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Peer reviewed

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For 31 years, from 1940 to 1971, August Torma was his country’s top official. This sounds impressive, until one specifies that his rank was “envoy.” He was tops because the Soviet occupation of Estonia eliminated all higher officials of his country. Estonia’s
only unoccupied territory was its legation in London, which is where Torma survived, in diplomatic limbo. His situation, along with that of his Latvian and Lithuanian colleagues, was highly unusual. One would have to think back to the demise of Poland 150 years earlier. Afterward, Turkey’s court ceremony kept calling out for the ambassador of Poland, who never responded. Torma’s case was the reverse: He kept appearing, even when uncalled for.

Torma was an agent without a principal. He was also the quintessential underling. He rarely offered personal opinions to his foreign counterparts. When asked, he would hedge, report the question to the foreign affairs ministry in Tallinn, sometimes receive a response two months later, and then report it to the inquirer—who had long ago lost interest. His voluminous reports back home conveyed what other diplomats and local officials had done or said. Except in trade matters, he hardly ever offered his own opinion, analysis, or characterization of a person. He seemed to consider himself a conduit, and he fulfilled this role to perfection.

Torma was good at his job, to the point of being at times considered for minister of foreign affairs. What would he have done in such a position? We know only how he acted after the Soviet takeover of Estonia. A more decision-minded personality might have collapsed, given a thoroughly maddening situation, but how could Torma collapse without proper authorization? He showed his habitual tenacity and attention to detail in cases such as saving Estonian merchant ships that the Soviet occupiers had ordered to return home. He satisfied his need to write reports by addressing them to the Estonian representative in the United States, Johannes Kaiv, even though the latter had a lesser diplomatic status—consul general in charge of legation. Torma sent the British Foreign Office drafts of memoranda before submitting them, inviting corrections (which were never offered).

Finally, two years after Estonia was occupied first by Soviet forces, “Torma found his own voice” (p. 137). The Foreign Office had dropped the Baltic ambassadors from the diplomatic list but maintained their personal status as diplomats. This was a concession to the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, which still claimed the Baltic states, even while the three states were under German occupation. The ambiguity regarding Torma’s status “altered his perception of himself fundamentally” (p. 137). Told that he no longer represented a government, he began to see himself as the representative of the Estonian people. Because his captive nation was prevented from giving him instructions, he felt freer to form his own opinions.

The title of the book describes Torma as “soldier, diplomat, spy,” but his role as “spy” was limited to routine contacts with the British secret service. Attempts to beef up this eye-catching label are unconvincing. Torma’s career as a soldier in World War I and afterward in Arkhangelsk (September 1918–November 1919) was brief. By December 1919, Estonia posted him as military representative in Lithuania. The hurried reader might wish to bypass the entire first chapter (1895–1930), which offers scant information about the young Torma and tries to compensate by providing sketches of marginal personalities. The second chapter (“Estonia on the Fringes of Europe, 1931–1939”) documents Torma’s passive style in Rome, Geneva, and London. His low-key
style fit well with the effort of the brand-new peasant republic of Estonia to pass unnoticed in the shadow of the Great Powers.

The drama builds in chapter 3 (1939–June 1940), which begins with the Soviet demand for military bases in Estonia and culminates with an ultimatum on 16 June 1940. Estonia’s authoritarian ruler caved in to Soviet demands without a shot. The world’s attention was riveted on Adolf Hitler’s forces entering Paris. The last message Torma received from Tallinn was that accommodation with the Soviet Union worked just fine; that message was followed by silence.

“Keep Calm and Carry On (1940–1944 is a superb chapter. In addition to describing the human drama of Torma the man, it casts a perceptive sidelight on the quandaries of the British Foreign Office (FO), torn between dearly held principles of international law and the blunt demands of the Soviet Union, well aware of the precariousness of the British military position. Britain came close to recognizing the Soviet Union’s annexation of the Baltic states but ultimately refrained, heeding the firm example of the United States. The diplomatic and journalistic activities of Torma and Kaiv made it more embarrassing to capitulate to Soviet demands. In the reports to and by the FO, “embarrassing” is a frequently used word. Embarrassment is what Torma tries to avoid yet inevitably causes for the FO. This is what internal FO correspondence expresses when forced to subdue Torma’s press activities in order to avoid stirring Soviet protests.

In the last major chapter (1944–1971), drama fades into still life. Torma likely saved some refugees in Germany from being sent back to Estonia (and on to Siberia). “He was not easily daunted . . . when it came to more immediate and practical tasks” (p. 155). He contributed to the British government’s decision not to recognize Soviet annexation of his country de jure, even in the face of encroaching de facto recognition. When Torma died in 1971, the embassy building lost its diplomatic tax exemption. The resulting financial duress forced the building to be sold in 1989, precisely when Estonia was rising from the ashes.

In sum, Tamman’s The Last Ambassador is worth reading at two levels. On one, it documents an unusual case in world diplomacy. On another, it describes a natural socio-psychological experiment: How does a perfect underling react when his superiors vanish overnight, yet his position is preserved?