LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 13, No.1 - Spring 1967
Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas

ISSN 0024-5089

LITUANUS
www.lituanus.org

BOOK REVIEW

Albert N. Tarulis, AMERICAN - BALTIC RELATIONS 1918-1922: THE STRUGGLE OVER RECOGNITION (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965).

The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) declared their independence during 1918. They fought the Whites and the Reds to implement the secession from the Russian Empire until 1920, when they signed peace treaties with the Soviet Government. In the peace treaties the Soviet Government renounced for all times claims of sovereignty over the Baltic countries, thereby confirming the right of nations to secede from the empire and recognizing the independence of the Baltic nations. Yet, despite the Soviet recognition of Baltic independence, the Government of the United States refused to recognize the Baltic States as independent entities until 1922 because they were considered as parts of "indivisible Russia". The study by Tarulis is an in-depth account of the efforts of the Baits to obtain recognition from the United States and the various policies pursued by the United States toward them.

President Wilson's principle of national self-determination expressed in the Fourteen Points was essentially meant to apply to the nations of the Dual Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. The exception was Poland, which was to be carved out of the Austrian, German, and Russian domains. Subsequently the principle was also extended to Finland. However, on vague grounds, the American government refused to make the principle of self-determination universal in applicability. Here was a distinct case of American idealism conflicting with realities of power politics. In the American official mind the nations of the Russian Empire (except, of course, Poland and Finland) were to remain subject. The story of the struggle for recognition of the Baltic States, even when their independence was established beyond doubt, is a testimony of the frequent inconsistency of American idealistic principles and behavior in foreign policy. One might add that even today the American Government would probably by quite reluctant to apply the principle of self-determination to all the nations in the Soviet Union, if the occasion arose, even though it is one of the official principles of American foreign policy.

It is paradoxical that the Baltic States received de facto recognition quicker from major powers which acted on basis of factual situation and power politics, rather than on principle of selfdetermination. When the Peace Conference failed to solve the Russian or the Baltic questions, the British took an independent course. After the defeat of Versailles in the U. S. Senate, Lloyd George went so far as to propose dismemberment of Russia as a condition for future peace. Besides Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States, he would have sanctioned independent Ukraine, Bessarabia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and even Siberia. Such a proposal was shocking to the American officials who still drew the line of Russia along the Finnish-Polish frontiers. The suspicion that an undivided Russia in the future can become a threat to peace was confirmed two decades later. The American mind, in a typical idealistic fashion, preferred to believe that the Russian people are incapable of disturbing peace.

The State Department persisted with a united Russia policy even when Denikin's and Kolchak's campaigns were clearly defeated. A typical official position, which persisted for four years, was expressed by Secretary Colby in instructions to U. S. Ambassadors concerning the „Russian problem". Essentially it confirmed the policy of Lansing. The instruction, reproduced by Tarulis, states in part:

> *A permanent and wise solution of the problem of Russia, it would seem, cannot be reached until there is put into effect a plan whereby all elements of the Russian people will be represented effectively for the consideration of the reciprocal needs, political and economic, of the different regions which made up Imperial Russia... A decision arrived at in any international conference to recognize as independent governments the factions which now exercise some degree of control over territory which was part of Imperial Russia, and to establish their relationships and boundaries, is not advisable and will seriously prejudice the future of Russia and an enduring peace. Dispositions of this sort must prove to be temporary and without doubt would fall when faced by a restored Russia resolved to vindicate its territorial integrity and unity... (as the) Department thinks that a real solution of the actual problem will be delayed and complicated by the dismemberment of Russia, it has been persistent in refusing to recognize the Baltic States as independent states apart from Russia. (Cited by Tarulis, p. 308.)*

According to Dr. Tarulis, the State Department viewpoint persisted essentially unchanged partly due to the influence of the Russian Ambassador Bakhmetev, whose proposals and memoranda often were expressed in American policy statements and who was consulted before pronouncements on the "Russian problem." Dr. Tarulis shows the united view on the

national question by all the Russian political factions, including the Bolsheviks, which would have endorsed Colby's statement cited above. The Russian view, essentially accepted by the United States until 1922, was that the national question would be decided by the Russian people. As Dr. Tarulis repeatedly points out, it meant that the non-Russian nations could have little hope of independence or substantial autonomy, and hence was rejected by the revolting nations.

Having adhered to the idea of indivisible Russia for so long, what was it that changed the mind of American Government in respect to recognition of Baltic independence? Dr. Tarulis believes that the change in administration (including the influence of electors of Baltic origin on such men as Senator Lodge and Secretary Hughes), the resignation of Bakhmetev as Russian Ambassador, and the demonstration of the Baltic States to establish orderly and democratic governments contributed to that end. The statement of recognition was issued on July 25, 1922. Subsequently it became somewhat controversial. Its text is as follows:

> *The Governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been recognized either de jure or de facto by the principal Governments of Europe and have entered into treaty relations with their neighbors.*
> *In extending to them recognition on its part, the Government of the United States takes cognizance of the actual existence of these Governments during a considerable period of time and of the successful maintenance within their borders of political and economic stability.*
> *The United States has consistently maintained that the disturbed conditions of Russian affairs may not be made the occasion for the alienation of Russian territory, and this principle is not deemed to be infringed by the recognition at this time of the Governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania which have been set up and maintained by an indigenous population. (Cited by Tarulis, p. 357).*

The controversy involves the question of conditionality of recognition. Was the United States still adhering to the idea of indivisible Russia and granting Baltic recognition conditionally? According to Tarulis, subsequent policy statements by U. S. Government have completely repudiated "conditional recognition". The Soviet Government, after the forceful incorporation of Baltic States in 1940, attempted to argue that recognition was temporary. The U. S. Government not only emphatically rejected such contentions (for example Welles' statement of July 21, 1940), but also pointed out that the Soviet Government itself in 1920 renounced forever claims on the Baltic countries. In subsequent attempts to get U. S. recognition of Soviet aggression, American officials pointed out that the recognition statement of 1922 stressed that indigenous populations had the right of self-determination. According to Tarulis, this introduced a new element into the recognition terms: "The United States government opposed the alienation of Russian territory only when it was brought about by force, by a third power; the decision of an indigenous population to secede from Russia was in the United States view no alienation of Russian territory" (p. 367). The United States thus issued an unconditional recognition of the Baltic States and adheres to this view today by refusing to recognize Soviet aggression and maintaining Baltic diplomatic representatives.

An intriguing question here might be raised. If the terms of recognition, as interpreted by the State Department, are as given above, would the United States sanction dismemberment of Russia, if the occasion arose, provieded this is accomplished through internal dynamics? The State Department has carefully evaded answering this question, even though there is no question concerning U. S. position toward the Baltic States.

Dr. Tarulis' work is based mainly on documentary sources. He has examined in detail State Department documents in U. S. National Archives, memoirs and papers of participants in the events, and documents of other major powers involved in the story. His approach is chronological and not strictly focused on American-Baltic relations. The story could have been more comprehensible if a greater attention was focused on American internal politics and the nature of Wilson's foreign policy in general. Otherwise, only minor stylistic criticisms could be indicated, but they are not important enough for exposition.

This work of Dr. Tarulis was published posthumously. The academic community has lost an outstanding scholar on Baltic affairs. Dr. Tarulis' last work is an outstanding contribution to historical scholarship and a fitting memorial to his life.

Thomas Remeikis
St. Joseph's College
East Chicago, Indiana