

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Introduction to the JBS focused issue on Baltic futures—Getting the discussion started

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8sz7c6jg>

Journal

Journal of Baltic Studies, 17(3)

ISSN

0162-9778

Author

Taagepera, Rein

Publication Date

1986-09-01

DOI

10.1080/01629778600000081

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

INTRODUCTION TO THE *JBS* FOCUSED ISSUE ON BALTIC FUTURES—GETTING THE DISCUSSION STARTED

Rein Taagepera, University of California, Irvine

Baltic Futures are the topic of this focused issue of the *JBS*, and the plural “s” should be noted. While there is only one past (although some relativists might dispute even that), many future scenarios are possible until one of them becomes reality—and it may well be a scenario no-one anticipated. Speculation about futures may be called idle talk, but it cannot be avoided. Desisting from speculation implies that the status quo will continue, and this is another such future scenario, an unrealistic one, since things never stay the same.

Most articles in this issue originated in talks given at the Baltic Futures Seminar held in Stockholm on July 30-31, 1985. Selected and reworked papers from this seminar have been complemented with an article on economic prospects and one on the Soviet armed forces; the latter fits in with the articles by Swedish military specialists. The credit for organizing the Stockholm seminar goes to Atis Lejins of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. This seminar took place in the context of a political action, the Baltic Peace and Freedom Cruise (25 to 31 July 1985). As a scholarly journal, the *JBS* neither approves nor disapproves this context. The essential point is that the individual articles published here underwent the usual scholarly referee process as practiced in North America, and the revised versions conform to accepted standards.

What is the scope of reasonable speculation about Baltic futures, and at what point does one shift to pipe dreams based on wishful thinking? During the 19th century, the international status and military situation of the present Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) remained remarkably stable, but during the 20th century, they underwent repeated drastic changes. Internal changes were deep even during the 19th century. Who in 1800 would have predicted the rise of high schools, literature, and theater in the Baltic peasant languages? The future is equally unpredict-

able. There are futures we might like or dislike. We might talk about some futures because we believe talking about them makes them more likely. There are others which we have to discuss, precisely in order to make them less likely—this also applies to the prospects for nuclear war.

For 40 years, the major feature of the status quo in the Baltic countries has been Soviet rule. Yet continuing international disagreement over legal status is also a fact. The Soviet Baltic republics and the Baltic Question both exist, and no amount of wishful thinking can abolish the one or the other. Both necessarily enter a broad discussion of Baltic futures. In his opening statement at the Stockholm seminar (“The Baltic Question: A Reappraisal”), Lejins reviewed how Soviet rule and the Baltic Question in its current form came about on 23 August 1939, together with some of the consequences in the present divided world:

Balts do not want war. Yet Balts currently serve in the armed forces of both sides. If war would break out they would be shooting at each other. Even today our young men—and sometimes women—are dying in Afghanistan. For our small peoples, every death is not only a tragedy for the next of kin but also for our nations.

The present division of Europe has continued for 40 years, but it has not been accepted. President Mitterrand, in an interview for Swedish Television in May 1984, called it absurd to think that this division would last. It is not a question of a one-sided victory or a return to the past but of finding novel solutions for Eastern Europe, Lejins said. (“East-Central Europe” would be a more appropriate term from the historical and geographical perspective.) Lejins presented the following agenda regarding Baltic futures:

In taking a new look at the Baltic republics we could ask ourselves if they are a purely internal Soviet affair to be studied only within the context of Soviet nationality problems or if they fall into the “Eastern European” category and hence subject to Western policies that are designed specifically for Eastern Europe? Can they play any particular role in considerations about the military balance in Northern Europe and security for the Scandinavian countries? How strongly militarized are the Baltic countries, and what is the balance after forty years of Sovietization there?

Most “realists” would be very skeptical when questioned about future Baltic independence. However, could not Soviet policy in the Baltic republics be used as a measure of Soviet foreign policy intentions for the western part of the Baltic sea and even Europe in general? Could not a security arrangement between the Soviet Union and the Baltic states exist similar to the one in 1939 whereby “legitimate Soviet security interests” (military bases on Baltic territory) are satisfied, while at the same time allowing for Baltic independence? One would hardly deny that this would be a breakthrough in the search for peace, freedom and security in the North, a confidence-building measure of major proportions.

Along with the conceivable (the present situation), this introduction by Lejins clearly exhorted participants to include inconceivable (non-status quo) aspects. The articles presented here respond to this in varying degree; some see little prospect of change, and others pursue various scenarios and possibilities of change to be attained or avoided.

Professor Rakowska-Harmstone (Carleton University, Canada) covers extremely wide ground, from military and demographic considerations to dissent. While these components have been extensively studied earlier, their juxtaposition is novel, and her study supplies a broad general background for the other articles. The central question is the relevance of Baltic dissatisfaction and resistance to Soviet rule for Soviet strategy, and the answer is: practically none. This is precisely a precondition for peaceful changes such as envisaged by Lejins. Military powers rarely withdraw under pressure, short of utter defeat. Afghanistan is more typical than Beirut. If peaceful change comes, it will not come because Moscow finds the Baltic countries hard to keep but because, lacking any strategic threat, it finds it pointless to keep them. If Baltic resistance has little strategic relevance, that says little about its relevance otherwise.

Dr. Gerner (Swedish Institute of International Affairs) reviews the historical role of the Baltic rimland between Russia and post-imperial Sweden. Swedish public opinion largely accepts Moscow's rule in the Baltic countries. The Russians see it as "natural" on the basis of both tsarist and Soviet mythologies of security and of liberation of other peoples—"the Moscow man's burden," if you will. Yet, Russian security needs are not filled by continuous expansion, for they would be better served by creating a cordon of Finlandized neighbors in East-Central Europe. This applies, in particular, to Finland's closest neighbors, the Baltic republics. De-colonization of the Baltic states would declench a chain reaction in Scandinavia and Western Europe, suggests Gerner. The latter would feel free to distance themselves from the United States, and for the first time ever, Russia's European flank would be secure.

The military dimension is covered in three articles. Von Thun-Hohenstein's (Salzau, West Germany) review of Soviet armed forces in the Baltic area was not part of the Stockholm seminar. It supplies a wealth of factual detail on the present Soviet navy, amphibian capacity, land and air forces, and missiles, pointing out some potential future uses. Assuming that Sweden's neutrality is respected, Denmark would be the focal point where Soviet (and Polish and DDR) forces in the Baltic sea could achieve a decisive breakthrough. In contrast, "the strategic-nuclear weight of the Baltic area compared to the Kola complex has become nearly insignificant," so that Baltic inclusion in a Nordic nuclear-weapons free zone would not affect Soviet strategy.

Lt. Colonel Uller (Royal Swedish Staff and War College) shifts the focus farther north, including the interaction of the Baltic and Leningrad military districts, which together involve 10% of Soviet ground forces. The degree of success of the initial Soviet thrust into northern Norway, possibly expanding to Sweden and Finland, might determine the direction of application of Soviet forces in the Baltic: the north or the Danish straits. Although Sweden and Finland serve the Soviet Union best as a neutral shield in times of peace and even crisis, Uller does not discount Soviet missile overflights and direct military action in time of war.

Colonel Hugemark, head of the Military History department of the Royal Staff and War College in Sweden, addresses directly Soviet costs and benefits in attacking Sweden either when NATO cannot intervene or in conjunction with an attack on NATO. In either case, the best deterrent would be for Sweden to be credibly armed and credibly neutral. Hugemark's analysis refrains from mentioning a potential second phase where the Soviets have seized southern Norway, using Sweden as a neutral shield which they no longer need. If the Soviets badly need transit rights, would Sweden bend its neutrality? And would the Soviets be satisfied with what satisfied Hitler, once they have Sweden surrounded? Sweden probably hopes for the NATO umbrella to spare them such worries. But what if Soviet special commandos seized Oslo way ahead of their regular forces, and only Swedes could dislodge them in time for the NATO umbrella to unfold itself?

All three military-oriented articles assume continuation of the political-strategic status quo and deal with avoidance of undesirable military futures. Potential Swedish and other reactions to a Soviet disengagement in the Baltic area (as outlined by Gerner) are intentionally not discussed.

Professor Viksnins (Georgetown University, USA), whose article was not part of the Stockholm seminar, deals largely with the past and current economic performance of Soviet Latvia, and his data on store and free market food prices may be especially important. Future prospects are touched upon regarding both status quo and marked change. If sovereignty should be attained, economic de-coupling would have to be thought out (as discussed in the section on "Systemic Development Problems"). In the more likely case of political status quo, economic prospects nonetheless are changing for the Soviet Union and hence for the Baltic republics, calling for new socio-political approaches.

Professor Shtromas (University of Salford, UK) deals squarely with the prerequisites for a non-status quo future: restoration of independence of the Baltic states. It is not a forecast that such a course will take place with a high or even a low probability. It is an analysis of present factors opposed, neutral, or favorable to independence. The likelihood of such an outcome is assessed as "realistic and strong;" it is predicated on a systemic change in Moscow. The Baltic nations have preserved the demographic and psychological capacity for independence. The links that the Baltic dissidents have established with Russian dissidents will enable them to discuss independence without confronting the forces of change in Moscow. Given the lack of political organization in the Baltic countries, the initial input by exile organizations could be more important than the latter might dare to think, especially in the light of widespread international non-recognition of Soviet rule in the Baltic countries. If such opinions came from someone in exile since 1944, one might be highly skeptical, but Shtromas grew up close to Soviet Lithuanian top administrators, which puts it in a somewhat different light.

Taken together, the articles in this issue cover the range in outlook from full acceptance of the status quo to full disregard of it, and neither extreme

satisfies me personally. Those who envisage major changes cannot tell how they get “from here to there.” After many predictions of major changes in a post-Stalin Soviet Union, one feels safer betting on the status quo. The hard-boiled realists are almost always better guides for the near future. But who needs any guide under status quo conditions? Although status quo realists rarely fail, they do fail in those rare instances where it really matters. Those who predicted the continuation of the Shah’s rule were right for 90% of the years—and yet basically wrong.

Is this the best a body of scholars can do regarding Baltic futures? Take a look once in a while, conclude that it is all blurry, and go and deal with the past for the next ten years? There is one approach that seems to be under-exploited: establishing trends and thinking them through. The status quo includes not only present situations but present *trends* that constantly undo the present situations. In mathematical terms: let the realists not fixate on x to the point of ignoring dx/dt . And let those who predict change make some effort to indicate which functional form of dx/dt would take us from x -subscript-zero to x -subscript-utopia.

Oh yes, discontinuities exist. But they are rare and most often are preceded by a gradual build-up of stress. To an appreciable extent, Soviet and Baltic demographic trends are determined decades ahead, the moment babies are born, to stay around for 70 years in most cases. The status quo is not one of an aging Latvian-Estonian population facing younger immigrants but a bulge of Latvians/Estonians born around 1900 on their way out and a bulge of post-war immigrants on their way to retirement homes. Russian fertility and family sizes in the Baltic republics stopped being higher than the Balts’ several decades ago, but most of us still cannot believe it. If we ignore trends, we are reduced to operate not on the basis of today’s status quo but of yesteryear’s. What is the future of demographic Russification when Russians have low and Uzbeks high birth rates? What is the future of linguistic Russification in a world undergoing full-speed Anglicization? What do measurable Soviet and Baltic economic indicators tell us regarding changing interaction patterns—and changing thinking patterns in Moscow? If there is to be another Baltic Futures seminar, these approaches are vitally essential.

Besides quantitative trends, qualitative changes have to be thought through. Even a political scientist should realize that there is a cultural aspect to a future, and a physicist should realize that x may no longer represent the same variable in a changing social context. Take “restoration of independence.” What does “restoration” mean? The way it is used in history books, one might think it is a synonym for “failure.” What is one supposed to restore? The Baltic independence in 1920-39 was comparable to that of the Netherlands of 1920-39. Since then, the Netherlands have traded in part of their military sovereignty (NATO membership, including foreign troops on Dutch soil), economic sovereignty (European Community membership), and even some political sovereignty (European Parliament). What would a restoration of Baltic independence mean? If it is the

independence of the Netherlands of 1920-39, where is the museum to fit it in? If it is the independence of the Netherlands of 1986, where is the restoration of the status quo ante? Clearly, the meaning of the term "Baltic independence" has to be rethought and redefined, if the Baltic Question is to be discussed in a futures context.

Perhaps lawyers are able to envisage a dichotomy of independence or the lack of it, but anyone looking at the real political scene observes a shifting quasi-continuum. Latvia is more independent than Mordovia but less independent than Lithuania. Bulgaria is more independent than any of them, but less so than Hungary or Romania, which in turn are less independent than Finland or Albania, which are surpassed by Sweden. If one reverses some of my rankings, this would still imply agreement with continuum rather than dichotomy. If one thinks Sweden is "completely" independent, one had better re-read Hugemark's article. In our interdependent world, even superpowers are not completely independent.

All this indicates that "Baltic Futures" is not a subject that can be disposed of with the present issue. It would take considerable clearing of conceptual underbrush even to prove that there is nothing underneath it—and there may be surprises. Atis Lejins and the authors in this issue of the *JBS* are to be thanked for getting the discussion started.