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INTRODUCTION HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Before the Modern Age

The three Baltic republics formed a distinct and unique cultural unit — a Western enclave within the multi-national Soviet state. They were the only areas of the USSR to have experienced an independent modern national life and modernization not patterned on the Soviet model. Although bound by geographic proximity and a modern history of inclusion in the same empire, the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians are ethnically and culturally diverse peoples. The Estonians speak a Finno-Ugrian language, related to Finnish, which is radically different from those of their two neighbors to the south. Latvian and Lithuanian are the only living varieties of the Indo-European Baltic family of languages. Estonia and Latvia developed within the North European Protestant world, while Lithuanian culture was shaped by the Central and Eastern European Catholic milieu. The histories of the three peoples during the twentieth century, their emergence as independent nation-states after the First World War, their mutual experiences during the interwar period, and their fate during the Second World War and its aftermath have served, however, to affirm a common identity which in some ways has superseded the cultural differentiation of the past.

The homeland of the Baltic peoples, the eastern littoral of the Baltic Sea, was medieval Europe's last pagan backwater. Although it straddled the commercially important waterway between the Varangians and the Greeks, its distance from the two European centers of civilization of the time, the Latin West and the Orthodox East, limited cultural contact between its indigenous inhabitants and the world of Christendom.

The first serious outside incursions into the area date from the beginning of the present millennium. While the occasional campaigns

for booty and tribute by several princes of the East Slav Kiev realm failed to introduce lasting political dominance, the expansion of the Latin West was accompanied by settlement and the imposition of suzerainty. The thrust began toward the end of the twelfth century and first touched the westernmost Baltic people, the Prussians. Within a few decades their lands were subjugated by the military monastic Order of the Teutonic Knights, which had transferred their crusades to this region after suffering reverses in the Near East. A few centuries later the Prussians became extinct, leaving only their name (until 1945) to the lands they had once inhabited. At around the same time the maritime Danish monarchy entrenched itself in northern Estonia, and German merchants colonized the region of the Daugava (Dvina) River. In 1201, a bishopric was established at the core of their operations, Riga. Another German military order, the Brothers of the Sword, pursued the conquest of the hinterland. As had happened with the Prussians, native resistance based on a rudimentary political organization proved sporadic and disunited. Within a century, the conquest of what would subsequently become Latvia and Estonia was completed. Their peoples were absorbed into the social and cultural structures of the world of Western Christendom of the High Middle Ages before they could develop a native political system. The invaders colonized, baptized and gradually enserfed the indigenous population, reducing their identity to an ethnic character, politically dormant until the age of modern nationalism. After the Danes sold their holdings in Estonia to the Teutonic Order in 1346, the area became a loose confederation of the domains of the Order, ecclesiastical estates ruled by princes of the Holy Roman Empire, and a few independent Hansa towns.

During their initial drive of the thirteenth century, the Latin Christians were unable to overwhelm the less accessible Lithuanians. A native chief, Mindaugas (Mindovg), successfully forged the Baltic tribes in the area of present-day Lithuania and parts of Belorussia into a lasting political entity. He inflicted a crushing defeat on the Brothers of the Sword, which led, in 1237, to their amalgamation into the Teutonic Order. Seeking peace with the Germanic invaders, he attempted to integrate his newly established realm into the West European political system. He converted to Latin Christianity and was crowned King on the authority of Pope Innocent IV. But internal strife thwarted his efforts. The Lithuanian state survived his violent end in 1263 at the hands of political opponents. Its society, however, returned to the pagan customs of its ancestors.

During the fourteenth century, a series of particularly able Lithuanian rulers — Gediminas (Gedimyn), Algirdas (Olgerd) and Kęstutis (Kenstut) — managed not only to contain the assaults of the Teutonic Order but also to expand eastward in the wake of the recession of Tatar power. Considerable East Slav territory was absorbed into Lithuania, making it a major power in Eastern Europe. The extensive state, whose rulers and ethnic core maintained their pagan religion, became a cultural battleground between Latin influences and the Orthodox traditions of the incorporated East Slav population. A resolution of this conflict came in 1386. Great Prince Jogaila (Jagiello), pressed by continuing incursions of the Order, sought Polish support. As a condition of his marriage to the heiress of Poland, Jadwiga, and his accession to the Polish throne, he agreed to the baptism of his pagan Lithuanian subjects into the Latin rite. The rule of Jogaila's cousin Vytautas (Vitovt), as Viceroy according to theoretical West European designation but as an independent Great Prince in practice, saw the apogee of Lithuanian power. The realm stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from the outskirts of Moscow to Poland. In 1410 the combined armies of Poland and Lithuania inflicted a crushing blow on the Teutonic Order at Grünwald (Tannenberg). It was never able to recover, and thereafter ceased to be the threat to Lithuania that it had been for two centuries.

The nearly 200 years of personal union with Poland, never clearly defined in the political sense, lasted until 1569 and had two long-term cultural effects on the ethnic core of the Lithuanian state: the Christianization of the Lithuanians according to the Latin Rite and the Polonization of the Lithuanian nobility. The older and culturally richer Polish society proved irresistible to the Lithuanian nobles. While a sense of distinct political identity was preserved for a long time, the Lithuanian nobility became culturally indistinguishable from their Polish counterpart. The effect on the peasantry was similar to that in Estonia and Latvia — enforced Christianization and enserfment to a nobility which could not speak their language.

As a result of the Reformation, the Teutonic Order and the ecclesiastical domains in the Estonian and Latvian lands became politically anachronistic. Their secularization coincided in time with the colonization of the New World, which attracted adventurous Europeans, and led to a manpower problem in the successors to the Order. Unable to defend themselves adequately, they began to seek foreign protection. The major political realignments were triggered by a Russian push toward the Baltic launched by Ivan IV. In reaction,

the rulers of northern Estonia preferred to submit to Sweden in 1561. The nobility of Livonia (southern Estonia and eastern Latvia) sought Lithuanian protection in 1560. Their lands were incorporated into the Lithuanian state; the western part of Latvia became the Duchy of Courland, a personal fief of the Lithuanian and Polish sovereign. Not long thereafter, also in a reaction to the Muscovite push, Lithuania regularized its personal political union with Poland into a formal constitutional arrangement. While duality of sovereignty was retained, a new Commonwealth structure with a joint sovereign and legislature was established at the Union of Lublin (1569).

The Commonwealth successfully resisted the Russian drive. However, it was not able to contain the Swedes. In 1629, Livonia was divided. Its northwestern half, including the city of Riga, came under Swedish overlordship; its eastern portion, Latgale, remained under Lithuanian rule. The status of the Duchy of Courland did not change. Except for Latgale, whose association with Lithuania for two centuries made it distinct from the rest of Latvia, the cultural boundary between Lithuania and the north acquired a long-standing character as one between Catholic and Lutheran worlds, and between Polish and German social and administrative practices.

Although Sweden itself had never experienced enserfment, the system of peasant bondage continued in its Baltic provinces. As a result, the sympathies of the government were not always automatically on the side of the Baltic barons. However, Sweden depended on the barons for military service and on uninterrupted grain imports from the region, and could not afford wholly to alienate the local seigneurs. On the whole, conditions among the peasants worsened during the course of the seventeenth century. However, in view of even worse times later, Estonians and Latvians have come to regard the Swedish period in their history rather warmly.

The next major change in the political configuration of the region came with the renewed and successful Russian push to the Baltic Sea during the Great Northern War. The Treaty of Nystad (1721) confirmed Russian possession of Livonia and Estland (northern Estonia). The imposition of Russian rule allowed the local nobility to reassert some of their former prerogatives which had been whittled down during Swedish times. Among its provisions, the peace settlement guaranteed all former noble rights, among them self-government and unlimited rule over the peasants, which had fallen into disuse. It is doubtful whether any other area in Europe at the time produced quite the extent of legal argumentation designed to redefine and, in

so doing, expand nobles' rights over their peasants. As a practical consequence, a closed corporation of 324 families established a monopoly of landholding in the area. The Baltic German barons proved loyal subjects of the Russian Empire. New opportunities for advancement in the administrative, diplomatic and military service developed, allowing them to expand their influence in St. Petersburg far beyond what their relatively small numbers warranted. For the Latvian and Estonian peasants, however, the late eighteenth century marked the nadir of their rights and living conditions.

In addition to the annexation of Livonia and Estland, the Russian Empire established *de facto* control over the Duchy of Courland, which had become virtually an independent state during the preceding century. Likewise, Russia managed to exercise preponderant influence over the decadent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Internal attempts at reform in this state triggered foreign intervention and its extinction as a political unit. During the course of the three partitions of the Commonwealth (1772, 1793 and 1795), the Lithuanian state fell almost entirely under Russian rule.

The Road to the Modern Nation-States

In all three Baltic countries the appearance and growth of national consciousness during the nineteenth century accompanied the social struggle of the peasantry against a culturally alien entrenched nobility. Matters were complicated by the desire of the Russian government to turn the region into a culturally integral part of the Russian state. The policy of Russification pursued by the Tsarist government, particularly during the latter part of the century, was aimed primarily at the old local élites and thus unwittingly facilitated the emergence of the indigenous peasant nations.

The Baltic provinces of Estland, Livonia and Courland were the first regions of the Russian Empire in which serfdom was abolished. The first attempt to limit this institution was made by Alexander I in 1804, but the Baltic barons managed to minimize any practical results from his measure. By 1819, however, personal emancipation had been effected. The trend of the previous five centuries was reversed. Although the peasants were legally free, they had not been endowed with land. Changes in the agrarian economy coupled with a series of measures from the 1840s to the 1860s enabled many peasants to acquire as personal holdings much of the land which they had formerly been forced to lease from the barons. At the same time,

the abolition of compulsory guild membership among urban craftsmen allowed Estonian and Latvian peasants to settle in the hitherto mainly German cities.

Proselytizing for the Russian Orthodox Church, which proved quite successful in some districts among the peasantry, established a counterweight to the German-dominated Lutheran Church. The competition between the two churches led to an expansion of publications in Latvian and Estonian.

The railway age saw a considerable expansion of the cities. Riga, Liepāja (Libau) and Tallinn (Reval) grew significantly with an increase in their importance as ports and industrial centers. In both Latvia and Estonia a middle class as well as a proletariat made their appearance. Tallinn, already more than half Estonian in 1871, was about two-thirds Estonian by 1897. The Latvian share in the population of Riga nearly doubled during the same period, from 23 to 42 per cent. This expansion of urbanization was accompanied by the introduction of education in the native languages. By the end of the century, the Baltic provinces were unique within the Russian Empire in having almost eliminated illiteracy.

The growth of national consciousness fostered by such socio-economic tendencies was furthered by the Russification policy pursued by the Imperial government during the reign of Alexander III. Its targets were the provincial administration, the courts and the educational system, which were the bastions of the privileged German elements. This pressure helped the fledgling political activity of the rising Estonian and Latvian elements, although forced imposition of Russian as the language of instruction in Latvian and Estonian schools resulted in an educational setback for the native languages. By the turn of the century, there were successes at the municipal level. In 1904, Estonians gained a majority in the municipal council of Tallinn. Between 1897 and 1906, Latvian majorities were elected to the municipal councils of four large towns.

A somewhat different socio-economic development occurred in Lithuania. In one portion of the country — the area southwest of the Nemunas River, which had belonged to Napoleon's Grand Duchy of Warsaw — the peasants were freed during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Emancipation, with the right to limited landholding, came to the rest of the country in 1861, along with the general abolition of serfdom throughout the Russian Empire. A social struggle with the Polonized nobility ensued.

The policy of Russification began earlier in Lithuania than in the

other two Baltic countries. It became a marked feature of cultural life after the 1831 uprising which accompanied a revolt in Poland. Initially it was aimed at the Polonized nobility; after the 1863 revolt, however, its measures also hindered the Lithuanian national renaissance. The Lithuanian peasantry had shown themselves to be more revolutionary than their counterpart in Poland. In 1865, the publication of Latin alphabet books in the Lithuanian language was prohibited, a measure not repealed until 1904. Policies of settling Russians in rural areas and of proselytizing for the Russian Orthodox Church were undertaken. The rights of the Roman Catholic Church were curtailed; in 1894, Roman Catholics were excluded from administrative positions in local government organs. A struggle for religious equality turned into one facet of the Lithuanian nationalist movement, in contrast to its Latvian and Estonian counterparts. The close identification of Catholicism with nationalism has persisted in Lithuania to the present day.

Cultural persecution by the Russian authorities led to the use of the compact ethnic Lithuanian population living across the border within the more liberal structure of Prussia as a *point d'appui*. The first journal in the Lithuanian language was published here, and books printed in Tilsit and elsewhere in that region were smuggled across the Russian frontier. These helped to nourish a system of *ad hoc*, almost secret "schools of the hearth" through which the level of rural literacy was raised and national values were fostered during a half-century of intense Russification.

Unlike Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania remained an almost entirely agrarian country. Its few urban centers were not populated by the ethnic Lithuanian majority. As a result, by the turn of the century there was virtually no Lithuanian middle class or proletariat. Rural overpopulation at a time of rising anti-Russian sentiment fostered emigration — mostly to the United States and Canada. It is estimated that on the eve of the First World War, one out of every three Lithuanians lived in North America.

The disorders which swept the Russian Empire in 1905 affected the entire Baltic area, though to different degrees. In Latvia and Estonia, the protests were heavily socio-political. Urban unrest was particularly severe in Riga and Tallinn. Freedom of the press and of assembly as well as a universal franchise were the principal goals of the strikers and demonstrators. Nationwide assemblies (1,000 Latvian delegates in Riga, 800 Estonian delegates in Tartu) convened in November and called for national autonomy. The situation in the countryside was

even more turbulent. German nobles and clergymen were particular targets for the jacqueries; nearly 200 manor houses were burned and about 100 noblemen killed. The brutal suppression of the uprising included the execution of several thousand people and the imprisonment and exile to Siberia of thousands more.

The revolution in Lithuania was considerably less dramatic and remained largely confined to rural areas. It appeared to be aimed more at perceived cultural enemies. Its targets were mostly Russian school-teachers and members of the Orthodox clergy; excesses were relatively few. The events in Lithuania were highlighted by the massive National Congress of 2,000 delegates which met in Vilnius (Vilna) in December 1905. The resolutions of the Congress sought autonomy, a centralized administration for the ethnic Lithuanian region of the Russian Empire, and the use of the Lithuanian language in administration. The reaction in Lithuania was likewise relatively mild. The Stolypin reform, which sought to create a rural class of prosperous farmers throughout the Empire as a social bulwark of the system, even benefited many Lithuanian peasants.

In spite of setbacks, the general political and cultural relaxation which set in after 1906 allowed for a steady intensification of the national consciousness of the Baltic peoples. Although the events of 1905 had forced many leaders into exile and emigration, Estonians and Latvians acquired representation through delegates to the Imperial Duma. The Lithuanians also acquired a group of experienced national politicians through this new Russian legislature. The elimination of restrictions on the press in the national languages affected all three republics, but was an especially pronounced cultural development in Lithuania.

The Years of Independence, 1918–1940

Modern Baltic history has been shaped by the conflict among great powers in the region. The simultaneous collapse of the Russian and German empires during the First World War allowed the three Baltic peoples to seize a rare opportunity of creating their own nation-states. Before the end of the war, on 16 and 24 February 1918 respectively, Lithuania and Estonia declared their independence. An analogous Latvian declaration appeared on 18 November, shortly after the end of hostilities in the West. The circumstances under which each of the three countries established its independence differed considerably.

The Estonian movement for separate statehood emerged from the dissolution of the Russian Empire. Estonia was the only national region to which the Provisional Government of 1917, after a massive demonstration of Estonians in Petrograd, granted autonomy. The organ of autonomous self-government unilaterally declared complete independence one day before advancing German troops occupied Tallinn. The collapse of Germany in November 1918 allowed for a reassertion of this proclamation. An invasion by the Red Army in December seriously threatened Estonia's independence, although a Soviet naval attack on Tallinn was foiled by a British naval squadron. While an appreciable minority of the population favored the Bolsheviks, the wide majority rallied to the cause of national statehood. By March 1919, Estonian territory had been cleared of foreign forces, although hostilities continued at the frontiers.

Circumstances in Latvia were far more complex. As the most industrialized part of the Russian Empire, Latvia had developed a strong working-class movement which had been affected by the revolution. Moreover, the Tsarist government had formed Latvian rifle regiments in the summer of 1915 after the German armies reached the Daugava (Dvina) River. These soldiers, along with the rest of the old Russian army, were affected by the revolutionary mood of 1917 and split their loyalties between a crystallizing national movement and the Bolsheviks. Such a division of sympathies immensely complicated the incursion of the Red Army into Latvia after the German collapse. Matters were further complicated by German attempts in 1919 to preserve a foothold in the Baltic lands. Utilizing the desperate Latvian nationalist need to stem the Red tide, a commander of the German *Freikorps*, General Rüdiger von der Goltz, tried to set up a puppet Latvian regime. The defeat of his army by Estonian-Latvian forces, British diplomatic and naval pressures, and the subsequent defeat of another German attempt to utilize a White Russian adventurer, Colonel Pavel Bermond-Avalov, as a cover for their operations allowed the Latvians to concentrate on clearing their country of the Red Army. By 1920 this had been achieved.

The Lithuanian declaration of independence came while the entire country was still under German occupation. The Lithuanian National Council (*Taryba*), a group of nationalist leaders whom the Germans had originally sought to use as a cover for their expansionist aims, issued the resolution unilaterally. However, it could not be implemented because of German refusal to recognize any arrangement which would not permanently tie Lithuania to Germany. The German

collapse in 1918 made possible the organization of an administration and an army. In early 1919, an invading Red force was repulsed. Later that year, the German forces of Bermond-Avalov were also pushed back into Latvia.

The establishment of Lithuanian independence was also complicated by pressures from the newly arisen Polish state for a restoration of the political union of historic times. Although they were resisted, these demands delayed Lithuania's recognition by the Western powers. Matters were exacerbated by the conflicting territorial claims of the two states. The capital of the historic Lithuanian state, Vilnius, was occupied by the Poles after conclusion of an armistice leaving the city in Lithuanian hands. As a result, Polish-Lithuanian relations remained strained throughout the interwar period, and diplomatic relations between the two countries were not established until 1938.

In 1920, the three Baltic countries concluded peace treaties with the Soviet state: Estonia on 2 February, Lithuania on 12 July and Latvia on 1 August. Russian claims to sovereignty over their territories were renounced in perpetuity. Nation-building could now proceed unhindered, although in Lithuania continuing problems with unsettled frontiers delayed this process.

The achievement of independence brought similar problems to all three countries. They needed to reform their social, economic and political structures to conform with their new status as nation-states. In societies which were still predominantly agrarian, the question of land ownership was a pivotal one, from the social as well as the economic point of view. Economies which had suffered during the years of war needed adaptation to new international circumstances. And new constitutional structures had to be devised for an independent state life.

Land reform proved most drastic in Estonia and Latvia. There the holdings of the large landed estates were redistributed to peasants, particularly to volunteers in the war for independence, thus ending the economic and political power of the Baltic barons. Their legal corporations, which had dominated social life in the area, had already been dispersed in 1917. Land reform in Lithuania, where the local nobility had been considerably more repressed in Tsarist times, was less sweeping. Although the large estates disappeared, their former owners were left with somewhat larger portions of the land they had once owned.

Loss of their Russian markets led to some hardship for the

Estonian and Latvian industries. Realignment came slowly, but it was successfully achieved. Estonia developed a new oil-shale industry. Timber and related enterprises were built up as export industries. In 1930, manufacturing engaged 17.4 per cent of Estonia's labor force and 13.5 per cent of Latvia's, but only 6 per cent of Lithuania's, which remained largely unindustrialized.

The principal economic effort in all three countries was to create an export economy based on agricultural produce and specializing in meat, poultry and dairy products. Government-sponsored cooperatives appeared in all three countries to handle the collection, processing and marketing of farm produce. Britain and Germany became the two principal export markets. These moves were intended to benefit the new independent farming class which had been created through land redistribution and which emerged as the principal component in the socio-economic structures of the three states.

In accordance with prevailing Western political currents of the time, all three countries adopted liberal democratic constitutions. Their legislatures clearly predominated over their executives. Single-chamber parliaments emerged in all three. In Estonia the Prime Minister was simultaneously head of state, and thus a vote of no-confidence in Parliament would leave the country without even a titular head. Such assembly structures are perhaps the most difficult of all to operate, and none of the three societies possessed a proper social, economic or political culture or tradition necessary to support their functioning. The radical parliamentary constitutions and electoral rules hampered the creation of stable governments. The pressures of radical interests and ideologies soon led, as they did throughout the rest of Eastern Europe, to the emergence of some sort of authoritarian system.

The earliest change came in Lithuania. A precarious political stability had been possible as long as the Christian Democrats and their allies managed to win majorities among the predominantly Catholic electorate. In 1926, however, a series of scandals led to their defeat. Later that year, the small Nationalist Union, supported by the passivity of the opposition Christian Democrats, was installed by the army, overthrowing a coalition government of Populists, Socialists and minorities which had been in power barely half a year. An authoritarian presidential regime, similar to that of Piłsudski in Poland, emerged under the leadership of Antanas Smetona.

The process of democratic disintegration was somewhat more long-drawn-out in Estonia and Latvia. Fragmentation into numerous small

political parties made the formation of stable coalitions a difficult task. In Estonia, governments between 1919 and 1933 lasted eight months on average. Political instability was aggravated by the social effects of the Great Depression. Pressures for political reform mounted, particularly from the right-wing League of Freedom Fighters, an association of veterans of the war for independence. In October 1933, their proposal for constitutional reform won by 72.7 per cent of the votes in a referendum. The following March, the Acting President, Konstantin Päts, made use of the new authoritarian Constitution to declare a state of emergency, deactivate Parliament and disband the League of Freedom Fighters. He ruled by presidential decree until 1938.

A similar change occurred in Latvia a few months later. In a situation of extreme polarization between right- and left-wing forces, Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis declared a state of emergency, formed a government of national unity, dissolved all political parties and governed without the legislature.

There were noticeable differences in the styles of the new regimes in the three countries. Authoritarianism proved somewhat milder in Estonia and Lithuania than in Latvia. The moderate Estonian leader considered his system as a transition to a more stable democratic system. A referendum on a new Constituent Assembly implicitly legalized his caretaker regime in 1936, and another new Constitution provided for a Parliament, which convened in 1938. Electoral rules were designed to favor Päts and his Patriotic League. However, elections to the lower house were basically fair. Despite their fragmentation, opposition groups won 17 of the 80 seats. In Lithuania, the more dictatorially inclined rightist Prime Minister Augustinas Voldemaras, who had been installed along with Antanas Smetona during the coup of 1926, was dismissed in 1929. Thereafter Smetona, casting himself as the "nation's leader," tried to fashion his regime on the fascist Italian model. Although his Nationalist Union, the only political group allowed to function openly, was expanded into a mass organization, many politicians from the previously important political parties continued their activity unofficially. The worsening international climate during the late 1930s led Smetona to allow the *de facto* emergence of "coalition" governments of national unity, even though the parties represented in them could not legally function as such. Authoritarianism in Latvia proved more straightforward. Ulmanis did not bother to legalize his regime by a referendum or to organize his supporters into an official party. Adopting a policy of "a strong and

Latvian Latvia," he combined the offices of President and Prime Minister. In his search for a base of support, he pursued a policy of enlarging the state sector of the economy, primarily at the expense of the German minority.

No significant opposition to the suppression of the parliamentary governments arose. Many former politicians proved quite willing to cooperate with the new regimes, whose introduction was rationalized by a need to prevent foreign influence or takeovers by extreme local rightist or leftist elements. The continued support of the professional officer corps assured their stability. While the liberal-minded intelligentsia could not be won over, and chafed under the relatively mild restraints on political expression, the rural population and the business establishment welcomed the prosperity accompanying stability — which was largely due, however, to the passing of the world Depression. From the mid-1930s, foreign trade showed a steady increase in all three countries. While political dissatisfaction was not absent, potentially serious internal dissension did not arise. In Estonia, the general amnesty of 1938 left only a few dozen "political" prisoners, nearly all of them espionage cases. Even the Lithuanian regime proved able to weather two grave blows to its prestige in foreign relations. In 1938, following a frontier incident, Poland presented an ultimatum demanding recognition of the Polish possession of Vilnius, and in March 1939 Hitler reannexed Klaipėda (Memel), which had been part of the pre-1918 German state.

The political authoritarianism was too mild to affect culture significantly. Indeed, the regimes supported the development of the national cultural life which had begun with the achievement of independence. The twenty-two-year period of independence was one of significant cultural advance for the Baltic peoples. Literary, artistic and musical life flourished. The increase in numbers of schools was phenomenal. Each of the three countries maintained a national university, where higher education in the native language became available for the first time. In Estonia the German-Russian University of Iurev (Dorpat) became the University of Tartu. In Latvia the Polytechnic Institute of Riga was expanded to become a full university. In Lithuania, since Vilnius was controlled by Poland, a new university was established at Kaunas in 1922.

The three Baltic countries attempted to pursue a path of neutrality in foreign policy as the war clouds gathered during the late 1930s. Even regional cooperation among the smaller states between Germany and the USSR proved minimal. Irreconcilable differences between

Lithuania and Poland hampered cooperation in that quarter, and Finland was not interested in any southern alliance. An Estonian-Latvian defensive alliance of 1923 was supplemented in 1934 by a Baltic Entente including Lithuania. However, the level of practical cooperation remained minimal. This may have been due partly to differences in opinion as to where the principal danger lay. Lithuania and Latvia inclined toward a predominant fear of Germany, while Estonia, which was further away from Germany and which had experienced an abortive Communist coup in 1924, was more concerned with the threat from the USSR.

All three countries eventually signed non-aggression or neutrality agreements with the Soviet Union (Lithuania in 1926, Latvia and Estonia in 1932), and with Germany (Latvia and Estonia in June 1939, and Lithuania in the context of the Act of March 1939 ceding Klaipėda). Neutrality laws patterned on the Swedish law of 1938 were adopted by Latvia and Estonia in December 1938, and by Lithuania a month later.

If the foreign policies of the Baltic states can be said to have been inclined toward any of the great powers, it was toward Britain which, while far away, could supposedly exercise its naval power in the area, as it had done in 1919. However, by 1939 Britain appeared increasingly weak. It also seemed to be moving in the direction of willingness to accept some sort of Soviet predominance in the Baltic states as a safeguard against German influence. The extent to which Britain was ready to tolerate Soviet control is unclear; one of the reasons for the failure of the Anglo-French military mission to the USSR in the summer of 1939 was its inability to grant the Soviets a free hand in the area.

The Baltic leaders strove to minimize and to balance both German and Soviet influences. Their attempts to maintain neutrality came to be criticized as pro-German by both Britain and the Soviet Union, which wanted the Baltic states to participate in collective defense against Germany. The sole area of direct German interest, Klaipėda, was wrested from Lithuania by force in March 1939, and German economic pressure on Lithuania increased; but German attempts to promote a military alliance with Lithuania directed against Poland, with Vilnius as a prize, were resisted by the Kaunas government. Baltic independence, however, was less dependent on efforts of the local governments than on arrangements among the great powers.