

Kaarel Piirimäe, *Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Baltic Question. Allied Relations during the Second World War*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 256 p. ISBN 978-113-7442-36-9

In the preface to his book, the author admits to having been shocked at the Western countries' nonchalant, or almost approving, reaction to the Baltic States' disappearance in 1940. This drove him to look into British and American perceptions of the Baltic States during the Second World War. This comes as no surprise, as the author (born in 1979) belongs to the first generation of historians to emerge since the Baltic States regained their independence, where, upon entering the era of postmodernism, the value 'trend' has markedly distanced itself from the established Cold War era rules of what is allowed, and what is not. The author believes that regardless of the existing volumes of literature on the Baltic States issue, his 'interpretation may find a useful niche in the historiography'. Either way, there are grounds for this ambition, as the mass of archival material that the author used is truly awe-inspiring, while his academic orientation is, for the most part, factological objectivity.

Aside from the preface and introduction, the book consists of nine chapters, comprehensive footnotes, a bibliography, index, conclusions and epilogue. While it is a pity that some errors found their way into the index, the book's general appearance is enlivened greatly by photographs, which, like the book's design, bear an additional informational load (the photograph on page 79 is especially characteristic of the book's content). Material is presented in chronological order.

The monograph's main characters are the British prime minister Winston Churchill and the American president Franklin D. Roosevelt. The author is rather sceptical of both figures. Churchill is portrayed as a hardened anti-communist, though one prepared to find compromises in order to preserve his authority. His right-hand man, meanwhile, Anthony Eden, is presented as a kind of alternative, one seeking a consensus of principles with the Soviets. Incidentally, the author views Eden's position in negotiations with Stalin in Moscow on 16–17 December 1941, where the politician unashamedly welcomed the dissolution of the Baltic States, as 'weak' (p. 63). The Soviets gave such epithets referring to Eden, commenting on him as being "spineless" if not a fool' (p. 65).¹ Based on

¹ As the author notes, the epithets have been taken from Vyacheslav Molotov and Sergei Beria's – the son of Lavrentiy Beria – memoirs, which were published

his citation of archival documents, the author even suggests the premise that when the war between the USSR and Germany has become a fact, the Soviets might have agreed 'to restore relations with the Baltic States', yet after Eden's concessions to Moscow, that possibility vanished (p. 68, this version is based on one Estonian diplomat's note to another, p. 185). However, the question remains, from which aspect does he make his assessment of Eden's behaviour in Moscow: from the position of Estonia or the Baltic States, or Britain? Not from any of the latter, most likely, and that, it would seem, is the 'new approach' to history. On the other hand, significant attention in the monograph is given to Britain's intellectual and public opinion on the Baltic States issue during the war years, and the author does not hide the fact that the dominant responses that made up that opinion were 'too small', 'nationalist', 'problematic to security', and so on (pp. 81–92).

Roosevelt is decidedly 'dethroned' in the monograph. The introduction states that 'Roosevelt's record of defending the rights of the Baltic States was in the final analysis not significantly more effective than Churchill's'. The author calls a myth the opinion entrenched in literature 'that Roosevelt saved the Baltic States from being bargained away by the British to the Soviets as a part of the Anglo-Soviet treaty of May 1942'. It is said that 'Roosevelt's objective was to avoid the bargain over territories and spheres of influence [...] to become public ...'. Basically, he did not oppose the formation of spheres of influence, but just tried to avoid signing off on any obligations. This position is illustrated effectively in a quote from Roosevelt's conversation with Maxim Litvinov on 12 March 1942 (pp. 71, 79). Nor does the author have any illusions about Roosevelt's initiated famous Atlantic Charter. In the monograph, it is viewed as an instrument of Western Allied propaganda, one which only encouraged 'political hypocrisy' (p. 55). An interesting aside is that the Foreign Office tried to create a special charter adapted to the Soviets, the Volga Charter, but it apparently failed (p. 58).

Sumner Welles, an under-secretary of state in the State Department, is also presented as a kind of alternative to the Roosevelt line. It appears that it was none other than Welles who initiated 'stronger' phrases in the declaration of non-recognition of the Baltic States' annexation of 23 July 1940: 'predatory activities' against 'the basis of modern civilisation' (pp. 38–40). Yet it would be wise to note that some time later, in his

in the USA. However, this only complicates the situation further, primarily because the memoirs are not free from subjective tendencies. Moreover, in the Russian translations of the above-mentioned memoirs, the evaluation of Eden's position during his negotiations with Stalin are missing completely (See: Ф. Чув, *Сто сорок бесед с Молотовым* (Москва, 1991), с. 70; С. Берия, *Мой отец Берия. В коридорах Сталинской власти* (Москва, 2002), pp. 126–127).

memoirs, the same Welles treated the Baltic States as historically and culturally attributable to Russia.²

The centre of attention in the monograph is details relating to Estonia, which is represented as a symbol of the Baltic States' problems. Unfortunately, this principle does not always stand up to closer inspection. Instead of the usual Versailles system normally used to characterise interwar Europe, here the Versailles-Riga system is presented (p. 8). This particular system could be used as a symbol or key to understanding the whole Baltic States issue, yet this concept is not developed in the monograph. It is unclear what the author has in mind, but it would not come as a surprise that in Estonia, this concept could prompt other associations than in Lithuania.

The stereotype of the Baltic States as a united unit fails in other cases as well. On page 17, it is claimed that on 25 July 1940, Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles had obtained a visa for the Estonian president, Konstantin Päts (but four days later, Päts was deported to Ufa). Meanwhile, Antanas Smetona, the Lithuanian president, emigrated to Germany. And even later, when Smetona reached the USA, his potential to act was restricted due to his 'pro-German sympathies'. This gives rise to the allusion that Estonia had a greater orientation towards Western democratic states than Lithuania. When Germany went to war against the USSR, Estonia's representatives in the USA and Britain asked for the mediation of Western diplomats in order to normalise relations between Estonia and the USSR; at the same time, a similar normalisation of relations was taking place between Poland and the USSR (see pp. 45–46, 68). The author does not mention Lithuania in this context; it is quite possible that he leaves it up to the reader to decide how this kind of initiative from Estonia's diplomats could have looked compared to the situation in Lithuania, where a pro-German government had taken hold. On the other hand, the author cites a response made by the Foreign Office official Christopher Warner about the Baltic peoples in general: 'There can be little doubt that a good many Balts have been serving the Germans ... This will not make the Russians treat them gently ...' (p. 46). Unfortunately, Piirimäe fails to offer a logical explanation as to how the orientations of Balts at the time could have been coordinated with their future prospects.

One of the key subjects in this monograph concerns the circumstances surrounding the preparation of the Anglo-Soviet treaty, plus the treaty itself. In the introduction, the author poses an intriguing claim about how 'Stalin's reasons for halting the pressure on the British to recognize the Baltic states as Soviet territory have not been adequately explained' (p. 4). Another rather effective moment in the monograph is the comparison of the Brits' negotiation strategies with the Soviets' intelligence reports on those strategies that were placed on Stalin's desk (p. 64). Although the

² S. Welles, *The Time of Decisions* (New York, 1944).

author does not aim to distinguish between Soviet security interests and their expansionist aims, objectively, the existence of that dilemma is quite visible in the monograph. Alas, the author's interpretation of the Anglo-Soviet treaty of 26 May 1942 is less than cathartic. Meanwhile, he explains the turning-point in the Soviets' position, when they unexpectedly agreed with the treaty draft recommended by the British that did not mention border recognition, as being motivated by 'wanting to keep their hands free', mentioned in Stalin's own letter to Molotov (pp. 75–76). Incidentally, the author does not think that this turnaround could have been influenced by America's negative stance on fixed borders. But perhaps it was not the negative but the positive aspect which came into play: Roosevelt's proposed example of 'leaving his hands free'. Stalin must have by then already known of the content of Litvinov's conversation with Roosevelt.

The question of recognition of the Baltic States' annexation is justifiably related to the question of the USSR-Polish border in the monograph. Regardless, we are left with the impression that the latter aspect is of secondary importance to the author. From page 73, we gather that Poland's representatives were opposed to Eden's draft (of 28 January 1942), according to which the Baltic States were to be attributed to the Soviets. Lithuania's situation was debated, but it remains unclear just how that argument unfolded: apparently, the Brits could not ignore Poland's interests, but they did take the Soviets' claims into consideration ... (?). The author is correct in noting that Sikorski's government was inclined to sacrifice Estonia and Latvia to the Soviets, hoping to maintain Lithuania under its influence. However, the following statements are left hanging: page 98 'Lithuanian-Polish cooperation had become especially close', and '[Lithuanians] hoped that Poland's restoration of its frontier would save Lithuania from the Soviet menace.' I would add at this point that the literature used by the author, despite its volume, is essentially Anglo-Saxon. He does not refer to either Lithuanian or Polish historiography, and appears to have no knowledge of studies like that by Krzysztof Tarka,³ for example. I also suspect that the author's awareness of problems that lie beyond the time-frame of this monograph is rather limited. Take the passage on page 65, which characterises the negotiations of the summer of 1939 between the West and the USSR: 'Confronted with the choice of either accepting the Soviet demand with the result of alienating the small states, or trying to bolster the resistance of the small states against Nazi aggression, Chamberlain's government had chosen the latter.' What did he have in mind when referring to 'the latter': perhaps the Baltic States' non-aggression pacts with Germany?⁴

³ K. Tarka, *Konfrontacja czy współpraca? Litwa w polityce Rządu polskiego na uchodźstwie 1939–1945* (Opole, 1998).

⁴ The author's reaction to Stalin's stubbornness in demanding Eden recognise the USSR's 1941 borders also appears rather postmodern, see p. 66: 'His objective was surely to deny the British any advantage ...'

But let us return to the two mentioned questions: recognition of the USSR borders with the annexed Baltic States, and recognition of the USSR border with Poland. It has to be said that in the monograph, these two problems essentially stay separated. The dimension that ultimately united them – X – remains unidentified in the text. Keeping in mind the volumes of Anglo-Saxon literature that were used, it would appear that this dimension X is not identified at all in Western political discourse either. This circumstance says a lot, especially when we link it to the Western states' policy of non-recognition of the Soviet annexation. The question that remains unanswered is: what was recognised then?

Another key subject in the monograph is Western states' reaction to Soviet attempts at legitimising the overthrow of the Baltic States. By 1944–1945, in the goals of the Soviets, the emphasis was not on recognition of the USSR borders from 1941, but on attempts at legalising the Sovietised Baltic republics. Usually, these Soviet actions were combined into one goal: to gain recognition of the Baltic States' annexation. But the material presented in Kaarel Piirimäe's monograph would allow us to distinguish between the Soviets' goals mentioned above, albeit only objectively, as the author does not do this himself. This is why at this point it would be worthwhile using features of USSR policy regarding the Baltic States in the period 1940–1945 already recorded in literature, and breaking them down into separate stages.

First, after the 1939 agreements with Germany, the Kremlin settled on having the Baltic States as protectorates, something Western states did not want to allow earlier. But the course of the Second World War soon showed that a protectorate system in the eastern Baltic did not satisfy the USSR interests, nor those of other large European countries. Nevertheless, there are grounds to believe that the Kremlin's decisions to both occupy and annex the Baltic States were not made at once. Initially, the plan was to occupy, eventually changing the regimes in the Baltic States in its favour.⁵ However, once the occupation was achieved on 15–17 June 1940, and considering the resulting developments both in the Baltic States and on the international arena, the Soviets progressed to annexation. They must have thought that no further complications would arise. Incidentally, it is stated in the monograph that 'the decision for full-scale Sovietization was probably made on July 3' (p. 12). Perhaps there are no serious grounds to argue this particular date, but it remains unclear whether the author sees a difference between 'full-scale Sovietization' and 'annexation'.

Second, there is a basis for believing that the US State Department's announcement to the Kremlin of 23 July 1940 was an unexpected and

⁵ Е. Зубкова, *Прибалтика и Кремль* (Москва, 2008), p. 74; П. Судоплатов, *Спецоперации. Лубянка и Кремль 1930–1950 годы* (Москва, 1997), pp. 151–155; А. Славинас, *Гибель Помпеи. Записки очевидца* (Тель-Авив, 1997), pp. 236–237.

unpleasant surprise, and, probably, ever since then the Kremlin thought about how to emerge from the resulting situation without losing face. Konstantin Umansky, the USSR ambassador in Washington, expressing his disappointment with the under-secretary of state Welles, drew attention to the phrasing of the document on the recognition of the Baltic States issued by the USA in 1922, which outlined respect for Russia's principle of integrity. Resting on this argument, Umansky tried to sophisticatedly extrapolate that America's recognition of the Baltic States was only temporary. Welles, not one to relent in this sophistication contest, called Umansky's argumentation 'incorrect'.⁶ A kind of consensus was reached between the Americans and the Soviets on the Baltic question: 'We agree to disagree' (p. 41).

Third. In December 1941, at the Kremlin, Stalin demanded Eden recognise the USSR 1941 borders, treating the Baltic States as territories added to the USSR. Incidentally, Stalin maintained a similar position in 1943 as well, in the Tehran talks with Roosevelt: he saw the Baltic nations as a historical part of Russia.

Fourth. As David Kirby notes, on 6 February 1942, ahead of the British War Cabinet's negotiations with the Soviets, a draft proposal for the Baltic States issue had been prepared, according to which the Baltic States were to keep their internal sovereignty, but foreign policy and defence portfolios had to be handed over to the Soviet Union.⁷ It appears that this could have been something similar to the situation that existed from the autumn of 1939 to the spring of 1940. So far, it is not clear how this draft proposal was negotiated (if at all), and based on what arguments it was rejected by the Soviets. It is a pity that this particular aspect is not discussed in the monograph. (On page 73 it is mentioned that on 13 April 1942, Eden presented a draft proposal, which foresaw 'local autonomy within the USSR' for the Baltic States; also, those wanting to emigrate would have that right. In practice, this painted an aterritorial future for the Balts.)

Fifth. In the spring of 1944, after the so-called reforms that extended the Soviet republics' rights, there was even talk about recognition of international status for the Soviet Baltic republics. In other words, in 1944 it was believed that the Baltic States would be recognised as having the political system which existed in the Soviet Union. Of course, the transparency of this process was complicated by the Soviets 'throwing' all 16 of the republics into the international market. But the version that they

⁶ П. Варес *На чаше весов. Эстония и СССР. 1940 год и его последствия* (Таллин, 1999), pp. 234–235; *СССР и Литва в годы Второй мировой войны*, т. 2: *Литва в политике СССР и в международных отношениях (Август 1940–сентябрь 1945)*, сост. А. Каспаравичюс, Ч. Лауринавичюс, Н. Лебедева, (Вильнюс, 2012), pp. 151–153.

⁷ D. Kirby, 'Morality or Expediency? The Baltic Question in British-Soviet Relations 1941–1945', *The Baltic States in Peace and War. 1917–1945*, ed. V. Vardys, R. Misiunas (London, 1978), pp. 47–58.

just needed votes at the United Nations was soon dismissed (p. 131). In addition, only the western Soviet republics were given precedence, mainly Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. During the Yalta Conference, Lithuania simply 'dropped off' the list (p. 137). How and why remains a mystery.

Another point worth noting in the monograph is Molotov's quote about the possibility of the republics establishing diplomatic relations with other countries: 'exchanging diplomatic representatives was entirely a matter for the republics and Britain and the United States to decide' (p. 124). It appears that Western diplomats were puzzled for some time, because they did not know how to react to this kind of statement. What is more, they did not have a clear strategic position. For example, this is how Averell Harriman responded to Molotov's question on his approach to the Baltic question: 'Washington did not consider it "helpful to be confronted with the question of receiving representatives from Soviet Baltic Republican governments at the present time"' (p. 125). Nevertheless, Western diplomats *de facto* commenced to establish ties with the Soviet republics: as the material presented in the monograph suggests, this was especially characteristic with regard to Ukraine.

The monograph's author calls the Soviet republic reforms the 'autonomy laws' according to the USSR Constitution of 1936. Anthony Eden used the same title for these reforms. But what is interesting is that the possibility of the Soviet republics becoming international subjects went almost automatically parallel with the eventual transformation of Britain's colonies into states with greater sovereignty (pp. 122, 123). As we see from the episodes from the Yalta (1945) and Paris Peace (1946) conferences included in the monograph, the status of the Baltic States and India could have been an object of exchange. Remarks made by Western politicians are noteworthy in this regard: 'toward the coming of age' by Eden; 'this ought to tide things over for a few years until the child learns how to toddle' by Roosevelt (p. 127). They are evidence that there was a point to the 'progressive sovereignty' option, albeit with a hint of irony. However, it appears that the Truman administration put an end to this progress (pp. 134, 141, 160). In fact, Stalin was against the allusions of 1947 to a British embassy in Kiev, as we learn from the monograph, but that was already a different period in history, not 1944–1945.

Either way, the intriguing question remains, why did the Sovietised Baltic States' eventual transit into the international arena stop? Numerous arguments are given in the monograph. One is that recognition of the Sovietised republics could have interfered with the question of Poland's eastern border (pp. 125–126). But the basis for this argument is doubtful, because, as we know, the Ukrainian SSR and the Belarusian SSR became members of the United Nations, even if they were in a lethargic state. Another argument was the apprehension that, having gained recognition for their republics, the Soviets could go ahead and annex Poland or Czechoslovakia

(p. 123). There are even less grounds for this argument, keeping in mind the nature of the international discourse at the time. The author's allusion to the general trend after the Second World War, to reject the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination, lacks a solid foundation as well. According to Pirrimäe, 'The European system as created after the First World War was not taken as a fixed one' (p. 159). We could agree that, given the outcomes of the Second World War, realisation of the principle of national self-determination was modified. But nor should we ignore the fact that in 1945, all the Central and East European countries were re-established, all except for the Baltic States. We could even state that the Versailles system was put back into place, according to its initial 'genetic' variety, only without the incidental 'Riga' component.

Nevertheless, in the monograph's epilogue, we find a statement borrowed from Paul A. Goble, which brings us to the crux of the problem. According to him, the Western countries' policy of non-recognition of the Baltic States' annexation under Cold War conditions served 'to dismantling the USSR as an illegitimate empire' (p. 160). Yet this kind of claim would suggest that in the non-recognition policy, the question of the Baltics *as states* was not a priority.

Kaarel Pirrimäe's monograph contains a continually repeated refrain: in Western diplomatic circles, the idea constantly raised in discussions with the Soviets was to use the Baltic States as a bargaining chip. The following arguments are given as to why this idea was never completely realised: the Baltic States were too small and inconsequential to be used as an effective bargaining tool in negotiating anything of significance. This is a telling motive that supplements the history of the Baltic States as hostages on the field of grand political actors.

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