

Survival against the Odds: The Baltic States at 100

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Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania recently celebrated a century of statehood, even though nearly half of that time was under Soviet or Nazi occupation. The consequences of the year 1918 continue to impact most aspects of life in the Baltic states today.

1918 is a symbolic date for the transformations it unleashed, since the outcome was far from clear or predetermined. A complex and confusing series of armed conflicts, with shifting alliances among the various protagonists who held diametrically-opposing visions for the future reordering of the region, played out for another exhausting two years following the immiserating four years of the Great War. Most of 1918 was experienced as a year of German military occupation. With the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918, where Lenin traded land for peace, the Russian government ceded control of the Baltic region and pledged to respect self-determination. The Lithuanians declared independence on February 16 while under German occupation, and the Estonians did so one week later, immediately before the arrival of the Germans. A German expeditionary force helped the Finnish Whites take Helsinki in April to bring the short but bloody civil war to an end.

From the standpoint of mid-1918, the most likely outcome would have been the formation of a single Baltic state: a Duchy formed by the German knightly orders of the Baltic Provinces, aligned with Imperial Germany.¹ These plans were abruptly dashed by the Armistice on November 11. A week later, the Latvians finally declared independence, but with German forces still in control of their territory. Emerging from the vacuum left by German capitulation, the new national provisional governments were immediately faced with Bolshevik invasions and the establishment of rival Soviet governments in their coattails.

This essay analyzes the challenges faced by the Baltic states upon their proclamations of independence one hundred years ago, and compares these with the challenges they have dealt with since the restoration of independent statehood in 1991. These have been both external and internal in nature. Among the myriad of challenges, domestically some of the most significant were consolidating democracy and the status of the ethnic minorities. Externally, deterring revanchist neighbors, seeking security through membership in international organizations, and regional cooperation have been existential questions. Although there have been notable differences between the three countries, they have shared the broader trends and developments during the past century, and thus will be treated together. Finland, which declared its independence from Russia a few months earlier, on December 6, 1917, will also be used as a point of comparison.

1. Mark R. Hatlie, *Riga at War 1914–1919: War and Wartime Experience in a Multi-ethnic Metropolis*. Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung 30 (Marburg, 2014), 193–94.

1918 was a sharp rupture from the past. Competing visions for the future of the peoples of the Baltic littoral arose. Initially, after the abdication of the Tsar in March 1917, the general demand of Estonian and Latvian nationalists was for a “free Estonia” or “free Latvia” within a “free and democratic Russia.” Independence was not on the agenda. Hundreds of thousands of Latvians and Lithuanians were displaced by the German advance and living as refugees in Russia. Refugee committees became hotbeds of radicalized political activity. Lithuanian nationalists living under German military occupation strove for sovereignty and received some encouragement from the Germans who sought to use Lithuanian aspirations as a means to weaken Russia and to legitimize their control.² In the Estonian case, there were three factors, in chronological order, which drove national leaders from championing autonomy to proclaiming independence. First was the goal of denying legitimacy to the looming German military occupation; second, reaction to the Bolshevik seizure of power and a desire not to be dragged into the impending Russian civil war; third, the emboldening example of neighboring Finland.

In creating their own states, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were influenced by the liberating ideals of the Russian Revolution and US President Woodrow Wilson’s call for self-determination (even though he did not intend it to apply to the Baltic nations). The common desire was for social revolution entailing sweeping land redistribution. Initially, following the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks gained popularity as the most uncompromising advocates of radical change, but the actual experience of Bolshevik rule diminished support. As Karsten Brüggemann has recently argued, class and nationalism did not function as opposing categories, but augmented one another. The key to the successful establishment of nation states was the central role of “nationally oriented” Estonian and Latvian social democrats who bridged the divide between “revolutionaries” and “nationalists.”³

Nationally-minded left-wing parties dominated the Estonian and Latvian assemblies that drafted constitutions. The progressive democratic institutions these established were a reaction against the previous era of Tsarist autocratic rule. They were unabashedly republican, spurning the creation of a monarchy to buttress their international legitimacy. Baltic lawmakers incorporated many of the most recent European best practices and followed the model of Germany’s 1919 Weimar constitution. Notable progressive features included a unicameral legislature with no upper house to check the people’s will, extension of the franchise to women, not yet widespread in Europe, and in the Estonian case—because of suspicions regarding strong executive power—the absence of a presidency and a provision for direct democracy in the form of popular initiative.

The fledgling states survived due to a fortuitous combination of external and internal factors. As no great powers favored the establishment of

2. Tomas Balkelis, *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2018), 45–47; Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 204.

3. Karsten Brüggemann, “Yearning for Social Change: The Russian Revolution in the Baltic Provinces,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 17, no. 3 (December 2017): 358–68.

independent states on the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea, the decisive factor was the will of the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians and the astuteness of their leaders. Peasants were strongly motivated by the national governments' pledge to redistribute estate lands. This was proven by their sacrifices on the battlefield against both the Russian Bolsheviks and German Freikorps during 1918–20. Having successfully defended their right to exist, they needed to gain the recognition of the international community. The Entente powers, however, prioritized supporting the Whites in the Russian Civil War and maintaining Russian territorial integrity. Estonia, and then Lithuania, Latvia, and Finland, made the first peace treaties with Soviet Russia in 1920 against the wishes of the Entente. Although the establishment of the independent republics is often portrayed in the literature as the result of the Versailles settlement, the peacemakers in Paris had scant knowledge of the Baltic situation nor did their deliberations focus on the region. Furthermore, the decisive military events took place after the negotiators in Paris had completed their task.

The long-term viability of the Baltic states was always in doubt. Recognition of Baltic independence in 1921 was not the preferred outcome, but the least worst for the Russia policies of the Entente powers. Tellingly, in an initially unsuccessful vote regarding their membership bids in the League of Nations, the Baltic states each garnered fewer votes of support than Georgia, which only months later would be absorbed by Soviet Russia.

Striving to achieve security, the Baltic states placed their hopes on the newly-formed League of Nations. Upon admittance into the League in September 1921, they were forced to adopt additional guarantees for the rights of national minorities that the founding members of the League did not. The five new states in the Baltic Sea region had already started negotiations to create a Baltic League from Helsinki to Warsaw in 1920. A key obstacle to the birth of an alliance was the Polish seizure of Vilnius in October 1920, which created a frozen conflict and ensured that Lithuanian relations with Poland would remain hostile until World War II. Four countries proceeded without Lithuania since Poland was clearly the more powerful and valuable ally.⁴

A treaty was agreed upon in 1922, but the Finnish Parliament rejected it. Finnish statesmen had been torn between choosing a Baltic or Scandinavian orientation. Finns were afraid that their southern neighbors could entangle them in a war with Germany. Rather than tie their fate to the other successor states of the Tsarist Empire, Finland turned towards Sweden (though this attraction was not mutual). However, Finland did not become fully recognized as a Nordic country until after three separate wars fought between 1939 and 1945 and its inclusion in the Nordic Council in 1955.

An alliance between Estonia and Latvia with only Poland would have been heavily lopsided. In the end, nothing more than a narrow defensive alliance between Estonia and Latvia proved feasible in 1923. Although the Baltic states are usually lumped together as a single bloc, their foreign relations and security policies differed markedly: Lithuania was a revisionist state while Estonia

4. Marko Lehti, *A Baltic League as a Construct of the New Europe: Envisioning a Baltic Region and Small State Sovereignty in the Aftermath of the First World War* (Frankfurt am Main, 1999).

and Latvia upheld the status quo, the post-Versailles settlement. Their differing orientations and threat perceptions hindered attempts at regional cooperation. For Estonia, the only plausible threat was Soviet Russia; for Latvia, Russia and Germany were equally dangerous, especially after the Nazis came to power in 1933. Estonia and Latvia both looked for support to Poland, the major military power in central Europe. For Lithuania, however, Poland was the major threat because of Vilnius. On the map of interwar Europe the USSR was not a neighbor of Lithuania, while Germany was. Importantly, the USSR was the only major power that recognized Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania, and Lithuania was the first country to sign a non-aggression pact with the USSR in 1926.

A Baltic Entente among Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was finally reached in 1934, but it only entailed diplomatic cooperation and excluded Vilnius and Klaipėda (Memel), the vital questions which were most likely to bring Lithuania into conflict.⁵ The Balts continued to harbor illusions towards Great Britain, who had aided them during their wars of independence, but the region simply did not rank among Britain's global priorities.

In addition to striving to achieve security, the new states faced multiple internal challenges in state- and nation-building. Most dramatically, Estonian communists attempted to seize power in 1924, with the Red Army on standby across the border, ready to snuff out the "bourgeois" republic. This incident shares some of the features of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine ninety years later.

The most impactful socio-economic reform was the land acts of 1919–22, which addressed the burning question of the era. The urgency of the issue is illustrated by the fact that the Estonian Constituent Assembly passed the land reform in 1919 before it had even finished drafting the constitution. The promise by national governments to give land to the peasants had been decisive in motivating them to fight for the national cause. Conversely, the Latvian and Estonian Bolsheviks' vision of model communes was out of synch with the aspirations of the peasantry. The large estates of the Baltic German and Polish landowners were redistributed among landless Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian peasants, creating remarkably egalitarian societies. Making peasants stakeholders of the new republics also had the consequence of nearly eliminating the appeal of communism. In Klaus Richter's words, the radical land reforms were the "social charters" for the new democratic nation states.⁶

Those who found it hardest to adjust to the new reality were the Baltic Germans who had been the political, social, and economic elite for centuries. An apt caricature of the time showed how the peasant chauffeur of a Baltic German aristocrat's horse-drawn carriage suddenly became the passenger. Reconciliation with the Baltic Germans was not possible as it was in Finland where the Swedish elite was intertwined with the new national

5. Eero Medijainen, "The 1934 Treaty of the Baltic Entente: Perspectives for Understanding," *Ajalooline Ajakiri: The Estonian Historical Journal* no. 1/2 (2012): 183–200; Alfonsas Eidintas and Vytautas Žalys, eds., *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years the First Republic, 1918–1940* (New York, 1997), 156.

6. Klaus Richter, "'An Orgy of Licence?' Democracy and Property Redistribution in Poland and the Baltics in Their International Context, 1918–1926," *Nationalities Papers* 46, no. 5 (2018): 791–808.

establishment. The gap between them was much greater for several reasons, beginning with the centuries of serfdom under Baltic German landowners, running through the bitterness of the 1905 revolution, and ending with the harsh German military occupation during World War I.

Many Baltic Germans emigrated, and some used their international contacts to place stories in western newspapers criticizing Estonia and Latvia for “discriminating” against an ethnic minority by not respecting their property rights and to submit petitions to the League of Nations. In the long run, these claims had little impact since Estonia became known for its generous cultural autonomy law of 1925, which gave both the Baltic Germans and the Jews the opportunity to control their own education system.⁷ The legislation, inspired by the ideas of Austrian Socialists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner, was widely recognized by contemporary observers as the most progressive legislation of its kind in the world. Its great innovation was inclusion based on the principle of individual choice rather than territory. Similar provisions for educational autonomy were put into practice in Latvia, but were never enshrined into law. Prominent liberal Baltic Germans, notably Ewald Ammende and Paul Schiemann, founders of the Congress of European Nationalities, actively propagated the Estonian cultural autonomy law as a model for other countries to follow.⁸

Although Estonia and Latvia made great strides in constructing a functioning democracy and robust civil society, the political system remained volatile and exhibited a rapid turnover of governments. The worldwide economic depression of the early 1930s polarized and exacerbated political tensions and stoked public desire for strongman rule. In these circumstances, similarly as elsewhere in Europe, a new populist radical right movement arose and quickly attained a mass following. The League of Veterans of the Estonian War of Independence (vaps) began as an extra-parliamentary pressure group, but within a couple of years morphed into the largest and most dynamic political force in the country. Much like current populists, the League whipped up public indignation at the allegedly corrupt political elite.

Parliamentary democracy failed to survive the challenge. Claiming to “save” democracy from the threat of the extreme right, interim prime minister Konstantin Päts (who had proclaimed Estonia’s independence in 1918) declared a state of emergency in March 1934 and had the leaders of the vaps movement arrested. Parliament, fearing the “fascist” threat, acquiesced in Päts’ actions and granted him temporary emergency powers. Päts extended these powers, however, and never relinquished them. Parliament and the political parties were dissolved and a new presidential constitution was adopted that cemented Päts’ authoritarian rule.⁹ The pattern in Latvia was

7. David J. Smith and John Hiden, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State: National Cultural Autonomy Revisited* (London, 2012).

8. Martyn Housden, “National Minorities as Peacebuilders? How Three Baltic Germans Responded to the First World War,” *Peace & Change: A Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 1 (January 2018): 5–31.

9. Andres Kasekamp, “The Rise of the Radical Right, the Demise of Democracy, and the Advent of Authoritarianism in Interwar Estonia,” in Lazar Fleishman and Amir Weiner, eds., *War, Revolution, and Governance: The Baltic Countries in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, 2018), 76–100.

very similar, where Kārlis Ulmanis (who had been Latvia's founding prime minister in 1918) emulated Pāts's example two months later. Lithuania had already succumbed to authoritarian rule in 1926, following Piłsudski's seizure of power in Poland earlier in the year. Finland managed to retain its democracy, although barely: a powerful radical right force, the Lapua movement, which sought to complete the "unfinished" White victory of 1918, dominated the political agenda in the early 1930s.

With war looming on the horizon, the Balts realized that neither the League of Nations nor regional alliances could protect them. At the end of 1938, they adopted neutrality declarations modelled after Scandinavia. These failed to save them. When faced with a Soviet ultimatum in 1939, Baltic cooperation was not implemented. Stalin purposely targeted one country at a time. This would be a lesson learned—Baltic cooperation flourished in the 1990s.

Baltic leaderships were initially satisfied that, unlike the Finns, they had avoided war. Finland saved its independence, although at the cost of tens of thousands of casualties and more ceded territory than Stalin originally demanded. Regime type has been posited as a factor in determining the different outcomes in 1939–40. In the Baltic states a small circle of individuals quickly and quietly made the fateful decision, while Finnish statesmen were answerable to the parliament and a free press.¹⁰

The decision makers were mostly the same founding fathers of the republics who had braved the odds in 1918, but now in an older age (and with more to lose) made a fatalistically cautious calculation. The heroic myth of 1918 played a role towards the end of the Second World War with a younger generation. Inspired by the events of 1918, Estonian and Latvian nationalists attempted to restore independent governments in the fleeting time and space between the German retreat and the Soviet advance. They believed themselves to be replicating the scenario of 1918 when victory had been accomplished despite the seemingly hopeless situation. They misguidedly hoped that the Estonian and Latvian men conscripted into the German armed forces in 1944 would form the nucleus of national armies that could halt the advance of the Red Army until Germany capitulated in the West, and thus provide an opportunity for independence to be restored. The circumstances had changed, however: the Soviets were now allies of the western powers.¹¹

During the long years of the Cold War, the fact that the annexation of the Baltic states by the USSR was never legally recognized by the USA and other western countries had little practical impact. Nevertheless, it played an important role in the restoration of independence in 1991 after the "Singing Revolution." The collective memory of 1918 and independence

10. Magnus Ilmjärv, *Silent Submission: Formation of Foreign Policy of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: Period from mid-1920s to Annexation in 1940* (Stockholm, 2004); Maria Groeneveld, *The Role of the State and Society Relationship in the Foreign Policy Making Process* (PhD Diss., University of Tartu, 2012).

11. Uldis Neiburgs, "Latvia, Nazi German Occupation, and the Western Allies, 1941–1945," in Lazar Fleishman and Amir Weiner, eds., *War, Revolution, and Governance: The Baltic Countries in the Twentieth Century* (Boston, 2018), 162; Kaarel Piirimäe, *Roosevelt, Churchill and the Baltic Question: Allied Relations during the Second World War* (New York, 2014).

inspired the Baltic nations and differentiated them from other Soviet republics. Unlike other post-Soviet republics, the Baltic states were not “successor states” to the USSR. Instead, they were able to base their state-building efforts on the principle of the legal continuity of their statehood, which provided them a stronger foundation for their transitions to market economies and democracies in the 1990s. Only these three post-Soviet countries have successfully built well-functioning democracies and integrated into Europe—legal continuity is an important factor that distinguished them.

Compared with the first period of independence, achieving security was simpler. The main lesson that had been absorbed at high cost during World War II—and that has shaped current Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian foreign and security policy thinking—is to never again be alone without allies. Although the international community overwhelmingly urged them to follow the model of neutral Finland—a successful democracy with a non-conflictual relationship with neighboring Russia—this path was rejected because neutrality had not saved the Baltic states from three occupations by two totalitarian powers during the Second World War. Finns drew a different lesson from the Second World War experience—self-reliance and the risk of disaster with the wrong ally (Nazi Germany).

The guiding principle of the Baltic states’ foreign and security policy became (and has remained) to integrate themselves as quickly and tightly into the European and wider western family by joining as many international institutions and organizations as possible.¹² In addition to joining NATO and the EU in 2004, the ultimate step in closely binding themselves into the European family was joining the single currency. Many observers were puzzled that the Baltic states did so in the midst of a debt crisis that was shaking the foundations of the Eurozone. The explanation is related to the above axiom. Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip was the first to spell this out explicitly as Estonia joined in 2011: the single currency is not simply a financial matter, it also enhances the country’s security more broadly.¹³ The Baltic states have endeavored to move from the periphery to the core of the EU. Baltic diplomacy has largely been driven by the adage: if you don’t have a seat at the table, you risk ending up on the menu.

Not only were the Baltic states different from their predecessors in the interwar period, but Europe had changed as well. It no longer consisted of competing powers, but it had united into a cooperative European Union, moving towards ever closer political union. Furthermore, immediate neighbors played a big role in aiding and supporting the development of the new states on the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea. Notably Sweden, which had remained aloof during the interwar period, had learned that actively supporting democracy and the rule of law and extending the zone of stability and prosperity

12. Daunis Auers, *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke, Eng., 2015), 209.

13. Andres Kasekamp, “Estonia: Eager to Set an Example in the EU,” in Michael J. Baun and Dan Marek, eds., *The New Member States and the European Union: Foreign Policy and Europeanization* (London, 2013), 101.

in its immediate neighborhood enhanced its own security.¹⁴ The Baltic states have followed this example by in turn providing assistance to former Soviet republics. They have been uniquely placed to transfer their knowledge and experience of reforms and European integration to countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, who once shared their fate. Conversely, activism in this direction has been viewed with alarm by Russia. From the perspective of the Kremlin, the success of the Baltic states is a negative example and a dangerous precedent for other post-Soviet states. Thus, the Kremlin constantly seeks to undermine and bring into disrepute the achievements of the Baltic states.

The main legacy of the Soviet era is the massive demographic shift that has resulted in Estonia and Latvia having a far higher percentage of foreign-born residents than other European countries. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 rekindled international interest in the situation of the large Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia, and sparked apprehension that the Baltic states could be “next.” Alarmist parallels with the Ukrainian case, however, ignore fundamental differences, most obviously membership in NATO and the EU.¹⁵

In the 1990s, Estonia and Latvia applied the doctrine of legal continuity—those who had been citizens prior to the Soviet occupation in 1940 and their descendants were deemed citizens, while those who arrived later had to apply for naturalization. As a result, a large proportion of Russian-speakers were disenfranchised. Like the Baltic Germans after 1918, Russian-speakers felt humiliated by their loss of status. Indeed, some objective socio-economic indices, such as unemployment levels, show that Russian-speakers are slightly worse off than Estonians and Latvians.¹⁶

The integration of ethnic minorities has not been as successful as during the interwar period because the magnitude of the challenge is much greater. However, the reason lies not only in numbers, but also in the fact that a neighboring great power that nurtures grievances has adopted an aggressive posture and regards Russian-speakers as compatriots who need protecting, whether they want it or not. Russia is actively working to prevent the integration of the Russian minority and continues to instrumentalize it as a pawn of its foreign policy. Moscow has been able to use its powerful media resources as a tool to keep many compatriots in the Baltic states in its informational sphere. From the other side, Estonian and Latvian governments have often acted in ways that are perceived as privileging Estonians and Latvians and disadvantaging Russian-speakers. Nevertheless, with the sole exception of the riot accompanying the relocation of the Soviet war monument in Tallinn in 2007, inter-ethnic relations have been peaceful.¹⁷

14. Annika Bergman, “Adjacent Internationalism: The Concept of Solidarity and Post-Cold War Nordic–Baltic Relations,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 41, no. 1 (March 2006): 73–97.

15. Andres Kasekamp, “Are the Baltic States Next?,” in Ann-Sofie Dahl, ed., *Strategic Challenges in the Baltic Sea Region: Russia, Deterrence, and Reassurance* (Washington, DC, 2018), 61.

16. Auers, *Comparative Politics and Government of the Baltic States*, 148–51.

17. Jennie L. Schulze, *Strategic Frames: Europe, Russia and Minority Inclusion in Estonia and Latvia* (Pittsburgh, 2018); Ammon Cheskin, *Russian Speakers in Post-Soviet Latvia: Discursive Identity Strategies* (Edinburgh, 2016).