

Book Review: WESTERN ATTEMPTS TO REWRITE BALTIC HISTORY

Stuart R. Schram, "L'Union Soviétique et les États Baltes" in LES FRONTIÈRES EUROPÉENNES DE L'U.R.S.S. 1917-1941, ed. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Paris, 1957, pp. 25-166.

The book *Les frontières européennes de l'U.R.S.S.* is devoted to an analysis of the relations between Soviet Union and Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Lithuania, Finland, and Rumania. It contains two studies; "The Soviet Union and the Baltic States" and "The Soviet Union and Other Countries". This review will be concerned only with the study of Stuart R. Schram on the Baltic States.

The study by Schram is not just an account of the diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Baltic States. The author is concerned not only to analyze these relations in the light of documentary sources, but also, in his words, "to reveal the truth, to the extent that this is possible at this time" about the origin, internal development, and foreign policy of these three states.

With the first sentence the author emphasizes, that the Baltic states, having emerged after 1917 from the shadows and taken a place in European community, today are disappearing again in a legendary fog. According to the Balts, their nations alone, with their own military and political efforts, had achieved independence, progressed without precedent in political, economic, and social fields, and lost their independence as victims of Soviet imperialism, despite the adherence to neutrality. In Soviet view, these states were creations of German and Anglo-American imperialists, for two decades their governments engaged in bloody suppression and social regression, and their people were liberated from fascism at the time that they were being betrayed to Hitler. According to Schram, the truth probably will be found somewhere between these two extreme viewpoints. To discover this truth is the proclaimed objective of the author. So let us inquire what kind of conclusions are reached by the author, who pretends to seek the truth objectively.

Against "Wilsonian Mysticism"

"It is difficult to comprehend what can be achieved by cloaking with Wilsonian mysticism a decision, which first of all reflected the concern to maintain order and security" (p. 34), writes Schram in connection with the declaration of independence by the Baltic States in 1917-1918. "How can it be denied, that the people, who decided the separation of the Baltic States from Russia, were being influenced not by Russia, but by the revolution?" (p. 33). With these two statements the author thinks he can comprehend the true motives for a "divorce" between Russia and these territories on the Baltic, which Peter the Great had acquired for Russia.

Evidently, the author does not believe that in this separation from Russia such things as national sense and consciousness had any significance. According to him, the declaration of Baltic independence belongs more to the category of events of class struggle. Up to the October Revolution bourgeois leaders of the Baltic nations had been quite satisfied with the belonging to great Russia; however, fearful of a revolution in their own countries and desiring to evade the danger of social revolution, they decided to sever the ties with Russia. Here the author calls even on Trotski in support of his views: "There is a tendency to overemphasize the power and meaning of separatist currents in revolutionary Russia... This separatism should not be considered as a permanent historical tendency. It is usually a temporary defensive maneuver, which is used by certain social strata that are threatened by revolutionary victory" (p. 34).

For "Socialist Realism"

Having disposed of "Wilsonian mysticism" and explained the independence of the Baltic states as a maneuver of the Baltic bourgeoisie to save themselves from revolution, Mr. Schram proceeds to discuss the political and economic development of the new republics. Here the author can point only to economic bankruptcy, social regression, and political degeneration.

According to him, during two decades the Estonian and Latvian leaders managed to ruin a flowering economy and to turn "one of the most industrialized East European areas to its native vocation of selling bacon" (p. 64). Even the agricultural policy ended with bankruptcy. The widely known and approved agrarian reforms in the Baltic had resulted in a situation in which "more than half of the peasants in the Baltic countries were forced either to work for their neighbors or to live below the level of subsistence" (p. 63). In internal politics all three countries had authoritarian regimes: primitive form of fascism in Lithuania, a full-pledged fascism in Latvia, and fascist corporativism in Estonia (pp. 64, 67).

The results of the analysis are so weak that the author himself feels a need to justify himself why he had disregarded the principle *de mortuis nil nisi bonus* and to show the sad truth (p. 70). He does not want to say outright that the states with such internal systems were not worthy of existence (p. 70); however, he feels a duty to help the reader to understand better the foreign policy of the Baltic states, for which knowledge of their internal policy is necessary. In other words, in the name of scientific interest, the author allegedly wanted to destroy the beautiful legends about the Baltic countries, so that in the remaining part of the study he could discuss the foreign policy of these countries.

Mysticism About Hitlerism in Foreign Policy

The author deviates from his design of explaining foreign policy in terms of internal development in the Baltic States. He feels he is forced to admit the rise of authoritarian regimes did not necessarily manifest in appropriate degeneration in foreign affairs. Even if those states were indeed the creation of Anglo-French capitalists, German imperialists, and white counter-revolutionaries, still, after independence, their leaders were aloof from military adventures and attempted to maintain possible relations with the Soviet Union. Even when Hitler came to power, the Baltic states, whose internal system to the author is similar to that of Hitler's Germany, hesitated what line to follow in foreign policy. "The dice were not cast" (p. 71), says the author. In other words, the Baltic States still were swaying between fascism and democratic forces, which, in the author's view, were represented in Eastern Europe only by the Soviet Union. For example, Lithuania's leadership, whom Moscow considered as "German puppets", had the best relations with Russia (p. 53). In general, the author finds nothing to reproach in these relations.

The situation allegedly changed in 1938. As the international situation deteriorated, the neutrality of the Baltic States became questionable. In the middle of 1938 the author sees in all three republics a growing tendency to seek entente with Germany at any price (p. 112). He tries to show the attempts of certain Baltic statesmen to seek security in total surrender to Germany (p. 122). According to the author, this conscious and unfortunate policy of Baltic statesmen during the last years of peace actually decided the future of these countries and explains the events of 1939-1940. In Schram's opinion, this is the most important consideration in evaluating the Russian demands during the negotiations of 1939 (p. 122).

In the case of Lithuania the unfortunate policy direction had begun with the crisis between Poland and Lithuania in March of 1938, when the Lithuanians, disregarding the "uninterested" aid of Litvinov, had lost their nerve. It is true that in the middle of August *Lietuvos Žinios* (News of Lithuania) still had the nerve to attack col. Beck. To the author this appears to be a proof that fascist reorientation had not yet occurred. However, toward the Muenchen meeting the pro-German tendency again clearly emerged. Around September 20, the journalist Gustainis, who was a personal friend of President Smetona and Prime Minister Mironas, allegedly had offered to an official of the German Foreign Affairs Ministry (von Grundherr) to exchange Klaipėda (Memel) territory for German guarantees of security to Lithuania. In March of 1939 this new tendency was confirmed by the transfer of Klaipėda to Germany. Although the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Urbšys tried to assure the English representative Preston that the agreement to transfer Klaipėda to Germany only strengthened Lithuanian neutrality, Mr. Preston had concluded that Urbšys' assurance was a mockery (p. 131). Surrender to Germany had occurred! Furthermore, according to the May 1939 treaty Lithuania had become a sort of economic satellite of Germany.

According to the author, in case of Estonia and Latvia the surrender of their policy to Hitler's Germany had occurred even earlier and less painfully than in the case of Lithuania. Already toward the spring of 1938 the General Staff of Estonia allegedly was preparing plans for military cooperation with Germany. During the Anglo-French-Russian negotiations of 1939 there was not the slightest doubt about the sympathies of the Baltic States. The protests against and reluctance to accept the guarantees of the Soviet Union against direct or indirect aggression, i.e. the reluctance to permit the powerful neighbor to intervene in internal affairs, was nothing else but "a stubborn refusal to participate in the peace front, which the democrats quite too late attempted to create" (p. 139). On the authority of the pro-soviet Latvian author Meikšins, Schram contends that such soviet guarantees practically would have meant the restoration of parliamentary democracy with anti-German statesmen at the helm (p. 150). Having rejected these guarantees and desiring the failure of negotiations, the leaders of the Baltic "dug their own grave" (p. 151).

The author presumes that the idea of annexing these countries — which had great strategic and economic significance and were, furthermore, inherited from Peter the Great — could not have been foreign to the Soviet Union. He believes, however, that an Anglo-French-Russian entente would have contained Russia from taking such a step.

The author is aware, that "many Western states have refused to recognize the fact of annexation", for "international law does not permit occupation of a country simply because its government is not trusted". However, he believes that all protests against Baltic annexation would have been weightier if the Baltic States had made a better use of their independence (p. 162).

Historical "Sources" for the Study

It must be emphasized that the history of the Baltic States, concocted by Schram, is not just a simple compilation of Soviet views, as one would be tempted to believe. On the contrary, the author regularly emphasizes that he is analyzing the problem objectively, without an a priori position; he wants to destroy the mysticism and legendry that have enveloped the brief existence of the three ephemeral states, to reveal nothing but the truth, based on "documentary sources."

The attached list of references would indicate that the author had serious intentions, for the list includes practically all the more important publications in Baltic and other languages (up to 1957) and diplomatic documents. However, the list of source materials does not by itself assure a competent work, for in this case the text has no connection with the sources. It may be doubted, therefore, whether Schram attempted to use seriously the works that he listed. There is no doubt that he did use part of the sources extensively, for example, the notes of Potemkin, articles from *Pravda*, works by the pro-soviet historians a la the Latvian Meikšins and the Estonian Kruus, as well as certain documents. Even in using diplomatic documents the author fails to arrive at an objective viewpoint. Repeatedly he makes statements, allegedly based on documentary sources (which are difficult to determine by the reader), which have no connection with the text of the documents or their historical contents. Such procedures and manipulation of facts led the author to contradictions and even ridiculous conclusions. He is forced to call even on Trotsky to support his "truth" about the Baltic States.

Why the Bias?

In the opinion of this reviewer, there are two reasons for the unsuccessful attempt of Schram to rewrite the history of the Baltic States.

First of all, Schram undertook a task which is beyond his capabilities. Despite the author's claim that he is a historian, and despite the sponsorship of the study by the noted historian, prof. Duroselle, who also wrote an introduction to Schram's work, we cannot recognize that Schram is a historian. He simply has not digested the sources objectively and scientifically. He is not aware of the dangers to impute a meaning to a text which literally does not exist or to talk on without documentary basis. He disregards these elementary requirements for anyone who wants to be called a historian. He cites *Pravda* as though it was an impeccable source and uses it even when he has to cite an exact date of an incident along the Lithuanian-Polish frontier (p. 118). Potemkin's authority is sufficient to believe the interesting story that during the Polish-Lithuanian crisis the Soviet Union threatened Poland to end the non-aggression treaty between Poland and the Soviet Union and to assume freedom of action. In other words, this meant Soviet intervention in behalf of Lithuania — a very important fact, which, however, so far has not been discovered by anyone else... Again it is *Pravda* — and here we may believe — which is best informed about the anti-communist repressions in Estonia (p. 120).

While the author accepts the Soviet sources with conviction of their authenticity, at the same time he expresses doubts about other sources. He is quick to warn the reader about the materials produced by U.S. Congress investigation of communist aggression in the 1950's (The Kersten Committee), because their authors could not be objective (p. 27).

Absence of facts do not restrict the author. He claims to know impossible things, for example, the secret thoughts of the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Urbšys (p. 127). He provides no documentation of such "secret thoughts". Where the author does use documents to support his statements the reader better be careful to note whether indeed his statement corresponds to the content of the document. For example, the cited conversation between the British representative Mr. Preston and the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Urbšys in connection with the German takeover of Klaipėda territory is incorrectly interpreted by Schram. The document states only that Mr. Preston suspected that Urbšys did not tell him everything, while Mr. Schram understands this to mean that Mr. Preston felt he was mocked by Urbšys.

It would be possible to indicate numerous other mistakes and distortions of the author. Before condemning the author we should perhaps indicate mitigating circumstances. After all, the author is a foreigner to the Baltic area, most likely unable to grasp the controversial matters and problems of those countries, whose history he is writing without knowing their languages; it is extremely difficult for him to orient himself in the jungle of unknown names and mysterious events. What else can we expect from a historian, who thinks that the cited criticism of col. Beck in Lietuvos Žinios, an opposition paper, must reflect' the so-called anti-German mood of official strata? Unable to arrive at a clear opinion, he acknowledges, that it is easier to believe the opinion of *Pravda*, according to which the mentioned colonel was Hitler's trustee for the Baltic countries (cf. p. 122).

In addition to being incompetent to write an objective study about Soviet-Baltic relations, Schram is unwilling to be scientific. He was motivated not by love of truth but by a desire to prove or justify his own preconceived theses. He is attempting to answer the question, raised in the introduction by prof. Duroselle, whether the national spirit of the Baltic people was such as to make it necessary to transform themselves into states. Mr. Schram endeavors to find a satisfactory answer in the negative sense. His objective is to show that the national factor did not exist, that the separation of the Baltic States from Russia had no basis, that the period of independent statehood was only an ephemeral and temporary historical episode.

If there ever was an author who was intent upon gathering all arguments for Baltic integration into the Soviet Union, who wanted to prove the alleged justification of Soviet demands between the fall of 1939 and the spring of 1940, and who

wanted to reject absolutely all facts for Baltic independence, then Schram is certainly such an author. Even the Soviets are more moderate in this respect in their published official versions.

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