

Baltic Studies in the Czech Republic and former Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

This article offers a survey on how Baltic States studies are progressing in the Czech Republic. Reference is made to the influencing factors behind these developments in Czechoslovakia, and later in the Czech Republic, after the “Velvet Revolution”. The main subjects of this evolution in modern history are the societal groups, publications, fields of study at University level and lecturing related to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Czech Universities. The scholarly publications featured in this survey may be seen as representing the core of what can be called “Baltic Studies” in the Czech Republic today. In particular, I will focus on book publications within history and political science. Their prime common denominator is that they are concerned with all three Baltic States, rather than with just one or two of them.¹

BALTIC SOCIETY IN ACTION

Generally speaking, Czech society's and scholars' interest for the Baltic States after the “Velvet Revolution” (1989/90) has grown only slowly. This is understandable because of former Czechoslovakia's membership in the Soviet Bloc – any independent focus prior to 1989 on something like “Baltic studies” would have been prohibited. The Baltic States were simply seen as a part of the Soviet Union and the truth about their independence in the inter-war period and their annexation prior to World War II was as much suppressed in Czechoslovakia as in the Baltic States themselves. Thus, although not recognised as such, some studies could in fact be pursued at official levels as well as within the unofficial groups of intelligentsia. Before the stirrings of democratic changes, only a few publications, such as

¹ I will not cover the numerous journal articles and conference proceedings that address Baltic questions. A few, however, may be mentioned here: Řeháček, L. and Švec, L. 1997. Česko-litevské vztahy v průběhu staletí. Ed Prague, Euroslavica; Švec, L. 2000. Nastolení autoritativního režimu v Lotyšsku a postoj československé diplomacie a publicistiky. Evropa mezi Německem a Ruskem. Ed. J. Valenty. Prague: Historický ústav AV ČR, pp. 363-373; Zájedová, I. 2004. The Baltic Region in Transition and its Foreign Relations. In Collection of essays of the conference on 'Globalization and Regionalism in East Central Europe and East Asia Comparison' (pp 318-330). Prague: Charles University.

Miroslav Hroch's *Evropská národní hnutí v 19. století*, (*European National Movements in the 19th Century*), mentioned Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians alongside other small suppressed nations. However, these publications were strictly censored to fit into the official canon. Only after the "Velvet Revolution" has it been possible to freely propagate knowledge about what (in the early 1940's) really took place in the Baltic countries.

Nevertheless, in the 1970's, among the various underground (dissident) groups existing in Czechoslovakia there was, surprisingly, a *Baltic Society* (calling themselves *Baltský svaz/Läänemereliit*). The soul of this society was Vladimír Macura, nicknamed Kreutzwald. Certainly, it was very difficult to decode all the pseudonyms. Other founding members were named as Perenaine (Hostess), Mesilane (Honey-bee), Sitikas (Dung Beetle), Kalevitütär (the daughter of Kalev), Vana -Tigu (old Snail), Kaarditark (Card Shark) etc.³ In 1974, this group of mostly translators, literary critics, writers and other supporters of all three occupied Baltic countries were operating in Czechoslovakia both underground and, at the same time, openly. In other words, the Society, in its own way, was able to promote the Baltic case. Society members were mostly from Prague, but some of them was from Bratislava as well known Maria Kusa.

On the one hand, concerning the themes presented at the "congress" of the *Baltic Society*, discussion focussed on the three Baltic nations, travel impressions etc. But, on the other hand, within the Society other topics were also discussed, and possible future translations into both Czech and Slovak languages were agreed. How was this managed? Paradoxically they used simply the Soviet system of directives. While officially supporting the literature of Soviet authors, they managed to introduce the cultural heritage of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the Czechoslovak public. On starting his translations, Macura resorted to the way of intrigue and translated Estonian verse under the name of a young unknown worker. Over the next fifteen years, Baltic Society members translated and managed to publish, under the title of Soviet Literature on Fine Arts, about one hundred Estonian, Latvian

³ Some nicknames were taken from the Estonian epic "Kalevipoeg".

⁴ These included, from Baltic literature: Kross, J. 1985. *Blázen Jeho Veličenstva*. Praha: Lidové nakladatelství (trans. V. Macura); Kaplinski, J. 1982. *Křídla zvedají stíny*. Praha: Odeon (trans. V. Macura); Avyžius, J. 1976. *Ztracený domov*. Praha: Lidové nakladatelství. (trans. A. Vlčková); *Nádherné stromy lásky. Milostná poezie baltických básnířek*. 1988. Praha (trans. V. Jestřáb, V. Macura, J. Žáček, R. Parolek);

⁵ The Estonian World Council supported the publication of the book, which is written in Czech, by the Charles University Press.

⁶ Professor Adolf Erhart (1926-2003) lectured in Baltic languages at Masaryk University Brno throughout the Communist period. His Baltic studies seminars were a part of Indo-European studies. He published the (university) textbook of Lithuanian language: *Litevština*. 1956. Prague: Statni Pedagogicke Nakladatelství and Baltic languages (*Baltské Jazyky*) 1984. Prague: Statni Pedagogicke Nakladatelství.

and Lithuanian titles!!!⁴ Yet no true historical or political literature about the Baltic States existed at that time in Czechoslovakia.

The above aspect still has relevance today, for although as an organisation *The Baltic Society* has lost its pertinence, its members continue to take an active part in related activities, issuing fiction and political literature, along with the encyclopaedia of Baltic writers (currently being reprinted). This encyclopaedia is one of the best examples of cooperation of all the members of *The Baltic Society* Nadežda Slabihoudová, Alena Vlčková, and Pavel Štoll. (Slabihoudová et al. 2003).

After the Velvet Revolution, leading on from the Baltic Society, the Czech-Estonian Club was founded in February 1991 (Latvians and Lithuanians also had their own clubs in Prague). Many former members of the illegal group became members of the newly opened club. The tradition of the Baltic Society to publish was preserved through the Estonian Club in association with the Balt-East publishing house (led by Antonín Drábek). Examples of Balt - East publications include Macura's analysis of the work of the Estonian writer Anton Hansen Tammsaare, and Nadežda Slabihoudová's Czech translation of Kreutzwald's fairy-tales. (Macura 1999; Kreutzwald 2000). But interestingly, fine literature did not prosper in the early aftermath of the Velvet Revolution.

HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PUBLICATIONS AFTER THE "VELVET REVOLUTION"

After the "Velvet Revolution" in 1989/90 in the Czech Republic, the earliest publication, in the field of history, to openly describe the Baltic States' annexation by the Soviet Union came out in 1994. It was a translation of a work by the Hungarian author Endre Bojtár: *Oloupení Evropy (The Robbing of Europe)*.

The first comprehensive survey of the history of the Baltic countries in Czech language came out in 1996 and was written by Luboš Švec, Vladimír Macura and Pavel Štoll (Švec et al 1996). The latter two authors belonged to both the *Baltic Society* and the *Estonian Club*, and Luboš Švec was a member of the *Estonian Club* in Prague. This filled a clear

information gap in the Czech public consciousness about the Baltic States. The study stretches from very early prehistoric times in the Baltic region to the first years of re-established independence. By focusing on the formation process of modern nations and states during the 19th and 20th centuries, the book traces two main historical lines from the beginning of the Middle Ages – the history of the Lithuanian Grand Duchy on the one hand, and Livonia and the Baltic provinces on the other. This enables one to compare the history of all three countries. Moreover, the history of the Baltic countries is not interpreted only as the history of the titular nations (meaning the ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians under changing rulers), but also includes the histories of ethnic minorities in the region that contributed to the specific economic and cultural development of this region. Since the Eastern Baltic Sea shore has always been seen as a very important strategic area, different Western and Eastern political and economic interests and cultural influences have met and crossed here. Alongside political history, the book offers its readers chapters on Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian culture.

Since the dawn of the new millennium, the more comprehensive studies on Baltic history and politics are gradually being complemented by more narrowed analyses. One example of these is the historical study, by Luboš Švec, of the relations between the inter-war Baltic States and Czechoslovakia (Švec, L. 2001). The author demonstrates how these relations were deeply influenced by the main trends of European inter-war politics. Czechoslovak relations with Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia can thus be seen only in the context of the country's view of Russia, Germany, and Poland. Fear of German revisionism represented a common denominator while the relations with Russia were rather dividing them. Czechoslovak foreign policy considered the Baltic region a minor, but not a marginal area of interest and its significance increased or decreased according to the developments in Eastern Europe as a whole. Looking from the position of an observer, Czechoslovakia evaluated Central Europe as an unstable area dominated by conflicting German, Polish and Soviet interests and represented a sensitive barometer of the political mood in Europe.

A recent publication in the field of politics and of Baltic studies is by the author of this article herself (also a member of both the *Baltic Society* and the *Estonian Club*). It examines the various paths towards integration that opened up for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in their "return to Europe" between 1991 and 1997 (Zájedová 2006, 2008). In the last decade of the 20th century, spurred by their efforts to gain international recognition, the Baltic States had to

tackle several challenges, including the redefining of the tripartite Baltic co-operation and future mutual relationships, the co-operation between the Nordic and Baltic states in the entire Baltic Sea area and, finally, the integration into the EU and other international organizations. In six chapters, the book focuses on these three distinctive and yet closely linked aspects of co-operation, mapping out the development of relations between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in various spheres and assessing their contribution to creating a sense of regional identity. The Baltic States are considered a geographical, geopolitical, institutional, legislative, economic, and socio-cultural entity, yet with homogenous and heterogeneous elements. Both of these dimensions contribute to the integration into the wider Baltic Sea and Euro-Atlantic space. Regarding the Baltic States, the factors promoting homogeneity are located not inside, but outside of them.

STUDYING BALTICS MATTERS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

Let us turn now to the studying of Baltic matters at University level. Prof. Dr. Radegast Parolek founded the Latvian language MA (five years of study) at Charles University's Faculty of Philosophy in Prague in 1990. His student Mgr. Pavel Štoll opened, in 2007, in the same Faculty, the new three year Latvian and Lithuanian language BA level studies. The academic year 2008/09 saw the opening of a new two year MA degree programme. This course programme is categorized under East - European studies, rather than Baltic studies, and Estonian, unfortunately, is the only Baltic (and also European) language missing from this programme.

At Charles University's Faculty of Social Studies, in the programme of International territorial studies, under Russian and Eastern-European studies, there is some material on the Baltic States. An example is the course 'Baltic States after 1991', led by Doc. Luboš Švec. In the same Faculty, but in the Institute of Political Science, in the faculty of International relation, courses on Baltic regional cooperation and Security perspectives in the Baltic area are led by Iivi Zájedová (Zájedová 2000).

In Brno's Masaryk University department of Philosophy there is a Baltic languages course, initiated by Prof. Adolf Erhart, available under the specialization of historical - comparative studies.⁶ The courses were subsequently handed on to Doc. Tomáš Hoskovec,

and once the field of Baltic Studies was established, Doc. Hoskovec (a *Baltic Society* member), encouraged the language scientists to start Lithuanian language teaching in 1996. In the academic year 1999/2000, Doc. Tomáš Hoskovec and Doc. Pavel Bočka initiated Baltic studies under the name “Baltistika” at BA and MA level. This is part of a broader programme incorporating history and cultural studies and involving combinations of other languages such as Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian and also, from October 2009, Estonian. Lithuanian and Finnish are currently the leading languages in the Brno Faculty, to be joined, as of 2009, also by Estonian. Latvian is offered as a supplementary language.

Brno is also home to a special project, which produces an on-line peer-reviewed quarterly “Central European Political Studies Review” and incorporates articles about the Baltic region (Zájedova 2005). This peer-reviewed on-line journal edited by the International Institute of Political Science of the Masaryk University in Brno (Czech Republic) has the services of the three political scientists Břetislav Dančák, Ivo Pospíšil and Adam Rakovský, who published in 1999 an analysis of the Baltic political transition processes (Dančák et al.1999). Their analysis was, and arguably still is, the best source available in Czech for complex description and evaluative information on the transition processes in the Baltic region. The volume was the result of long-term research in the field of comparative democratic transition in Central Europe and the Baltic States. Based on a profound theoretical knowledge in the field of “transitology” and democratic consolidation, the volume covers political changes and economic transition, as well as particular fields such as citizenship and minority policies. It uses, besides others, sources and literature in the original languages. A deep awareness of the difficult destinies of the Baltic nations during their historical development pervades the whole book, which combines single case studies with more comparative pieces.

Another more narrow analysis, this time in the field of political science, was published in 2005 by Maximilián Strmiska, Vít Hloušek, Lubomír Kopeček and Roman Chytilek (Strmiska et al 2005). Their joint research was the product of a strong tradition of party system research provided by the political science and European studies departments of the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno. The analysis is not confined to the Baltic party systems only, but looks at all the party systems of the Europe Union, including the ten countries that joined the EU in May 2004. However, one longer section of the book, written by Vít Hloušek, is devoted solely to the party pluralisms of the Baltic States. The

various country chapters also cover the historical development from the emergence of modern mass parties in the 19th century until the present day. The party systems are analyzed according to relevant criteria, such as the format and type of the party system, cleavages, impact of electoral rules etc. and some main parties are discussed. The book exceeds the framework of a textbook by attempting to paint a complex picture of party system diversity within the European political traditions. The main part of each country study is dedicated to the period after the break-up of the Communist Party rule.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, we can see that there is no concrete academic institution, chair or research program in Prague, focusing on the Baltic region exclusively. At Charles University's Faculty of Philosophy in Prague there opened, in 2007, the new three year Latvian and Lithuanian language BA level studies and in 2008/09, a new two year MA degree programme. However, Estonian language is missing from this programme. Nevertheless, the Baltic Society has nurtured talented scholars with the ambition and ability to create Baltic Studies programs in the Czech Republic, and there are a number of interesting monographs, volumes and articles published in the Czech language. The impetus to build up Baltic studies in the Czech Republic seems to have come predominantly from the persons who were members of the one-time illegal *Baltic Society (Baltský svaz/Läänemereliit)* or from the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian clubs. The most flourishing at present is "Baltistika" at Brno's Masaryk University, especially with its study programme complementing the wide variety of languages to be taught, among them Lithuanian, Latvian, Finnish and newly in the academic year 2009-2010, Estonian too. However, scholarly-aimed interests in the Baltic countries remain a rather exotic enterprise in historical and social science studies. Their general perception of the Baltic States is as successful countries successfully liberated from the Soviet occupation.

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