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Russia's Strategic Advantage in the Baltics: A Challenge to NATO?

Jiri and Leni Friedman Valenta



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**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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Cover image: Landing Craft, Air Cushion 87 departs the well deck of the San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock ship USS Arlington (LPD 24) during a beach landing in Ventspils, Latvia, as part of exercise BALTOPS 2017; U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Ford Williams via Wikimedia Commons

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	5
The Syrian Connection	7
Geography Is Russia's Destiny	7
Geography Is Also the Destiny of the Balts	8
The Russian Navy Originated in the Baltic	9
Putin's Geopolitics: Ochampchire, Sevastopol, and Tartus	11
The World's Most Militarized Enclave and the Suwalki Gap	12
BALTOPS Exercises	14
Belorussia's Zapad Maneuvers	14
Russia's Baltic Conquests: "L'Histoire Evenementielle"	15
The Baltics Under the Bolsheviks	16
Clashes Between Civilizations	18
Clashes Within Civilizations	20
Liberal-Minded Russian Rulers	21
Memories of Hitler and Stalin Haunt the Baltics	22
Russia's Minorities in the Baltics	23
2007: Russia's Cyber War in Estonia	24
Putin's Interventionism	27
Conclusion: Strategic Savvy and Preventive Diplomacy	28
Notes	31

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a time when news reports often have as much Shakespearean drama as fiction, General Sir Richard Shirreff, a former NATO deputy supreme commander of Europe, has created fiction he believes could become news. In his novel, *2017 War with Russia*, he anticipates a 2017 Russian invasion of the Baltics through Latvia. Much like Georgian provinces South Ossetia and Abkhazia, invaded by Russia in 2008, Latvia is a state with a high minority of Russian speakers – 34%. The Crimea Russia also invaded in 2014, also have large Russian minorities. Shirreff posits the Russian president then tries to blackmail NATO by threatening a nuclear response to any defense. A Russo-NATO war follows which assumes a nuclear face.¹

However, in another scenario, retired U.S. general, Jack Keane, former vice chief of staff of the U.S. Army posits the Russians would invade not Latvia, but Lithuania, a state with only a 9% Russian population from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.²

Yet a third case for war in the Baltics, was provided in 2013 by a Russian analyst, Mikhail Aleksandrov, of the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] Institute in Moscow. He linked it to the conflict in Syria. On

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August 27, 2013, President Barack Obama was seriously contemplating a missile strike on Syria to punish its dictator, Bashar al-Assad, for using sarin gas on civilians during the country's civil war. His "red line" against chemical WMD having been crossed, Obama sent four destroyers to the Syrian shores ready to carry out an attack.

With Russian help, the strike was ultimately forestalled by diplomatic measures. But on August 26, 2013, as Russia and Iran were preparing to defend Assad, Aleksandrov offered some advice to Putin. "In the case of a NATO attack on Syria, Russia should deploy its forces where we have clear *strategic advantage*, that [is] in the Baltics."³

Recognizing that Russia does have a military and strategic advantage in the Baltics comparative to NATO, the present inquiry focuses primarily on divining aspects of strategic importance to NATO. We also look at Putin's possible intentions in the Baltics. Because nations have complex histories that mold or mar them, what geopolitical lessons and historical lessons can we draw from Russia's previous military interventions? Has the historical relationship of Russia with the Baltic states been conditioned by a clash of civilizations as claimed by some Baltic thinkers? If so, how does this factor into the present tensions? What role does the sizable minority of Russians in the Baltic states play in the Kremlin's policy-making? How can strategic military savvy and diplomacy aid in preventing the escalation of present tensions in the Baltics into full-scale war?

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THE SYRIAN CONNECTION

In the event of a U.S. attack on Syria, claimed Mikhail Aleksandrov, a strategic deployment in the Baltics “could be managed with minimal losses.” Moreover, “Half the population of Estonia and Latvia would meet the Russian troops with flowers ...” Even a troop buildup on Latvia’s and Estonia’s borders as well as in the Kaliningrad region and the Baltic Sea “...would have a sobering effect on the hotheads in Washington.”⁴

The timing of this article, surely coordinated with the Kremlin, was no accident. It appeared two days before Obama hosted three Baltic presidents in the White House. It also marked the August 23rd anniversary of the signing of the 1939 Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact – a secret agreement between Hitler and Stalin through which the two totalitarian monsters divided up eastern Europe. In that devils’ bargain, the Baltic states fell to Stalin.

All this became particularly relevant again with President Donald Trump’s attack on Bashar Assad’s al Shayrat airport on April 6, 2017, after another massacre of Syrian civilians with sarin gas. Wisely, the U.S. attack was limited to one airfield, and it was mainly a U.S. lesson on the peril of crossing Trump's red lines.

GEOGRAPHY IS RUSSIA’S DESTINY

Russia’s history is that of an empire whose manifest destiny has been to expand both north and south from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Henry Kissinger has posited Russia’s historical expansion as pursuance of “a

special rhythm of its own over the centuries, expanding over land mass ... interrupted occasionally over time ... only to return again, like a tide crossing the beach. From Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin circumstances have changed, but the rhythm has remained extraordinarily consistent.”⁵

Kissinger’s dissertation must be qualified, however, by an understanding of Russia’s major geopolitical handicap – one also motivating her expansion. She has been largely landlocked for most of her history. Thus, as French historian Fernand Braudel wisely observed, “Russia could not really exist unless it filled the whole isthmus between the Baltic and the southern seas, and controlled any links between them.”⁶ Braudel also wrote elsewhere, “...that is almost changeless, the history of man in relation to his surroundings.”⁷

Russia’s own manifest destiny was propelled by her condition as a country whose Arctic and Pacific oceans have, until modern times, been frozen for much of the year. Moreover, her three seas have all historically posed problems to Russia with attaining access to the world oceans. In the south, her Caspian Sea is closed. Her Black Sea is open, but she could only reach the Mediterranean through the narrowest of passages, the Straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles – located in Turkey and jealously guarded the Turks. Over the centuries, when Russia sought to capture the straits, the western powers came to Turkey’s rescue and firmly caged the Bear in the Black Sea.

In the Baltic Sea, meanwhile, the Straits of Denmark have provided another narrow exit from a sound that can be easily blocked by the western powers. Thus, with this Braudelian perspective, we can comprehend that Russia’s historical imperative was to obtain what she lacked – ports – warm ones in the south on the Black Sea, and ice free ones on the Baltic Sea to the northwest.

GEOGRAPHY IS ALSO THE DESTINY OF THE BALTS

As with Russia and nations everywhere, the geography of the Baltics has been their destiny. Recall that like Russia, the nations of Latvia and Estonia have in common numerous lakes and waterways which have

figured as routes for trade as well as conquest. Among these in Estonia is one of Europe's largest lakes, Peipus, which shares a border with Russia, and the Narva River, which flows from Lake Peipus to the Baltic Sea.

What distinguishes Estonia from Latvia, however, is that Estonian geography has undergone more significant changes over the centuries. From the 5th to the 16th century, warriors' and traders used a waterway from the Baltic Sea through Tartu to Lake Peipsi.

As explained to us by Tartu scholar Malle Salupere, the two main rivers of Estonia were then the Emajogi and Parnu. The Emajogi is known for its Latin name Mater Aquarum [mother of waters]. It is known in Estonian as Emavesi and in Russian as Omov'zha [mother water]." The Emajogi constituted the shortest route to the trading centers in Russia. However, the route underwent geologic changes during the Middle Ages in a way that interrupted the direct connection to Novgorod and Pskov through Lake Peipus and the Baltic Sea. Consequently, Tartu, declined as a commercial center, although it eventually became the intellectual and cultural center of Estonia.⁸

In sharp contrast, Latvia's Daugava River (Dwina in Russian), untouched by geological changes, maintained its commercial viability as the main waterway connecting Russian warriors and traders from the heartland of Russia to the capital, Riga.

THE RUSSIAN NAVY ORIGINATED IN THE BALTIC

No one was more aware of Russia's geopolitical handicaps than Tsar Peter the Great. An eighteenth century visionary, Peter grasped that in order to become a great power, Russia needed to have a navy and proper ports. Thus he began an expansion in two directions. First he marched – as well as sailed – south towards the Black Sea and the Caucasus, using Russia's numerous rivers to good effect. Yet, for all his efforts, Peter's mission in the south was not blessed. Only temporarily did he conquer a segment of Caucasian coast and Azov, a port on a tributary to the Black Sea. A sort of Russian Alamo, it was lost in bloody battles with the Crimean Tatars backed by the Turks.

Disappointed, but not discouraged, Tsar Peter led his army in a second direction – northwest – and built a new capital, St. Petersburg, on the coast of the Gulf of Finland and a formidable new navy port, Kronstadt. Tsar Peter loved his new capital and its naval fortress, but the problem of reaching the open seas remained. Kronstadt was ice-locked six months of the year.

As Dominique Lievan has posited, Russia's expansion can be at least in part explained by the origination of several Russian navigable rivers and their many tributaries in the wooded, northwestern belt. Also helpful was that in contrast to western Europe, Russia's general absence of mountains contributed to a "homogeneity and unity in Russia's relentless expansion."⁹

For decades Russia used her network of rivers to trade with several countries to the west. But rivers could also be vehicles for conquest. In 1710 Peter conquered Livonia, a country consisting of present day Estonia and part of present day Latvia. Thus he obtained for Russia two, ice free port cities for his ships – Riga the future capital of Latvia, and Tallinn, the future capital of Estonia.

In the late 19th century, Peter's frustrated aims in the south were again taken up by Catherine the Great and her paramour, Count Grigory Potemkin. In 1783, after a victorious conclusion to a major battle with the Crimean Tartars and their Ottoman supporters, Catherine annexed the Crimean peninsula and founded the warm port of Sevastopol. Then as now, Sevastopol is the home of Russia's Black Sea fleet. Writer Alexis Troubetskoy has called Sevastopol. "the eye-tooth of the bear," a symbol of the empire's power in the Black Sea.¹⁰

In the 19th century, Karl Marx, writing for the *New York Tribune*, succinctly described what Russia's ports in the south and north meant to her. "Without the Baltic and Black Seas," he wrote, "the empire was rendered a colossus without arms and without eyes."¹¹

Russia maintained possession of her northeastern ports in the Baltics and her major Sevastopol port in the Crimea right up until the 20th century.

However, she lost all of these priceless possessions during what Putin has repeatedly referred to as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” – the collapse of the USSR in 1991. With the help of Boris Yeltsin, who became president of Russia, the non-Russian republics of the USSR achieved their independence – thus ending the Soviet empire. The Baltic nations led the pack. Thereafter, to obtain geopolitical protection against Russia’s repeated encroachments, the three Baltic states successfully sought admittance to NATO in 2004.

In 1991 Russia then agreed to something every retired navy officer in the Crimea must have cursed when he thought about it. She relinquished the Crimea and rented its naval pearl, Sevastopol, from the Ukraine, a new state that had been a part of Russia for centuries.

Even that rental came into doubt after the 2004 color revolutions in the Ukraine and Georgia, brought two pro-Western leaders Viktor Yushchenko and Mikheil Saakashvili to power. Yushchenko began to speak of ending Russia’s rental in 2017. Did Putin ask himself what would Tsar Peter or Tsarina Catherine have done?

PUTIN’S GEOPOLITICS: OCHAMPCHIRE, SEVASTOPOL, AND TARTUS

Russia’s 2008 intervention in Georgia and her occupation of two provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, was the first time since the fall of the USSR that she attempted to change the borders at her periphery. Although the pretext for the invasion was to aid Russian speakers then in conflict with Georgia, we propose another theory. Her subsequent interventions in the Caucasus were also structured around regaining ports and coastlines she had lost; a factor which had severely weakened her. As we saw, in her 2008 invasion of Georgia, Russia carved two small breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Most important was Abkhazia, a littoral region which permitted the Russian navy to regain not only valuable coastline, but also an old and small, yet not negligible, former Soviet warm water port, Ochampchire.

Even before that, Putin's navy also began cementing an alliance with Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad. Worried about Sevastopol and trying to renew the Russian presence in the Mediterranean, Putin was able to restore and upgrade Syria's Port of Tartus, to service Russian ships. Then Sevastopol came under a new threat – a 2013 revolution in Kiev, during which Putin's corrupt and willing puppet, Viktor Yanukovych, was overthrown.

The election of a pro-West government in Kiev once again put Russia's continued rental of his indispensable naval base in doubt. Thus, in 2014, Putin, invoking primarily Russia's "strategic interests", in Sevastopol, but also religious and historical reasons for regaining the former jewel of the empire, took the Crimea back.

Ever since the Crimean annexation, Russia has waged hybrid war in eastern Ukraine, and Western leaders and geo-politicians have understandably feared that Putin, might also try to regain his lost Baltic ports, Riga and Tallinn. There is also another Baltics harbor, a former Soviet nuclear rockets and submarine training base, Paldiski, near Tallinn. With its name originating from the Estonian pronunciation of *baltiyskiy* [Baltic in Russian], this strategically located port was established and became in 1718 and naval a submarine training base under Nikita Khrushchev. Like Pearl Harbor, its deep waters are perfect for large ships, and geographic protection from storms. Yet another former Soviet naval and commercial base in the Baltics is Klaipeda in Lithuania, known as "Memel" while under Prussian rule.

THE WORLD'S MOST MILITARIZED EXCLAVE AND THE SUWALKI GAP

Without question, the loss of the Baltic ports in 1991 was a serious blow to the Kremlin. After the collapse of the USSR and the loss of the Baltic states, Putin was left with only two northern ports, Kaliningrad [formerly Königsberg], ice-free all year, and Kronshtadt, frozen in winter, although modern ice breakers have been helping to alleviate that problem. Presently, Russia's Baltic fleet is located in the western town of Baltiysk [formerly Pillau] in Kaliningrad.

A former Prussian exclave annexed at the end of WWII, Kaliningrad is a small region separated from Russia proper by Lithuania and Belorussia. Naturally, this makes its management difficult. Most of the replenishment its supplies are by sea and air.

While far from Russia's mainland, it has the advantage of being much nearer to the major cities of her European adversaries. Recently, in addition to deploying more troops to the borders of the Baltic States, and new ships to the Baltic Sea, Russia has been heavily arming its Baltic exclave. Visiting Kaliningrad in early December 2016, analyst Yelena Morozova posited that "...economically backward and cut off from Russia, this 6,000-square-mile stretch of land is now easily the most militarized territory anywhere in Europe."

Kaliningrad also contains a large Russian airbase, and in 2012, the Russians began to deploy S-400 missiles, in an advanced, integrated air defense system. At the present time they have Iskander ballistic missiles, said to be already nuclearized, with a range of 400 miles. There is also a powerful radar listening station that covers all of Europe. A new railway is being built as happened in the Georgian province of Abkhazia before the 2008 Russian invasion.¹²

There are presently a million people living there, a fourth of which are military. Represented are a naval infantry brigade and two of motorized rifle divisions. But since Putin's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and in Syria, the base has become the focus of much greater attention from NATO than formerly.

The recent focus, if not obsession, of the NATO generals has also become a 64-mile stretch of land between Kaliningrad and Belorussia known as the Suwalki Gap. You pass through it if you drive from Warsaw to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, as we did in 2010. To the NATO generals, the corridor, where enemy forces could cut the Baltic States off from NATO support, is as important as was the Cold War era's Fulda Gap in Germany. Then, Fulda, at the Hesse-Thuringian border, was one of two critical invasion routes where a critical hypothetical tank battle with Russia was a fundamental part of NATO military planning.¹³

BALTOPS EXERCISES

Caught up in the drama of Russia-gate at this time, the mainstream U.S. media has yet to give Americans any significant and objective coverage on what is happening in the Baltics. This is despite not just the buildup in Kaliningrad, but, for some time, an increasing number of deployments by Russian ships and planes into the airspace and waters of NATO members. Accordingly, the NATO leaders upgraded their own naval exercises. Thus, the 2017 June BALTOPS exercises, normally used for the maintenance of sea and naval facilities in the Baltic Sea, this year included unusual high end military maneuvers, with U.S., Swedish and Finnish troops taking part in the drills.¹⁴

The previous year 45 warships, 60 aircraft and almost 6000 troops from 17 countries were involved, including the U.S. A few months earlier, on March 21-25, 2015, 33,000 Russian troops were involved in military exercises that included a simulated takeover of Sweden's Gotland Island, Finland's Aland Islands and Denmark's Bornholm Island.¹⁵

Present estimates are of about 225,000 troops in Kaliningrad and about 330,000 Russian soldiers stationed on the borders of the three Baltic States. This is what Mikhail Alekesandrov meant when he spoke of Russia's strategic advantage in the Baltics.

The Russian military exercises somewhat backfired, however. For the first time in history, the Swedes deployed military units to Gotland, viewed as the most vulnerable Swedish flashpoint. Prominent spokesmen in neutral Sweden and Finland have called for their countries to join NATO – most unwelcome to Putin.

BELORUSSIA'S ZAPAD MANEUVERS

In the last several months of 2016, a large buildup of troops took place in Belorussia, a Russian ally, whose borders are only about seventy miles from Kaliningrad. Putin ordered the preparation for Zapad [West] maneuvers in Belorussia to take place after the NATO Baltops exercises scheduled for September 2017.

The U.S. concern was that the Russians have used such large maneuvers in the past to mask the buildup of invasions in Georgia and the Crimea. Belorussia's Alexander Lukashenko has had some disagreements with the Kremlin in the past, although, at least verbally, he has indicated his solidarity with Russia.¹⁶ No intervention took place, however, and the buzzing of U.S. ships and planes by Russia has fallen off in the present Russo-U.S. diplomatic climate, despite the largely anti-Russian U.S. media.

RUSSIA'S BALTIC CONQUESTS: "L'HISTOIRE EVENEMENTIELLE"

That history often repeats itself, if not precisely, is why the past is often prologue to the future. Any serious inquiry into Putin's intentions in the Baltics must begin with Ferdinand Braudel's "*l'histoire evenementielle*" [history of events] or chronology. Thus, our historical inquiry looks at Russia's repeated expansionist waves towards the Baltic coast, both before and subsequent to Peter the Great's conquest of Livonia.

The first Russian foray came in 1050 during the Kievan Rus. Then Prince Yaroslav the Wise captured the then strategic and commercial center of Tartu, at that time still linked with waterways to the Baltic Sea. The Russians named their conquest Yuryev. After eleven years Yuryev was recaptured by the Estonians. Yet the name "Yuryev" remained deeply rooted in the Russian DNA. More than 800 years thereafter, Tartu was renamed Yuryev during Tsar Alexander III's Russification of Estonia.

Still, the Russian rulers did not surrender their strategic vision with regards to the Baltics. In medieval times, Estonia and part of Latvia, then known as the single country of Livonia, were ruled by the Teutonic knights, warrior monks, known as the Brotherhood of the Sword. The ports of Tallinn and Riga, were also dominated by German merchants, members of the Hanseatic League, a mini-precursor of the European Union.

Enter Tsar Ivan IV [a/k/a "The Terrible"] (1533-84). Having defeated the Tartar khanate of Kazan, Ivan, like Peter later, turned from Russia's southern steppes to the Baltics. Russian leaders have always been good at finding pretexts for their wars and Ivan was no slouch. He dug up the

so-called “Tartu tax” that Tartu dioceses had paid to Russia in the distant past and demanded its reinstatement. In 1553, with the tax still unpaid, Ivan launched what became known as the Livonian War. His *oprichniki* [terror squads] descended on the poor Livonian peasants and merchants, and conquered both Narva and Tartu. There followed his *oprichnina* [reign of terror]. His agents spread out and destroyed competing Russian *boyars* [princes], thus centralizing the rule of the Russian state.

Ivan’s territorial advances, meanwhile, were resisted by a medieval, European, “mini-NATO” – Poles, Danes and Germans from northern cities – determined not to allow Russia’s conquest of the Baltics. Only Ivan’s death without an heir in 1583 brought to a close his Livonian venture. Sweden allied herself with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and invaded and occupied Russia. Much as in the present time, the Poles played an active role in unifying the Western powers against their traditional enemy – Russia.

Eventually, the Muscovites liberated Moscow, yet owing to their historic roots, the mutual enmity between Russia and Poland still lives – depicted in each country’s folklore, music, art and public diplomacy.

A century or so thereafter, the historical pattern of assault on the Baltics was repeated again. As noted, Tsar Peter the Great held the strategic vision of Russia becoming a great naval power in both the Black and Baltic Seas. Modernizing his army and defeating the Swedes in the 1709 epic Battle of Poltava, Tsar Peter did what Ivan IV failed to do. He conquered the two much desired Baltic ports, Tallinn and Riga, brought Estonia and Latvia under Russian control, and built a Baltics fleet. Nor did Russia lose control of these ports for the next 200 years. Catherine later partitioned Poland and added its remnant, along with new state Lithuania, to her empire.

THE BALTICS UNDER THE BOLSHEVIKS

World War I, and the onset of Kerensky’s 1917 revolution and Lenin’s Bolshevik coup, offered hope to the Balts of attaining autonomy and eventual independence. Less warlike and emotional than the Latvians,

the Estonians have usually preferred diplomacy and legal agreements to fighting. Yet, they soon learned the Bolsheviks compromised only at the point of enemy guns. Together with their ethnic cousins, the Finns, and the help of the British Royal Navy, they finally beat back both the Bolsheviks and Germans, and for some inter-war period of time gained their independence.

The Latvians meanwhile, hung their hopes on Lenin's promise to free them. Like the tsars, the commissars trusted the Latvians more than the Estonians. Latvians had fought bravely for Russia in WWI, and Lenin's admiration and trust for them went so far that he forged his personal guard from the ranks of the Red Latvian Rifles. In 2010, Dainis Ivans, a Latvian leader of the late Soviet era, shared with us the thrust of a book he had written about his great uncle, a highly decorated commander of Lenin's personal guard.

Yet, soon enough, Lenin's promises of freedom under the Bolsheviks proved no ruble of the realm. Fighting both the Germans and the Bolsheviks, the Latvians too, only gained a short-lived independence after WWI.¹⁷

By the end of the World War II, the Baltics were back under the Soviet hammer and sickle. The German occupation and bloody and horrific war brought not only tremendous suffering to the Balts, but also vast ethnic changes. Tens of thousands of Latvians escaped to Sweden. Seventy-five thousand Jews were killed thanks to Nazi ethnic cleansing. Then, as the war ended, Baltic Germans returned to Germany in expectation of a coming new Russian occupation of the Baltics.

With their "liberation" from the Nazis by the Russians, the Balts only went from one reign of terror to another along with further ethnic changes. Among the horrors under Soviet rule was the Kremlin's colonization policy. Initiated first under the tsars, it was even more cruelly employed by Stalin. These policies involved deporting large numbers of the indigenous population, particularly those that the empire found troublesome, while enforcing the massive emigration of Russians to Latvia and Estonia.¹⁸

Also evident though to a much lesser degree in Catholic Lithuania, the forced emigration naturally helped to create frictions between the Russian minorities and the native populations that are still evident today. In 1940 there were 207,000 Russians in Latvia. By 1989 the number had risen to 905,000. Nor were Russians reluctant to come to a country whose many factories required a large workforce. Under Bolshevik rule the Russian immigrants also received preferable treatment in obtaining living quarters and jobs. Naturally this too led to the further deepening of ethnic tensions.

Following Stalin's death came the rise of more liberal-minded Russian rulers, first Nikita Khrushchev in 1954-64, and then Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985-91. Thereafter came the major crisis, the 1991 collapse of the USSR.

CLASHES BETWEEN CIVILIZATIONS

The rich histories of the Baltic states also include the dynamic process of clashes between and within Western civilization. In 1987 the late Soviet Nobel prize winner and leading dissident, Andrei Sakharov wrote,

“We were amazed by Estonia's high standard of living, the organization and tempo of economic activity, the patent contrast to European Russia... people in Estonia say that they work harder and better, and therefore they live better...”

But that, to him, was

“...only part of the truth... The deeper reason is that the steamroller of socialism passed over their land later, in a watered-down, rather slipshod fashion. It had less time to do its destructive work.”¹⁹

However, the economically more advanced development of the Baltic states comparative to Russia was not just the result of several decades of shorter Soviet rule of the Baltics. Above all it had to do with civilization processes of several hundred years that made Estonia but also Latvia and Lithuania different countries than Russia. What were these?

Since medieval times, and unlike in Russia, the Western, mercantilist, economic system prevailed in the Baltics. Estonian and Latvian cities thus flourished as members of the Hanseatic League – a trading confederation of German and Baltic port cities – a mini-precursor of the European Union. The resulting prosperity of Baltic towns comparative to Russian towns and cities was remarkable. When one visits the Estonian city of Narva as we did in 2009, it is easy to accept the thesis of Estonian historian and politician Mart Laar that Estonia’s Hermann Order Castle, facing Russia’s Ivangorod stronghold across the narrow Narva River, “symbolized the opposition between the two different worlds – the West and the East.”²⁰

During Yaroslav the Wise’s invasion of the Baltics, the Russia of the Kievan Rus was renowned for its material success and splendor. But, as Moscow became the new center of the empire with its mystical, Orthodox church and Tartar habits of its semi-oriental aristocracy, Russia transformed itself into a centralized police state with a draconian feudal system.

Alexander Chubarov, author of *The Fragile Empire*, has posited Western Christianity as a motivating force: “In Western Europe, particularly after the ...Reformation, the Christian religion motivated individuals to engage in some kind of profitable economic activity. Economic success strengthened the belief of the faithful that they were ...destined for future individual salvation.” In Russia, however, “...the Orthodox religion promised its people not an economic but a political way of collectivist salvation,” basically through their tsar.²¹ After the 1917 Bolshevik takeover, the new “religion” of Leninism reinforced the collectivist tradition ingrained in Russian history.

The Swedish-Polish defeat of Ivan IV brought to Livonia the benign government of the Swedes. Although the Germans still dominated the Estonian city of Tartu and Riga, the Swedish kings granted its merchants special rights. However, when the estates of German landlords were confiscated by Swedish royals, the Baltic Germans turned from Sweden and asked Russia for protection. This particular civilization factor was one of several reasons why Peter the Great was able to defeat the Swedes with the support of the German merchants under the tsar’s protection for over 200 years.

Tsar Peter's victory in the Great Northern War was a turning point in the evolution of the Russian empire. For the first time, Russian tsars ruled over Western peoples, Estonians and Latvians, primarily of the Protestant religion.

The ruling class, however, remained the Baltic Germans, descendants of the Teutonic knights. Wisely, Peter rewarded their loyalty by maintaining their privileges as landlords. He also avoided the horror of Ivan's *Oprichnina* or Stalin's later collectivism and secret police. Private property was maintained along with laws and taxes, the Lutheran faith and the German language.

Unsurprisingly, the Baltic German nobility remained loyal supporters of Peter's empire, and for the next two hundred years things were relatively peaceful. Even the Jews flourished. Vilnius became the Jewish capital of Eastern Europe.

Following WWI, the Baltic states, grounded in the Western economic tradition, continued to flourish economically despite their tortuous past. Estonia, in particular remained economically viable. Latvia, continued to enjoy some economic autonomy even throughout the forced Russification of the late 19th century under Alexander III, and the forced Sovietization under Stalin in the 20th century. All three Baltic states enjoyed their traditional higher standard of living than most of the USSR and a relatively more relaxed political atmosphere.

CLASHES WITHIN CIVILIZATIONS: AMALGAMATION

As a former part of a Catholic, Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and counterreformation, Lithuania and a part of Latvia known as Latgale followed a different path than the other Baltic republics. Whereas in the former Livonia, the vanguard of civilization was the fanatic Lutherans, in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Latgale it was the determined Catholic Jesuits. Thus, Lithuania, together with Latgale, preserved a strong Catholic identity and strong historical-religious ties with Catholic lands.

Differing civilization legacies have thus shaped the Baltic different historical experiences and economic performances. In the post-Soviet era, Estonia unsurprisingly forged the most impressive economic growth. Central Bank President Jean-Claude Trichet, and EU Economy Commissioner Olli Rehn, both reported, they “very impressed” by Estonia’s fiscal performance, “which will distinguish the Baltic state as having the lowest level of debt among all euro area members.”²² This was reflected in that it was also easier for Estonia, after 1991, to comply with the required NATO defense contribution of 2%, unlike many larger countries.

LIBERAL-MINDED RUSSIAN RULERS

Whilst examining the clash of civilizations between Russia and the west-minded Baltic states, we must not forget that not all prior Russian tsars were simply tyrannical autocrats. Even today, scholars at Tartu University remember Peter the Great treated his new Baltic subjects with respect and allowing considerable autonomy for the locals.

Alexander I (1777-1825) ordered the reopening of Tartu University, allowing the Jesuit-turned Lutheran college of higher learning to become one of the most progressive educational institutions in Europe. He also introduced a series of agrarian laws and most importantly, abolished serfdom in the Baltics in 1816-1819, several decades before it was abolished in Russia proper by his grandson, Alexander II. During his rule also came the heyday of Riga in the first part of the 19th century, as the imperial government invested in enlarging its port and adding many new buildings to the city.

So popular were both Alexander I and II in the Baltics that in the early 1860’s schoolmasters and peasants named the first higher school fully in the Estonian language, Aleksandrikool. Thus, long before Mikhail Gorbachev, tsarist liberal-minded rulers encouraged the national awakening of the Estonians, the Aleksandrikool became a tremendous project in Estonia, uniting nationalist groups, although at that point they still believed in the goodness of the tsar. Unfortunately, during the reactionary rule of Alexander III, the Aleksandrikool was closed and reopened as a Russian school.²³

MEMORIES OF HITLER AND STALIN HAUNT THE BALTICS

With the help of prominent Estonia historian Igor Rosenfeld, we learned that one of the most crucial elements in shaping the present history of the Baltics was the 1939-45 Ribbentrop-Molotov pact and cooperation-turned-clash of Hitler and Stalin. After August 1939 the Baltic states, free for twenty years during an interwar period after 1919, became subject to the diabolical power games of both these totalitarian leaders.

By the end of June 1941, Estonia and Latvia were occupied by the Germans as they attacked the USSR. Consequently, mass confusion mingled with unfounded hopes. Many Estonian and Latvian commandos initially greeted the German forces as “liberators” and joined them in resisting the Soviets in the forests. In return the Germans regarded the Estonians, but not the Latvians, as racially superior to other Baltic peoples and employed some of them in the task of destroying “undesirables” like Jews, gypsies and left-leaning Estonians. In Latvia, as Dainis Ivans explained, even some of the officers of former Latvian Red Rifles, like his great uncle, joined the German Wehrmacht to fight the Soviets.

It is impossible to determine whether the crimes and malice of the Nazi regime were more virulent than the Soviet ones. But by no means could the overthrow of the Nazis and reoccupation of the Baltic States by the Russians in 1945 be considered a “liberation.” With it came the large deportations of prominent Estonians and Latvians to Siberia. Nor had these abated even by 1949. Historian Malle Salupere recalled to us the deportation that year of her own family and other kulaks (farm-owning peasants) to the Soviet Union. As the deportations drained the native Baltic populations, their places were taken, at Stalin’s behest, by Russian immigrants.

The key fact is that at by the end of WWII, 90% of the population consisted of native Estonians, whereas presently a third of the population is Russian. Meanwhile, almost half of Latvia’s population is now Slavic. This includes Ukrainians and Byelorussians as well as Russians.

RUSSIA'S MINORITIES IN THE BALTICS

“...Yes, there are complications caused by the fact that the center has dictated much that damaged the development of the republic. Union agencies are overloading Lithuania with industry, which has damaged the ecology. Russians are flooding in, unfortunately not the very best people, and migration to the republic is growing. That causes clashes.”

These critical words were uttered not by Baltic heralds of the civilizational clashes between East and West, but by democratic-minded Soviet leader Alexander Yakovlev. A principal conceptualizer of Gorbachev's reforms, his frank words explained the result of Russian colonial policies during the Soviet era vis-a-vis the Baltics.

Stalinist colonization policies were intended to change the ethnic balance of the conquered countries to keep them bound to the empire. Today, the resulting large Russian minorities in these republics, have attracted Vladimir Putin's strong interest in preserving the rights of Russian speakers anywhere.

Protecting co-believers in other lands was practiced under both the tsars and commissars. It's not surprising that President Putin, as a sort of born again Orthodox Christian, is following this practice too. The worry is that the rights of Russian minorities has already been used as a pretext for invasion of Crimea and intervention by proxies in eastern Ukraine, and may be used again in the Baltics.

The Russian minority in Estonia resides primarily in its capital, Tallinn, but also in Idaviru, a county that lies between Lake Peipsi and the Gulf of Finland. The largest city of this region is Narva, with 97% Russian speakers. A third of the population of that region holds Russian passports as did a sizable number of Russian speakers before the invasions South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. This was also true in the Crimea. Eighty percent of all electricity for Estonia comes from Idaviru, making it a point of special vulnerability in the event of war. Meanwhile, a hundred percent of Estonia is dependent on Russia gas.

In 2010, Ivans explained to us that the Russian speaking minority in Latvia mainly resides in its capital, Riga, composing 50% of its population. He told this to us as we viewed Latvia's main river, the Daugava, not far from his farm house, its water passing further to capitol Riga. Most of the Russian speakers in Lithuania, also live in its capital, Vilnius, and the port city of Laipda, located near Kaliningrad.

Putin has been critical of both Latvia and Estonia for their treatment of Russians immigrants. The latter have complained of not having equal rights because of citizenship requirements, which involve passing an exam in the difficult Estonian or Latvian languages. This has resulted in many Russians being unable to become citizens.

2007: RUSSIA'S CYBER WAR IN ESTONIA

In the 21st century, warfare has taken new and unexpected forms. The world's first cyberattack took place in 2007, as a Russian war against the republic of Estonia, conditioned by WWII history, came alive. The cyber war was not an issue that NATO generals addressed at the time, perhaps because there was uncertainty about exactly what was happening and who was responsible. All this was one year before Russia invaded Georgia and a decade before the Russians used a cyberattack to interfere in the US 2016 presidential election.

The events leading up to the Estonian cyber event are not well known, yet they are significant. The uproar began In April 2007 when the municipal government of Tallinn decided to remove a statue of a Red Army soldier from the city's center. The Russian Liberator – *voin-osvoboditel*, as it was called in Russian, depicted the soldier with a submachine gun on his back and war medals decorating his breast. Its removal was ordered by the government on the shaky grounds that it was located in a busy intersection, but the real reason may have been Estonian hostility over the annual rite of Russian Estonians parading around the statue with Russian flags to celebrate Estonia's "liberation."

The bronze soldier's uprooting was to be followed by its transfer, along with the remains of a dozen soldiers buried under it, to a military cemetery. But then all hell broke loose. Many Russians living in capital Tallinn, but also their brethren in Idivaru around the Lake Peipus coast, were outraged. As explained to us in 2010 by the late Tartu chemistry professor Viktor Palm, for some of these Russian and Estonian demonstrators, the monument was a symbol of liberation by the Russians from Nazi fascists during WWII. Yet to many Baltic nationals and their Finnish comrades, the thousands of volunteers who fought alongside the Wehrmacht against the Red Army in WWII, they were battling not Russian liberators but Soviet occupiers of their country. To them the Bronze soldier was the hated symbol of the atrocities under Stalin. Thus had a crowd consisting of both Estonians and many non-integrated Russians, begun to riot in Tallinn. The several days of uproar that followed resulted in the death of one person, injuries to a hundred others and more than a thousand detainees.

The Russian Federation meanwhile proclaimed that the dismantling and removal of the Bronze soldier statue and the human remains "is just a vengeful policy towards Russians living in Estonia and towards Russians." WWII veterans and the few survivors of Nazi concentration camps in the Baltics, Israel Western Europe and America felt the same way.

During those fiery and tense "Bronze nights" of rioting, world opinion divided along predictably political lines. While the Russians did not officially confess they were behind the cyberattack, the magnitude of their fury was evident. The Russian Federation Council militated for the "toughest possible measures against Estonia." Not only did Russian stores boycott Estonian goods and commodities, Russia also announced plans for repairing the railway lines to Estonia, aimed at disrupting Estonian oil exports to world markets.

On May 2, the Estonian Embassy in Moscow was attacked by protesters and picketed by Russian *Nashi* [patriotic youths]. Protesters also attacked the Estonian ambassador and had to be dispersed by security guards. And then came the massive, Russian cyberattack affecting government and bank websites – the first ever of its kind.

The events leading up to the Bronze soldier affair had much to do with recent and not so recent Estonian history. During WWII, the Germans for several years occupied both Estonia and Latvia. Initially they were welcomed as liberators in both countries. However, their brutal policies, failure to recognize Estonian independence and murders of Jews, gays, communists and social democrats, quickly resulted in a reign of terror. Again, Estonians, as during the earlier German and Russian occupations in WWI, were treated like geese. Considered inferior they were not entrusted with self-rule.

While occupying the Baltics, the Germans killed over a thousand Estonian Jews and established concentration camps in Tallinn and Tartu that received prisoners from all over Europe. Some Estonians, like some Latvians, Ukrainians and Slovaks, participated in the war against the USSR.

Given an inglorious choice, this might have been forgiven by Russia over time. But Estonia's Fatherland party decided, in August 1992, to do more than just forget. They paid homage to a Nazi military unit, the Estonian SS Legion, by celebrating the Legion's 50th anniversary. Nor was that the only transgression from the Russian point of view. Soon after the Nazi veterans' gathering, Mart Laar's Party, later known as the Fatherland-Republic Union, began to actively support the installation of monuments to the SS Legionnaires inscribed with glowing tributes.²⁵ Laar, as a historian, was also the main proponent of the clash of civilizations thesis as displayed in his book, *Birds-Eye View of Estonian History*.

Just imagine the anger of the Russians living in Estonia, some of whom had fought the Germans in WWII. Surely their sentiments were shared by Vladimir Putin and his government. The Estonian government's building of Nazi monuments and some of its members sponsoring regular reunions of both Wehrmacht and SS Veterans were bad enough. But then came the movement to remove the monument of the Bronze soldier.

In short, the uproar over the Bronze statue of the Red Army soldier was not an isolated event for a country which projects that it is interested in liberal democracy, but at the same time supports a political party which glorifies former Nazi occupiers together with elements of Nazi ideology.

Nothing could have incurred Putin's wrath and loathing more than the glorification of Nazi fascists, and we cannot blame him. But neither can we wholly blame those Estonians who suffered under Stalin after the Red Army's supposed liberation from the Nazis. Thus, we must not only concern ourselves with the Russian naval buildup in Kaliningrad and in Belorussia, but also the still existing potential conflict between the large Russian speaking minorities and the native populations in Estonia and Latvia.

The 2007 cyber war against Estonia, demonstrates that WWII history and the Russian and German occupations of Estonia are very much alive in the Baltics, and if not handled with the utmost sensitivity, there can be yet another conflict that can spill across the borders and bring a large scale new Russian intervention in areas of heavy Russian population.

PUTIN'S INTERVENTIONISM

Would Putin like to have the Baltics? Yes, particularly the naval ports. However the Russian president knows he cannot roll his tanks across the borders of a Baltic country anytime soon as proposed by saber-rattling analysts. Putin recently told a group of western experts that it was "stupid and unrealistic" to think Russia might attack anyone in Europe, and he's right. The saber-rattling, in our view, is part of a dual Kremlin strategy. Abroad, the goal is to project Russian military power and strength – to restore Moscow's superpower status, with Russia as a global co-equal of US "hegemony." Putin also wants as much leverage as possible with respect not only to the Ukraine and Syria.

At home, however, Putin is facing an upcoming 2018 election. The continuous Putin's support for the Russians brethren in "near abroad" of course, is also designed to deflect attention from Russia's numerous domestic woes – a worsening economy, western sanctions, and a swamp of state corruption at the top that Putin is loath to drain.

NATO'S newest deployments in Central Europe – a response to aggressive Russian moves – merely serves to confirm for the Russian people the

propaganda line of what Putin and state television have been telling them for a long time; that the west is hell-bent on “encircling” them. Naturally, once his election is assured, Putin can ease off beating the drums of war.

Notice that the novelty under him has been limited, low-cost interventions aimed at carving only territories with sizable Russian speaking populations. Putin is conscious of the costs involved in both blood and treasure, and does not wish to be involved in more than one critical crisis at a time. All of Putin’s interventions in Europe have been aimed at carving territories with Russian-speaking populations rather than occupations or large wars. Even with his 2015 intervention in Syria, Putin has focused on creating a strategic corridor from capital Damascus to Aleppo, where the Russian bases, Tartu and Latakia are located and Alawi Shiite officers live, some married to Russian women.

Of course, the continuous occupation of the Crimea and hybrid war in the Ukraine are serious impediments to the making of a real reset between NATO and Russia. Putin’s boast about not attacking anyone in Europe excludes about 10,000 people who have perished in the Ukraine in a war that the Kremlin kicked off and has sustained.

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC SAVVY AND PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

It would be foolish, of course, to completely rule out a Russian military intervention in the Baltics while being engaged in what Obama used to call “strategic patience” rather than preventive diplomacy. Above all we must divine and remain aware of Putin’s or his successor’s intentions. Strategic surprise is a staple of Russian military doctrine.

As we demonstrated, however, the NATO planners would be well advised to worry about the relationship between the Russians living in Estonia and Latvia and the indigenous populations. If there is ever a conflict with the Baltics, it will be provoked, as in 2007, by Russo-Estonian and Russo-Latvian ethnic disturbances. But even then, Russia would most likely use cyber war because of the presence of trip wire NATO troops.

President Donald Trump, inexperienced in foreign policy, must thoroughly familiarize himself with a number of limited conflicts – Syria and the Ukraine and the growing military buildup tensions now in the Baltics – in order to make the best judgment calls. His administration must also redouble its efforts to divine Russian intentions by reviving creative Kremlinology and undertaking a serious study of Russia's national security interests and decision-making.

Here the study of the Russian doctrine of strategic surprise and deception is indispensable to the making of pre-emptive diplomacy. One must also study historical, geographic, civilization and ethnic conflicts at the Russian periphery. Western failures to master these factors in divining Putin's intentions have surely aided in facilitating Putin's surprise military interventions of Georgia, the Crimea and Syria.

Although we believe the conflict in the Baltic region with Russia is avoidable, nevertheless, NATO planners should consider that the strategic advantages of the Baltics, not just in arms but in civilization factors could be of great help in a conventional conflict. Thus, the most suitable NATO troops for Lithuania and Latvia are of course, those of Catholic Poland, Belgium, France and Spain rather than the forces of large Protestant members such as the UK and Germany.

Our net assessment, however, is that the likely target of any Russian military intervention will not be a Baltic state. Combined with a possible coup it could possibly be Belorussia and/or Moldova, with their large Russian speaking populations. As long as NATO is strong and vigilant, the U.S. president is not threatened with impeachment by the results of present Russiagate, and NATO trip wire troops are deployed in the Baltics, an intervention there is not likely. Putin himself probably spoke truthfully when he said at one point it's crazy to expect one from him. He knows the price is too high and he still hopes for deal-making with Trump if the anti-Russian hysteria in the U.S. subsides.

Meanwhile he is setting his sights on the Arctic. A major geological change is in progress, and the melting of the ice together with modern ice breakers is slowly providing a new opening for the Russian navy in Antarctica.

As we have indicated, in the Baltics Putin is primarily interested in protecting the Russian and Russian speaking minorities. Our conflict prevention must thus include our discrete support for upholding the civic and language rights of the sizable Russian minorities in the Baltics. As Marina Best has warned, the obstacles posed for the Russian minorities and harsh means of expulsion causes them to resist integration and cleave to their own language and culture.

The Estonians and Latvians might also follow the lead of Lithuania. Seeking to become a multicultural country, it promotes language proficiency and genuinely seeks to integrate rather than discriminate against the Russian population.²⁶ True, Lithuania has a much smaller Russian minority than Estonia and Latvia, but her different approach should be considered by her sister states.

Above all, we must repeatedly reconfirm our commitment to NATO, and its small trip wire units in each Baltic state. American policy should also encourage the building of strategic highways and railroads to advance integration of the defense policies of all three states.

Our final point is that while we do not believe an invasion of the Baltics is imminent, the continuous and unwavering NATO commitment to its Baltic members is the most important deter to any Russian intervention. Whoever is running Kremlin must know that the Balts showering flowers on Russian invaders is just a pipe dream. Not flowers but bullets will welcome the invaders.

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