that without the Baltic republics, there would be much less unrest among the other republics. Interestingly, in 1929 the American minister to the Baltic States had declared that “it is
generally understood in all border states and, one hears, in Russia itself, that once the Red Army steps over the frontier the knell of the Bolshevik regime will sound to all listening ears”. In contrast to such views, in the 1970s a western commentator had suggested that the three Baltic republics were “on the road not to assimilation, but to physical extinction.” [24] In 1991, however, it was not the Baltic republics that passed into "the dustbin of history”.

Footnotes


4. United States National Archives, State Department Decimal File, (hereafter referred to as USNA), 860p.00/283. On 20 June, the First Secretary of the French embassy wrote in his journal, "Annexation to the Soviet Union is half done". Jean de Beausse, Carnets d'un diplomate francais en Lettonie 1939-1940 (in Latvian and French), Riga: Liesma 1997, 160.

5. USNA, 860p.00/283.


14. On the deportations in Latvia, see Deportation of 14 June 1941: Crime Against Humanity, Riga: Latvijos vestures institute apgads 2002, Latvija vesturnieku komisijas rakst. 6. sejums. There has been considerable controversy concerning the exact number of deportees in 1941. Latvians have now generally settled on 15 000, the Estonians on 10 000, but the Lithuanians' figures range from 17-19 000 to 27 000. Part of the confusion in the Lithuanian statistics revolves around problems of establishing the numbers of Jews and Poles deported; see Eugenijus Grunskis, Lietuvos gyventojų tremimai 1940-1941, 1945-1953 metais, Vilnius: Lietuvos Istorijos Institutas 1996. Solomonas Atamukas, Lietuvos zydu kelias, Vilnius: alma littera 1998). On the deportations in all three Baltic republics, see Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagapera, The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980 Berkeley: University of California 1983, 38-42. For an example of the life of a deportee, as opposed to a prisoner in a labour camp, see the diary of Onute Garbstiene, Hell in Ice, Vilnius: Ethnos 91 1992. For an account by a prisoner, see Menachem Begin, White Nights, London: Macdonald 1957.


17. For accounts of the spread and growth of the violence, see: Andrew Ezergailis, The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941-1944, Riga: The Historical Institute of Latvia 1996; Atamukas,
18. Ny Dag, 10 February 1944. To make a show of the independence of the Union
Republics of the USSR, the Soviet government, on 1 February 1944, decreed the addition
of Article 18a to the Stalin constitution: "Each Union Republic has the right to enter into
direct relations with foreign states and to conclude agreements and exchange
representatives with them."

19. USNA, 860n.01/97.

episode in this intervention, see Liutas Mockunas, Pavarges herojus, Vilnius: Baltos

21. See Grunskis, Lietuvos gyventojų tremimai. For a general account of post-war
resistance and the deportations, see Misiunas and Taagapera, The Baltic States, Chapter
III Post-War Stalinism: "1945-1953". For examples of higher estimates of deportees see
the reports for the various countries in Vilniaus tribunalo nuosprendis Vilnius:
Tarptautinio Kongreso remimo fondas 2000).

22. Quoted in Ignas Seinius, Raudonasis tvanas, first published in Danish, 1941; Vilnius:
Vaga 1990, 134. Strong's major contribution to the history of the Soviet incorporation of
the Baltic States was her The New Lithuania, New York: Workers Library Publishers
1941.

23. Alfred Erich Senn, Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games, Champaign IL: Human
Kinetics 1999, 100.

24. Arthur Coleman to Washington, 21 November 1929, USNA, 860i.00/182; Helene
Carrere d'Encausse, L'empire eclate: La revolte des nations en U.R.S.S. Paris:

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