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DOCUMENT

NEGOTIATING IN THE KREMLIN: THE ESTONIAN EXPERIENCE OF 1939

Notes on the Evidence

Among the more fateful events in the history of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is certainly their incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940. The process of annexation may be said to have had its „informal" inception in the Mutual Assistance Pacts which the USSR concluded in turn with each of the three Republics in the fall of 1939. To date non-Balts have shown only a parsimonious interest in the political history of the Baltic countries during this fateful era of their independent national existence. Yet a greater awareness of the events of 1939-1940 will throw at least some light on the more or less permanent sources of Soviet behavior. With this in mind two documents are published here for the first time. They should be of some interest to students of Soviet foreign policy and behavior in general.

The first document is a testimony of Mr. Karl Selter, Estonian Foreign Minister during the period in question and a participant in the negotiations in the Kremlin which led to the Soviet-Estonian Mutual Assistance Pact of 1939. The testimony was written in 1953 in Geneva and was intended for the use by the U. S. House of Representatives' Select Committee to Investigate the Incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR (83rd Cong., 1st and 2nd sess.), usually known as the Kersten Committee. (*The Hearings and Reports* of the Kersten Committee still constitute the most extensively documented story of Soviet aggression against the Baltic States.) In the testimony Selter delineates his experiences at the Kremlin during the negotiating sessions and presents a brief overview of the political circumstances which led to the pact and the reasons why the Estonian government accepted its terms. The original statement was written in Estonian and forwarded to the Estonian Consulate in New York City. Here it was translated into English and returned to Mr. Selter for signature, and subsequently it was forwarded to the Kersten Committee. Although the Kersten Committee in its publications frequently cites both Selter's statement and the more important document to be described subsequently, the originals were not published verbatim. Mr. Selter, a graduate of the Faculty of Law at the University of Tartu, was in governmental service from 1922 until his death in Geneva in 1958. Most of his early service was in the Ministry of Justice. In 1933 he became Minister of Trade, and from May to October 1939 he was the Foreign Minister. In November of 1939 he was assigned to Switzerland in the dual role of Estonian Ambassador and permanent delegate to the League of Nations.

A document of vastly greater historical significance is the minutes of the negotiations which occurred in the Kremlin on September 24 and 27-8, 1939. The minutes were recorded by Mr. Selter and Mr. Ants Piip Sr., another member of the Estonian delegation. A copy of the minutes, signed by Selter, was forwarded to the Estonian Consulate in New York directly by him, while the copy from Piip was received there through Mr. Ants Piip Jr., who had brought with him numerous documents from his father's collection when he departed Estonia. The elder Piip was abducted by the Soviets in 1940 and is believed to have perished in Siberia. He had been a Professor of International Law at the University of Tartu, had represented his country at numerous international conferences in Geneva and The Hague, and had lectured at the University of California at Los Angeles during the summer session of 1932. Mr. Piip had served the country in various capacities: from October 1920 through January 1921 he was the Chief Executive (*Riigivanem*); from October through November 1919, from January 1921 to November 1922, from December 1925 through July 1926, from May through October 1933, and again from October 1939 until his abduction he was the nation's Foreign Minister. During the time of the negotiations for the pact he was a member of the First Chamber of Parliament. Other members of the Estonian delegation at Moscow were Professor Jiiri Uluots and Mr. August Rei. At the time Uluots was the President of the First Chamber of the Estonian Parliament. He had been a Professor of Law at the University of Tartu, and served as the Dean of the Faculty of Law and as Assistant Rector of the University. Uluots had served several terms in Parliament, and after the conclusion of the Mutual Assistance Pact he served for a period as Prime Minister. Professor Uluots died in 1945 in Sweden. The fourth principal member of the Estonian negotiating team was also a prominent figure in Estonian politics, Mr. August Rei, who at the time was the Ambassador to the USSR. From December 1928 until July 1929 he had been the Chief Executive (*Riigivanem*), and from November 1932 until May 1933 he had been the Foreign Minister. During 1936 and 1937 Rei was an assistant to the Foreign Minister. Mr. Rei died in Sweden in 1963.

The minutes of the Kremlin meeting on September 24, 1939, are a translation of Mr. Selter's minutes which were recorded by him in Estonian. (Piip and Uluots were not involved in the negotiations until the 27th, while Selter and Rei were present at all times.) The copy on file at the Estonian Consulate in New York is a certified true copy in Estonian with Mr. Selter's signature. The minutes of the second round of negotiations, on the 27th of September, are translations from Professor

Piip's recording of the proceedings; the copy in New York was among the documents deposited there by Ants Piip Jr. It contains no signature. The minutes of the third day of negotiations (28th of September) were also translated from Mr. Selter's signed copy. In the first and second parts of the minutes, i. e., those signed by Selter, there appear the Roman numerals II and VI, whose meaning cannot be discerned from the documents in New York (numeral VI is omitted from the published text). The headings for the minutes were supplied by the editors. Also, in the minutes received from Piip's file it appears that the first annex refers to the telegram mentioned in the text in the preceding sentence, and the second annex is a reference to maps which show the exact locations where the USSR was to be allowed to station troops.

Finally, two additional documents are included to provide clarity to the substance of the Kremlin discussions. The original Soviet proposal for Mutual Assistance Pact, presented to the Estonian delegation on the 24th of September, is a translation of a document available in the archives of the Estonian Consulate in New York. The final text of the Mutual Assistance Pact is reprinted from Rei's collection of documents, cited below.

From documents which follow, it is evident that the Soviet Union displayed military might both covertly and overtly during the period preceding the negotiations.*

* Besides the general sources and studies of Soviet aggression — the Kersten Committee *Hearings and Reports* and the analytical study by Albert N. Tarulis, *Soviet Policy Toward the Baltic States, 1918-1939* (Notre Dame, 1959) — the more important sources dealing with Estonia specifically should be mentioned. Mr. August Rei, the Estonian diplomat referred to above, has published a valuable collection of documentary materials: *Nazi-Soviet Conspiracy and the Baltic States: Diplomatic Documents and Other Evidence* (London: Boreas Publishing Co., Ltd., 1948). It contains excerpts from treaties, diplomatic telegrams (especially between the USSR and Germany, and the German Foreign Office in Berlin and the Embassy in Moscow), speeches etc. Further, a rich source of information is *Baltic Times*, an English language weekly newspaper published in Tallinn beginning in 1932; copies of it are available in the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Mr. Herbert R. Runne, a graduate of Yale University's School of Law, wrote an honors senior thesis (1961) while at Princeton University, entitled *Once Free, Once Proud*, a copy of which is in the University library.

The Estonian Foreign Minister had been lured to Moscow to conclude a new trade agreement, the negotiations of which had recently been completed in Moscow. Selter had been Minister of Trade at the time an earlier trade agreement had been signed. When he arrived in Moscow on the 24th of September Selter received a virtually immediate demand from Molotov for Soviet base rights in Estonia. Molotov offered a mutual assistance treaty and threatened the Soviet use of force if Estonia refused to sign such a treaty. Selter's statement mentions the massing of Soviet troops on Estonia's border and their being taken off of alert on the 28th when the pact was concluded at midnight; Runne's thesis (see footnote) cites a source for the Soviet military order of battle for these units. When Selter returned to Tallinn to inform his government of the Kremlin's demands, President Pats at a Cabinet meeting which included General Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, found a consensus, that the Soviet threat of force in all probability was not a bluff, and that to resist a vastly superior armed enemy would result in the annihilation of the Estonian people. President Pats believed the chances for national survival in the long-range perspective to be better if the country accepted the terms of the pact.

When Selter and Rei returned to Moscow, accompanied by Professors Piip and Uluots, new demands were made by Molotov. Although the Soviets had earlier assured that the internal order of Estonia was to be unmolested, Molotov now states that the reason for proposed 35,000 man Soviet garrison in Estonia was "to prevent Estonia and the Soviet Union from being drawn into war, and also to protect the internal order of Estonia" (see minutes of September 27). Among the locations initially demanded by the Soviets was Tallinn, the Estonian capital. The final pact was signed at the Kremlin at midnight, 28 September 1939. The Latvian Foreign Minister was asked to Moscow on the 30th of September for the conclusion of a similar treaty. On October 4th, 1939, the Estonian Cabinet resigned; President Pats' appointed Uluots as Prime Minister and Piip as Foreign Minister. Selter was reassigned to Geneva in a capacity mentioned earlier. On June 16, 1940, under several apparently fake pretenses, the Soviet Union demanded in an ultimatum sent to the Estonian government:

The Soviet government considers it absolutely necessary and urgent that: (1) a government be established in Estonia that would be capable and willing to warrant the honest execution of the Soviet-Estonian mutual assistance pact; (2) free passage be promptly ensured to Soviet troops which are to be stationed in sufficient numbers in the most important centers of Estonia in order to guarantee the realization of the Soviet-Estonian mutual assistance pact and to prevent possible acts of provocation against the Soviet garrisons in Estonia.

(See Rei's collection of documents, p. 47)

Mr. Rei, in a statement (p. 47 in his booklet) asserts that when Molotov handed him the ultimatum in Moscow, he wanted a reply within eight and one half hours, and in case of unfavorable reply, the Soviet troops stationed on the border would be ordered to march into Estonia to suppress all resistance. The oral threat of force was not included in the written ultimatum. In any case, with the country occupied after its acceptance of the new Soviet demands, new one-party elections were held in mid-July, resulting in a totally pro-Soviet legislature. The *NY Times*, in its editorial of July 20, 1940, termed this "Democracy, Russian Style." On July 22nd the pro-Soviet Estonian government voted to join the USSR.

Whether the Soviet Union's intention in the Baltic in 1939 reflects the historic Russian desire to control this part of her eastern frontier; whether it reflects an actual Soviet phobia of vulnerability, thus requiring the Baltic as a defensive buffer-zone; or whether it reflects purely ideological expansionism, as mirrored by the following quote from the December 25, 1918, issue of Izvestia:

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are directly on the road from Russia to Western Europe and are therefore a hindrance to our revolution because they separate Soviet Russia from revolutionary Germany... The conquest of the Baltic would make it possible for Soviet Russia to agitate in favor of the Socialist revolution in the Scandinavian countries so that the Baltic Sea would be changed into the Sea of Socialist Revolution...

remains a matter of historical conjecture. However, the Soviets had already concluded a non-aggression treaty with Estonia in 1932 (see League of Nations, *Treaty Series*, vol. CXXXI, pp. 297-307), and their modus operandi prior to and after the conclusion of the Mutual Assistance Pact of 1939 suggests strongly that the final incorporation of Estonia into the USSR was a carefully meditated political maneuver, and the pact was only one aspect of the preconceived execution. In any case, the published documents hopefully will provide those interested with political history of the Baltic with additional material for a conclusive treatise on this historically crucial epoch in the histories of the three Baltic countries.

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