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Memorandum by the Third Secretary of Legation in Latvia (Abbott)⁷⁶

THE BALTIC STATES AND THE EASTERN PACT

In attempting to analyze the real attitude of the Baltic States toward the so-called Eastern Locarno Pact, a distinction must be made between the viewpoints of Latvia and Estonia, which in general are identical, and that of Lithuania, which is considerably different, in spite of the fact that as members of the recently formed Baltic Entente the three countries have officially followed a joint policy.

In brief, it is believed that Latvia and Estonia are fundamentally opposed to an Eastern Pact of mutual assistance for the following reasons:

1. They feel that the League of Nations, the Kellogg Pact,⁷⁷ their non-aggression and conciliation treaties with Russia, and the Baltic Entente should provide a very considerable degree of assurance for their independence and security, and do not therefore feel the necessity of making any special sacrifice for the purpose of obtaining additional guarantees.
2. They feel that such a sacrifice of their interests would be involved, as they consider that the inspiration for the pact is primarily Russian, that it is hostile in spirit to Germany, and that if they were to join it they would place [Page 233] themselves under Russian influence and in opposition to Germany, and abandon their basic principle of following a neutral, independent, purely Baltic foreign policy.
3. They realize that a pact of mutual assistance of the type proposed by Russia and France involves an obligation to permit the passage of foreign troops in case of war, and that this would involve a serious danger to their independence.
4. They realize that by joining the proposed pact they would be forcibly drawn into any war breaking out in Eastern Europe.

It should be mentioned that the viewpoint of Finland appears in the main to be the same, and has been much more clearly expressed in the past—which probably explains why Finland was not included in the countries which were expected to join the pact.

On the other hand, Lithuania obviously favors the Eastern Pact. At the present time she has extremely close political, economic and military relations with Russia, and is predisposed to look with favor on any project sponsored by that power. Moreover, the present relations of Lithuania with her two powerful neighbors, Germany and Poland, are so strained that she is not inclined to scrutinize too critically any measure which offers her immediate additional security.

To understand the viewpoint of the Baltic States, one must take into account their previous history. Estonia and Latvia have a heritage of centuries of subjection under German and Russian rule which has left them with a dislike of their former masters, a somewhat elated appreciation of their newly won freedom, and a spirited determination to keep it. The past history of Lithuania differs from that of the other two Baltic states, firstly in that the pre-war land owners were Poles and not German Baits, and secondly in that Lithuania has had the experience of being at one time an independent and powerful nation. The memory of

their past glories has a strong influence on the present character of the Lithuanian people.

The events of the years 1918–1921, when Latvia and Estonia experienced first a German occupation—with the accompanying plans for colonization of the Baltic Provinces with German ex-soldiers—and then a Bolshevik occupation, have also strongly influenced the viewpoint of these states. The land-owning peasantry, which is the backbone of both countries, has ingrained in it a distrust and hatred of Baltic Barons and German plans for expansion along the Baltic, but even more of Bolshevism. Both Latvia and Estonia are fortunate in having almost exact ethnographic boundaries and consequently have had no boundary disputes of any consequence. Lithuania, on the other hand, has the two serious problems of the Vilna and Memel districts which have embittered her relations with Poland and with Germany, and which influence her foreign policy almost to the exclusion of any other factors.

The geographic situation of the Baltic States makes their security a difficult and important problem not only to [Page 234] themselves but to their powerful neighbors. None of the three states have any natural boundaries (unless Lake Peipus might be so considered in the case of Estonia), and they are open to attack from both land and sea. They are certain to be the field of a war between Russia and any of her western rivals, especially a war between Germany and Russia. This strategic situation has always made difficult the relations of Latvia and Estonia with Russia, since both the former know that they have reason to fear Russia's natural desire to control an area so important to her defense, while Russia has always regarded with suspicion their relations with other powers; and any action not meeting with Russian approval has evoked accusations that the Baltic States were the tools of imperialistic powers preparing to attack Russia through their territory. This mutual distrust is one of the chief reasons why Latvia and Estonia have shunned too close relations with Russia but at the same time have been careful to avoid offending her. The history of security in the Baltic is thus largely the story of the efforts of three small new states to insure their independence, on the one hand, and the efforts of Russia to protect her western border, on the other.

When the Baltic States were being formed, and were bargaining for recognition from the Allied Powers, there was some sentiment in favor of a guaranteed neutral status similar to that of Switzerland. This idea, however, did not meet with much favor from the Western Powers, and was soon abandoned by the Baltic States themselves.

While they placed great importance upon their admission to the League of Nations and the security offered them by Article 10 of the Covenant,⁷⁸ the states formed wholly or in part from former Russian territory felt the need of some additional guarantee of their security and independence, since the Soviet Union was not a member of the League. In the case of Rumania and Poland, this additional security was obtained through a military alliance with France. The Baltic States on the other hand felt that the better solution was the formation of a Baltic union. Under the original idea, such a union was to include all the Baltic States from Finland to Poland; and in the early years of their independence considerable progress towards the formation of such a union was made. While its final accomplishment was prevented largely because of the seizure of Vilna by Poland, and partly by the inability of Finland to decide whether its interests lay with the Baltic or the Scandinavian States, a feeling of unity among the Baltic States and a desire to act together in all measures affecting their security has always existed. [Page 235] This desire for joint action has always been opposed by Soviet Russia, and until 1934, with success.

Russian efforts to increase the security of its western frontier began with proposals for non-aggression pacts in 1922 and 1923. Nothing came of these proposals, and the question was allowed to drop until 1926, when new proposals were made to the five Baltic States. As Lithuania earnestly desired to strengthen her position against Poland, a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Government was concluded, and ratified in November [*September?*], 1926.⁷⁹ After prolonged negotiations, a Latvian-Russian non-aggression pact was initialled in 1927. This treaty was never ratified, partly because of difficulties in agreeing on the terms of a conciliation convention which was to form an annex to it, and partly because of a change of administration in Latvia, involving the fall of the strongly pro-Russian Social Democratic Government which had negotiated the treaty. No progress in negotiating a non-aggression pact was made in Estonia; and the initialling of such a pact by Latvia aroused considerable resentment, as it was felt that the two countries should have followed a joint policy.

The satisfactory relations between Russia and Germany prevailing after 1926 greatly reduced the danger of war in Eastern Europe and caused a lapse of interest in security measures both in Russia and in the Baltic States. By 1931, however, conditions had changed. Russia was fearful of difficulties in the Far East, and the rise of Hitlerism in Germany was viewed with distrust. Russia accordingly approached all the states on her western border, from Rumania to Finland, with new proposals for non-aggression pacts. The plan was supported by France, which was also negotiating a non-aggression treaty with Russia at this time. The Baltic States could not well refuse this offer. Estonia, Latvia and Finland wished to negotiate jointly, but this Russia refused to do.

Finland was the first to sign,⁸⁰ followed shortly afterwards by Latvia, on February 5, 1932.⁸¹ Latvia was considerably influenced during the negotiations by the fact that her commercial treaty with Russia would shortly expire, and it was hoped (as it turned out, in vain) that a conciliatory attitude towards Russia would assist the renewal of the commercial treaty. There was considerable opposition to the treaty in conservative circles, but Latvia did not dare to isolate herself after Poland had announced her intention of concluding such a treaty. Ratification however was delayed until June 18, in order that the Latvian and Estonian treaties should enter into effect at the same time. These non-aggression pacts were supplemented by the convention denning aggression, signed in London on July 3, 1933,⁸² between Russia and a number of other [Page 236] powers including the Baltic States.

In the latter part of December, 1933, the Governments of Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were informally approached by Russia and Poland with the proposal that the Russian and Polish Governments should jointly guarantee the security and independence of the Baltic States. The premature publicity which these proposals received hopelessly prejudiced all chances of their success; and the speech of Litvinov on December 29, 1933, in which he emphasized the interest of the Soviet Union in the security of the Baltic States, and even in internal conditions which might affect that security, aroused a considerable degree of distrust and apprehension in Latvia and Estonia. Considering that the acceptance of the suggestion so made would in effect put them in the status of protectorates of Russia, the four Governments thus addressed rejected the proposal—Finland with a brusque negative, and the others by countering, with cautious decisiveness on the part of Latvia and Estonia, and hesitancy and some indications of regret on the part of Lithuania, to the general effect that any such guarantees for the Baltic States should involve the participation of all the interested Powers.

At the same time there was a revival of interest in a Baltic Entente. This was furthered by the sudden Polish-German *rapprochement* early in 1934, which tended to eliminate Poland as a possible member of such an entente and at the same time greatly alarmed Lithuania and caused her to be more tractable. As a result, the Baltic Entente between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was initialled in Riga on August 29, 1934, and signed in Geneva on September 12, 1934.⁸³

When Russia and France advanced the idea of an Eastern Pact of mutual assistance, which was to include Russia, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, the political situation in Eastern Europe was extremely complicated. There has grown up a sharp antagonism between Russia on one side and Poland and Germany on the other. The Baltic States were extremely distrustful and nervous regarding the Eastern European policy of Nazi Germany; but Estonia and Latvia were even more distrustful of Russia and her new and exaggerated concern for the security of the Baltic States. They especially desired to avoid being drawn into the sphere of either Germany or Russia. The situation was further complicated by the considerable influence of Poland in both countries, and by the increased tendency in Lithuania to depend on Russian support in its disputes with Germany and Poland. Furthermore there had appeared in Latvia and Estonia [Page 237] authoritarian governments which were strongly anti-Communistic and anti-Socialistic.

The official attitude of the Baltic States towards the so-called Eastern Locarno Pact has, from the beginning, been favorable on the surface. The Foreign Ministers of Latvia and Estonia announced their general approval of such a plan on July 29, 1934, soon after the idea was put forward; but they were careful to state that this approval was only of a pact including all the Powers originally mentioned as signatories. Shortly afterwards, the Foreign Minister of Lithuania expressed a similar attitude during a visit to Moscow. The next official statement was some time later, at the first meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the

newly formed Baltic Entente in Tallinn on December 21, 1934, when it was announced that "The three States reaffirm their sympathetic attitude towards the proposed Eastern Pact of Mutual Assistance, and they agree to regard this matter as a question of common interest, in relation to which they will maintain unanimity of action." This expression of approval was, however, somewhat hypothetical, since no text of the proposed pact had as yet appeared.

The British-French proposals for a general European security system, developed at the London Conference of February, 1935,⁸⁴ were followed by visits of the Baltic Ministers in Paris and London to the Foreign Ministers of France and Great Britain on March 9 and 13, respectively, for the purpose of announcing that the Baltic States were in favor of an Eastern Security Pact and were especially interested that this pact be made a part of the general European security system.

The indication of the attitude of the Baltic States was an article by Mr. Vilhelms Munters, Secretary General of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was published in Riga on March 8, 1935.* In this article, Mr. Munters for the first time drew attention to the actual obligations which such a pact would place upon the Baltic States.

The mention by Mr. Munters of the question of the passage of troops is significant. In an informal discussion on March 17, with a member of the staff, Mr. Ludwigs Ekis, formerly Counselor of Legation in London, and Chief of the Western Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and now Minister of Finance, stated that letting foreign troops into Latvia, under a neutral guarantee pact, was one thing, but getting them out again was quite another. He intimated that Mr. Munters' mere mention of [\[Page 238\]](#) the point concerning the passage of troops was intended to convey a certain lack of enthusiasm for the pact.

In so far as the official attitude of Latvia and Estonia towards the Eastern Pact has failed to accord with their fundamental viewpoint as set forth above, the explanation is to be found in their unwillingness to put themselves in the position of directly opposing and antagonizing Russia. The fact that France jointly sponsored the plan, and that Italy and Great Britain have joined in treating it as an element in the proposed system of collective security, has also made it difficult for them to venture open disapproval. (In this connection, it is to be noted that Mr. Munters, in his article mentioned above, gives the impression that it was France alone which had originated the pact and which was chiefly interested in bringing it to a successful conclusion.) Latvia and Estonia felt, moreover, that they could safely support the idea of an Eastern Pact so long as they specified that it must include Germany and Poland, since they were convinced that these countries would never enter such an arrangement.

This view is directly confirmed by conversations which members of the Legation have had with Prince Michel Sturdza, Rumanian Minister in Riga, in which he stated that Mr. Munters had several times told him frankly that Latvia was basically opposed to the idea of any pact of mutual assistance which might place Latvia under obligations to permit the passage of Russian, German or Polish troops across Latvian territory, but that to avoid offending the Soviet Union or France, Latvia had so far given its qualified approval to the idea on this condition which he was confident would prove unrealizable.

While the visit of the Baltic Ministers in Paris and London lent itself to the appearance of Baltic support for the pact, and was apparently interpreted in this way throughout Europe, it is believed that this visit was really motivated by a fear lest the idea of the Eastern Locarno Pact might so evolve as to result in an arrangement by which the Western Powers, under the guise of having brought about an appeasement in the Baltic area by means of a regional agreement, would in effect have disinterested themselves in the further development of the situation there, leaving Soviet Russia implicitly to assume the position of their mandatory in dealing with such questions of regional concern as might arise. This fear gave point to their assertion of an interest in the question and their insistence that the proposed Eastern Pact should be dealt with as a part of a "general European settlement".

It is not believed that the decision of Germany to reestablish compulsory universal military training or the subsequent diplomatic visits of Sir John Simon and Captain Anthony Eden have changed the attitude of Latvia and Estonia [\[Page 239\]](#) toward the Eastern Pact. The announcement of Germany's decision was received with rather surprising calmness in both countries. In a conversation with a member of the Legation on March 29, Mr. Munters intimated that the Latvian Government

was not especially worried by Germany's action. He went on to state that Germany's refusal to join the Eastern Pact will cause Russia to abandon the idea of the pact and try to form a military alliance with France, which he believes the Russians want even more than the pact.

To sum up, it may be said that the basic objection of Latvia and Estonia to the Eastern Locarno Pact is that it is sponsored by the Soviet Government, and they feel that it is merely another effort to bring them under its influence and definitely force them to join the Soviet-French camp in opposition to Germany. The immediate objection to the pact is the obligation to permit the passage of foreign troops which is contained or implied in this type of pact. These countries realize fully the danger to their independence of any temporary occupation of their territory by either Russian or German troops.

In spite of these fundamental objections to the proposed Eastern Pact, it is believed that Latvia and Estonia would reluctantly join it if Germany and Poland should by some unforeseen possibility agree to do so. Much as Latvia and Estonia dislike the idea of the pact, they would dislike even more to find themselves so isolated as they would be by holding aloof in that eventuality. And it is probable that they would even more reluctantly join if Poland were to do so (even though Germany were to refuse) in order to avoid putting themselves into opposition to a preponderant grouping of Powers including all their immediate neighbors.

On the other hand it is believed that Latvia and Estonia would definitely refuse to join a pact leaving out Poland and Germany, as has recently been advocated in Soviet circles. As Mr. Munters intimates in his article, such a pact would be purely and unmistakably a military alliance against Germany. Lithuania would probably join anything that Russia insisted upon, even though it involved the break-up of the Baltic Entente.

What the Baltic States really want is to have their independence and security guaranteed by the Western Powers, especially Great Britain, under some plan which would be under the supervision of the League of Nations in which they have an extraordinary faith and loyalty.

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[RIGA ,] April 9, 1935.

76. Transmitted to the Department by the Minister in Latvia in his despatch No. 681, April 12; received April 24.↵

77. *Foreign Relations, 1928, vol. I, p. 153.*↵

78. *Treaties, Conventions, etc., Between the United States of America and Other Powers, 1910–1923* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1923), vol. III, p. 3336.↵

79. League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. LX, p. 145.↵

80. January 21, 1932; see *ibid.*, vol. CLVII, p. 393.↵

81. *Ibid.*, vol. CXLVIII, p. 113.↵

82. League of Nations Treaty Series, vol. CXLVI, p. 67.↵

83. *Ibid.*, vol. CLIV, p. 93.↵

84. British Cmd. 5143, Misc. No. 3 (1936): *Correspondence Showing the Course of Certain Diplomatic Discussions ... June 19, 1934 to March 1936*, p. 15.↵

*. Full translation transmitted with Legation's despatch No. 668 of March 30, 1935. [Footnote in the original; despatch not printed.]↵