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# From Empire to Independence: The Curious Case of the Baltic States 1917-1922

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From Empire to Independence:

The Curious Case of the Baltic States 1917-1922

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## Abstract

Many historians have looked at the interim period of the Baltic States between World War I and World War II, and their independence movements. However, there are few substantial works that look at the complex and interrelated histories of how Russian and American foreign policy shaped the Baltic independence movements and subsequently gained international recognition. This paper will try to address how and why the Baltic States were able to gain and maintain their independence by external forces and then gain formal recognition by the United States in 1922. To gain my results, I analyzed some of Lenin's translated writings on foreign policy, many relevant telegrams and letters published in the National Archives of the U.S., and went through secondary sources from both American and Baltic historians. I found that self-determination rhetoric, WWI, and the Russian Civil War were the primary forces that allowed Baltic nationalists to fill the power vacuums created by those same sources, and the stabilization period that followed made U.S. recognition a possibility. If we can understand how and why Baltic independence was secured during the 1920s, we can have a more thorough explanation of the role of the Baltic States in the collapse of the Soviet Union during their Singing Revolutions.

## Introduction

When writing a historical background section for a symposium volume titled, “The Baltic in International Relations between the Two World Wars” editors John Hiden and Aleksander Loit provided a relatively concise and informative summary of the history of the Baltic States. Concerning the 1920s, they wrote, “Internal instability caused by external intervention and civil war ensured that Soviet Russia’s effort to retain the Baltic republics was not successful.”<sup>1</sup> That observation explains how the Baltic States were able to maintain their independence and did not rejoin Russia. However, this statement needs to be expanded upon in order to holistically comprehend the turbulent history of why and how Russia’s Western Provinces became three independent Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania with full U.S. *de jure* recognition.

External intervention and influence not only caused internal instability, but also paradoxically created the conditions necessary for internal stability in favor of Baltic independence. Self-determination rhetoric from Bolshevik Russian leaders and the U.S. fueled independence and recognition movements. External intervention in the form of World War I’s eastern front, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, and the Russian Civil War initially created chaotic and unstable political conditions. Ultimately, those unstable internal conditions created the power vacuums for stable nationalist institutions and governments to take form. Those same forces that allowed for Baltic nationalists to take power became roadblocks toward U.S. recognition. Formal recognition from the international community solidified the newfound internal stability in the Baltic States as U.S. foreign policy toward the region changed in 1922.

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<sup>1</sup> John Hiden and Aleksander Loit, ed. *The Baltic in International Relations Between the Two World Wars* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1988), 16.

Since the beginning of the 19th century, the three Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were a part of the Russian Empire. Peter the Great's 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial conquests of the territory gave Russia access to the Baltic Sea's ports and new lands to add to the large empire.<sup>2</sup> The cultural awakenings of the late 19th century occurred in the Baltics after a long period of Russification. Popular Baltic folklore, literature, and art reappeared along the Sea in an attempt to revive the local culture. The differences between each state and more importantly, between the Baltics and Russia, became clearer during this period.

Self-determination became a powerful revolutionary current after the 1880s as local populations began to recognize the social and ethnic disparities in the region.<sup>3</sup> In the Baltics, class had everything to do with ethnicity, and the indigenous populations had been at the bottom of the social ladder. While the Bolsheviks wrote of the need for Russia's multi-ethnic peoples to ignore calls for nationalism and instead focus on the oppression they face by the bourgeoisie, they were ignoring the intertwined nature of class and ethnicity.<sup>4</sup> Most of the Baltic natives were still living in the agrarian countryside after the delayed renunciation of serfdom. Increasingly, native Baltic peoples were starting to fill in the ranks of the new urban class, the petty bourgeoisie, and the intelligentsia with the spread of industrialization.<sup>5</sup> Yet the same generation that was experiencing mild social mobility was not so far removed from the old class system in which only the Russians and the Germans held the higher social positions.

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<sup>2</sup> Janis Elksnitis, "The Baltic Countries and their Years of Independence, 1918-1940," <http://www.conflicts.rem33.com/images/The%20Baltic%20States/vabaperiod.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley W. Page, "Lenin, the National Question and the Baltic States, 1917-19," *American Slavic and East European Review* 7, no. 1 (1948): 15.

<sup>4</sup> Tõnu Parving, "Population and Ethnicity as Intervening Variables in the 1905/1917 Revolutions in the Russian Baltic Provinces," in *Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte: Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 1982), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The attack of the Bolsheviks on the new native middle class pushed them away from socialist ideology and towards the center nationalists.<sup>6</sup> The growing class of native Baltic urban professionals would come to play a key role in championing the cause of their own national self-determination.<sup>7</sup> The sudden growth of this new class allowed them to become more politicized so they could eventually have a say in forming their own state.

The Russian Revolution of 1905 and then the Russian Revolutions of 1917 saw the rise of Baltic nationalism. The 1917 Russian Revolution changed Baltic calls for autonomy to ones of independence. Declarations of independence based on self-determination principles brought Baltic nationalist politicians to power as new governments formed along the Baltic Sea. As it dominated the conversation on questions of nationality, self-determination rhetoric fueled the fight for autonomy and independence. In both the U.S. and Russia, the rights of self-determination were professed and then echoed by different political factions in the Baltic States, most notably, the nationalists. The consistent championing of the right to self-determination by President Woodrow Wilson consequentially caused Baltic nationalists to turn to the U.S. for assistance and independence recognition.

World War I brought with it unstable political conditions that resulted in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Its adoption had monumental effects for Baltic nationalists as it separated Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from Russia. Germany's attempt to create Baltic puppet states was however unsuccessful because the Allies overturned it 8 months later when Germany lost the war. The end of WWI affected the Baltic independence movements from the Armistice to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

the Versailles Peace Treaty with numerous political factions claiming power. As German soldiers left the Baltics, nationalist governments were left vulnerable to Russian invasion without outside help. Baltic pleas for U.S. recognition that would safeguard their institutions were ignored. U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and the Baltics was also framed during this time period and stubbornly insisted on non-recognition. The U.S. would not recognize Soviet Russia because of the Bolshevik presence, but its decision to not recognize nationalist Baltic governments that filled the power vacuum was rooted in its allegiance to White Russians claiming the old Empire's territorial integrity be maintained.

The Russian Civil War as it occurred in the Baltic States showed how both White Russian and American diplomats worked together to stall recognition. The signing of peace treaties between the Russian Bolsheviks and the Baltic nationalists brought back internal stability. This time, governments representative of the indigenous population were at the head of this stability. Such a turn of events in each of the Baltic States allowed dedicated supporters of Baltic independence to finally gain *de jure* recognition by the United States. The 1920 election that forced a change in administration, along with a stable period of nationalist rule in the Baltics allowed for the extension of full recognition.

This paper will be organized into five chapters that look at the interplay of forces between Russia, the United States, and the Baltic States in terms of how they contributed to Baltic independence and U.S. recognition. The first chapter will look at how self-determination rhetoric fueled nationalist movements around 1917 and shaped independence declarations. The chapter begins with an examination of the Bolshevik party's definition of self-

determination and then moves to how those principles spread to the Baltic Provinces through the Provisional Government and subsequent independence declarations after the 1917 October Russian Revolution. It concludes with an attempted explanation as to why and how the Baltic States looked to the U.S. for support of their right to self-determination. The second chapter tries to explain the importance of WWI as an external intervention on Baltic instability that created power vacuums. The effect of the October Russian Revolution and subsequent Bolshevik power struggles, particularly in Latvia, are also examined. The chapter ends with a look at the ongoing negotiations of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk by the Bolshevik Russians and its result in the Baltic States. The third chapter outlines how the external intervention that allowed Baltic nationalists to come to power was also the impetus for the U.S. non-recognition policy. It begins with the arguments used by Russian governments to claim the Baltic Provinces as their own, looks at the connection between those arguments and the formation of U.S. policy toward the Baltics, mentions the arguments used against propping up Baltic buffer states, and ends with the importance of White Russian influence in America. The fourth chapter examines the Russian Civil War as it occurred in the Baltic States. A large portion of the chapter is dedicated to showing how the Armistice and Versailles Peace Treaty expanded the Civil War into the Baltics as instability grew with myriad armed groups vying for political influence. The White Russian arguments used to defer U.S. recognition are expanded upon, paying special attention to the economic arguments stated by the Russian Ambassador to the U.S., Boris Bakhmetev. U.S. policy is revisited in response to chaotic conditions in the Baltic States throughout 1920 and 1921. This chapter also mentions White Russian losses as the Civil War continues due to the successful rejection of White Russian influence in the Baltics

culminating in Baltic-Soviet peace treaties. The fifth chapter is dedicated to the last two years of the battle for *de jure* recognition from the U.S. It starts out with failed attempts at *de facto* recognition, and moves to the 1920 election, after which unofficial Baltic representatives were allowed to stay in America and Consuls were set up in each Baltic State. The roles of Commissioner Young in Riga, private U.S. firms, and American citizens and domestic representatives are highlighted. Ambassador Bakhmetev's resignation and recognition from the international community is summarized and then revisited with an exploration of the domestic pressure that influenced Hughes to extend full recognition.

Throughout this paper I make mention of various political groups in the U.S. and the Baltic States. This was done intentionally as a representation of the confusion and uncertainty Baltic nationalists faced when looking into the future of their states. For convenience, I have limited the number of groups mentioned and used some names interchangeably, although that should not diminish their importance. For example, different political institutions such as the Latvian National Council, the guberniya, and the National Council of Lithuania comprised of different democratically elected representatives of various political parties are later rebranded as just the "Baltic nationalists." Under different names, many political groups were seeking Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian independence and U.S. recognition but they all had the same overarching goals, so I used the general name of Baltic nationalists to include all of them. It should be noted that the Lithuanian National Council also went by the name of the Taryba, even while under German influence. Lastly, the different spelling of Estonia, either with or without the letter "h" was chosen based on the source. Most U.S. State Department records use the "Esthonia" spelling while others do not. The inconsistency is also present in this paper.

## Chapter 1: The Power of Self-Determination

To understand the attitudes of self-determination in the Baltics, Lenin's position on the nationality question must be understood. After some nationalist uprisings in the late 1800s and the intensity of the 1905 Russian Revolution in the Baltics, Bolshevik theorists had to address the nationality question. Lenin started to address the issue in 1913. He clearly stated his position in support of the rights of all peoples to separate from Russia. One passage from his writings that shows this idea explicitly states, "as regards the national question, the proletarian party must, first of all, insist on the promulgation and immediate realization of full freedom of separation from Russia for all nations and peoples who were oppressed by Tsarism."<sup>8</sup> Bolshevik ideology was against nationalism, oppression, and annexations. This meant that they would need to defend maintaining the Baltic Provinces in the Russian Empire while championing contradictory ideas.

Whilst supporting a large multi-ethnic communist state, Lenin was condemning large multi-ethnic empires; those ideas seem to contradict one another. In Lenin's October 25th, 1917 "Decree on Peace" speech at the All Russian Congress of Soviets, he exclaimed, "if any nation is kept within the frontiers of another state by violence...to decide without the least compulsion the question of the form of its state existence, then holding on to such a nation is annexation, i.e., seizure and violence."<sup>9</sup> His ideological disagreement with the multi-ethnic empires of the time stemmed from the fact that those ethnic minority states were annexed. That was the fundamental difference between his idea of a large state and the multi-ethnic

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Parming, "Population and Ethnicity," 17.

<sup>9</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Decree on Peace," Pravda, October 26, 1917, in *Lenin: Collected Works*, 28, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971).

empires already in existence. Lenin defined annexation by including all of the subject peoples of Russia.<sup>10</sup> I agree with Stanley Page's perspective that Lenin's attitude "created the impression that he stood for complete dissolution of the Russian Empire into its component feudal parts."<sup>11</sup> By defining annexations in such a manner, Lenin makes it seem as if he does not support keeping any annexed nation within the Empire and supports independence for all of those national minorities, such as the different ethnic groups living in the Baltics.<sup>12</sup>

In the end, Lenin sought to reconcile nationalism and self-determination with international Marxism. Lenin showed his optimism in the success of a large soviet state when he wrote: "The proletarian party strives to create as large a state as possible, for this is in the interests of the workers; it strives to bring the nations closely together, to fuse them but it intends to bring that about not by the use of force, but only by a free brotherly union of the workers and the toiling masses of all the nations."<sup>13</sup> Lenin wanted to create such a communist state without force, and evidently believed that although nationality and self-determination were important, states would voluntarily give up some of their own sovereignty to join a free brotherly union of the workers under Petrograd's central rule. Lenin's solution to the national question was to incorporate those ideas of international Marxism so that all nations would unite under centralized rule, and give up nationalistic ambitions.

The ideological goals of self-determination gained explicit recognition and support at the meeting of the Council of People's Commissars on November 15, 1917. At this meeting, the

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<sup>10</sup> Page, "Lenin, the National Question and the Baltic States," 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Although the Germans had occupied a large part of the Baltics by the time the speech was given, the Red Army would later invade as well, contradicting this speech.

<sup>13</sup> Page, "Lenin, the National Question and the Baltic States," 18.

Council announced the self-determination of the nations of Russia.<sup>14</sup> The meeting produced the “Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia” signed “in the name of the Russian Republic, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars, V. Ulianov. People’s Commissar on Nationality Affairs, Josef Dzhugashvili.”<sup>15</sup> The document began with mention of “emancipation” of workmen and peasants, and then led into the evils of the Tsarist regime for inciting the peoples of Russia against one another; something Lenin thought his government would not have to do to maintain the large state because annexed lands would want to join the workers’ utopia Russia was supposed to become. The language used to describe the people of Russia as just now “being emancipated from the hateful shackles” provides readers the sharp contrast between the prior regimes and the new Bolshevik rule as a government that is against imprisoning its people.<sup>16</sup> The end of the declaration summed up the Council’s views on the question of Russia’s nationalities in four principles: all people of Russia are sovereign and equal, people of Russia have the right to free self-determination, “even to the point of separation and the formation of an independent state,” all national privileges are disabled, and national minorities and ethnographic groups can freely develop.<sup>17</sup> Lenin simultaneously championed the right of all people to secede from Russia and denounced the century long practice of national privileges while calling for a strong centralized proletarian state.

Bolshevik speeches and declarations had strong notions of self-determination that spread to the Baltics as did the Bolshevik influence in government even before the October

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<sup>14</sup> Bronis J. Kaslas, *The Baltic Nations-the Quest for Regional Integration and Political Liberty* (Pittston: Euramerica, 1976), 68.

<sup>15</sup> V. I. Lenin and Josef Dzhugashvili. “Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia,” in *A Documentary History of Communism*, ed. Robert V Daniels. (London: I. B. Tairis & Co., 1985).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Russian Revolution. The Latvian governing bodies in particular, were heavily influenced by Leninist ideas. According to Andrew Ezergailis, “by July 1917 the Latvian Bolsheviks had almost complete control of the Workers’, Soldiers’, and Landless Peasants’ Soviets in Latvia.”<sup>18</sup> The same calls for self-determination that were uttered by Lenin were repeated by local political groups, and spread ideas that the local population can and should chose their fate, and by extension, their own form of government.

Before the Bolshevik coup, the fall of the tsar led to an attempted autonomous district of Livonia in modern day Latvia. The existing ruling institutions of the tsarist regime of administration collapsed after the February Revolution, and the new government’s authority was questioned as Baltic calls for self-determination took form. Kerensky’s government was too weak to prevent the creation of administrative bodies in Livonia even though he refused to recognize an autonomous Latvia.<sup>19</sup> The provisional government was pre-occupied with the political power struggle with Petrograd’s Bolsheviks and the war, so it “could not prevent trained Latvians from assuming most of the duties of administration or from creating an independent Governmental Council in South Livonia.”<sup>20</sup> This development allowed for Latvia’s political leaders and population to recognize that they are not fully dependent on Russia. South Livonia’s Governmental Council was not officially recognized as the autonomous government of Latvia, but it acted as the central government in the small unoccupied area.<sup>21</sup> They were

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Ezergailis, *The 1917 Revolution in Latvia* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 1974), 105.

<sup>19</sup> Kaslas, *The Baltic Nations*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

responsible for maintaining a general sense of public order in the chaotic region just miles from the German army, showcasing the first example of autonomous rule in Latvia.<sup>22</sup>

The Provisional government in Petrograd was unable to maintain its authority in Estonia as well. Demonstrating their approval for ideas of self-determination, the Estonian nationalist and socialist leaders asked for autonomy. Approximately 150,000 Estonians paraded through Petrograd in front of the Tauride Palace demanding autonomy.<sup>23</sup> The Decree of March 30, 1917 by the Provisional Government granted Estonia the right to autonomous self-government.<sup>24</sup> Estonia would now learn to function as an autonomous territory; the precursor for independence because there would already be a historical precedent of self-rule in place. New government institutions were created with Estonian national leaders, such as Jean Poska as the High Commissioner. The new law allowed the formation of an Estonian National Council (called “guberniya” by the Russians) to preside over Estonia and the northern part of Livonia.<sup>25</sup> These actions “brought de facto recognition of autonomy in Estonia,” for the very first time.<sup>26</sup> The clause of the Provisional Government’s decree that best described the newly gained autonomous powers is written as follows:

The guberniya commissar, together with the temporary guberniya zemstvo council, shall be responsible for: a) management of the affairs of local self-government in the

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<sup>22</sup> Riga fell afterwards in August of 1917. The German occupation of Riga brought with it different governing institutions in Latvia while scaring the Estonians of an approaching front.

<sup>23</sup> Kaslas, *The Baltic Nations*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

guberniya and of the zemstvo economy, b) management of affairs of the general administration...general zemstvo taxes on the basis of existing laws...<sup>27</sup>

Estonia had never existed as a state or an autonomous area. It used to be part of Livland or Livonia, so creating autonomous government institutions was a big step towards independence. Autonomous rule gave Estonian political leaders some experience with self-determination that would be echoed in their independence declarations.

Both American and Russian touting of self-determination for small nations were repeated in the Baltic independence declarations. One such national minority that declared independence on the basis of self-determination on November 29, 1917 was Lithuania.<sup>28</sup> The Lithuanian National Council's declaration echoed the same principles that Lenin had been preaching about the evils of annexation and the right of self-determination. It read:

In consideration of the fact that Lithuania was annexed to Russia by force and has never ceased to demand independence, even by armed force...that it has been shamefully oppressed and mistreated by the Tsarist government for 120 years...the National Council of Lithuania...declares that the Lithuanian nation considers itself free and unconstrained by any ties with the Russian state.<sup>29</sup>

The Lithuanian manifesto uses similar language to Lenin's "Decree on Peace" by stating that there were violent tactics used to maintain the province, which makes its annexation as defined

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<sup>27</sup> Cited in Robert Paul Browder, ed., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), 300-301.

<sup>28</sup> Lithuania was also the only Baltic country that existed independently before WWI, with its first written mention as a nation in 1009.

<sup>29</sup> Kaslas, *The Baltic Nations*, 66-67.

by Lenin. A very similar resolution that also used self-determination based language was passed by the Estonian National Council after the October Russian Revolution. Once local Estonian Soviets briefly took power in Tallinn, the Council met on November 28, 1917. It passed a resolution proclaiming it the supreme power:

On the basis of the self determination of nations...whereas in Russia the state power...has been completely destroyed and no central authority exists which the subdivisions of the state could obey...the Estonian Maanoukogu [National Council] proclaims that...it has the sole supreme power to enact laws and regulations which all in Estonia must obey.<sup>30</sup>

By using similar language and definitions of annexation, these declarations serve as examples of how the same notions of self-determination perpetuated by the Russian Bolsheviks were used by the Baltic States in their independence movements.

From the American perspective, the start of the Great War also began the Baltic pleas for the United States to take action on the side of Baltic self-determination. Due to the large number of Lithuanians in America after the Lithuanian diaspora, a logical place to begin asking for outside help was in the United States. The use of petitions by Baltic descendants in the U.S. began before the U.S. joined the Allies in World War I. The first American-Lithuanian petition that was brought before Wilson's attention came during the Spring of 1915. It contained one

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<sup>30</sup> Cited in Karl Aun, "The 1917 Revolution and the Idea of the State in Estonia," in *Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte: Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 1982), 291.

million signatures urging American support of an autonomous Lithuanian state.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Wilson was aware that problems were arising in Russia's Baltic Provinces and those problems would have to be dealt with after the war.<sup>32</sup> The following year, the Lithuanian Alliance of America reflected the local change in demands from autonomy to independence. On June 10<sup>th</sup>, they adopted a resolution asking the U.S. government to recognize their right "to be independent and to choose any form of government which these races consider best suited to themselves."<sup>33</sup> They were asking the U.S. government to recognize their right to self-determination.

The Lithuanians and other Baltic nationalist governments had reason to believe that Woodrow Wilson may help in their nationalist cause because of early signs of support. In 1916, during the midst of the fighting, Wilson supported the House of Representatives in issuing a proclamation setting November 1<sup>st</sup> as "Lithuania Day."<sup>34</sup> The proclamation states that November 1<sup>st</sup> will be "a day upon which the people of the United States may make contributions as they feel disposed for the aid of the stricken Lithuanian people."<sup>35</sup> This help was intended for the war stricken area and did not necessarily mean that the U.S. government supported a state of Lithuania. However, Wilson proclaimed November 1<sup>st</sup> as "Lithuania Day," not "Western Russia Day." This acknowledgement of the existence of a "Lithuania" by both the legislative and executive branch of the U.S. government, even before the Treaty of Brest-

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<sup>31</sup> Albert N. Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations 1918-1922: The Struggle Over Recognition* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Text of President Wilson's Proclamation of Lithuania Day, September 11, 1916, The Newberry, [http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423970\\_3\\_0230](http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423970_3_0230).

Litovsk, was significant. It was a sign that a big and influential Western power knew such a place existed and was willing to extend help, even if it was only through monetary humanitarian aid.

Due to the popularity of Wilson's championing of the rights of small nations, both Estonia and Lithuania announced their declarations of independence to diplomatic representatives of the U.S. in advance.<sup>36</sup> Although Washington had received some requests for support of Lithuanian independence, the first active step toward seeking recognition based on self-determination was a proclamation by the Taryba forwarded to D.C. on February 9, 1918.<sup>37</sup> Both Secretary of State Robert Lansing and President Woodrow Wilson received letters from the Taryba with their declaration of independence and a request for recognition.<sup>38</sup> The Taryba proclaimed:

...the restoration of a Lithuanian independent state, with Vilnius for its capitals and the freeing of that state from all bonds whatever they may be previously entered into with or forced upon by the neighboring states... It has an existence of its own which is only waiting for international recognition in order to become fully sovereign.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to the State Department's wishes, Lithuania's position, as well as that of the other two Baltic State, was made clear and former U.S. hopes of an autonomous state in a federal Russia

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<sup>36</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> Taryba is used interchangeably with the Lithuanian National Council because they were the same government body of Lithuanian nationalist politicians.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Chargé Hugh R. Wilson to the Secretary of State, March 3, 1918, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918, Volume II* (Washington: GPO), 817-819, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1918Russia.v02>.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Chargé Wilson to the Secretary of State, February 9, 1918, *FRUS, 1918, Russia, Vol. II*, 818-819.

were pushed aside. Now the State Department had to deal with demands that the right to self-determination be upheld.

President Wilson's non recognition policy surprised the hopeful Baltic diplomats. This shock was primarily caused by Wilson's contradictory self-determination policy for which he claimed all people have a right to. Zigfrids Meierovics, Latvia's Foreign Minister at the time, sums up the general Baltic sentiment when he says, "it was to be expected that the United States would be the first to recognize the national states which were coming to make use of the principles proclaimed by President Wilson."<sup>40</sup> Not formally recognizing the independence of the Baltic States seemed like, and essentially was, a contradiction of Wilson's esteemed principles of self-determination.

## **Chapter 2: WWI and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk**

World War I brought with it many external forces that created unstable conditions in the Baltics. As a part of the eastern front, the Baltic States gained a new opportunity for nationalist aspirations. Whilst fighting for a losing Russian Army, Baltic allegiance to the Russian throne and Provisional Government were tested. Oncoming German soldiers caused massive evacuations and the presence of both Russian soldiers alongside German soldiers further complicated the Baltic political situation. The removal of the Kerensky administration by the Bolsheviks in Russia was mirrored in the Baltics even though they were preoccupied with a German invasion. Troublesome negotiations of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk were yet another

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<sup>40</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 20

external factor that had important consequences for the Baltics by separating the region from Russia.

As a part of the Russian Empire, Baltic soldiers fought alongside Russian troops in World War I. The eastern front was primarily on Latvian soil. Latvian and Russian soldiers showed their initial solidarity by fighting against German forces together, as a united multiethnic state. About 180,000 Latvians were serving in the Russian army at the onset of WWI.<sup>41</sup> Although the frontline eventually went all the way to Petrograd's circumference, causing the Bolsheviks to relocate to Moscow, most of the fighting and local damages were inflicted upon Baltic soil. This made the locals even more aware of the devastating situation caused by the war than their larger and stronger Russian cousins.<sup>42</sup> War weariness brought about beliefs that any regime change would improve their situation, whether it was brought about by Lenin's promise of bread and peace, or secession from a warring government.

As in any war torn area, the Baltics experienced political chaos as a result of World War I, but also had to deal with regime change following the Russian Revolutions. The front line literally separated the Baltics from Petrograd's leadership battle by battle, creating an opportunity for independence that had not existed before. The political groups that stayed behind would now become the forces of change. Historian Tõnu Parling notes, "the 1917 Revolutions in Russia resulted in the appearance of a large vacuum in governmental authority, the collapse of centralized political power. The tsarist state and its successors were in chaos,

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<sup>41</sup> Kaslas, *The Baltic Nations*, 49.

<sup>42</sup> The family reference here is made intentionally to signify the special relationship between the Baltic peoples and their Russian rulers.

and in the Baltic unable to cope with the military encroachments of the Kaiser's Germany."<sup>43</sup> By 1915, all of Lithuania and the province of Kurland were occupied. German armies continued to push into Russia's Baltic Provinces with the fall of Tsar Nicholas II and kept getting close to Riga once the February Revolution propped up the Provisional Government.

The chaotic conditions of the war met with evacuations that created new opportunities for leadership. Approximately half of Latvia's population left between 1915 and 1917.<sup>44</sup> Approaching German armies and retreating Russian soldiers ravaged the area and split Latvia apart between German occupied territory and land still controlled by Russia's central government. Some Latvians and Lithuanians left the Baltic Sea area for inner Russia to escape German rule.<sup>45</sup> The moving frontline was followed by an influx of Russian soldiers into the region to defend Russia's borders. Due to the war effort continuing even after the February Revolution, large numbers of Russian troops were stationed in the area, having an input in local disputes. Tõnu Parming explains that in both Latvia and Estonia, "a sizable proportion of the radical left consisted of non-natives, generally Russians, both in the ranks of industrial workers, as Baltic industry expanded to fill tsarist war-production needs, and in the ranks of the military."<sup>46</sup> Those soldiers brought with them the sociopolitical ideas and developments from inner Russia to its periphery.

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<sup>43</sup> Parming, "Population and Ethnicity," 8.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Ezergailis, "The Causes of the Bolshevik Revolution in Latvia 1917," in *Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte: Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 1982), 278-279.

<sup>45</sup> Evacuations from Estonia were not as prevalent or on such a large scale because German forces took Lithuania and most of Latvia first and did not approach Tallinn until 1918.

<sup>46</sup> Parming. "Population and Ethnicity," 8.

After toppling the Provisional Government during the October Revolution, Lenin and his followers had to find a way out of WWI. An armistice was concluded between Imperial Germany and Bolshevik Russia at the beginning of December, 1917 and peace negotiations began shortly afterwards. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was negotiated by Trotsky, the Bolshevik government's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, and tried to keep in line with Bolshevik rhetoric but failed in that aspect. During the negotiations, Trotsky asked for a peace without annexations because they were inherently conflicting with Bolshevik principles of self-determination mentioned earlier.

The fact that the Bolsheviks had control over the leadership in the Baltics is just that, a fact. After the October Revolution, soviet governments sprang up in Estonia and the unoccupied provinces of Latvia, but they were short-lived because of advancing German armies and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.<sup>47</sup> Lenin's peace at any cost tactics sacrificed an area in which his own party already had consolidated a lot of power after the October Revolution. Yet they did face some opposition with the growing power of nationalists using self-determination as cause for secession. In war torn and separated Latvia, the Bolsheviks repeatedly reminded their supporters that, "the success of a socialist revolution in Latvia depended on the victorious emergence of a socialist revolution in the whole of Russia."<sup>48</sup> In his writings, Latvian Bolshevik leader Peteris Štucka said that Latvia depended on Russia, but even he made the distinction

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<sup>47</sup>James D. White, "Nationalism and Socialism in Historical Perspective," in *The Baltic States: the National Self-Determination of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, ed. Graham Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 32-33.

<sup>48</sup>Sigurds Ziemelis, "Latvia on the Way to October: The Role of the Latvian Social Democratic Party in the Victory of the Socialist Revolution," in *Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte: Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag GmbH, 1982), 261.

between Latvia and Russia; they were two distinct and separate areas. Such hints would indicate that he viewed Latvia as autonomous, even while a part of socialist Russia.

The Latvian Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Peteris Štucka, saw the nationality question as something to be worked on within the framework of proletarian internationalism and close ties to the Russian government. The Latvian Social Democratic party was composed of mainly Bolsheviks, and had strong connections to Lenin and the Petrograd Bolsheviks. Andrew Ezergailis, wrote about the differences between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Latvia, pointing out that the Social Democrats were the largest Latvian party and “had reoriented their thinking away from national concerns to social ones”<sup>49</sup> However, that does not mean that national concerns were erased by any means. The Latvian Bolsheviks “adhered to the ideology of friendship among nations, relying on V.I. Lenin’s theory on national problems and proletarian internationalism.”<sup>50</sup> The connection between Latvian political leaders and Lenin made them push for a centralized state, and not ask for independence while they remained in power. Štucka wrote in “Nacionalais jautājums un latviešu proletariats,” “we love a Russian, Jewish, Estonian, Lithuanian etc. worker not because he is a Russian, Jew, etc., but because he is a worker. Such is the faith of Latvia’s communists regarding the nationality question.”<sup>51</sup> On a very similar note, Štucka also wrote, “we are against all nationalism... only those who can become enthusiastic about national federations have not understood, or do not want to understand the significance of class struggle.”<sup>52</sup> This is how the Latvian Bolsheviks tried to solve the nationality question in Latvia the same way Lenin did in Russia; by emphasizing that

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<sup>49</sup> Ezergailis, “The Causes of the Bolshevik Revolution in Latvia 1917,” 271.

<sup>50</sup> Ziemeļis, “Latvia on the Way to October,” 260.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Ezergailis, *The 1917 Revolution in Latvia* (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 1974), 81.

the struggle was over class rather than nationality, even though the two categories were intertwined.

The German invasion allowed Latvian nationalists the opportunity to call for independence. Russian troops abandoned their posts and socialist Latvian forces that were outnumbered yet unwilling to surrender to German troops retreated to inner Russia.<sup>53</sup> Russian leaders headed back eastward and “at this critical moment removed the last vestiges of the authority of the Russian state in the Baltic Provinces.”<sup>54</sup> Reformist nationalists had less Russian and Latvian Bolsheviks around to preach the benefits of a centralized workers’ state led by Petrograd. The fleeing of many radicalized Russians meant that there would be less opposition to Baltic independence. The Bolsheviks were losing their constituencies in the occupied areas, making united Baltic and Russian soviet governments unlikely. The nationalist reformers that stayed behind, and with some émigrés, were able to call for the creation of their own state.<sup>55</sup>

Before the peace treaty was negotiated, guarantees against German aggression were yet another concern for Baltic nationalists. In 1918, the Baltic States were saturated with both German, and Red Army soldiers. German ploys to create puppet states on the coast were rumored and seemed to be true. An example of this occurred when an Estonian member of the Constituent Assembly came to a British Foreign Minister in Petrograd seeking British advice and protection. The Germans allegedly offered to guarantee Estonian independence if the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Parming, “Population and Ethnicity,” 18.

<sup>55</sup> However, the unoccupied part of Latvia fell under Latvian Bolshevik rule. The same situation was occurring in Estonia as well, but not Lithuania because it was firmly under German control.

nationalist forces were to accept a German protectorate.<sup>56</sup> Presumably, the Germans either would or already have made similar offers to both Latvian and Lithuanian nationalists as well.<sup>57</sup> This was a familiar predicament- the choice between German or Russian rule. Fear of German aggression made the Baltics turn to the West for recognition, and thereby protection, while German wishes for puppet states made the Western nations suspicious of the real agents of power in the proclaimed independent republics.

In charge of Russian foreign affairs, Trotsky handled the negotiations and tried to stretch out talks to provide more time for an international communist revolution. The Bolsheviks believed the proletariat revolution would spread to the Central Powers from their Western Provinces, especially to industrialized Germany.<sup>58</sup> Keeping the Baltic Provinces not only would have given the Bolsheviks more territory to rule over, but also would be a possible influence on neighboring Germany and Scandinavia. On February 10, 1918 Trotsky made an unheard-of diplomatic move by not signing the peace treaty while simultaneously announcing demobilization.<sup>59</sup> Trotsky tried to solve his dilemma of waiting for a proletariat revolution in Germany while dealing with a world war with the “neither-peace-nor-war” solution.<sup>60</sup> Unhappy with Trotsky’s bold move, Germany continued its war effort once more by moving its armies further into Russia on February 18, 1918.<sup>61</sup> Lenin wanted an immediate peace treaty with Germany so he could fulfill his promise of ending the war. Frustrated with the peace

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<sup>56</sup> Memorandum from Barclay to the Secretary of State, January 28, 1918, *FRUS, 1918, Russia, Vol. II*, 815-816.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* A Latvian representative called to discuss the same topic a couple weeks later because they had received the same offer.

<sup>58</sup> Visvaldis Mangulis, *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century* (Princeton: Cognition Books, 1983), 29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: the Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 545.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

negotiations, Lenin pushed for making a final peace, even if that meant allowing Germany to annex its former territory, the Baltic Provinces, while German soldiers marched northward.

Facing the inevitable approach of German forces and power struggles with Soviets, the nationalist Estonian government declared independence. Before German soldiers took Tallinn, Konstantin Päts, Jüri Vilms and Konstantin Konik, Estonian politicians on behalf of the Estonian National Council, declared the existence of an independent Estonia on February 23, 1918.<sup>62</sup>

Facing an approaching frontline without having adequate defensive forces made such a declaration easier, and seemingly futile, for the National Council because they had nothing to lose. The German army was going to occupy Estonia anyway, so the declaration stood as just a formally stated position of how the Estonians now thought of themselves; as an independent entity, separate from the Russian Empire.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was seen as a humiliating defeat to the Bolsheviks, but Lenin argued for it to pass because it was necessary to end the German invasion. Lenin issued the “Decree on the Socialist Fatherland in Danger” after German armies kept advancing once peace talks paused and the army was too close to Petrograd.<sup>63</sup> On February 23, 1918, the Germans laid out their terms for peace, demanding all of the territory its troops had seized, including the Baltics. In the end, the Baltic Bolsheviks that managed to escape German invasion were betrayed by their leaders in Petrograd by the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. “Some Latvian Rifles even threatened an independent war against the Germans if Lenin concluded that

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<sup>62</sup> White, “Nationalism and Socialism in Historical Perspective,” 33.

<sup>63</sup> Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 547.

peace.”<sup>64</sup> Reminiscing upon his time in power, Štucka, “made clear that his party had never really become reconciled to the notion of a separate state. He stressed they had never used the slogan 'an independent Latvia' because they laughed at the very notion; 'in the era of imperialism', he reminded his readers, 'the independence of tiny nations was nothing more than a diplomatic deception, while in the era of socialism it would be quite unnecessary.’”<sup>65</sup>

Bolshevik leaders in the Baltics wanted a centralized Russian state under their control, but the treaty would legally bind the Baltics to Germany. Rather than become a “diplomatic deception,” the independence of those small states as a result of the Peace Treaty took away long-standing Russian influences that had possessed the sole juridical rights of sovereignty.<sup>66</sup>

The formal separation of the Baltic States was brought about by World War I and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. The peace treaty was signed on March 3, 1918 with a significant loss for Russia. The Bolsheviks agreed to give up 1,267,000 square miles of territory with 62 million people in it.<sup>67</sup> The legal separation of the Baltic States from Russia is evident in Article III, which states that the, “territories lying to the west of the line agreed upon by the contracting parties which formerly belonged to Russia, will no longer be subject to Russian sovereignty.”<sup>68</sup> The Soviet Executive passed the peace proposal by a vote of 116 to 85 even though Lenin was called a “traitor” from the Left SRs, a Russian political group, and some members on the left wing of

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<sup>64</sup> Mangulis, *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century*, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Swain, “The Disillusioning of the Revolution’s Praetorian Guard: The Latvian Riflemen, Summer-Autumn 1918,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 4 (1999): 670.

<sup>66</sup> Our Special Correspondent, “The Present Position of Lithuania,” *The Baltic Review*, 343, in Record Group 59, National Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Mangulis, *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Telegram from the Consul General at Moscow to the Secretary of State translating the Peace Treaty of Brest Litovsk, March 30, 1918, *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, Yale Law School.

his own party.<sup>69</sup> The treaty isolated the remaining Bolsheviks in the Baltics, which allowed for nationalist reformers in the area to form their own government institutions under limited German protection.

### **Chapter 3: The Peace Conference Formation of U.S. Foreign Policy**

Initial U.S. policy towards the Baltics formed during WWI. That policy was founded by the external forces that allowed Baltic nationalists to come to power. The (White) Russian Ambassador in the U.S. and certain American diplomats once more changed the Baltic political situation. Before the Peace Conference, Baltic pleas for international recognition of their independence were neglected as U.S. policy in the region revolved around their optimistic prediction of a White Russian victory in the ensuing Civil War. At the Peace Conference, the Allied Powers nullified the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and once again that external action brought about more chaos in the Baltics. The presence of German troops, more favorable to Baltic nationalists than Russian troops, had maintained a small amount of Baltic stability because it kept the Russian Civil War, and the Red Army soldiers that came with it, away from the coast. The retreat of German soldiers is what caused internal instability to flare up again and the Civil War to expand, but it ultimately stopped the Baltics from becoming German puppet states.

It took the United States four years after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to extend full recognition to the Baltic States because the U.S. had close ties with Russia during WWI. Individual U.S. diplomats had different view on the independence of the Baltic States and chaotic political conditions made it difficult to understand which faction was in charge. Most

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<sup>69</sup>Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, 547.

importantly, the U.S. believed that Russia would shed Bolshevism rather quickly and become a large and powerful state, which included the Baltics, once more.

The prevalence of certain Russian diplomats, such as Boris Bakhmetev, also slowed down the recognition process. Before the October Revolution, Kerensky's ambassador to the United States paid a visit to Washington on July 7<sup>th</sup>. Bakhmetev "made it immediately clear that neither mutual affection nor trust would prevail if the U.S. started advocating dismemberment of Russia."<sup>70</sup> In response, Baltic representatives claimed that they should be able to decide their own fate.<sup>71</sup> However, they had yet to declare independence and would not have legitimate institutions that allowed for their self-government until the aftermath of the October Revolution.

Arguments by each Russian government for retention of the Baltic States were strategic as well as economic, appealing to America's need for a strong Russian ally and a peaceful Europe. This was done primarily by pitting the Baltics as necessary for defense against further German aggression. Although Russian aggression in the area was evident to the Baltic nationalists and they tried to make it as obvious to the State Department, Germany's aggressive tendencies were cause for more concern in the aftermath of WWI. The Tsarist, Provisional, and Bolshevik governments all argued that the retention of the Baltic littoral was critical for Russia for two main reasons: "1, the Baltic area could be used as a springboard for aggression against Russia, and 2, its possession by Russia provided an indispensable security zone for her."<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to determine whether each Russian government actually believed the Baltic States

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

were so important, but the argument was that the Baltics were inseparable from Russia because secession would undermine its national defense.

Those closest to the region, i.e. the local Baltic population, knew that the area was not critical for Russia's national defense by their experience during World War I. Although Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial Army came close to Petrograd, the war left Russia proper in-tact. In the winter of 1918, a demoralized German Army was able to capture 1172 Bolshevik officers and 16,000 enlisted men in the Livonia and Estonia region, with only 20 killed and wounded soldiers of their own.<sup>73</sup> No strategic military reversals occurred in the Baltic States. For an area that it considered so critical for self-defense, it seems puzzling that Russia would not be willing to properly defend the Baltic defense zone that allowed the German Army to cross all of Lithuania and Kurland, to the Daugava River outside of Riga in just one campaign in 1915.<sup>74</sup> Resistance was so low in this esteemed Russian buffer, that, "in Kurland, German cavalry patrols took whole towns virtually without firing a shot."<sup>75</sup> The Baltics were more like a playground for soldiers to intersect and burn land when a direction, either towards or away from Russia or Germany, was already established by decisive battles elsewhere.

America's ties with Russia hindered any willingness the U.S. may have had to recognize the new republics. Immediate difficulties for recognition were directly related to Russia's role in World War I. Albert Tarulis explains that, "were there U.S. to support openly the separatist tendencies among the non-Russians, it would have lost not only Russian friendship, but also

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

<sup>75</sup> Cited in Ibid., 71.

Russian military contribution to the common struggle against Germany and her allies.”<sup>76</sup> It was clearly not in the interest of the United States to upset an ally. The obvious focus was on winning the Great War and Russian soldiers were necessary, so Russia could not be abandoned. To help configure U.S. policy toward Russia, Elihu Root was sent on a diplomatic mission during the summer of 1917. He confirmed the idea that if the U.S. showed sympathy for Russia and did not support its dismemberment, he expected that Russia would stay in the war.<sup>77</sup> All of this occurred before the October Russian Revolution, before Russia left the war. However, U.S. policy of supporting Russia’s interests remained the same. The U.S. still would not openly support Russia’s dismemberment after its role in WWI diminished.

America’s determination to have close ties with Russia was expressed even after the Bolsheviks made a separate peace. Exemplifying the close knit relationship, in 1918, U.S. Ambassador Francis stated,

I shall not leave Russia until forced to depart. My Government and the American people are too deeply interested in the welfare of the Russian people to abandon the country and leave its people to the mercies [sic] of Germany. We shall do all possible...to protect and preserve the integrity of this great country.<sup>78</sup>

Even when Russia was no longer aiding the Allies in Germany’s defeat, the U.S. maintained its determination to have an ally in Russia.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Ibid., 35.

<sup>78</sup> Letter from the Ambassador in Russia (David R. Francis) to the Secretary of State, April 15, 1918, *FRUS, 1918, Russia, Vol. I* (Washington: GPO), 440, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1918v1>.

Robert Lansing's downplaying of the situation in the Baltics and his optimism in Great Russia's revival became the bedrock of America's "do-nothing policy." Albert Tarulis asserts, "Lansing was aware of the centrifugal forces at work in Russia, but belittled them."<sup>79</sup> He, like Wilson, seemed to think that the Baltic question would answer itself quickly. Lansing's diplomatic capabilities went beyond mere deferment as evidenced by his work as Secretary of State after the end of the Great War. However, his policy, as well as Colby's, maintained one of deferment until the question would answer itself. Since he thought that Russia was only temporarily disintegrated, deferment seemed like the only logical solution.<sup>80</sup> The rise of the Bolsheviks and the October Russian Revolution surprised the Western world, so it seemed natural that such a strange force would not last long and the Russia the U.S. was familiar with, an Ally during wartime, would soon return. In his war memoirs, Lansing wrote that he suggested a "do nothing policy," "until the black period of terrorism ends and the rising tide of blood has run its course," and in the meantime, America should "see to it that Russia's interests are safeguarded."<sup>81</sup> After all, he did not want to involve the United States in more of Europe's conflicts than he had to as isolationism's popularity rose.<sup>82</sup> It made no sense to focus on some tiny Baltic States seeking independence recognition when Germany had to be defeated and Western Europe had to be taken care of.

Lansing's views on the relationship between Russia and the Baltic States cemented U.S. policy during his term. He made up his mind September 9, 1918 before the war was over, that

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<sup>79</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 21.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> David S. Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism* (Cahpel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 235.

the Baltic States should be, “autonomous states of a Russian confederation, and that the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty should be completely abrogated or denounced along with all treaties relating to Russian territory.”<sup>83</sup> As Secretary of State, Lansing’s views of the proper role of the Baltics were critical, and with Wilson’s approval, were the official expressed views of the American government. He saw an autonomous Baltic region within a strong Russia as a suitable solution. Theoretically, it could have appeased Baltic nationalists while not interfering with the strength of a Russian ally. The idea of a confederation was less likely to displease the Russians, “who were inclined to concede to the Baltic peoples no more than a weak autonomy.”<sup>84</sup> Once established, such views remained until Lansing’s resignation. On October 5, 1918, Lansing assured Bakhmetev that the position of his government had not changed and its objective was to assist Russia.<sup>85</sup> In the conflict between the Baltic nationalists and Russians who wanted to maintain their territorial integrity, Lansing’s allegiance was with Russia, and Bakhmetev.

Certain U.S. officials held different views of the role the Baltics could play in international politics that would support their independence. One such role the Baltic States could, and were willing to, play was that of a buffer state. Lieutenant Colonel Warwick Greene, Chief of the U.S. Mission to the Baltic Provinces, thought the Baltic States would make a great buffer between two rivals, Russia and Germany.<sup>86</sup> The delicate balance of power checking European ambitions after World War I was just that- delicate. In trying to solve the Baltic problem, the council of foreign Ministers decided to send food, equipment, and arms to the

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<sup>83</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 89.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Ibid., 56.

Baltic States at the end of 1919.<sup>87</sup> Yet the idea of buffer states to dampen any further annexationist wishes was appealing. Not only did Germany invade Russia, but Russian troops also invaded East Prussia through the Nemunas River and moved towards Königsberg and Danzig during the first couple months of WWI.<sup>88</sup> Recent aggressive tendencies that went through Baltic lands were not only from the side of the Germans, so they were prime contestants for buffer states between powerful neighbors. Greene's support of Baltic buffer states was also embedded in checking Bolshevik expansion.<sup>89</sup> Claims of an international proletariat revolution were reason enough to support efforts to the contrary. Although no one in the State Department was in favor of Bolshevik expansion, they continued to believe the communist revolution would end on its own accord and was not a real threat CITE. U.S. foreign policy only acknowledged the Russia of 1917, and therefore any attempt toward recognition without a powerful Russian government that the U.S. recognized would be futile.<sup>90</sup> The proximity of Greene's position to Soviet Russia made him more afraid of the Bolsheviks, and therefore more supportive of independent Baltic States, than U.S. diplomats sitting behind their desks at the State Department, far removed from any Red Army soldiers.

America's wish for a strong Russia even put the country at odds with Great Britain when it came to the question of the Baltic States. American support of Baltic independence would make the U.S. assume "moral responsibility for their protection" and further British trade

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<sup>87</sup> John Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 337.

<sup>88</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 59. The Nemunas River was also known as "Die Memel" in German. The port city that touches both the river and the Baltic Sea in modern day Lithuania, was called "Memelland" by the Germans and "Klaipėda" by the Lithuanians and was ruled by both states at different points in history. It later became a contested region and a cause of conflict between Lithuania and Germany.

<sup>89</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Letter from the Acting Secretary of State to Mr. Jonas Vileišis, August 23, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III* (Washington: GPO), 658-659, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1920v03>.

disguised as buffer states.<sup>91</sup> Siding with the British in setting up a Baltic buffer zone would neither help U.S. economic interest nor their diplomatic relations with non-Bolshevik Russia. In response to suggestions of Russia's dismemberment to prevent a Bolshevik Russian menace, Lansing replied with a strong moral and strategic pro-Russian stance. Referencing Lloyd George's idea of extending recognition to form an anti-Bolshevik alliance of independent states from Estonia to the Caucasus, Lansing claimed it would be "a moral wrong and would pave the way for conflicts in the future."<sup>92</sup> More importantly to U.S. interests, Lansing wrote, "a divided Russia... would be a far greater menace to the British Empire than would be a united democratic Russia, well able to defend itself, but not disposable to attack."<sup>93</sup> Such reminders of a need for a strong Russia that the U.S. can count on as an ally broadly rejected other approaches toward the Bolsheviks, like the formation of a chain of independent states.

The Russian Ambassador made his feelings about the separatist Baltic States known once again before the Peace Conference. Although no reply was given, Bakhmetev was a recognized Russian diplomat and that role alone made his voice in D.C. heard. Although Russia was in a Civil War, Bakhmetev was invited to present the Russian view on the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that allowed the Baltic States to officially separate from the empire and gave them certain freedoms although they frequently interfered with the newly established indigenous

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<sup>91</sup> Letter to Mr. Fletcher, February 13, 1922, 860N.01/36, RG 59.

<sup>92</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Ambassador in Great Britain (Davis), December 4, 1919, *FRUS, 1919, Russia* (Washington: GPO), 129-130, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919vRussia>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

Baltic governments.<sup>94</sup> He submitted a statement of peace terms regarding Russia that he wanted to present at the Peace Conference that included the following two conclusions:

1. Exterior unconditional abrogation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and all other agreements concluded by the German Government after Nov. 7 1917, either with the authorities acting in the name of Russia [the Bolsheviks] or with whatever National or Political groups claiming to represent authority over any territory of the former Russian Empire.
2. Evacuation of German troops from the territory of the former Russian Empire...<sup>95</sup>

It was no coincidence that anti-Bolshevik Russian organizations in the U.S. were also “bombarding the State Department and White House with petitions and appeals favoring adherence to the principle of a ‘one and indivisible Russia’ and portraying Baltic leaders of independence as German puppets.”<sup>96</sup> Bakhmetev knew that the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had to be voided in order to keep the Baltic States a part of the Empire as the treaty legally separated it. German authorities did in fact allow local governments to organize and even allowed the Taryba, which set up strong networks of sovereignty support and independent institutions, to form.<sup>97</sup> Characterizing the Baltic nationalists as German puppets, their claims to self-determination would seem unauthentic and not gain any traction in the United States. If Bakhmetev could get Wilson and the State Department to see the Baltic leaders as marionettes

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*, 335.

<sup>95</sup> Telegram from the Acting Secretary of State to the Commission to Negotiate Peace, December 13, 1918, *FRUS, 1919, The Paris Peace Conference, Vol. II* (Washington: GPO), 476, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919Parisv02>.

<sup>96</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 90.

<sup>97</sup> E. H. C. Loudon, “Lithuania’s Struggle for Recognition” *The Baltic Review*, 345, in RG 59.

of the German Kaiser, it would make U.S. support for their independence very unlikely.

Recognition pleas and recommendations in the Baltic Commission were blocked, “by the firm commitment of Italy and particularly the United States to the territorial integrity of Russia.”<sup>98</sup>

Bakhmetev’s influence was affirmed when the Allies called for the renunciation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the removal of German soldiers from former Russian lands under the Armistice ending World War I.

#### **Chapter 4: The Russian Civil War**

Expansion of the Civil War into the Baltics after the Versailles Peace Treaty created havoc for the young indigenous governments that were somewhat protected by the presence of German troops. In this manner, more and more militant factions began fighting in the region and word got back to the U.S. State Department that the situation was serious. Diplomatic views of different ambassadors from both Russia and the U.S. stopped the State Department from answering Baltic recognition and assistance requests. U.S. involvement in Russia’s Civil War in the Baltics was minimal and mostly consisted of humanitarian aid. Although seen as a precursor for recognition, organizations such as the American Relief Administration were rather used as a substitute.<sup>99</sup> Such relief efforts still continued Baltic hopes for U.S. recognition of their independence. Ultimately, peace treaties were signed by each Baltic government with the

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<sup>98</sup> Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*, 341.

<sup>99</sup> Frank Costigliola, *Awkward Dominion: American Political, Economic, and Cultural Relations with Europe, 1919-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 90.

Soviet Russians as local fighting dwindled from external intervention in Russia proper (mainly from Great Britain) and Baltic nationalists forces pushed out White Russian troops.<sup>100</sup>

The difficulty in determining the true placement of power from so many competing political factions during the Civil War can be exemplified by recognition pleas from nationalists becoming more desperate. Pleas, declarations, petitions, and appeals submitted to the U.S. government by the newly enfranchised Baltic leaders before Fall of 1918, only asked for moral support for their independence.<sup>101</sup> Article XII of the Armistice Convention directed all German troops in former Russian territory to retreat, “as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable having regard to the internal situation of these territories.”<sup>102</sup> Reports had made it clear that the internal situation of these territories was a mess.<sup>103</sup> Without having consent from the Allies, defeated and hungry German troops began to retreat, violating Article XII of the Armistice, while the Russian Civil War was at a peak in the Baltic States. The newly formed provisional government of Lithuania appealed to the Allies on November 11, 1918 via radio, “for aid against Bolshevik danger as Red Army troops began to move into the vacuum left by withdrawing Germans.”<sup>104</sup> The increase of political instability in the Baltic States that resulted from the end of WWI is reflected in the changing aid requests to the United States.

With a German communist revolution taking place in Berlin, the Red Army was instructed to convert the Baltic Sea to a “Soviet Sea” that could influence revolutions in

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<sup>100</sup> Alan Palmer, *The Baltic: A New History of the Region and its People* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2005), 287.

<sup>101</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 92.

<sup>102</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>103</sup> Various National Archive documents and FRUS papers have zero indication of a stable political situation in the Baltics.

<sup>104</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 97.

Scandinavia and Germany alike.<sup>105</sup> During December of 1918, the Council of People's Commissars and the Central Executive committee of the Soviets of Worker, Soldier, and Peasant Deputies even recognized the Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.<sup>106</sup> Under Soviet rule, recognition by the U.S. was impossible and although the true extent of Soviet power in the area is doubtful at the very least due to reports of intensive yet unsuccessful Bolshevik campaigns, the soviet presence created more desperate conditions for Baltic nationalists.<sup>107</sup> Maintaining hope, the American Lithuanian National Council submitted a long telegram to the State Department now requesting not only independence, but also for American troops to occupy Lithuania.<sup>108</sup> Although no reply was given, there was recognition of receipt. There were repeated requests for recognition of the newly organized State Council of Lithuania as the provisional government of an independent Lithuanian state but there was no reply.<sup>109</sup> The continuous silence in Washington suggests uncertainty, and constantly changing hands of power in the area support that uncertainty.

The event that came to be known as Estonia's War of Independence from late November, 1918 to March, 1919, showcases the confusing multitude of agents involved in various armed conflicts of the time period. Most of these groups were from areas surrounding the Baltics and expanded local instability due to their fighting. This particular battle consisted of the following groups: Estonian and Latvian nationalists, backed by most of the local

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<sup>105</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>107</sup> Telegram from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State, May 9, 1921, *FRUS, 1921, Vol II* (Washington: GPO), 755, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1921v02>.

<sup>108</sup> Letter from the Lithuanian National Council to the Secretary of State, November 14, 1918, *FRUS, 1918, Russia Vol. II* (Washington: GPO), 845-849, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1918Russiav02>.

<sup>109</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 100-101.

population and by the Entente, the British Navy, British and French advisers, Finnish volunteers, White Russian armies under several commanders, Polish forces, the *Landeswehr* force, an “Iron Division” of German mercenaries, Estonian and Latvian Bolsheviks, the Red Army, and the Latvian Rifles.<sup>110</sup> The Baltic Germans were trying to retain their influence and privileges dating back to the Teutonic Knights, the Bolsheviks and their sympathizers wanted to set up a Soviet state, and the nationalists and their sympathizers were trying to retain their claim to independent statehood.

It was difficult for the United States government to fully trust and understand the confusing political situation in the Baltics, Latvia in particular. The Latvians faced a peculiar situation because Latvia had more notable pro-Bolshevik tendencies. The U.S. government was in no way likely to recognize and form diplomatic relations with a small soviet state if it was not going to even recognize the more powerful Bolshevik Russian government. The Red Army’s commander in chief was a Latvian, and ethnic Latvians made up a majority of the cheka.<sup>111</sup> In Soviet military history, only one Baltic military group would have prominent mention, the Latvian Rifleman. Their fame for consolidating Lenin’s power and being a significant section of the Red Army is well known. Regiments of the Rifleman had once formed the Kremlin Guard, and were critical to keeping Lenin in power at the beginning of 1918.<sup>112</sup>

However, the U.S. General Staff’s Intelligence Division published a guidebook on Latvia in 1919 that said Latvians have a nationalist movement and are more pro-Allies, rather than

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<sup>110</sup> Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 33-34.

<sup>111</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 118.

<sup>112</sup> Swain, “The Disillusioning of the Revolution’s Praetorian Guard,” 667.

pro-Bolshevik.<sup>113</sup> Although the guidebook shows that the U.S. government saw Latvia's struggle as a nationalist one, its Bolshevik leanings and support of the Iskolaaat government under Štucka, is difficult to ignore. Reports that the Latvian capital of Riga is under the control of Bolsheviks because of uprisings comprised of "some Lettish" that were using British supplied arms further blurred the true stance of Latvian sentiment.<sup>114</sup> Bolshevik tendencies of each of the Baltic States could be questioned by association and fed into the concept of a united Russia. The set-up of soviet regimes along the Baltic coast during the Russian Civil War naturally made the Western powers hesitate even more when considering the recognition of Baltic independence. The Allies, the United States in particular, did not want another Bolshevik government and had legitimate reason to question whether the Baltics, especially Latvia, would ultimately become socialist states.

Frequent skirmishes and changing hands of power that included many actors made it difficult for distant states to know exactly which agents were holding a solid majority of power in the area. Different alliances were made. For example, Estonian nationalists sided with some White Russians to drive back the Red Army in May of 1919. Afterwards, General Nikolai Yudenich assumed command of Russian forces and the Estonian troops moved south to help the Latvian nationalists fight the Baltic German and White Russian allied forces under Colonel Bermond-Avalov in Riga.<sup>115</sup> By November, as Yudenich's army was retreating from Petrograd to Estonia, his forces were disarmed and disbanded by the nationalists because he refused to

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<sup>113</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 118.

<sup>114</sup> Telegram from the Chargé in Denmark (Osborne) to the Acting Secretary of State, January 6, 1919, *FRUS, 1919, Russia* (Washington: GPO), 666, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1919vRussia>.

<sup>115</sup> Clemens, *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire*, 34.

recognize the concept of Baltic independence.<sup>116</sup> Even though the nationalist forces won and the Red Army was forced to retreat further and further away from Tallinn, the sheer number of powerful actors with different interests, made a stable consolidation of power in the hands of the nationalists alone unlikely.

During the height of the Russian Civil War in the Baltics, cries for assistance and the safeguarding of the nationalist governments that came from recognition were ignored. The need for military assistance to the Baltic nationalists that was answered by the British and French missions was ignored by the Americans.<sup>117</sup> On December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1918, President Janis Čakste of the Latvian State Council requested naval protection, arms, and munitions because of the, “urgent need to combat Bolsheviks who were advancing like a tide, taking hostages, pillaging, and levying contributions, while the Germans were purposely handing Latvia over to the Bolsheviks.”<sup>118</sup> One would assume that U.S. involvement in the Russian Civil War, admittedly it was minimal, would extend to the Baltic nationalists as well, but that was not the case because nationalist aspirations would contradict the U.S. vision of a strong Russia.<sup>119</sup> When asked for assistance in fighting Bolshevik forces, Lansing instructed American officials to not give any assurances implied by advising Latvian authorities to not conclude an armistice with Bolshevik Russia.<sup>120</sup> The U.S.’s decision to not intervene actually helped the Baltic nationalists by forcing them into peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks. Continued fighting

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<sup>116</sup> Clemens, *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> Telegrams from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Acting Secretary of State, December 27 and 29, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III*, 667, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1920v03>.

<sup>118</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 115-116.

<sup>119</sup> Cited in Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace*, 341.

<sup>120</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Commissioner at Riga (Gade), February 4, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III*, 646.

may have led to White Russian forces gaining traction in the Civil War and eliminating any chances of Russian support for Baltic self-determination.

Ambassador Bakhmetev understood the significance behind U.S. recognition and made it known. According to Albert Tarulis, the Russian Ambassador reminded the U.S. that the “independence of small states could only be maintained artificially, through the political and economic support of an outside power ‘actuated by a purpose of jeopardizing the economic freedom of Russia and interfering with the liberty of her commercial intercourse.’”<sup>121</sup>

Bakhmetev made the economic necessity of the Baltic States for Russia an argument that was sure to win over America’s sympathy. The U.S. Division of Russian Affairs shared this view and deemed the economic resources of the Baltic States as insufficient to maintain “prosperous independence.”<sup>122</sup> Since the U.S. believed Russia would shed Bolshevism and return to normalcy anyway, it could not feasibly “interfere with the liberty of her commercial intercourse.” Baltic ports were described as an integral part of it.

The economic vitality the Baltic States brought to the Russian Empire was exaggerated. The purpose behind such an exaggeration is twofold; if the U.S. saw the economic necessity ownership of the Baltic ports brought to the country, support of its dismemberment would decline and if the Baltic States were to be recognized as independent, they would need to sustain economic independence. Great effort was put into placing the Baltic States and Russian Empire as mutually dependent.<sup>123</sup> The Russian Political Conference prepared pamphlets that

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<sup>121</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 43.

<sup>122</sup> Division of Russian Affairs to the Undersecretary of State, March 25, 1921, 860N.01/37, RG 59.

<sup>123</sup> Commissioner Young to Secretary of State, May 1, 1922, 860N.01/49, RG 59.

were distributed to the Allied diplomats, newspaper officials, and the public.<sup>124</sup> These pamphlets claimed the Baltic ports handled 20% of Russia's foreign trade.<sup>125</sup> Such a large portion of trade would have significant economic consequences for any country, thus making it difficult for anyone to support such a devastating economic blow. With such a claim, foreign ministries would have to consider whether the nationalistic aspirations of a small population on Russia's western borders is justification for possibly wrecking Russia's economic health. To further dramatize the economic consequences of Baltic recognition, Vassily A. Maklakov, Russia's ambassador in Paris, claimed that the "absolute independence of Baltic states would mean Russia's ruin economically and strategically."<sup>126</sup> Neither the U.S. nor the other Allied powers had reason to "ruin" Russia. Since the economic vitality of Russia supposedly depended on the Baltic ports, recognition of the independent Baltic States would mean support of Russia's decline.

Realistically, Russia's economy did not depend on its control of the Baltic ports. Before the war, the Baltic ports only handled 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the tonnage from Russia's foreign trade, and only 1/6<sup>th</sup> of its value; significantly less than the original claim<sup>127</sup> However, Russia held claim to the importance of those ports and their right to maintain them. A letter from the Russian Political Conference explained that they would never renounce their claim to the area, because the geographical position of the Baltic States attached them to Russia, which had invested a lot of money "toward the development of ports which are indispensable to her trade."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 43.

<sup>125</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>127</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>128</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 46.

Desperately seeking independence, the Baltic States incorporated free trade provisions in their peace treaties with Russia so as to make the economic dependence argument invalid.<sup>129</sup> The open port assurances made by the Baltic States were disregarded in Washington.<sup>130</sup> The policy of non-recognition continued, justified by the argument that the Baltic Provinces were of economic vitality for Russia and the Baltic States would be unable to maintain economic independence.

Concerning the Baltics, the Russian Civil War was over in 1920 as each nationalist government signed peace treaties with the Bolsheviks. Tired of fighting and wishing to maintain their independence, secret talks began with Foreign Commissioner Chicherin after Lloyd George persuaded his cabinet to stop supplying White Russians with arms via the Baltic States.<sup>131</sup> Soviet Russia recognized Estonia's independence and signed a Peace Treaty at Tartu that would keep Red Army and White Russian soldiers out of the country February 2, 1920.<sup>132</sup> Both Latvia and Lithuania followed suit as they sought negotiations with Chicherin and signed peace treaties ending the Civil War in the Baltics on August 1<sup>st</sup> and July 12, 1920, respectively.<sup>133</sup> Solidifying the separation of Soviet Russia and Baltic States, Article 1 of the Russo-Lithuanian Peace Treaty states:

In accordance with the declaration made by the Russian Federative Socialist Soviet Republic of the right belonging to all nations of free self-determination...Russia

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<sup>129</sup> Palmer, *The Baltic*, 287-289.

<sup>130</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 53.

<sup>131</sup> Palmer, *The Baltic*, 287.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

unconditionally recognized the sovereignty and independence of the State of Lithuania...relinquishes for all time all the sovereign rights which Russia had...<sup>134</sup>

The Treaty of Tartu and Treaty of Riga offered the same relinquishment of power to the indigenous governments. This formal separation from Russia did not involve a German protectorate and resulted in stable governments. Baltic leaders would no longer have to worry about the imminent threat of Russian invasion and could focus their energies on international recognition since White Russians and the U.S. still viewed the states as temporary.

Even towards the end of the Russian Civil War, Bakhmetev maintained strongly against the separation of the Baltic States from the Russian Empire. His views of the Baltic States mimics U.S. policy and maintain that the U.S. not recognize them for it would create a permanently bad relationship with Russia. He writes,

The only point to which Russian opinion strongly objects is the recognition of the [Baltic] States in a form which would legalize their separation from Russia and grant them an international status of complete sovereignty and independence. Such a course, qualified as 'dismemberment of Russia,' has called for most emphatic protests from Russian bodies of all shades of political thought.<sup>135</sup>

This fear of the "dismemberment of Russia" has been echoed in the State Department continuously in reference to any suggestions of recognizing the Baltic States. He refers to Russia's political situation as a "temporary disability" and says that recognition of the Baltic

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<sup>134</sup> *The Baltic Review*, 349, in RG 59.

<sup>135</sup> Letter from the Russian Ambassador (Bakhmeteff) to the Assistant Secretary of State (Dearing), July 1, 1921, *FRUS, 1921, Vol. II*, 755-759, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1921v02>.

States would be considered taking advantage of that temporary disability. He continues to call the independent condition of the Baltic States one of the most temporary nature and writes “even now the Baltic States might be swept away if circumstances would warrant the expedience of an aggression by the Moscow Soviet.”<sup>136</sup> Mimicking the understanding of the United States, Bakhmetev says the independence of the Baltic States, “would last only while Russia remained inarticulate.”<sup>137</sup>

U.S. Ambassador John W. Davis held fast to the notion of an indivisible Russia. Ambassador Davis’ reaction to many notices from the Latvian nationalists played a role in watering down any support Washington may have had in recognizing the Baltic States. From his post in London, he received passionate requests from the Latvian Foreign Minister, Zigfrids Meierovics, to inform Wilson that the Latvian government was begging him to, “save in the name of humanity, an entire country from murder and annihilation by organized foreign bands.”<sup>138</sup> Davis’ minimum response was a blowback to Baltic nationalists. Henri Simson, Latvia’s representative in London, had contact with Davis during this time of crisis. Simson informed Davis that the German troops were evading Article XII of the Armistice Convention and evacuating Latvia without first receiving orders from the Allied powers. Davis was also told that the Germans were delivering arms, munitions, and fortified posts to the Bolsheviks, and were, “systematically devastating the country and are pillaging and murdering in concert with the Russian troops who are coming in to take their place.”<sup>139</sup> Although he was made aware of

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> 861C.00/4, RG 59.

<sup>139</sup> No. 36 from the Ambassador in Great Britain (Davis) to the Acting Secretary of State, December 30, 1918, *FRUS, 1919, The Paris Peace Conference, Vol. II*, 480-481.

the urgency the matter required, he did not dispatch the note for another ten days when almost all of Latvia was under Bolshevik control and also used regular mail for delivery.<sup>140</sup> Davis' decision to sit on the notice does not have an explanation but it was a clear indication of his views. He did not see the matter as something urgent or worthwhile for the U.S. to react to. If Davis had seen the case for Baltic independence as one worthy of his support, he would not have waited ten days to forward an enclosed translation of Simson's notice. Also, by choosing to send the letter via regular mail, Davis showed his lack of urgency. In fact, the Ambassador's letter was not received by the State Department until January 25, 1919, approximately 35 days after Simson's initial notice.<sup>141</sup> His personal message to the Acting Secretary of State was very short and contained more clues into his opinion of the Baltic situation. He wrote that Simson's letter contained, "a protest against the alleged violation by Germany of Article XII of the Armistice."<sup>142</sup> Without bluntly stating his opinion, Davis makes it known that he does not believe the "alleged" violations are taking place. Ambassadors are a source of information for foreign policy and their portrayal of events has a direct and significant impact on U.S. foreign policy. Without U.S. ambassadors that were aligned with the cause of the Baltic nationalists, it was highly unlikely that the State Department would change its policy of non-recognition.

A change in diplomatic personality also positively changed the outlook on the Baltic States. To have a better understanding of the happenings in the Baltic, Evan E. Young was assigned to the post of Commissioner of the United States for the Baltic Provinces of Russia in

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<sup>140</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 116.

<sup>141</sup> No. 36 from the Ambassador in Great Britain (Davis) to the Acting Secretary of State, December 30, 1918, *FRUS, 1919, The Paris Peace Conference, Vol. II*, 480-481.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

1919.<sup>143</sup> In contrast to Ambassador Davis, Commissioner Young promptly reported changes in the region. Responding to a successful Bolshevik attack on Poland August 10, 1920 Young reported that the situation in the Baltic area was critical and warned that armed conflict will break out between Estonia and Soviet Russia because Estonia would reject its demand for a union.<sup>144</sup> Unlike Ambassador Davis, he promptly warned the State Department of a hostile situation and received a reply from Secretary Colby the following day. Young's concern was matched by Major Edward W. Ryan, the American Red Cross Commissioner for the Baltic States and Western Russia.<sup>145</sup> In response to their concern, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, the *USS Pittsburgh* was sent to Tallinn and plans were made to evacuate the 250 Americans involved in relief efforts in the Baltic States.<sup>146</sup> Regardless of the situation, the presence of the visiting admirals and commanders from the U.S. likely sparked hope along with inquiry on the part of the nationalist Baltic governments. Latvian President K. Ulmanis, like other Baltic leaders, wondered why U.S. ships were there because of their consistent refusal to recognize Baltic independence.<sup>147</sup> However, the important part is that U.S. ships were actually sent to the region, even though it was not to help fight the Russians (be they Bolsheviks or Imperialists), but rather because Young was actually concerned about the severity of the situation and reported it to his superiors. His reports on desperate conditions in Latvia and Estonia caused the State Department to "appraise the situation in the Baltic with caution...the Department felt that conditions in Latvia

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<sup>143</sup> Division of Russian Affairs to Undersecretary of State, March 25, 1921, 860N.01/37, RG 59.

<sup>144</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 315.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Telegram from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State, August 12, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III*, 657-658.

<sup>147</sup> Telegram from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State September 7, 1920 and Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Commissioner at Riga (Young), September 11, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III* 660-661.

were ‘more disturbed than usual.’”<sup>148</sup> The reappraisal of the Baltic situation definitely did not favor recognition because it showed instability, but it served as a reminder that the Baltic region no longer considered itself and integral part of Russia.

In a letter from President Wilson to the President of the assembly of the League of Nations, Paul Hymans, Wilson stated a reason against recognition; he was concerned about the instability on Russia’s borders created by mutual mistrust and fear of war.<sup>149</sup> The Soviets refused to demobilize because they were afraid of new attacks, while nationalist groups on Russia’s border are afraid to disarm because they did not trust the Bolsheviks.<sup>150</sup> Wilson’s explanation of his concern gave hope to some Baltic nationalists. The passage in question is written as follows:

It is obvious to all that these small struggling border states will not attack Great Russia unless encouraged by promise of support from the stronger powers...an attempt at pacification must be a public and solemn engagement among the Great Powers not to take advantage of Russia’s stricken condition and not to violate the territorial integrity of Russia nor undertake themselves any further invasions of Russia, not to tolerate such invasions by others. . . . The responsibility for any new war which might break out on the Russian border would then be clearly placed.<sup>151</sup>

Jonas Vileišis, the self-titled “Representative of Lithuania in America” (which is how he signed all of his communications with the State Department), saw the opportunity to change America’s

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<sup>148</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 327.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Telegram from the Acting Secretary of State (Davis) to the Ambassador in Belgium(Whitlock), January 18, 1921, *FRUS, 1921, Vol. II*, 924-927.

attitude. Although the passage states that the U.S. does not want to “violate the territorial integrity of Russia,” ideals of pacification are mentioned, and if he could convince the State Department that Lithuania’s actions were rooted solely in self-defense and they had no further intention of engaging in conflict with Russia, perhaps America’s foreign policy would change. Unsuccessfully, Vileišis tried just that. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, he assured the State Department that the Lithuanian government wanted to return to peaceful existence and their military efforts were only in self-defense against Bolshevik aggression.<sup>152</sup> The new pleas for recognition tried to address Wilson’s concerns by explaining the regions violence employing self-defense and claiming a wish for peaceful relations with Russia. Of course, that did not change the fact that American policy was still under the influence of the Russian Ambassador Bakhmetev and in the hands of officials that were devoted to the concept of a Great Russia.

## **Chapter 5: Post Civil War Hurdles for U.S. Recognition**

External intervention from the U.S. primarily came in the form of political influence through self-determination rhetoric, siding with White Russians during the Civil War, and voiding the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that caused internal instability. The limited extent of U.S. intervention in the Baltics kept pleas for recognition going. The lack of independence recognition from the international community that allowed for the internal instability of the Baltics to get so out of control ended in relatively stable Baltic Republics run by indigenous local governments. The *de jure* recognition offered by the Supreme Allied Council, excluding the U.S., and American political changes in administration and diplomatic personality, allowed domestic pushes for recognition to prevail.

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<sup>152</sup> Letter from Mr. Jonas Vileišis to the Secretary of State, Jan 27, 1921, *FRUS, 1921, Vol. II*, 753.

One must first understand why the United States was looking into the Baltic situation in order to comprehend how U.S. foreign policy changed with the onset of 1920. In his 1919 “Report of the Mission to Finland, Esthonia, Latvia, and Lithuania” commissioned by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robert Hale notes the importance of the Baltic States in the U.S.:

The key to the Russian problem is in the Baltic States, and on the proper solution of the Russian problem depends the peace of the world. We can not shirk these problems and do our duty as the world power which, whether we like it or not, we are... We can not ignore them... For the world’s sake and our own selfish sake, we can not afford to have Bolshevism coming through to the west; we can not afford to have an ambitious and unscrupulous Prussia piercing through to the east...The problem is as monumental as it is urgent.<sup>153</sup>

Following Hale’s report, serious changes in U.S. foreign policy were primarily limited to Western Europe. However, Hale represents the interest of small groups of government officials that felt it was a moral right for the U.S. government to address the Russian problem in terms of the Baltic States. The fear of Bolshevik expansion accompanied the moral obligation the majority of Baltic independence supporters argued was the reason that the U.S. must extend recognition. Yet the initial *de jure* recognition attempts by such groups or individuals did not work.

Attempts at *de facto* recognition were likewise unsuccessful. The State Department and American officials abroad were careful to make sure that their correspondence with secessionist states was minimal and would not yield *de facto* recognition. Feeling

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Hale, “Report of the Mission to Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on the Situation in the Baltic Provinces,” S. Doc. No. 105-66, (1919).

unrepresented in the U.S., Baltic governments unsuccessfully tried to appoint Consuls in Washington.<sup>154</sup> Indirect attempts at gaining international recognition of their sovereignty through *de facto* diplomatic relations were used by all Baltic governments after initial formal recognition attempts fell through but they had no official relations with the State Department.<sup>155</sup> For example, the State Department did acknowledge the correspondence between the U.S. minister in Bern, Pleasant Stovall, and the Lithuanian National Council in Lausanne but did not consider those contacts as the formation of *de facto* relations.<sup>156</sup> Acting carefully to not establish *de facto* relations, Lansing “took under serious scrutiny...Stovall’s request for transmission of Lithuanian communications from Lausanne to the American Lithuanian National Council in Washington.”<sup>157</sup>

Baltic representatives were turned away from the United States, so as to not establish *de facto* relations. As a first step toward attempted *de facto* recognition, the American Lithuanian National Council informed the State Department that Dr. John Szlupas has been “detailed to act as the envoy to the U.S.”<sup>158</sup> Although there was no reply from the Americans and Dr. Szlupas was not accepted into the ranks of foreign diplomats.<sup>159</sup> If the U.S. had accepted him as an envoy, diplomatic *de facto* relations could have been established; contradicting U.S.-Baltic policy. A similar situation occurred with an Estonian representative. Ferdinand Kull was selected as the Estonian official to go to Washington to discuss matters of

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<sup>154</sup> Telegram from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State, August 27, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III*, 659.

<sup>155</sup> Division of Russian Affairs to Undersecretary of State, March 25, 1921, 860N.01/37, RG 59.

<sup>156</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 85.

<sup>157</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> 861.00/1614, RG 59.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

mutual interest, and try to establish relations. However, Minister Ira N. Morris cabled the State Department from Stockholm that Kull was pro-German, causing the acting Secretary of State, Richard L. Polk, to give instructions to deny Kull's visa application.<sup>160</sup> The rejection of Estonia's attempt at *de facto* relations also showed the difficulty the U.S. government had in determining the intentions of Baltic officials. Morris' accusation of Kull's pro-German leanings cast doubt on his sincerity and good faith, and was another legitimate excuse to reject recognition.

The 1920 election brought along with it a change of administration, diplomatic staff, and a chance for foreign policy revision in favor of Baltic independence. Domestic elections frequently influence that nation's foreign relations, so the Baltic nationalists began to intervene in U.S. domestic elections for their own gain. The significance of the 1920 election for supporters of Baltic independence is evidenced by domestic pressure placed upon the new President for recognition as unofficial Baltic representatives were setting up offices in Washington. Before Harding was even inaugurated, he started to receive recognition petitions from American Lithuanians.<sup>161</sup>

A change in administration changed the officials that were in charge of formulating and carrying out U.S. foreign policy. Warren G. Harding's new Secretary of State, Charles E. Hughes, believed that, "independence and equality of states was the postulate of international relations."<sup>162</sup> This statement can either be taken cynically by comparing Hughes' ideals to Wilson's championing of self-determination that did not amount to much of anything for the Baltic States, or as an opportunity to change foreign policy. Consul Albrecht, on the eve of

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<sup>160</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 86.

<sup>161</sup> 860M.01/91, RG 59.

<sup>162</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 339.

Harding's inauguration, tried to push his support of the Baltics onto the newcomers in the State Department by reminding them that, "the United States remains the outstanding great power which has withheld not only *de jure* but *de facto* recognition... and failure to recognize will only cause ill-feeling and difficulty in trade relations."<sup>163</sup> He did not get a response, but this was the first attempt by an American diplomatic official to get Washington to change its policy of non-recognition.

Colby and Hughes had more relaxed policies toward Baltic representatives on missions of a diplomatic nature than Lansing. For example, under Colby and Hughes, Kalninš and Vileišis were able to stay in DC as the unofficial consular agent of Latvia, and Lithuania's unofficial representative, respectively.<sup>164</sup> With Colby's permission, Edward Wirgo was also appointed as Estonia's unofficial representative of in the United States.<sup>165</sup> Those representatives were informal, but they were not sent away- making another stride toward recognition.

The appointment of Consular representatives to the Baltic region was a huge stride toward recognition. It gave the State Department a much closer look at the region and much more reliable information. Now, Washington could get reports that it trusted from its officials and know which political factions were in charge and whether or not they were stable enough for the U.S. to extend recognition. Initially, there were only Consular representatives in Estonia and Latvia, and the battle for a Lithuanian Consular was also fought by Young.<sup>166</sup> In a memo to

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<sup>163</sup> 860i.01/29, RG 59.

<sup>164</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 340.

<sup>165</sup> Telegram from The Consul at Reval (Albrecht) to the Secretary of State, October 6, 1920, *FRUS, 1920, Vol. III*, 662.

<sup>166</sup> Lithuania was in constant battle with Poland over Vilnius ever since the Polish forces drove back the Bolsheviks but then never left Vilnius, claiming it was a part of Poland. Violent disputes over the former (and current) Lithuanian capital ensued and the Lithuanians temporarily moved their capital to Kaunas. Incidentally, there are

the State Department, he listed two reasons for the importance of Consular representation in Lithuania; there were an increasing number of countries that had recognized an independent Lithuania and were establishing diplomatic relations, and the British were trying to gain an economic monopoly in the area.<sup>167</sup>

Young reminded Hughes that England already had an appointed Commissioner for Lithuania while the U.S. still had yet to recognize the country and did not have a Consul in Kaunas.<sup>168</sup> Growth of business transactions after 1920 between the U.S. and the Baltic States required the appropriate diplomatic institutions to handle the growing volume of trade. The large presence of American Lithuanians with economic ties to the newly independent state made a strong argument for a Consul in Kaunas to facilitate trade and handle business.<sup>169</sup> Consequently, Clement S. Edwards was sent to Kaunas July 13, 1921 but received the additional instructions to remember that, “the question of the recognition of an independent Lithuanian Government by the United States was not involved.”<sup>170</sup> Although the Consular appointment specified non-recognition, its presence was a visual reminder of slowly growing ties with the Americans. In this manner, the external presence showcased a stabilizing internal situation. The U.S. would not have set up a Consul if the region was still in a chaotic state that could pose a threat to its staff.

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still some visible hostilities between the local Lithuanians and Polish minority that do not assimilate in the city today.

<sup>167</sup> 701.4160M, RG 59.

<sup>168</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 342.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>170</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 342.

External recognition, emphasized by Young's support of independent Baltic States, helped the recognition process along. Young was supportive of the Baltic nationalists and used his post and influence to continuously press for recognition. He sent reports to Washington whenever another state recognized the Baltic States.<sup>171</sup> With some reservation for Lithuania due to its conflict with Poland, the principal Allied powers, except the U.S., recognized the Baltic States on January 1921.<sup>172</sup> The Baltic States were no longer without any powerful friends, even though they still lacked America's recognition. Continuing his pro-recognition tendency, Young followed up the Allied powers extension of recognition with the following reminder to his government:

If I may venture a suggestion as to what form our policy should take, if any change in our policy is or may be contemplated, it would be that we extend without further delay *de jure* recognition to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, coupled with a frank statement that we leave to the future the determination of the relationship which shall exist between the present so-called Baltic States and a new, orderly, and stable Russia.<sup>173</sup>

The latter portion of Young's message reflected his view that any new Russia would not include the Baltic coast. In this manner, Young differed from his predecessors. By stating that the future relationship between the Baltics and Russia should be left to them, Young moves away from the idea that a strong Russia must, or should, include the Baltics.

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<sup>171</sup> 701.9640P, RG 59.

<sup>172</sup> "New States on the Baltic," *New York Times*, January 28, 1921, <http://ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/98473668?accountid=14518>.

<sup>173</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 328.

Some private firms along with newspapers began to lobby the State Department for recognition less than two weeks before the Supreme Council of Allies extended it to Estonia and Latvia, and decided to hold off recognizing Lithuania temporarily until it solved the conflict with Poland over Vilnius. Just before the decision of the Allied powers to recognize the Baltic States, a *Memorandum on Behalf of Lithuanian Independence* was received by the Acting Secretary of State from the PR firm of McAdoo, Cotton & Franklin on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1921.<sup>174</sup> The memo listed the following arguments for recognition:

1. The U.S. government is traditionally sympathetic to national aspirations.
2. Hope for restoration of a free Russia should not stop the national aspirations of independent non-Russian peoples.
3. Status quo would put non-Russian border peoples under unnecessary Russian misfortunes.
4. Lithuanians are not Russians in every way; by race, language, religion, etc.
5. The Lithuanian government has been recognized by Great Britain, France, Finland, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Soviet Russia, and Italy while the U.S. unfairly recognized some former Russian territories, (i.e. Poland, Finland, and Armenia).
6. Lithuania is throwing off Soviet rule, and should be encouraged and supported.

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<sup>174</sup> William G. McAdoo was Wilson's Secretary of Treasury from 1913 to 1918, and also a candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination in 1920.

7. Recognition and admittance to the League of Nations would force Poland to withdraw its troops from Lithuania and deprive Soviet Russia of claim that Lithuania allows hostile troops on its territory, thus averting the danger of a Russian invasion.<sup>175</sup>

McAdoo's calls for recognition made it into the *New York Times* and spread those same ideas. The article states, "McAdoo says that the effect of refusal to recognize Lithuania is not to help the Russian people but to force the Lithuanians back into Russia under Soviet rule."<sup>176</sup> Claiming that the current policy would strengthen Soviet rule would likely gain Baltic recognition support from Americans that were previously indifferent or favored a democratic Russia with its old borders. Although newspaper articles do not change foreign policy, they publicize actions of U.S. government officials that are subject to democratic elections.

Congressman Chandler from New York was a major supporter of Baltic independence and lobbied the U.S. government for support and full recognition from within. May 16, 1921 the New York Representative argued that a nation requires four essential concurring elements to assert independence and claim the precious right of self-determination: physical basis of geography, territory, and population, well-defined distinctions in blood, language, and religion from the larger state, educational basis of citizenship, and governmental oppression by a larger nation over a small one.<sup>177</sup> He argued in detail that each of the Baltic States has each of those elements and therefore a "sacred and solemn duty rests upon the United State to recognize at

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<sup>175</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, .333-334.

<sup>176</sup> "Recognition Urged for Lithuania," *New York Times*, February 16, 1921, <http://ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/98474795?accountid=14518>.

<sup>177</sup> Special to The *New York Times*, "Chandler Appeals for Baltic States," *New York Times*, May 17, 1921, <http://ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/98427141?accountid=14518>.

once the independence *de jure* of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.”<sup>178</sup> Further support came from Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, as he joined the petitioners. Hoover spent time in Eastern Europe during his war-time relief experiences and supported recognition due to his concern for the suffering people and the opportunity present for expanding trade relations.<sup>179</sup>

Memorial Day in 1921 saw the peak of a large campaign for recognition. On that day, Harding received 135 volumes of bounded signed petitions from a delegation of American Lithuanians and Latvians introduced by Representative Chandler.<sup>180</sup> One million signatures on a petition for recognition included Senators, Representatives, Governors, Professors, clergymen, mayors, and ordinary American citizens.<sup>181</sup> Such massive petitions are difficult to ignore. As the issue of Baltic recognition became more and more prevalent with stabilizing conditions in Eastern Europe, a change in policy once again seemed feasible. Internal memorandums for and against recognition once again circulated in the State Department revamping the debate.<sup>182</sup>

On September 22, 1921, the League of Nations voted the Baltic republics into full membership, affirming their nation-state status. The Baltic republics were still looking for U.S. recognition. Young summarized the Latvian (and by extension Estonian and Lithuanian) attitude toward the United States as:

Hostility toward American policy; the keenest regret and disappointment at United States failure to extend *de jure* recognition; friendliness toward American citizens, due

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<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 344.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 345.

to some extent to the activities of American relief organizations: the Red Cross, A.R.A., YMCA, YWCA, Joint Distribution Committee, and HIAS.<sup>183</sup>

The question of Baltic recognition remained relatively quiet afterwards. The only following progressive move on behalf of the U.S. in 1921 was the appointment of a Consul in Kaunas under Clements J. Edwards.

Renewed debate among the State Department for Baltic independence recognition also brought with it a White Russian perspective. July 1, 1921, Ambassador Bakhmetev submitted an Aide Memoire that said the problem of “the so-called Baltic States” was that they were temporary and did not have the deep-rooted historical traditions that would allow permanent severance from Russia.<sup>184</sup> He claimed, “It would be a flagrant violation of the principle of political morality if advantage would be taken of the temporary disability of Russia for settlements which would prejudice Russia’s position as a political and economic entity.”<sup>185</sup> This reminder of America’s duty to uphold Russia’s greatness and not recognize the Baltic States as independent entities took hold because recognition was once again delayed for another year.

1922 brought a change in U.S.-Baltic relations; by the end of Summer official relations were established. In the beginning of the year, Washington was still clinging to its old policy and reiterated those views in the following statement:

The United States has not recognized the so-called Governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. An American Commissioner and American consular officers are, nevertheless,

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<sup>183</sup> Cited in *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>184</sup> Letter from the Russian Ambassador (Bakhmeteff) to the Assistant Secretary of State (Dearing), July 1, 1921, *FRUS, 1921, Vol. II*, 755-759.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

stationed within the territory which they control, and informal relations of a friendly character are maintained. There are informal Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian representatives in the United States.<sup>186</sup>

Although Washington claimed to maintain its earlier policy, the admission of having representatives, even of informal nature, differed significantly from previous statements.

The removal of a strong Russian influence in the State Department paved the road to recognition. Ambassador Bakhmetev resigned in April 28, 1922 from his influential post since his reception in Washington in July, 1917.<sup>187</sup> Albert Tarulis sums up the Ambassador's influence by stating, "Finally, a major obstacle toward recognition was eliminated with Bakhmetev's resignation...Many a decision was first checked with him. Many a communication carried ideas he had suggested. Many a measure failed of adoption because he had disapproved."<sup>188</sup> Following his resignation, supporters of Baltic independence had new opportunities to sway opinion in the State Department to their favor.

After Bakhmetev's resignation, the State Department tried to gain the most current information of the internal situation in the Baltics, suggesting an upcoming new policy. Hughes took initiative by requesting the Division of Russian Affairs to prepare a memorandum listing all the pros and cons of recognition.<sup>189</sup> The new Secretary of State no longer questioned recognition of Latvia and Estonia, but still wanted Young's opinion as to whether the Vilna Plebiscite effectively ending the Polish-Lithuanian controversy justified simultaneous

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<sup>186</sup> 860N.01/46, RG 59.

<sup>187</sup> Letter from the Russian Ambassador(Bakhmeteff) to the Secretary of State, *FRUS, 1922, Vol. II* (Washington: GPO), 875-877, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/FRUS.FRUS1922v02>.

<sup>188</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 354.

<sup>189</sup> 860N.01/72, RG 59.

recognition of Lithuania.<sup>190</sup> Young replied that, “there is no longer any probability of armed conflict between Poland and Lithuania.”<sup>191</sup> Along with opportunity for Baltic independence recognition, Young also received additional staff in preparation for such recognition. The State Department assigned Consul Harold B. Quarton, Vice Consul Earl I. Packer, and additional personnel to Riga along with Young to make his office “the Department’s principal source of information relating to conditions and the progress of events in Soviet Russia”<sup>192</sup> By assigning additional Americans to the region, the Baltics were becoming the West’s window to the East, and especially the happenings in Soviet Russia.

The decision of the principal Allied powers to recognize the third Baltic State solidified the international community’s view, with the exception of the U.S., that the internal Baltic situation was stable. Settlement of the Vilnius question allowed for *de jure* recognition of Lithuania to be extended by the principal Allied powers.<sup>193</sup> The Associated Press wrote about the June 30, Conference of Ambassadors’ decision:

No representative of the United States participated in this decision nor in the discussion which preceded the action of the Council. Opinion was withheld on the part of the

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<sup>190</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Commissioner at Riga (Young), May 15, 1922, *FRUS, 1922, Vol. II*, 872.

<sup>191</sup> Telegram from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State, May 16, 1922, *FRUS, 1922, Vol. II*, 872-873.

<sup>192</sup> 861.00/9400A, RG 59.

<sup>193</sup> The principal Allied powers only declared their readiness to extend *de jure* recognition to Lithuania on June 30<sup>th</sup>, but did not actually do so until 5 months later when Lithuania accepted the Versailles Peace Treaty terms relating to navigation of the Nemunas river.

United States and the right reserved for the American Government to take whatever attitude it cared to later.<sup>194</sup>

Undoubtedly, the large number of Baltic Americans and other supporters of independence recognition were unhappy with such news. Independent republics of Estonia and Latvia had already been recognized now that Lithuania agreed to stop fighting Poland for Vilnius and also gained recognition, U.S. policy seemed outdated and out of touch with the rest of the Western world. Publicity of the continuing non-recognition policy reenergized domestic pressure.

Commissioner Young confirmed that U.S. policy seemed outdated and should be reconsidered. He submitted another request for the U.S. to extend recognition to the Baltic States April 6, 1922. He affirmed:

A careful and searching survey of conditions today unquestionably brings one to the conclusion that, given a continuation of conditions as they are at present, these States will encounter comparative little difficulty in maintaining themselves as political entities... each one of these so-called States has made very considerable and very substantial progress in the primary and essential work of the successful administration of their several territories...bear in mind the fact that in each one of these countries the nationals of the government in power make up the great majority of the population...these governments exercise their power by and with the consent of their respective peoples.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Cited in Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 356.

<sup>195</sup> No. 1916 from the Commissioner at Riga (Young) to the Secretary of State, April 6, 1922, *FRUS, 1922, Vol. II*, 869-872.

His appraisal of the Baltic situation affirms the maintenance of its newfound stability. By 1922, the nationalists were in full control and Young describes their administration as “successful.” Young affirmed that all three States were ready for recognition since they were already functioning under the principles of self-determination.<sup>196</sup> After a turbulent period, their governments were representative of their populations and they were ruling with consent, all principles U.S. rhetoric supported.

Following the Council’s recognition of Lithuania, a petition of 29 prominent American educators asked for recognition of all three Baltic States. Princeton University Professor Harold H. Bender led the petition.<sup>197</sup> It that implored Hughes “in behalf of national justice, international peace and stability, and the growth of democratic ideals in the world that the Government of the United States extend formal recognition to the republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Esthonia.”<sup>198</sup> In his quest to gain support of other professors, Bender sent letters to his peers at other universities pointing out America’s outdated foreign policy. Noting recent stabilizing events and the four years of maintained independence of those states, Bender claims the Baltic States “represent democracy as we understand it.”<sup>199</sup> He writes that there is no real objection from the government and at the time, there was none, other than a continued policy from Lansing’s term. Signed by esteemed American educators such as the President Emeritus of Harvard, Presidents of Princeton, Lafayette, and Mount Holyoke, the petition was brought to

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<sup>196</sup> Young to the Undersecretary of State, May 1, 1922, 860N.01/49, RG 59.

<sup>197</sup> Harold Bender studied and published works on the Baltic languages as a comparative philologist. He became interested in the national and international situation of the Baltic States after spending a year working for the House Inquiry on the Lithuanian question. He also became the director of the new Baltic American Society.

<sup>198</sup> The University of Chicago Office of the President to the Honorable Charles Evans Hughes, June 22, 1922, 860N.01/51, 52, RG 59.

<sup>199</sup> Harold H. Bender, June 20, 1922, 860N.01/51, 52, RG 59.

Hughes' personal attention.<sup>200</sup> The petition seemed to work because within one month of its receipt, U.S. policy changed.

The last domestic push for recognition made Hughes address President Harding in favor of revising U.S. policy. On July 24, 1922, Hughes wrote a letter to Harding stating his belief that the time had come to grant recognition to "the so-called Baltic States."<sup>201</sup> He noted that the economic and political conditions under the Baltic governments have been stable within their jurisdictions, informal relations have been established between them and the U.S. for over two years, and have been recognized by all other important governments.<sup>202</sup> Regarding Russia, Hughes wrote of the motive for a change in policy:

Recognition by the United States has been delayed by considerations connected with the whole Russian problem...it was felt that the interest of the United States required for the future a strong and united as well as democratic Russia...we can, I believe, deal with the Baltic question on its merits, extend recognition to the Baltic Governments and have this action accord with our general Russian policy.<sup>203</sup>

Hughes' letter, like the one he received from Professor Bender five days earlier, summarizes the difficulty in gaining recognition because it was seen as an integral part of Russia but asserts that it should change.<sup>204</sup> The belief in the right of the Baltic situation to be handled on its own mimics prior arguments based on self-determination. Hughes' description of Russia's political situation as the "Russian problem" and the political situation in the Baltics as the "Baltic

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<sup>200</sup> Office of the Under Secretary to Mr. Poole, July 5, 1922, 860N.01/52, RG 59.

<sup>201</sup> Secretary Hughes to President Harding, July 24, 1922, 860N.01/56a, RG 59.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Letter from Harold Bender to Hughes, July 20, 1922, 860N.01/52, RG 59.

question” separates the two areas. The economic situation was reexamined and the debt of the Baltic governments was deemed to be in no different position to the U.S. as that of other Allied governments; thus favoring recognition as was noted on the State Department file.<sup>205</sup> As for Harding, he was “quite agreeable to recognition and most cordially endorsed the form of announcement” suggested by Hughes.<sup>206</sup>

Harding’s rapid approval of Hughes’ recommendation for extending recognition finalized the decision. Young was instructed on July 25<sup>th</sup> to inform the Foreign Offices of each Baltic State that the U.S. would extend *de jure* recognition to all three of them on July 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>207</sup> Full recognition from the U.S. was granted July 28, 1922 with the following message:

...the Government of the United States takes cognizance of the actual existence of these Governments during a considerable period of time and of the successful maintenance within their borders of political and economic stability. The United States has consistently maintained that the disturbed conditions of Russian affairs may not be made the occasion for the alienation of Russian territory, and this principle is not deemed to be infringed by the recognition at this time of the Governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania which have been set up and maintained by an indigenous population.<sup>208</sup>

With this statement, Baltic and Russian policy officially became two separate entities.

Recognition was based on the maintenance of political stability and the principle of self-

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<sup>205</sup> Division of Russian Affairs to Secretary of State, July 21, 1922, 860N.01/56, RG 59.

<sup>206</sup> President Harding to Secretary Hughes, July 24, 1922, 860N.01/60, RG 59.

<sup>207</sup> Telegram from Department of State to Riga, July 25, 1922, 860N.01/52a, RG 59.

<sup>208</sup> Telegram from the Secretary of State to the Commissioner at Riga (Young), July 25, 1922, *FRUS, 1922, Vol. II*, 873-874.

determination as shown by the description of Baltic governments as set up by “an indigenous population.” The State Department’s *Diplomatic List* changed the status of unofficial Baltic representatives in Washington to Chargés d’Affaires with Louis Seja representing Latvia as of Sept 28 1922, Voldemaras čarneckis representing Lithuania as of October 11 1922, and Anthony Piip representing Estonia as of Dec 31 1923.<sup>209</sup>

## Conclusion

In the course of five years, a little known area of Western Russia became three independent and fully recognized Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. To the U.S. and other foreign powers, these states were previously unheard of and questions of independence and *de jure* recognition unimaginable. Upon admission to the Russian Empire, they were known as the territories of Swedish Estonia, Swedish Livonia, and the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia.

Thanks to the self-determination principles feeding off of initial nationalistic aspirations, Russia’s Baltic Provinces began pushing for independence. External intervention in the form of World War I and the Russian Civil War wreaked havoc in a political, economic, and humanitarian sense. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Versailles Peace Treaty, and the Russian Civil War all created tremendous instability in the Baltic region by removing traces of Bolshevik, White Russian, and German power. That same political instability allowed nationalist factions to take the opportunity to declare their independence and then fight for it while also stopping the United States from recognizing and supporting nationalistic ambitions.

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<sup>209</sup> Tarulis, *American-Baltic Relations*, 359.

Without the turbulent events leading up to the end of the Russian Civil War in the Baltic States, it is unlikely that nationalist groups would have been able to rise to power and form independent governmental institutions. Power vacuums created by external intervention and fluctuating hands of power during the Great War and both Russian Revolutions gave rise to indigenous democratic governments by the time the Civil War ensued the region. During the Civil War, the local governments were threatened by both White and Red Russian factions but made their peace with the side that seemed to be winning, the Bolsheviks. Ultimately, nationalist governments did establish themselves as legitimate powers in the Baltic States and were able to transform their newfound situation enough to gain U.S. recognition.

The process of regional stabilization was reflected in the fight for U.S. recognition. Domestic groups, private firms, and some U.S. government officials joined the Baltic States in lobbying the State Department for assistance, whether it be military or political, in solidifying the independence of the Baltic States. As time passed without any further external interventions, Baltic governments were stable enough to overcome the last hurdles of U.S. non-recognition policy due to the changing political landscape of America. By June of 1922, Ambassador Bakhmetev had resigned, Secretary Lansing and President Wilson were out of office, WWI definitively ended, the Russian Civil War was dwindling in favor of the Bolsheviks, armed conflict in the Baltics died down after the 1920 Baltic-Soviet peace treaties, and the international community had already extended either *de jure* or *de facto* recognition. Internal stability in the hands of indigenous Baltic governments had formed out of the chaotic conditions brought on by external intervention. That stability was confirmed by the last influential Western power to extend *de jure* recognition on July 28, 1922. Although the Baltic

States would once again become a part of Russia under the USSR, the interim period between the two world wars did exist with independent Baltic governments. Memories and stories of independence from a prior generation played a key role in the breakup of the Soviet Union, especially during the Singing Revolutions on the Baltic littoral.

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