

Some Aspects of the Baltic Area Problem

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I.

The purpose of this article is to discuss several aspects of what may be referred to in a general way as the Baltic-area problem. Certain of these aspects will have to do with the historical past of this region, in an attempt to assign these lands their place in general European and world history. For illustration we shall choose several critical periods when this area played a particularly important role, periods that greatly influenced its political, economic and cultural structure. In the last section, we shall discuss the Baltic problem as it stands today.

The importance of any geographical region depends on several factors. One is the natural resources of the area, which may be conducive to the area's growth as an industrial center and at the same time arouse competition for influence over and domination of the area. Another factor is the trunk routes that may pass through the area; convenient and important routes can make an area that is otherwise poor vitally important in political and economic international relations. And finally, possibly the most important factor is the human element. The historical significance of an area is, in the main, dependent upon its inhabitants.

A present day observer of the world scene, very rarely meets with references to the Baltic area. The world's attention today is centered on Korea, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. But does this relative silence concerning the Baltic mean that the area experiences no problems, that the three Baltic states are in permanent eclipse? Does it mean that the historical significance of the region is irrevocably ended? There have been times of silence in the past, and it may be that they have lasted longer than the periods of strife and crisis. Nevertheless, the Baltic Sea still washes against the region's shores, and it would not seem that the current silence is eternal.

No one doubts the historical significance of the Baltic area. Primarily, it has always been an important communications center, where routes from West to East and From North to South cross. Dr. Walter Kirchner, who has published many works on the history of the Baltic area, considers that only a few areas that have known 4,000 years of human history rank with it in historical importance. Among these he names Mesopotamia, Egypt, Sicily, the Rhine Valley and a few others. He bases his conclusions on the fact that the southeastern shores of the Baltic (primarily present day Latvia and Estonia) are "at the junction of great communication lines between East and West or between North and South."¹

Beginning with the ancient amber-trade routes, through the Viking expeditions between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea and Constantinople, the Hanse traders of the Middle Ages and up to the more recent Dutch, English and French trading companies, the Baltic area has been an important communications center. For three hundred years (from the 16th century to the middle of the 19th) the Baltic region also served as an important source of raw materials. The shipbuilding yards of Holland, England and France could not dispense with Baltic lumber, and especially with its hemp — for a brief time the area had an all but complete monopoly of hemp production.

But the Baltic area's ties with the west were not only economic ones. From the West it received Christianity; from the West it received its civilization. Obviously, given the absence of natural barriers, it could not avoid being influenced by Eastern civilization. The Polish historian S. Kutrzeba, speaking mainly of historical Lithuania, has demonstrated how a synthesis of Eastern and Western civilizations evolved in that country's territories. The noted Lithuanian cultural philosopher S. Šalkauskis devoted an entire book to the study of this problem.² Today their thesis may be paraphrased and extended

over the whole Baltic region to show that here, possibly more intensively than any place else, the free and the captive worlds meet. Without doubt, the meeting place of such contradictions cannot but conceal within itself a certain dynamism, which sooner or later will have to explode the political structure that was erected, without considering the wishes of the Baltic peoples, after the bizarre and ironic ending of the Second World War. Then, possibly, the Baltic area may recover at least a part of the historical significance it has enjoyed in the past.

II.

Although historical times began in the Baltic area relatively late (Christianity did not reach Denmark until around 826 A.D., Sweden until the beginning of the 11th century and Lithuania until the middle of the 13th), the territories were inhabited for several millennia before this, as was so well described by the Danish author J.V. Jensen (1873—1950) in his famed novel **Den lange Rejse**. The theory that the Indo-European homeland may be found in the Baltic area may also have some foundation. Up to the 9th century A.D., this area was mentioned only rarely and then usually in fantastic terms by geographers and travelers and in the Viking sagas. The element that attracted the most attention was Baltic amber, which the Greeks, using a term pregnant with meaning for present day humanity, called **elektron**.³

In about the 9th century A.D. a period of strife began on the relatively quiet Baltic shores. Historians attempt to divide this period into various subperiods according to which nation dominated the area at a particular time. Although the **dominium maris baltici** concept itself was probably first formulated in the middle of the 16th century, one can perceive efforts to establish hegemony over the area at a much earlier time. The first period (approximately from the 9th to 11th centuries) may be named after the Viking rovers. The first Russian chronicles referred to the Baltic Sea itself as the "Viking Sea." During the 12th and 13th centuries Denmark dominated the area and even controlled parts of present day Latvia and Estonia. From the 13th to the 16th centuries, at least from the point of view of trade and shipping, the Hanseatic League dominated by spreading its posts throughout the whole area, and the city of Lubeck was called, not undeservedly, "Queen of the Baltic." By the middle of the 16th century, the Baltic question had become an international problem in the full sense of the word, since it became extremely important, both as a communications center and as a source for raw materials, especially for ship-building. At the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th century, the dominant political and military force in the Baltic area, without doubt, was Sweden, and her King Gustavus Adolphus (1611—1632) could legitimately boast that he had turned the Baltic Sea into a "Swedish Lake." With the 18th century, two new states — Russia and Prussia — appear along the Baltic shores, which, especially after the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, will occupy the whole eastern and southern shores of the Baltic Sea and will reduce Sweden and Denmark to second-rate powers. Obviously, they were never able to dominate the whole of the area, which stubbornly maintained the rights of free Shipping, that were so staunchly defended by the two most important sea powers of the day, England and Holland.

But probably the most interesting years of the Baltic past were the years between 1792 and 1812. During these twenty years, a determined war was being carried on against Britain by revolutionary and Napoleonic France, with the whole of Europe, and not only Europe, soon joining the conflict. With the declaration of the so called Continental Blockade by Napoleon in 1806—1807 (in reality a self-blockade on the part of the European continent), the Baltic Sea became almost the only region where a comparatively free trade could be carried on between Europe and the rest of the world. Not without basis did the semi official British publication **Annual Register**, in a survey of the world scene on the eve of the year 1807, write: "At the commencement of 1807, every eye was fixed on the coasts of the Baltic. It was here that the destinies of Europe were to be decided, as they have been in former periods on those of the Mediterranean."

It is interesting to note that at this time a new but swiftly rising sea power, the United States of America, was eyeing the Baltic coasts with great interest. Even earlier they had established consulates in all important Baltic towns, and in 1811 they formally appointed a consul to Riga.⁴ John Adams, the second president of the U.S., was probably best acquainted with Baltic questions. (His son, John Quincy Adams, was serving, at this time, as the first American ambassador at St. Petersburg.) In 1810 he wrote: "It is of great importance to us at the present to know more than we do of the views, interests, and sentiments of all the northern powers. If we do not acquire more knowledge than we have, of the present and probably future state of Europe, we shall be hoodwinked and bubbled by the French and English." Reading these words of John Adams today, one is struck by the thought that they are just as meaningful now as they were almost 150 years ago; only the culprit is changed.

There can be little doubt, that such a competent statesman as Napoleon fully understood the importance of the Baltic area. In a conversation with a Swedish representative he declared that Sweden, by refusing to join the Continental Blockade, had done him more trouble than all the five coalitions put together. He had also placed his garrisons in all the important Baltic area towns, wherever that was possible (as it was without exception in all towns as far north as Klaipeda), and his consuls and agents followed the movements of every ship on the Baltic Sea.⁵ Napoleon had even worked out plans for joining the Baltic area with Western Europe in a practical sense. "Through canals that will be dug, the Baltic rivers will be joined with those of the Western ocean and of the Mediterranean Sea, and the astonished people will watch sea going vessels navigating on land from the mountains of Scandinavia up to the Alps and the Pyrenees," wrote J.P.Q. Catteau-Calleville, a student of the Baltic area of the Napoleonic period.⁶

Primarily, no doubt, because Napoleon was unable to gain Swedish adherence to the Continental Blockade although one of his marshalls, Bernadotte, did gain the crown of Sweden, his plans for Baltic integration fell apart, and with the treaties of the Congress of Vienna, the Baltic area returned almost to the **status quo ante bellum**, except that Russian influence increased greatly. Throughout the 19th century there were efforts to change this *status quo*, especially in connection with Polish and Lithuanian efforts to regain their independence. Thus, during the revolt of 1831 and especially that of 1863, the idea of landing troops on the Lithuanian coast was broached in the West, but nothing came of these plans up to World War I, which greatly altered the situation of the Baltic area and created the conditions for the restoration of Poland and the three Baltic states.

III.

The road to acceptance into the international family of nations was difficult for the Baltic states after World War I. It is true that the principle of national self-determination proclaimed during the war, in theory almost admitted this right in regard to the Baltic states. Nevertheless, in practice they had to overcome many obstacles before being admitted as full-fledged members of the international community. It is interesting to note that the greatest difficulties in obtaining recognition were experienced with the United States, the staunchest defender of the right of national self-determination at that time, and at present the strongest supporter of the Baltic peoples in their fight for freedom. It would seem that the situation at that time was obscured by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. It was feared that the recognition of the Baltic states would further weaken the already weak counter-revolutionary forces in Russia. The government of the United States was not against the recognition of the Baltic states in principle, but it delayed such recognition until the situation in Russia might settle down. Mr. Evan Young, the representative of the United States government at Riga, probably expressed accurately the attitude of his government at that time when, on July 23, 1920, he stated: "With an orderly, well-established government of Russia, the Baltic provinces will again become a part of what will probably be a federated Russia." But, instead of an orderly government, a terroristic Communist regime established itself in Russia, with which neither the Baltic states nor the United States should have had any relations. Indeed, the United States did not establish diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. until 1933.⁷

But the period from 1918—1939 in European history maybe characterized as an age of the rise of small states. At that time, several theorists appeared who went so far as to attempt to prove that small nations have contributed more to the history of civilization than large ones. The British historian H.A.L. Fisher (1865—1940) wrote: "Almost everything which is most precious in our civilization came from the small states — The Old Testament, the Homeric poems, the Attic and Elizabethan drama, the art of the Italian Renaissance, the common law of England... The quantitative estimate of human values, which plays so large a part in modern political history, is radically false and tends to give a vulgar instead of a liberal and elevated turn to public ambitions."⁸

It is in this that the period differs from the present one, which began with the tragic end of the Second World War and which may be called the age of great power domination. The idea of freedom and progress for the small states has found its way into Africa and Asia, while the cradle of this idea — Europe — has become the graveyard of small states. The area of the Baltic Sea, which through long centuries has been the meeting ground of the cultures and interests of East and West, of North and South, today has become the meeting ground of freedom and slavery. In regard to the eastern and southern Baltic shores, these have not experienced such tragedy since the great Ice Age. At that time the Baltic and Central European areas down to the Carpathians were engulfed by ice that slowly flowed from the Scandinavian mountains. Today the process has been reversed, and an occupying wave from the Urals has engulfed the area.

The essential problem today is whether or not this wave will continue to the North and West or whether it will break against the desire for national and human freedom and recede to its source.

At the present time, as at every point in the historical process, the world is acted upon by two forces: a conservative force, which tries to maintain the **status quo** and to smother the remaining centers of freedom, and a dynamic force, which is trying to destroy the **status quo**, through revolutions and wars if other means are not available. The guiding idea of the conservative force is well expressed in the old saying "Sint uti sunt sive non sunt" ("Let it be as it is or be not at all"). Today, two extremely important institutions serve this force: the United Nations, especially the Security Council, with its great power veto; and the new atomic and hydrogen weapons, which in the opinion of many have made war obsolete. It appears to many people today, that things must remain as they are, that otherwise the world is faced with total annihilation. This dilemma is patently false, for there is a middle way leading to eventual liberation for the Baltic area but not to total destruction. This same slogan, "Let things be as they are," was adopted for two centuries by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and its sad end must stand as a reminder to those who firmly believe in the permanence of the present division.

Anyone who has closely observed the Baltic scene during the last several years cannot but notice certain new phenomena, which cannot be fully placed in the categories that predominated in that area during the last decade. We have in mind that part of the Baltic area which against its will, has fallen under the dominion of Moscow— Poland and the Baltic States. These, according to Professor W.F. Reddaway, are the "most Baltic states."⁹ For the Scandinavian states have always been closer to the North Atlantic community than to the Baltic, especially Denmark and Norway, which today are NATO members. In regard to the southeastern Baltic shore, there, after Stalin's death, a conscious or unconscious process

of differentiating these so-called socialist republics from the other Soviet republics set in. Common Baltic-republic drama and music festivals, scientific conferences, economic and agricultural conferences, etc., show that in spite of the efforts at amalgamation there is more and more need to distinguish the Baltic republics from the rest of the Soviet Union. Byelorussia is often included in this group, although it somehow does not seem to fit.

It is difficult at the present time to interpret this process with certainty. But this much is obvious: even the Kremlin now finds it difficult to ignore the fact that the Baltic republics, with their Western traditions and culture and with memories of close cooperation stemming from the period of independence, have much more in common among themselves than they have with the other Soviet republics.

A still more significant trend is the emphasis on common Baltic interests that Poland has shown since the events of October, 1956. Obviously it is not difficult to perceive in her continuous appeals to the Scandinavian states an effort to detach Denmark and Norway from NATO. On the other hand, Poland's growing interest in Lithuania and the other Baltic states could mean that if a Polish sphere of influence were established, Moscow's domination of these states might diminish, and then Poland itself could feel freer in regard to Moscow. Because of this, Poland's appeals to the Scandinavian countries may be regarded as an effort to use the weight of these states in achieving this aim. Obviously, this must remain pure speculation for the moment, but the fact, for example, that a conference of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, German and Polish delegations was held during last summer's youth festival in Moscow, shows that the Baltic question may again be approaching a new phase.

In any case, the desire for freedom that has been so cherished during the whole of Baltic history has not died there, even today. And this is true not only of the northern part but also of the southeastern part, or among the Baltic nations in the full sense of that term. The captive Baltic states may answer those who are trying to convince them of the permanence of the status quo in the words of Benedetto Croce, that "to assert that liberty is dead is the same as saying that life is dead, that its mainspring is broken."¹⁰ As the glaciers of the past melted and were followed by a time of growth, so it may be hoped that the 20th century glacier will melt and be followed by a new era of freedom and progress on the shores of the Baltic Sea.

NOTES

1. Walter Kirchner, *The Rise of the Baltic Question*, 1954, p. 2.
2. Cf. S. Šalkauskis, *Sur les confins de deux mon-des*, Geneva, 1919.
3. A. Spekke, *The Ancient Amber Routes and the Geographical Discovery of the Eastern Baltic*, Stockholm, 1957.
4. The National Archives in Washington have collected much interesting material on this subject, which the author has had an opportunity to examine and which could form the basis of a study on U.S. — Baltic relations in the years 1807—1812. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Paris. These still await careful study.
5. Three volumes of the reports of the Napoleonic consul at Klaipėda are held in the Archives of
6. Professor W. Graham, of the University of California, is engaged in an analysis of American policy in regard to Finland and the Baltic states. He has already published separate studies on the American diplomatic recognition of Finland, Estonia and Latvia. He has collected extensive material for a similar study on Lithuania, but illness has so far prevented him from completing his work.
8. Quoted in Bernard Newman, *Baltic Background*, London, 1948, p. 15.
9. W. F. Reddaway, *Problems of the Baltic*, 1940, p. 6.
10. Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 1955, p. 57-58.