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## THE BALTIC QUESTION IN THE AMERICAN AND BRITISH PRESS, 1939—1940

The Baltic question during the crisis year from August 1939 to August 1940 deserves to be explored from many different angles. One aspect that has not been studied as fully as possible is the depiction of the Baltic states in the Western press during this period. Leading newspapers in the West both reflected and shaped public opinion, and they offer an important vehicle for assessing international interest in the fate of the Baltic states. This paper will provide a brief analysis of how the Baltic issue is covered and depicted in four major American and British newspapers — the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Times* of London, and the *Manchester Guardian* — in 1939—1940, including an assessment of the accuracy and nature of the picture that is given.

Let us turn, first of all, to the extent and accuracy of the news coverage regarding the Baltic states. Given the momentous events of the year in question, e. g., the invasion of Poland and the fall of France, how thoroughly was the Baltic treated? In general, it must be noted that Baltic affairs were rarely front-page news. The two major exceptions to this statement were the conclusion of the so-called mutual assistance pacts in late September—early October 1939 and military occupation and Sovietization in June—July 1940. However, it is striking that the first of these crises received considerably more coverage than the second. June 1940 was dominated by the defeat of France, a shattering psychological and material blow to the Western democracies, while in late September 1939 the war was still a new phenomenon and Poland was far less important to the West than France. Another element in the disparity in coverage for these two periods was that the Soviet ultimatums and annexation in 1940 hardly surprised anyone, whereas Stalin's move into the Baltic states in 1939 created a new situation that seemed to call for analysis and assessment. In between the two crisis periods in 1939—1940 the Baltic was only occasionally dealt with in the newspapers under review.

The accuracy of the reporting from the Baltic, despite the limited sources available, was relatively high. None of the newspapers reviewed had a correspondent based in the Baltic states. Typically, the datelines for news items with a byline were Stockholm or Moscow. In spite of the secondhand nature of most reports one can find few errors in the descriptions of the events of this period. On the other hand, it is also clear that the Baltic peoples and their cultures were not thoroughly known to American journalists in particular. For example, the *New York Times* called the Latvians and Lithuanians "Slavs" and referred to the Estonians as "Asiatic stock," while the *Washington Post* assumed that since the Baltic region had previously been under tsarist rule, it was "Slavic

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rather than Teutonic in character.”<sup>1</sup> In October 1939 the *New York Times* still thought that Tartu University was “one of the chief German centers of the Baltic States.”<sup>2</sup> There was considerable uncertainty about which of the Baltic ports were ice-free, and on one occasion the *Washington Post* confused the Baltic and the Scandinavian states.<sup>3</sup> In short, while the depiction of current events was quite accurate, a deeper knowledge of Baltic society and development was not in evidence.

Overall, the American and British press showed much sympathy for the plight of the Baltic States and admiration for their achievements. *The Times* of London, for example, spoke of the “stubborn heroism” and “customary courage” of the Balts and argued that they had gained many friends in the United States and Western Europe. In an editorial entitled “Burglary in the Baltic” the *New York Times* approved the strongly worded condemnation of Soviet actions in the Baltic region by U. S. Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles in July 1940.<sup>4</sup> The positive side of the image of the Baltic countries viewed them as “well-ordered progressive states with steadily improving living standards,” where the soil for Communism was weak.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, in the newspapers under review the most common adjectives used to describe the Baltic states were “small” and — to a lesser extent — “helpless.” An editorial in the *London Times* on July 25, 1940 perhaps best sums up this ambivalent attitude toward the Baltic situation. Even with complete Sovietization, it was argued, the experience of the 1920s and 1930s would not be totally eclipsed. Baltic languages and culture were now much better known in the world, and the Balts themselves had gained an important measure of self-respect through the years of independence. Nevertheless, *The Times* also pointed out the “difficulties inherent in the creation of tiny national units” and suggested that the burdens of statehood may have been too great for the Baltic peoples.<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of Finland in the American and British press during the Winter War offers an interesting contrast to the depiction of the Baltic question in 1939—1940. Although there was some confusion about whether Finland should be seen as a Scandinavian or a Baltic state, it was clearly placed in a different category from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania because of its size and location.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Finland’s initially successful resistance to Soviet attack in the Winter War occasioned a highly sympathetic response by American and British public opinion, as reflected in the massive coverage of the Finnish question in the Western press throughout the Winter War. In the United States Finland was especially remembered as the only country that had kept up on its World War I debt payments, and which it dutifully continued in 1939—1940.

To what extent were the Baltic states treated as a unit by the American and British press in this period and to what extent was there any individual differentiation among them? During the early parts of the crisis in fall 1939 it was not immediately assumed that all three Baltic states would necessarily have the same fate. However, with the establishment of the mutual assistance pacts in all three cases by mid-October 1939 there was an increasing tendency to group them as a unit. From the beginning Estonia and Latvia were viewed as highly similar because

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, December 3, 1939, Section VII, p. 27; October 1, 1939, p. E1; *Washington Post*, September 29, 1939, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, October 11, 1939, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Washington Post*, October 12, 1939, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times* (London), October 14, 1939, p. 9; July 25, 1940, p. 5; *New York Times*, July 24, 1940, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *New York Times*, October 26, 1939, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times* (London), July 25, 1940, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, October 9, 1939, p. 6; *The Times* (London), October 10, 1939, p. 9.

of their previous history, strategic location, and their important harbors which were coveted by the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the situation of landlocked Lithuania, bordering on Germany, appeared to be substantially different, especially when the Wilno (Vilnius) and Memel (Klaipėda) questions were taken into account.

Let us now turn to certain specific issues regarding the Baltic states in 1939—1940 and an assessment of how they were handled by the four newspapers under review. *The Times* of London immediately recognized the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as a potentially fateful agreement for the Baltic states, noting already on August 24, 1939, that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania “now fear that in the end they may be called upon to pay the cost of reconciliation” between Germany and the USSR.<sup>8</sup> A particularly intriguing question is how much the Western press knew about the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the amendment assigning Lithuania to the Soviet sphere of influence of September 28, 1939. In mid-September 1939 both the *New York Times* and *The Times* asserted that Estonia and Latvia had been assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence, although they were unsure what form Soviet hegemony would take. As late as September 22, for example, *The Times* felt that Germany might not have conceded more than one ice-free port in the Baltic states to the USSR.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Lithuania was correctly seen as belonging to the German sphere of influence, largely because it bordered on East Prussia. Clearly, the substance of the secret Nazi-Soviet agreement of September 28, 1939 did not leak out since Soviet demands for a mutual assistance pact with Lithuania appeared to catch the Western press by surprise.<sup>10</sup>

In 1939—1940 the most-discussed aspect of the Baltic question in the American and British press was Soviet pressure for military bases in September-October 1939 and the consequences for the status of the Baltic states. The *New York Times*, for example, published fully six editorials on the Baltic question in only a fifteen-day period (September 27 to October 11, 1939). There was broad agreement in the Western press that the mutual assistance pacts signified the establishment of Soviet protectorates in the Baltic states, a situation that was said to closely parallel Nazi treatment of Slovakia earlier in 1939. Other terms used to describe the position of the Baltic states were “vassal state” and “dependency.” A *New York Times* editorial on October 3, entitled “Stalin Collects,” was typical: “The terms imposed on Estonia, obliging this helpless little neighbor to submit to Soviet control of her foreign policy and Soviet occupation of the strategic islands off her coasts, foreshadowed what was in store for the other Baltic states.” *The Times* of London agreed that control over domestic affairs could remain in Baltic hands, but that foreign policy would henceforth be subordinate to Moscow.<sup>11</sup> There was even some suggestion that the USSR had pretensions of a gradual transformation of the Baltic socio-economic structures according to the Soviet model, but this was not the dominant interpretation.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that the American and British newspapers usually viewed the Baltic question in a larger European context and often made comparisons between Hitler’s and Stalin’s actions.

<sup>8</sup> *The Times* (London), August 24, 1939, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, September 15, 1939, p. 5; *The Times* (London), September 19, 1939, p. 6; September 22, 1939, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, September 29, 1939, p. 1; *Manchester Guardian*, October 4, 1939, p. 7; October 9, 1939, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, September 28, 1939, p. 24; October 3, 1939, p. 22; *Washington Post*, September 30, 1939, p. 8; October 10, 1939, p. 8; *Manchester Guardian*, September 18, 1939, p. 3; September 30, 1939, p. 8; *The Times* (London), October 3, 1939, p. 7; October 11, 1939, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, October 10, 1939, p. 4.

Reports on the reactions in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the Soviet-imposed bases and pacts suggested an attempt to put the most favorable interpretation possible on these events. Baltic political circles in Moscow, for example, argued that the Baltic states had long experience in dealing with the Russians, and the situation was not nearly as drastic as it was made to appear in the international press. A report from Riga in *The Times* of London noted on October 10 that Baltic political sources saw no reason for the USSR to extinguish Baltic independence. "The stamping out of their individual life, it is pointed out, would be a most foolish demonstration of intolerance, of no benefit to Russia, but damaging to her prestige in the eyes of would-be admirers abroad. On such a slender thread of hope hangs the vital independence of two, if not three, Baltic republics."<sup>13</sup>

On the heels of the Soviet-Baltic mutual assistance pacts followed two closely related phenomena: the resolution of the Wilno question and the mass exodus of ethnic Germans from the Baltic states. After the collapse of Poland and the Soviet seizure of Wilno, Lithuania immediately raised its hopes for recovery of the city and the surrounding region. It will be recalled that in the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact both Germany and the USSR specifically recognized Lithuania's interest in Wilno.<sup>14</sup> In early October 1939 the American and British press gave conflicting reports on how the Wilno question would be resolved. On October 3 the London *Times* speculated that the Soviet Union might award Wilno to Lithuania with a view toward strengthening that country as "an outpost against Germany." On the other hand, on October 4 the *New York Times* Moscow correspondent suggested that "the utmost Lithuania can hope for is a privileged commercial position in Wilno," and on October 8 a report from Moscow in the same newspaper indicated the "workers" of Wilno opposed handing over the city to Lithuania.<sup>15</sup> When the USSR did in fact turn Wilno over to Lithuania a few days later, the *New York Times* noted that most observers in Moscow were surprised by this action, but the newspaper credited Soviet shrewdness since the move would bring the USSR substantial goodwill at minimal cost.<sup>16</sup>

The beginning of the massive evacuation of the German population from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in October 1939 naturally occasioned much speculation with regard to the motivation behind this striking phenomenon. Three different explanations were offered in the newspapers reviewed. In the first view Germany was seen as the moving force as Hitler called the ethnic Germans "home to the Reich," motivating them with hair-raising stories of what Soviet rule in the Baltic would mean. Second, it was asserted that Moscow demanded the German evacuation, presumably to be rid of a troublesome minority in its sphere of influence.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the Balts themselves were alleged to be the initiators of the action and were "taking the chance of ridding themselves with Soviet help of dangerous nests of Nazis."<sup>18</sup> In the end the main causal factor remained a mystery to outside observers, but all agreed that the action had ominous overtones.

<sup>13</sup> *New York Times*, October 11, 1939, p. 6; *The Times* (London), October 11, 1939, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Nazi-Soviet Conspiracy and the Baltic States*. A. Rei (ed.). London, Boreas, 1948, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> *The Times* (London), October 3, 1939, p. 7; *New York Times*, October 4, 1939, p. 1; October 8, 1939, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> *New York Times*, October 12, 1939, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *New York Times*, October 11, 1939, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times* (London), October 14, 1939, p. 10.

Between mid-October 1939 and mid-June 1940 the Baltic states only rarely appeared in the American and British press. The most common news item concerned relations between the Soviet military and the local Baltic population. A sign of the times was a report in the *New York Times* in January 1940 about Karl Selter's appointment as Estonia's permanent representative to the League of Nations. Since many people assumed that Estonia was under Soviet domination, it was feared in some circles that Selter, the former Foreign Minister of Estonia, might be an observer for the USSR.<sup>19</sup>

As noted above, the final crisis of the independent Baltic states in June-August 1940 received less attention in the Western press than the first one in fall 1939. After some nine months of the threat of Sovietization the events that took place were not unexpected. Once again, the information provided was generally accurate, but the amount of detail was more limited than previously. The *New York Times* and *The Times* of London agreed on an estimate of about 500,000 occupation troops pouring into the Baltic in June 1940.<sup>20</sup> As in fall 1939, the four newspapers tended to agree on their interpretation of events in summer 1940. A *New York Times* editorial, entitled "Stalin Afraid," put it as follows: "Fear is the only intelligible motive that can explain Russia's sudden invasion of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — fear of Germany, fear of Russia's position in a Europe dominated by the German war machine." The editorial continues: "It looks, almost, as if the dictator who precipitated the European war by making a pact with Hitler last August is now afraid of the Frankenstein monster he helped to loose upon the world."<sup>21</sup> The *Washington Post* put the matter more succinctly: "The Russian government is terrified by the speed and magnitude of the German victories in the West."<sup>22</sup> The *New York Times* called the Soviet-style elections in June 1940 a "travesty of democracy" that in their "sheer cynicism" exceeded even Hitler's plebiscites.<sup>23</sup> With regard to the future there was little consolation the Western press could offer. Only *The Times* of London argued that Soviet rule "was a better alternative than absorption in the new Nazi Europe."<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, it may be said that the Baltic question received extensive coverage in the American and British press during the two crisis periods in fall 1939 and summer 1940, especially September-October 1939. Overall, while not particularly profound in analysis, the reporting was generally accurate with few exceptions. Although Western newspapers adopted a highly sympathetic tone towards the Baltic states in 1939–1940, the American and British press clearly felt that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — in contrast to Finland — had no real control over their fate and were merely the pawns of the two great powers in the region — Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This view reflected the perspective of large states located far from the Baltic area. Nevertheless, the only way to reach a deeper understanding of the fate of the Baltic states in 1939–1940 is to regard them as subjects, rather than objects, of history and to assess their situation in the context of the complex interplay of domestic and foreign policy during the entire independence era.

<sup>19</sup> *New York Times*, January 17, 1940, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *New York Times*, June 23, 1940, p. E5; *The Times* (London), June 18, 1940, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *New York Times*, June 17, 1940, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Washington Post*, June 16, 1940, p. B8.

<sup>23</sup> *New York Times*, July 20, 1940, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times* (London), July 25, 1940, p. 5.

## BALTI KÜSIMUS AMEERIKA ÜHENDRIIKIDE JA SUURBRITANNIA AJAKIRJANDUSES AASTAIL 1939—1940

Balti küsimuse peegeldumine 1939.—1940. aasta Ameerika Ühendriikide ja Suurbritannia pressis on seni käsitlemata teema. Artiklis on analüüsitud tähtsamates ajalehtedes («New York Times», «Washington Post», «Times» ja «Manchester Guardian») sel ajal avaldatud. Ajalehtede informatsioon pärines valdavalt nende Moskva ja Stockholmis esindustest.

Ilmneb, et sõnumid Baltikumi kohta olid harva esikülje uudiste hulgas. Erandeiks olid 1939. aasta septembris-oktoobris Nõukogude Liidu ja Balti riikide vahel nn. baaside lepingute sõlmimine ning 1940. aasta okupatsioon ja sovetiseerimine. Esimene küsimuste ring pälvis ajalehtedes enam tähelepanu kui teine.

Kirjutised olid enamasti tõepärased ja faktitäpsed. Vahel tuli ette ka koomilisuseni küündivaid eksitusi, sest üldine ettekujutus Balti riikide ja rahvaste ajaloost või kultuurist oli üsnagi puudulik. Silmatorkav oli Balti riike sümpatiseeriv toon. Erinevalt Soomest käsitleti kolme Balti riiki kui suurriikide poliitika ohvreid, kes polnud suutelised ise oma saatust määrama.

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## БАЛТИЙСКИЙ ВОПРОС В АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ И АНГЛИЙСКОЙ ПРЕССЕ 1939—1940 ГОДОВ

Тема отображения прибалтийских событий 1939—1940 гг. в прессе США и Великобритании нашими историками до сих пор не рассматривалась. В статье анализируются материалы, публиковавшиеся на страницах важнейших газет тех лет — в «Нью-Йорк таймс», «Вашингтон пост», «Таймс», «Манчестер гардиан». Информация преимущественно поступала от представителей этих газет в Москве и Стокгольме.

Из газет явствует, что публикации со сведениями из Прибалтики редко попадали в число новостей первой страницы. Исключение составляют публикации сентября—октября 1939 г. о заключении договоров между Советским Союзом и тремя государствами Балтии по вопросу о военных базах, а также публикации об оккупации и советизации этих государств в 1940 г. Первый круг вопросов привлекал большее внимание, чем второй. Преобладали статьи с достоверными и соответствующими действительности фактами. Хотя попадались и комичные, а порой и циничные огрехи, поскольку представления иных авторов о странах Балтии, истории их народов или культуре были весьма поверхностными. Бросается в глаза сочувствующий тон в отношении стран Балтии. В отличие от Финляндии эти три государства рассматривались как жертвы политики крупных держав, которые оказались не в состоянии определить свою судьбу.