

The Baltic States and the Great Powers

Foreign Relations, 1938–1940

David M. Crowe



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To Kathryn



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Preface and Acknowledgments

THE REACQUISITION OF BALTIC INDEPENDENCE in the aftermath of the August 18–21, 1991, coup in the former Soviet Union brought an end to a tragic episode in the rich history of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. This book looks at the origins of their first attempt at nationhood and the significance of the relationship of these countries with the major powers from 1918–1940 on their history during that period. The idea for this work came as the result of graduate work done under Professor Victor S. Mamatey at the University of Georgia. Research on the subject continued over the years in Washington, London, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere and resulted in a number of publications on various aspects of Baltic history. The dramatic political transformations that swept the Soviet Union and the Baltic republics as a result of Mikhail Gorbachev's post-1985 reforms prompted me to begin work on this project. Once it became apparent, at least to those of us involved in Baltic studies over the past few decades, that the changes sweeping the Soviet Union would lead to a dramatic new status for the Baltic states, the need for this study became more pressing. Although some details, particularly those dealing with the Soviet conquest of the Baltic countries in 1940 were well known, little had been done, except by a small group of specialists, on their more complex international relationships. The significance of the Baltics as a buffer and avenue between Germany and the Soviet Union had always been acknowledged, though little was done to discuss their complex relationships with one another and the broader international community. Tragically, as this study shows, their fate from the outset of their efforts to acquire independence after World War I was tied to that of the two countries that played such an important role in destroying it twenty-two years later—Soviet Russia and Germany. This situation became particularly apparent by 1938. As the European scene heated up in the face of growing German aggression, the Baltic countries found themselves less and less in control of their own destiny. Diplomatic and military pressure was used time and again to force them

gradually to abandon various aspects of their autonomy, culminating in their complete takeover by the USSR in the summer of 1940.

Yet this study is more than a mere look at power politics in Eastern Europe in 1938–1940. It also explores the historical and ethnic differences essential to an understanding of the complex and often unfathomable forces that have helped form the history of that region and continue to plague it. In addition, this work also looks at the powerful human forces that so deeply affected the history of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. It underscores the dreams, ideals, and motivations of a number of important diplomats, politicians, and soldiers who molded the history of the Baltic states and the nations around them. Central to this story were Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, whose fears and ambitions make up a major part of this tale, along with other important, though less well known, figures.

As in any work, the success of this book is directly tied to the support given by a number of individuals. I would first like to thank those unnamed specialists and their assistants at the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane and Kew who were so patient with me over the years, as well as a similar group in the National Archives of the United States. I would particularly like to thank Rodney A. Ross of the Center for Legislative Archives of the National Archives, who spent tireless hours preparing the freshly opened files of the House Select Committee on Communist Aggression for me. I would also like to thank Alexander S. Bulatov, of the USSR Academy of Foreign Trade, for the valuable primary sources he provided me during the course of my research and writing. Equally supportive has been my student assistant in the Department of History at Elon College, Heidi De Preiter, and the department's incomparable secretary, Brenda Cooper. I also salute Teresa LePors, the reference and public service librarian at the McEwen Library at Elon College, who again and again ran down sources in a number of languages essential to my work. I would also like to acknowledge Elon College's Research and Development Committee for its generous Summer Research Grant that enabled me to complete this project.

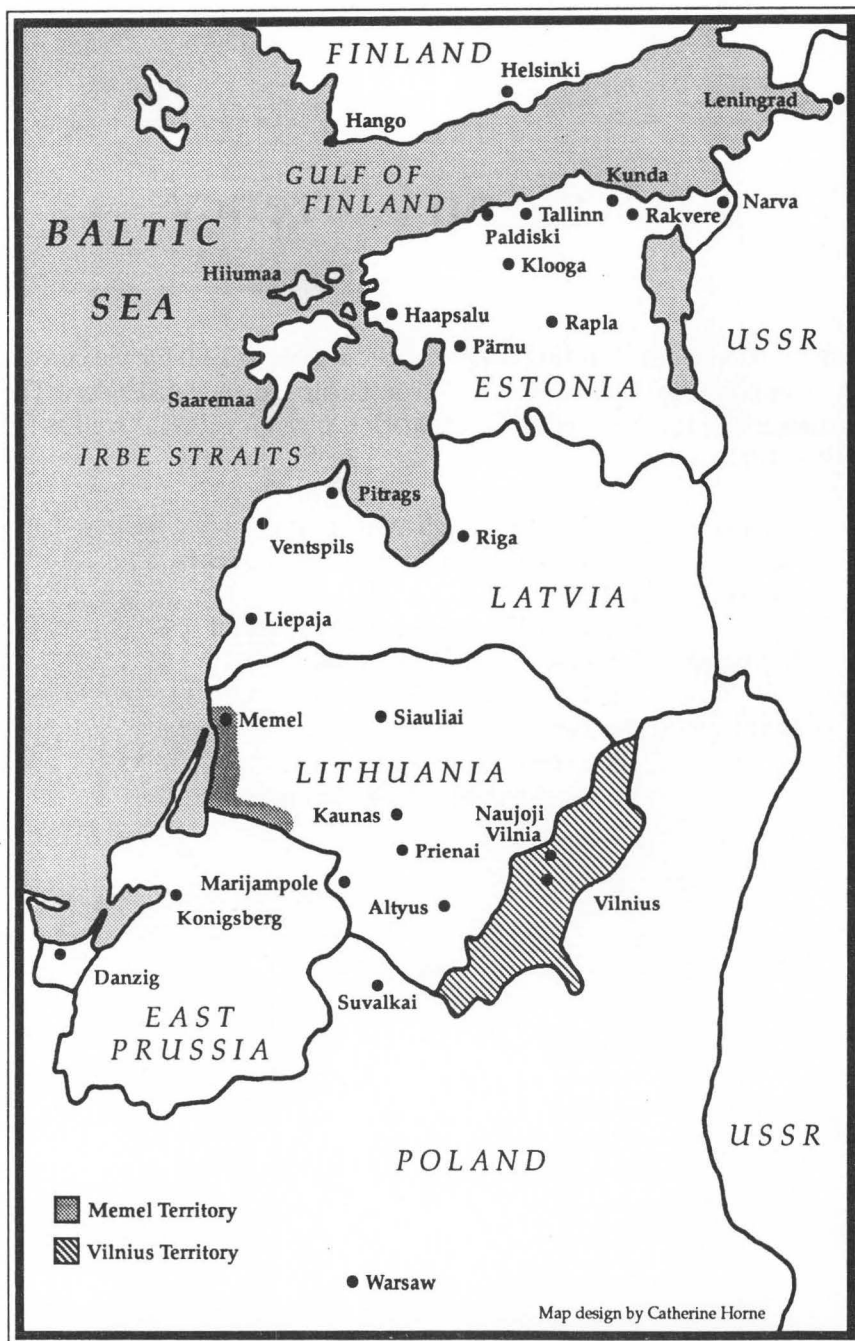
However, the most important person in this effort has been my intellectual companion and silent collaborator, Kathryn Moore Crowe, to whom this book is dedicated. Not only has she supported and encouraged me to complete it, she also played a major role in preparing the manuscript for final submission. Her efforts made the project much more enjoyable and meaningful.

David M. Crowe

A Note on Currency

THE EXCHANGE RATES during the period from 1938 to 1940 for the currencies mentioned in the text were fairly consistent and are listed below. The exchange rate for the German Reichsmark is given for 1928 as well as for 1938–1940.

Estonia	Kroon (singular); Krooni (plural) US\$1 = 3.92 Krooni; 1 Kroon = 100 Sents
Latvia	Lat (singular); Latos (plural) US\$1 = 6.05 Latos; 1 Lat = 100 Sartimi
Lithuania	Litas (singular); Litai (plural) US\$1 = 6.05 Litai; 1 Litas = 100 Centu
Germany	Reichsmark(s) 1928: US\$1 = 4.21 Reichsmarks 1938–1940: US\$1 = 2.5 Reichsmarks



The Baltic States and the surrounding area

1

Seeds of Discord: 1918–1938

THE BALTIC STATES—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—emerged as independent nations at the end of World War I. Over the next twenty years, they struggled to create the political, economic, and social institutions necessary for survival in the chaotic interlude between the twentieth century's two world wars. The Baltic states also tried to develop diplomatic ties that complemented their tenuous geographical and strategic positions along the southeastern Baltic littoral and that would allow them to enjoy normal status in the international community. Domestic political immaturity as well as the abnormal swirl of events in Eastern Europe between 1918 and 1940, however, severely compromised the ability of their leaders to pursue completely independent foreign policies. In addition, Baltic leaders discovered that the two nations that had played such an important role in their history prior to independence—Germany and Russia—though temporarily crippled after World War I, would continue to play important roles in determining their future.

The Germans had been an important force in the southeastern Baltic region since the Middle Ages, when the Teutonic Knights and the Knights of the Brotherhood of the Sword conquered and settled the area. For 800 years, they and their descendants, the Baltic Germans, remained a dominant force in Baltic society. Russian influence entered the area in the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great and his successors gradually brought most of ethnic Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under Romanov control. Yet even under the tsars, a Baltic German superstructure dominated Estonian and Latvian life, whereas Polish culture, which had grown steadily since the Polish-Lithuanian union of 1569, dominated ethnic Lithuania.¹

Emergence of Baltic Independence

Despite the stifling cultural and political climate of imperial Russia, an Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian cultural renaissance, buffeted by mild

tsarist economic and agricultural reforms, emerged after the French and Napoleonic revolutions and stimulated a growing sense of ethnic identity in each area. By the time of the 1905 Revolution, several Baltic political movements emerged that paved the way for independence efforts after 1914. The Russian revolutions of 1917 and the Russian civil war provided the background for this struggle, which resulted in Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian nationhood as the former Russian provinces of Estland (Estonia), Livland (Livonia) and Kurland became the independent republics of Estonia (February 1918) and Latvia (November 1918) and much of the three former Russian provinces of Kaunas, Vilnius, and Suvalkai became independent Lithuania (November 1918). Afterward, leaders of the newly independent states worked to gain international *de jure* recognition of their status and join the community of nations. They also tried to adopt foreign policies that complemented their position in northeastern Europe.² Unfortunately, their policies often followed confused directions because of the peculiar power vacuum that existed in the region after World War I. This conflict had severely crippled Germany and Russia—the area's traditional powers—as the new Polish state, prodded by France, tried to expand its influence in the region.³

Great Britain, the other major Western power with interests in the area, continued to pursue its historical goals there; those goals centered on maintaining the balance of power in the Baltic while creating a buffer between Germany and Russia. As part of this plan, the British voiced encouragement for Baltic independence efforts after the October Revolution in 1917, but the encouragement constituted “mere exercises in tactics and propaganda” designed to weaken German influence in the region. By fall 1918, British policymakers saw strengthened support for Baltic state independence as a means of realizing their goals, weakening Bolshevik Russia, and limiting “German influence” in the region. They left the door open, though, for the possible reunion of the Baltic states with a stable Russia because they were uncertain of the ability of these countries to remain independent. By mid-1919, the Foreign Office began to support the concept of “limited independence for the Baltic states based on a treaty, ‘solution by agreement,’” with federation ties to a non-Bolshevik, independent Russian state. Primary in this change was a desire to enhance Britain's economic interests in the area and to bring about peace.⁴

Changing fortunes in the Russian civil war later prompted London to accept the idea of separate Baltic peace negotiations with Lenin's government, though London would not grant the Baltic states *de jure* recognition. The Baltic republics now “had to assume complete responsibility regarding their own war and peace decisions.” Furthermore, London discouraged them from any aggressive policy toward the Soviets, because

the British were not inclined to offer the new countries any more than “material support” in case of a renewed Baltic-Soviet conflict.⁵

London’s antagonists, Germany and Russia, had struggled for control of this important strategic region throughout the Russian civil war. Germany had occupied Lithuania in 1915 and brought the rest of Russia’s Baltic provinces under its sway over the next year. Imperial German officials saw this region as “a German-guarded colony and buffer zone.” As World War I ended, the government of Prince Max von Baden adopted an “October policy” that sought to protect the Baltic German minorities and German economic interests in the southeastern Baltic region. The Allies insisted in Article 12 of the Armistice of November 11, 1918, that Germany maintain forces there to prevent the region from falling into Bolshevik hands.⁶

Britain, a strong advocate of a continued German presence in this area, supported Baltic German Landeswehr efforts to drive Bolshevik forces from Latvia by early spring 1919. Unfortunately, these activities revived German ambitions in the region and resulted in a Baltic German coup against the Latvian government of Karlis Ulmanis on April 16, 1919. For Britain and its allies, the question now was which nation, Germany or Russia, made “the greater threat to British national interests.”⁷

The British government concluded that Germany presented the most immediate threat and demanded that it take actions to restore “the previous status quo” in Latvia. Landeswehr forces, however, continued to operate independently and by early June 1919 were in conflict with Estonian and Latvian troops. The Allied demand that Germany “immediately halt the advance of its forces” was aided by a Landeswehr defeat at Wenden on June 22, though it did not end the Baltic German threat.⁸

The Baltic German commander, Graf Rüdiger von der Goltz, merely re-oriented his policy with an eye toward cooperation with White Russian forces in the region. He hoped to use the Baltic states as “a base of operations” to topple Lenin’s government, “restore the old order,” “lift the Versailles Peace Treaty off its hinges,” and then “perhaps reinstate the German Monarchy.” These dreams were dashed by the end of 1919, however, when a combination of Allied diplomatic and military pressure, native Baltic resistance, and the removal of official German support saw the defeat of German-White Russian forces in Latvia and Lithuania.⁹

Soviet Russia, the other villain in the Baltic wars between 1918 and 1920, was equally unsuccessful. The Russian civil war, which came to engulf the southeastern Baltic area, began in 1918 as an effort by anti-Bolshevik forces to dislodge Lenin’s regime. Estonia, strategically important to the British and the Germans as “a passageway to Russian markets,” had fallen under Bolshevik control several weeks after the October Revo-

lution; however, within three months, the Bolsheviks were forced out of the country by the Germans. The Bolsheviks chalked up important electoral gains in Livonia and in Riga before the Germans took it over in early September 1917, and Lithuania and Kurland, occupied by Germany in fall 1915, remained under German control. Germany acquired Livonia and Estonia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of March 3, 1918.¹⁰

The collapse of the German war effort in November 1918 opened the door for new Soviet Russian opportunities. Red Army forces successfully invaded Estonia and Livonia within weeks of the November 11 armistice, and by early January 1919 had taken the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius. In Estonia and Lithuania, the Bolshevik military threat ended by February 1919, though communist forces were not driven from Latvia until the following summer. At this juncture, Lenin's government began to consider peace with the individual Baltic countries, which, rebuffed in their desire to gain Allied *de jure* recognition, saw peace with Soviet Russia as a means of acquiring recognition of this status. For Moscow, such treaties would bring international recognition and end its diplomatic isolation. After some hesitation, Estonia and then Lithuania and Latvia concluded prisoner exchange agreements with the Kremlin on November 19, 1919; separate, formal peace treaties were signed the following year.¹¹

By the end of 1920, the Baltic states had applied for membership in the League of Nations to acquire its "guarantee" of their "territorial integrity." Although initially rejected for fear of a confrontation with Vladimir Lenin's Soviet republic, Estonia and Latvia were granted *de jure* recognition by the Allied Supreme Council in January 1921. Lithuania did not gain complete Allied acknowledgment of its independent status until summer 1922 because of its territorial disputes over Vilnius and Memel (Klaipeda). All three countries, though, were allowed to join the League of Nations in fall 1921.¹²

The Search for International Identity

Their acquisition of independence and international recognition gave the Baltic states reason to be optimistic about their future. At the same time, they were determined "to strike a balance between their need for foreign aid and their understandable refusal to be dominated by outside economic interests." Consequently, they remained receptive to diplomatic and economic overtures from all countries yet retained an idealistic view of Britain "as their principal benefactor and protector." This attitude was fortified by a strong British presence in the Baltic in the immediate post-war years, which saw London emerge as an important Baltic trading partner. Unfortunately, neither London nor Paris accepted the absolute

permanency of the Baltic states and both governments refused to adopt any stance that would force either of them to defend Baltic sovereignty in the future. This policy reduced the impetus of England's commercial policies, in contrast with France, whose goal imbalance was the reverse, and Germany, whose "political and economic goals were increasingly overlapping."¹³

Weimar Germany, Britain's principal competitor in the Baltic region during this period, saw trade as a means of restoring its international stature and the Baltic states as "springboards" to increased economic ties with the Soviet republic. Weimar leaders sought "to resume economic penetration in the East" to gain "access to Russian markets"; this goal, in the view of the Weimar government, "was dependent on better relations with the border states." One of the most serious obstacles that German diplomats had to overcome was a strong antagonism on the part of the Baltic states toward Germany and toward their German minorities, particularly in Latvia. Because Berlin felt this group was "a vital key to the success of the Weimar Republic's proclaimed goal of friendly Weimar-Baltic relations," one of its principal diplomatic aims in Estonia and Latvia in the 1920s was to get the Baltic peoples to distinguish between "the Reich German and the German Balt." Berlin chose to emphasize "a German policy and not that of the Baltic barons."¹⁴ Unfortunately, German efforts, linked to formal trade discussions with Latvia and Estonia in 1921 and 1922, failed to temper both countries' harsh nationalization laws aimed principally at the Baltic Germans. At the same time, the commercial talks collapsed because Tallinn and Riga insisted that their war claims against Germany be settled simultaneously with formal trade agreements. Gustav Behrendt, head of the Eastern Department of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, (Foreign Office, Ministry) concluded that "the regional Baltic alliance projects were a crucial factor in the obvious reluctance of Estonia and Latvia to finalize trade deals with Germany." These discussions, though, "contributed indirectly to the eventual stabilization of relations between Germany and Russia"—the two countries signed a trade accord on May 6, 1921—and paved the way for a stronger German economic role in the Baltic states later on.¹⁵

Poland, the southeastern Baltic's other significant power, also presented difficulties for the area's new countries, particularly Lithuania. Led by Vilnius-born Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, who envisioned a Polish-led federal union of small countries in the region, Warsaw tried unsuccessfully throughout the 1920s to assume a dominant leadership role among its smaller neighbors. A number of internal and external conflicts arose that destroyed these efforts, particularly in the Baltics.¹⁶

The most serious conflict was the illegal Polish seizure of Lithuania's ancient, polonized capital, Vilnius, on October 6, 1920. The Lithuanian government, which considered itself in a "state of war" with Poland be-

cause of this move, antagonized many countries because of its stubborn efforts to seek international redress on this issue. The government's response also had a negative impact on its Baltic-state neighbors, which, as one League of Nations official put it, "had a certain common international identity." Lithuania's efforts also "hampered Polish ambitions of organizing a Baltic bloc" and antagonized the British and the French, who, though initially angered by the Polish coup, tended "to look at Kaunas through Polish glasses."¹⁷ These problems intensified when the Lithuanian government, following Poland's example, seized Memel on January 10 and 11, 1923, at the same time that French and Belgian forces occupied the Ruhr. Although the major powers sanctioned Lithuania's move with the Memel Statute of 1924, the Lithuanian government found the district hard to administer because of the resistant German population. As a result, Lithuania became even more isolated at the very time its Baltic neighbors were searching desperately for a diplomatic vehicle that would collectively strengthen their position in the area.¹⁸

The region's other meddlesome power, at least from the perspective of Britain and Germany, was France, Poland's closest ally. Although its influence in the area eventually waned, France emerged from World War I seeking to counterbalance Germany and to contain the Bolshevik presence in Eastern Europe. Initially Paris regarded the Baltic states as "temporary ramparts" against Lenin's government and assumed they would ultimately be reunited with a "resurrected liberal Russia." French leaders looked to Poland as the only large country in the southeastern Baltic that could play a leadership role in this process, which rested on the creation of a "cordon sanitaire around Russia composed of the new small states on the Soviet borders." The linchpins of this system were Poland and Czechoslovakia, which Paris felt were strategically important as "'bastion states' projecting as salients deeply in German territory." French influence among the Baltic states rested on its encouragement of a Polish-led bloc of nations that included Estonia, Latvia, and at some point, it was hoped, Lithuania. The French government, though, did not back up its efforts with a strong economic presence among the Baltic countries, a policy that neutralized some of the effectiveness of its political goals.¹⁹

Concern over the threat of Bolshevik Russia, uncertainty about a momentarily crippled Germany, the emergence of a new and aggressive Polish state, and Lithuania's conflict with Poland deeply affected Baltic diplomatic and military considerations. As the Baltic nations sought to heal the wounds of war, their diplomats struggled to find ways to maneuver through this complex maze of regional instability to develop protective but nonantagonistic foreign policies with each other and with their large neighbors.

Seeds of Baltic Unity

One of the most important efforts by the Baltic states centered on some form of Baltic unity. Seeds for this approach had arisen during the wars of independence between 1918 and 1920, when Baltic military and political leaders met to discuss mutual concerns aimed at winning independence from the Soviet Union. Their most significant efforts dealt with the formation of some type of regional coalition of states that would afford them a measure of collective political, economic, and military strength and security. Efforts by Poland, which were encouraged by France, to assume a pre-dominant role in such a union was met with increasingly strong Soviet and German opposition. Lithuania's refusal to deal with Poland during this period further neutralized attempts by the Baltic states to draw closer together. Despite these problems, serious efforts were made to create some form of common, regional Baltic union. At the Bulduri Conference of August 6–September 6, 1920, Estonian, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish representatives approved the concept of a common monetary and economic union, a Baltic Economic Council, an arbitration convention, a defensive military accord, and a regional nonaggression pact. A treaty containing all of these major points was drawn up and would have gone into effect if all states had approved it by December 15, 1920. Unfortunately, the strains of the Polish-Soviet War and the Polish seizure of Vilnius destroyed any prospect that the treaty would be formally accepted by the deadline.²⁰

Renewed fears of Soviet aggression against the Baltic states and Finland at the end of 1920 led Estonia and Latvia to conclude a military alliance in summer 1921, though attempts to draw Lithuania into this circle failed because Kaunas wanted the alliance aimed at Poland, not Moscow. The Kremlin's threat that "an alliance between Latvia and Estonia on the one side with Finland or Poland on the other would be regarded as a *casus belli*" cast a chill over a meeting in Helsinki between Finnish, Latvian, and Estonian officials in July 1921 but did not stop a major conference in Warsaw March 13–17, 1922, that included these three nations and Poland. Although the conference ended with the Warsaw Accord, which pledged neutrality and consultation between any of the signatory powers if one or more were subject to acts of aggression, the Finnish parliament's refusal to approve it once again doomed an attempt at Baltic unity.²¹

The role of Poland in any efforts to create a Baltic union deeply concerned Germany and Soviet Russia. Berlin opposed any alliance system in Eastern Europe that would hamper its efforts to resolve its territorial disputes with Poland and Lithuania, whereas the Kremlin, which viewed Poland as a bastion of Western influence in the region, opposed any moves that ran counter to its desire to keep its capitalistic neighbors disunited.

Consequently, soon after Estonia, Latvia, Finland, and Poland signed the Warsaw Accord on March 17, 1922, Moscow offered Riga, Warsaw, and Tallinn closer diplomatic and economic ties as well as arms limitations at a hastily gathered, pre-Genoa meeting in Riga (March 29–30) to counter what some Soviet diplomats felt was “part of a French plot to surround Russia with military alliances.”²²

Several weeks later, in the midst of the unsuccessful Genoa Conference, the Kremlin signed its dramatic treaty with Germany at Rapallo, which, though it strengthened Moscow’s hand against Poland’s regional designs, created fear among some Baltic diplomats that the new German-Soviet ties would undercut their efforts to be the middlemen for revived trade between Soviet Russia and the West. Consequently, though all three Baltic governments immediately offered “their services as friendly intermediaries in economic matters between Germany and Russia,” the Rapallo accord convinced Latvia’s foreign minister, Zigrids Meierovics, that a Baltic League with Warsaw was the only way to counter the threat of this new alliance and bring stability to the region.²³

Regardless, none of the Baltic states, Finland, or Poland felt it wise to reject Moscow’s invitation to meet in the Soviet capital December 2–12, 1922, to discuss arms reductions and problems of aggression. It became apparent, though, in a series of preparatory meetings that differences among the non-Soviet delegations on military aid and other questions would make it difficult to draft an accord. These differences and Baltic insistence in Moscow that a “moral disarmament” agreement precede a disarmament pact destroyed any hope of success. Before the talks ended, however, Maxim Litvinov, the head of the Soviet delegation and chief of Soviet legations abroad, reminded the delegates about his government’s disillusionment with continued Franco-Polish collusion in Eastern Europe. This warning, combined with Lithuania’s insistence throughout the meeting that Estonia and Latvia support its stance on the Vilnius question in the League of Nations and Finland’s diplomatic drift toward Scandinavia, underlined the Latvian Foreign Office’s conclusion several months earlier that the only immediate Baltic alliance ties open to it were with Estonia. Spurred by Soviet demands for neutrality and the guarantee of the right of passage in response to a Communist uprising in Germany in the second half of October 1923, Riga and Tallinn signed six agreements, anchored by a ten-year Treaty of Defensive Alliance, on November 1, 1923, that, according to one official, was “the first step towards the alliance of the small Baltic states.”²⁴

The new pact triggered a variety of responses from several of Europe’s major powers. The French government wanted Poland to consider adhering to the Estonian-Latvian agreement, and the pact heightened German Foreign Office interest in what it now termed *Randstaatenpolitik* (border state politics). Georgii Chicherin, the Soviet foreign minister, in an inter-

view in the *Manchester Guardian*, blamed the new alliance on French diplomatic activity and felt that the only way that Soviet Russia's small neighbors could "solve the problem of their healthy development" was through closer ties with Moscow.²⁵ The Estonian-Latvian treaties also stimulated several Baltic conferences in 1924 that ended without any significant changes in Baltic unity.²⁶ Britain's and France's *de jure* recognition of Soviet Russia, which Latvian officials felt reduced Western support for the Baltic states, coupled with a violent Communist coup attempt in Tallinn on December 1, 1924, convinced Estonia and Latvia to try to meet again jointly with Finland and Poland in Helsinki in mid-January 1925 to discuss their differences. However, a Soviet warning to Latvia several weeks before the conference that Moscow would consider any military accords with Poland "a hostile act" weakened Latvian enthusiasm for the meeting. This warning and continued friction between Lithuania and Poland seriously undermined the conference, though the delegates did conclude a general arbitration treaty and other minor pacts.²⁷

The failure of the Helsinki meeting to resolve the question of Baltic security prompted Meierovics to look to Germany and the USSR for such guarantees. Meierovics's stance, coupled with Germany's offer of an arbitration treaty, a trade agreement, and the possibility of a German-Soviet-Baltic alliance system, was met with strong Franco-Polish opposition. Warsaw's pressure on Estonia undercut Meierovics's efforts to hold a joint Baltic state conference on Berlin's offer, and separate visits by Meierovics and Kaarel Pusta, the Estonian foreign minister, to the West that summer convinced the former that "a close connection with Poland seems less attractive than ever." Pusta evidently reached the same conclusion before he arranged an arbitration treaty with Germany on August 10. This agreement, coupled with the decision to delay what would be the last of the annual Baltic Entente Foreign Ministers' conferences for some years and Meierovics's untimely death on August 22, ended an important era in Baltic foreign relations.²⁸

Failed Baltic Security Efforts

The Locarno treaties of October 16, 1925, which restored Germany's international prestige and gave it "a freer hand" in Eastern Europe, prompted Latvia and Poland to float separate Eastern Locarno pacts to give their areas protection similar to that afforded Western Europe. Riga's proposal fell on deaf ears, and Poland found a similar lack of interest from most of its neighbors and hostility from the Soviet Union. Moscow, supported by Germany, countered with an offer of a separate Polish-Soviet nonaggression and neutrality pact with a clause that pledged both countries not to

join any alliance aimed at the other in order to keep Warsaw from creating an anti-Soviet Baltic bloc. Poland, uninterested in singular ties with the Soviet government, rejected the idea.²⁹

Moscow followed up this offer on March 5, 1926, with individual neutrality, nonaggression, and border guarantee proposals to the Baltic states and Finland that would separate them from Poland and weaken their bonds with each other. Encouraged by similar agreements between Berlin and Moscow on April 26, 1926, Tallinn, Riga, and Helsinki responded with separate but similar lists of qualifications on May 5 that underscored their fears about the impact of the Soviet terms on their military and diplomatic ties with other countries and the League of Nations, as well as Soviet efforts to isolate them diplomatically. In the meantime, the Lithuanian government had entered into secret negotiations with the USSR on these proposals.³⁰

In the midst of these developments, Warsaw countered with promises of aid to Estonia, Latvia, and Finland if the Soviets attacked them and, after Marshal Pilsudski's coup of May 12, 1926, noted that similar support from Estonia and Latvia would be required only if Poland were first invaded by the Soviet Union. Warsaw also promised to try to reach a condominium with Lithuania over Vilnius to try to draw it into this circle. Baltic efforts to convince Lithuania to resolve its differences with Poland ground to a halt in August when Lithuania, pressured by Polish troop movements in the Vilnius region, insisted that Estonia and Latvia support its stance on the Vilnius issue as the price for Lithuania's adherence to a pact that included Poland. The following month Kaunas signed a nonaggression-neutrality agreement with the USSR that included in a separate note the latter's "implied recognition" of Lithuania's claim to Vilnius.³¹

Individual talks between Moscow and the other Baltic republics were less successful. Finland and Estonia suspended them because of differences with the Kremlin over the composition of the negotiation commission for the arbitration pact and other issues, and Riga "initialed certain paragraphs of a nonaggression pact" with the Soviet Union on March 9, 1927. Estonia, which had just signed a trade treaty with Poland and a customs union agreement with Latvia, severely criticized Latvia's move because it appeared to compromise the new customs treaty with Riga. Poland voiced similar concern, and the British government, supported by France, questioned the wisdom of the accord, particularly after Soviet officials proclaimed it a "diplomatic victory at Riga over England." On the other hand, Germany, careful to remain neutral in this dispute, was quietly pleased by anything that would draw Latvia into the German-Russian camp and weaken Baltic collusion with Poland.³²

Further discord occurred several months later when Riga and Moscow signed a five-year trade pact on June 2, 1927, that granted the USSR signifi-

cant tariff reductions to encourage Soviet trade through Latvia. Felikss Cielēns, Latvia's foreign minister, responded to a rising crescendo of domestic and international criticism of his tilt toward Moscow with renewed talk of an Eastern Locarno pact whereby Great Britain, France, Germany, and the Soviet Union "would guarantee the neutrality and integrity of the Baltic states." Cielēns's idea had little practical value, as Britain had restricted its limited commitments to areas west of the Rhine and Germany would not be part of any agreement that limited its ability to settle its border differences with Poland. Furthermore, Gustav Stresemann, the German foreign minister, told Cielēns that his country's dispute with Lithuania over Memel was a further hindrance, and the Lithuanian government earlier had insisted on Latvian support of its position on Vilnius as the price for its role in any such pact. In the end, Cielēns was able to salvage only the trade agreement with Moscow. Seven weeks later, his government fell, replaced by conservatives who preferred a "western orientation" for Latvia.³³

Failed Baltic security efforts, however, dovetailed with the heady Era of Locarno that came to symbolize Europe's return to "a more normal period of diplomatic friendship and cooperation." The peak of this era was reached after the United States proposed to fifteen countries at the end of 1927 a treaty that would renounce "war as a means of solving differences and as a tool of national policy." The Franco-American agreement, known as the Kellogg-Briand Pact or the Pact of Paris, was idealistically embraced by the world's major powers. The Soviet government, which felt the pact was aimed at the USSR, tried to neutralize its impact by rapidly agreeing to its terms and then proposing its own regional version—the Litvinov Protocol—in late 1928. Moscow made its initial offer to Poland, one of the original powers invited to sign the accord, and to Lithuania. Similar gestures were later made to Estonia, Latvia, and Romania. Lithuania agreed to the proposal but insisted on signing it separately from the others. The final treaty, which some have termed an act of "negative security," symbolized the end of this phase of Baltic security efforts.³⁴

Era of "Drift" in Baltic Foreign Policy

What followed was a period of "drift" that had already begun to affect Baltic foreign policy. Many of the deeper fears that had driven Baltic diplomats to search desperately for collective means of national security had somewhat dissipated at the same time that many of the nations in the region had begun to mature. In fact, aspects of the international competition—such as the Anglo-German trade rivalry—that had triggered some of this concern had actually helped the Baltic countries by

pulling them “into the orbit of Western economic and political life and away from Russia.” Fears of the Soviet Union had also lessened, particularly after agreement to the Litvinov Protocol, which for once showed Moscow’s willingness to use a collective agreement to achieve some form of “spiritual” security in the region.³⁵ What remained were annoying regional frictions that trivialized relations between the nations along the southeastern Baltic littoral. Estonia cultivated stronger ties with Poland, whereas the Latvian government sought a Western orientation that included some form of “Baltic alliance as a ‘bridge of peace.’” Riga’s ties with Poland remained shaky, though there was strong sentiment for closer relations with Warsaw. On the other hand, Latvian officials were quite critical of the strengthened Estonian-Polish relationship. This attitude, in turn, affected Estonian-Latvian ties, which, despite some military and economic relations, had become something of a dead letter by 1931. Relations with Lithuania remained difficult because of Kaunas’s continued suspicion of its neighbors’ ties with Poland. Yet public interest in Baltic collaboration remained strong, according to a public opinion poll conducted in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by the Latvian newspaper, *Jaunakās Zinas* in fall 1931.³⁶

Baltic Concerns over Germany

What ended this era of drift and uncertainty was fear of Germany. Its domestic and international revitalization created some concern in the Baltic states for several reasons: Germany’s growing economic significance to Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; the relationship of Weimar Germany to the revitalized Baltic German communities of Latvia and Estonia; the rebirth of a strong German naval presence on the Baltic Sea; and Lithuania’s running dispute with Germany over Memel.

In the decade after Baltic independence, Lithuania’s export trade to Germany had grown from 43.3 percent in 1923 to 59.9 percent seven years later. During the same period, Estonia’s export business with Germany had risen from 10.8 percent to 30.1 percent, and Latvia’s from 7.6 percent to 26.6 percent. German import sales to these three nations, however, declined during this period. Sales to Estonia, for example, dropped from 51 percent in 1923 to 28.3 percent in 1930; sales to Latvia, from 45.2 percent to 37.2 percent; and sales to Lithuania, from 80.9 percent to 48.5 percent. Despite this decline, Germany had emerged as the Baltic states’ principal trading partner, rivaled only by Great Britain, which either matched or bought slightly more Estonian and Latvian goods than Germany did. The British purchase of Lithuanian goods was much less significant, and British imports to Estonia and Latvia, which had always been much less than