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Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia at the Paris Peace Conference

By Dr Charlotte Alston

The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires at the end of the First World War threw up all sorts of new territorial issues in areas unfamiliar to Western diplomats. When the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George admitted in the House of Commons in April 1919 that he had 'never heard of Teschen in Silesia, an uproar ensued. There is a story - probably apocryphal - told by Stephen Tallents, about the French military mission in Latvia arriving with a supply of Yen to finance its trip because those responsible had assumed Latvia to be a Japanese island. This anecdote ably expresses the confusion of western officials about the range of issues, areas and representatives of governments with which they had to deal.

It was not the case, however, that Baltic affairs were completely unknown. There was a great deal of emphasis in Paris on making informed decisions, and on applying the principles of self-determination for the peoples of Europe. Organisations like the Inquiry in America and the Political Intelligence Department in Britain were devoted to developing expertise and informing the leading delegates at the peace conference. At the same time, as it began to seem increasingly likely that the Allies would win the war, the representatives of new governments in Europe sought to build relationships with the Allied governments. Zourab Avalishvili, a Georgian representative who arrived in London at the end of 1918, described his role as that of the 'switchman' - he would transfer his country's allegiance smoothly from Germany to the Allies.

The first Baltic contacts with Allied representatives took place in Petrograd in January 1918, when, following the closure of the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, Estonian and Latvian delegates canvassed the British, French and American embassies for support. They developed through 1918 in Stockholm, which the British Ambassador to Sweden, Sir Esme Howard, described as 'a meeting house for the leaders of various subject races who hoped to achieve independence after the collapse of the Romanov empire'. And they continued in London, where Ants Piip, Zigfrids Meierovics, Rudolf Holsti (the Finnish Foreign Minister) and David Ghambashidze of Georgia met regularly at the Royal Society Club and shared the contacts they made among such British experts on Baltic affairs as they could find.

During 1918 *de facto* recognition was granted to Estonia and Latvia on a formula first suggested by Jaan Tönnisson in a meeting with Howard in Stockholm - that rather than recognising the independence of each country, their national assembly or national council be recognised 'as a *de facto* independent body until the meeting of the Peace Conference'.

The dispatch of Lithuanian representatives abroad was delayed until the autumn of 1918 - in part because of the manner in which Lithuania's governing body had been established, under a German protectorate. However, the Lithuanians benefitted from the work of émigré associations such as the Lithuanian National Council in Lausanne, and the Lithuanian Council in America. Augustinas Voldemaras visited Switzerland in October 1918, and toured the Allied embassies there to canvas for Allied support. When he left Lithuania again in December 1918, it was under a cloud of controversy. With Bolshevik troops approaching Vilnius and no significant Lithuanian forces available to defend even the treasury, Voldemaras, Antana Smetona and Martynas Yčas fled Vilnius. While they later claimed this was a pre-planned trip aimed at securing western aid, their detractors believed they had deserted their posts. Voldemaras went first to Berlin and then toured the Scandinavian capitals; in February 1919 he went on to London and then to Paris; getting in touch on his way with the same diplomatic contacts that Piip and Meierovics had already established.

When the Paris Peace Conference formally opened on 18th January 1919, both the Estonian and Latvian delegations were already in Paris. The leadership of the delegations was reserved for an older generation of diplomats, Jaan Poska, the Estonian Foreign Minister and former Mayor of Tallinn, and Janis Cakste, who was already in Paris representing Latvia. Meierovics was present as Latvian Foreign Minister, and as he was known and well-liked by Allied diplomats he had an important role to play. Ants Piip, who had been Estonian Minister in London, was close to the British delegation (the most sympathetic of the Allies to the Baltic cause). As Professor of International Law he has been described as the 'fundamental strategist of the Estonian campaign' in Paris.

Lithuanian representation in Paris was not a straightforward matter. When Voldemaras arrived in Paris in February 1919, there were already at least three focal points for representation. Firstly Juozas Gabrys, one of the best known Lithuanian émigrés in the west, had been invited to Paris by the French government who were strong supporters of the Polish cause, and were pressing for a swift agreement between the two countries. He arrived in Paris in December, and took part in discussions with Roman Dmowski, the head of the Polish National Committee. Secondly a Lithuanian delegation which had originally been sent by the Taryba to the Allied meeting at Spa in November arrived in Paris in early January. There was a third group of American-Lithuanian representatives, who provided much of the finance for the Lithuanian delegation, as well as much-needed practical support and access to unofficial contacts. This made Voldemaras's group the fourth Lithuanian delegation in Paris, and his position was complicated by his insistence on presenting himself as the Prime Minister of Lithuania, despite the fact that a new government had been formed in his absence. The Spa delegates and the American Lithuanians eventually recognised Voldemaras's leadership, leaving Gabrys isolated, with no official position.

The chaos in the Lithuanian delegation highlights the difficulties that the Allied governments faced in assessing how far any individual represented who they claimed to. Numerous new small countries were emerging from the former Russian Empire: delegations were present in Paris at various times during 1919 not only from the Baltic states but from Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus, the Don and Kuban Cossacks, and from the North Caucasian Government, all seeking admission to the Conference, and audiences with Allied foreign ministers. Another problem that dogged both the British and French authorities was their readiness to accept reports of the 'pro-German character' of the various delegates. The Spa delegates were briefly arrested on their arrival in Paris as they were believed to be German spies. Smetona was denied a French visa on these grounds, and the British Foreign Office received reports on Voldemaras which suggested that it was 'doubtful how far his sympathies are with the Entente'. An MI6 report on the two delegations described Voldemaras as 'an opportunist and untrustworthy in his statements', but admitted that Gabrys and the Spa delegates were 'open to the same reproach'.

Although all three Baltic delegations maintained a presence in Paris throughout the conference, none of them were formally admitted. In a letter in January the Spa delegates had asked not for 'a seat at the table, but... for standing room back against the wall'. Both Estonian and Latvian delegations, and Voldemaras when he arrived, asked for official admission. Lithuanian soldiers had fought for the Allies on the Eastern Front in the Russian Army, and on the Western Front in the American Army, Voldemaras argued. The position of Lithuania *vis à vis* the Entente was 'absolutely identical' to that of Poland, and they therefore ought to be given official admission. He saw no contradiction in the fact that Lithuania had not been officially recognised by the Allied powers - there was clearly a place at the conference for nations that formed part of another state, such as the British Dominions. He was no more successful however than the delegation that came before him, nor than the other Baltic delegations.

Recognised delegations might be invited to an audience with one of the higher decision making bodies (the Council of Ten, later the Council of Four or the Council of Foreign Ministers) or with one of the ever-expanding number of commissions for individual issues or regions. No commission on Baltic affairs was formed until May 1919, and in the first few months of the conference the Baltic delegations had to rely on informal liaison and the submission of memoranda. The principle tasks of the three delegations were to secure recognition for their governments, and to obtain military assistance in the continuing struggle against Soviet, German and Polish forces in the region. Meierovics commented at the time that if he could secure both recognition and military assistance for Latvia, then his task abroad would be finished and he could go home. But the conflicting demands of other delegations often obstructed these goals. The Russian Political Conference, which represented the anti-Bolshevik Russians in Paris, strove to delay any decision on Baltic independence. They argued that proximity to Bolshevism was causing Russia's border states to tend towards complete independence, but that no decision on their future could be made without reference to a restored Russian state. Voldemaras confronted not only the Russian Political Conference but also the Polish delegation. Federalists amongst the Poles favoured close union with Lithuania, while annexationists (who tended to have the upper hand in Paris) wanted a centralised Polish state including Vilnius, which the Lithuanians claimed as their historic capital. The Lithuanian delegation opposed both Polish positions; they also contested ownership of Klaipėda

(Memel) with Germany. They were handicapped in the first few months of the conference by the view, prevalent in the French and American delegations, that Lithuania was part of a Polish rather than a Baltic problem. With Poland's official delegation admitted to the Conference, Voldemaras lamented that it was likely that the Vilnius question would be seen from their point of view.

While the Baltic delegates had few opportunities to meet with the real decision makers at the conference, they made more progress with regional 'experts' within the Allied delegations - Samuel Morison, for example, who had responsibility for Finland and Baltic States within the American delegation, and Esme Howard, who was now the British delegate with responsibility for north-eastern Europe, including Russia, Poland and the Baltic States. His diary records regular meetings with Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian delegates, often over lunch or dinner. These individuals were often frustrated by the lack of attention paid to their recommendations by their superiors, however. Howard complained that whatever he proposed or suggested 'met with a stony silence'. He did not recall being asked even once 'to discuss with the Prime Minister any single matter connected with Russia and her attitude to its neighbours', and he doubted that many of the memoranda or reports that he and his assistants submitted were read. 'It was singularly disheartening', he commented, 'never to hear even a word of criticism of our reports'.

One of the largest problems that confronted the Baltic delegations in Paris was the absence of any Russian authority with whom the Allies were prepared to deal. James Headlam-Morley, a junior member of the British delegation, commented that 'In the discussions everything leads up to Russia. Then there is a discursive discussion; it is agreed that the point at issue cannot be determined until the general policy on Russia has been settled; having agreed on this, instead of settling it, they pass on to some other subject'. This incoherence was compounded by the ebb and flow of the military situation in Russia. During the spring of 1919 Admiral Kolchak's anti-Bolshevik Russian forces advanced to within 75 miles of the Volga. Kolchak's ephemeral success was the backdrop to decision making in Paris during the spring, and it generated a contradiction in Allied policy. On one hand the British and French governments had made assurances to the Baltic states about their future independence. On the other hand they knew that a restored Russian government under Kolchak or any similar figure would want its Baltic coastline back and would object to the

actions of the powers that had removed it. In a note that the Council of Four dispatched to Kolchak in May they made reference to the relations which 'exist between the Allied and Associated Governments and the de facto [Baltic] Governments'. But none of the British, French or American delegations had a clear Russian or Baltic policy, and on top of this they found it difficult to agree with one another. Esme Howard described the relations between the Allied delegations as being 'so bitter they might have been engaged in fighting each other instead of fighting side by side'.

The Baltic delegations in Paris cooperated both in practical terms - sharing contacts, and coordination of action; and in rhetorical, strategic terms - the presentation of the Baltic region as a coherent entity comprising states capable of securing and maintaining their independence. Practical cooperation began before the Paris Peace Conference and continued during it. It also extended beyond the Baltic governments to take in all of Russia's border states. In September 1917 the Ukrainian governing body, the Rada, had invited representatives of all non-Russian nationalities within the Russian empire to a 'Congress of Non-Sovereign Nations' in Kiev. Ants Piip, Zigfrids Meierovics and Augustinas Voldemaras were all in attendance. The Ukrainians, Meierovics insisted at this congress, were 'the avant-garde of our [Russia's] nationalities' - 'the first to raise her voice and demand her rights.... the first one to have thought about the fate of other nations and summoned us here'. But to gain victory we Russia's non-sovereign peoples must become allies in the true meaning of the word. We must form one unified front, against all who are opposed to the principle of self-determination'.

In London, Piip and Meierovics worked closely with both Rudolf Holsti of Finland and David Gambashidze of Georgia. In March 1919 representatives of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Belarus, Azerbaijan and the North Caucasian Government attended a meeting with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. Meierovics asked where, how and when the question of Russia's border states would be dealt with. Clemenceau assured them of his personal sympathy, but said the German treaty needed to be settled before the Conference could move on to the Russian problem. This meeting lasted 20 minutes. In April, the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Georgian and Ukrainian representatives wrote a joint appeal for admission to the conference and recognition; in September the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian delegations wrote a joint letter to the president of the peace conference expressing their 'complete solidarity'

and asking for a decision to be taken as soon as possible on the recognition of their independence.

The Estonian and Latvian delegations played particularly strongly on the strategic advantages of cooperation in their rhetoric on independence. Their memoranda exploited western interest in the idea of a 'cordon sanitaire' or 'barbed wire fence' between Germany and Russia; a series of stable and moderate governments countering pernicious German influence or the anarchy of Bolshevik Russia. In this context the concept of a Baltic League became important. It was much favoured by western diplomats like Howard. This idea had been raised by Jan Tönnisson as early as the autumn of 1917, when he told a session of the Maapäev that 'if the Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, Finnish and Scandinavian people unite, they would have, as a union of thirty million people, a certain amount of influence during the negotiations at the peace conference'.

Notions about what such a league might mean varied widely. Jaan Poska defined the Baltic Sea region as covering three distinct areas - Scandinavia, the Eastern Baltic, and the Southern Baltic. On this basis Ants Piip and Kaarel Pusta drew up a memorandum which outlined a system of linked alliances, firstly between Norway, Denmark and Sweden; secondly between Finland, Estonia and Latvia, and thirdly between Lithuania and Poland. This triangular league would possess a common armed force and a co-ordinated navy, and would act as one on political and economic questions. Meierovics championed Baltic co-operation throughout his career, favouring a 'vertical orientation' of alliances with Estonia and Lithuania. There were some Lithuanian advocates of a Baltic alliance - Dr Jonas Šliūpas was a notable example - but the inclusion of Poland in any such arrangement was deeply problematic as it was assumed they would dominate the relationship. Voldemaras often seemed reluctant to tie his country more closely to the Estonian and Latvian cause. He was convinced that Lithuania had a strong hand to play at the Peace Conference, because of the country's long history as an independent state. Lithuania, he argued, did not need to rely on Wilsonian rhetoric about the right to self-determination. The inclusion of Jewish and Belarussian representatives in the Lithuanian peace delegation was intended to strengthen this point. Neither did the Russian demands for access to the Baltic Sea apply to Lithuania. If they were associated with this emerging Baltic regional identity, it was more often through the rhetoric used by the Estonian and Latvian delegations, and despite Voldemaras's own efforts.

The ease with which the delegations secured an audience with the Baltic Commission highlights the hierarchy that existed in the mind of Allied diplomats. Vasilii Maklakov of the Russian Political Conference was heard by the Commission on 26th May. The Estonian delegation were heard on 28th May; the Latvian delegation on 10th June; and the Lithuanians not until 7th July. It is clear from their discussions that members of the Commission, even the most sympathetic, saw the Lithuanian government as less stable, less trustworthy, and less inclined towards the western allies than the Estonians and Latvians. On the other hand, the fact that the Lithuanian delegation was heard by the Baltic Commission at all demonstrates that the Allies were beginning to consider them as part of a 'Baltic question' with Latvia, Estonia and even Finland, rather than as part of a purely 'Polish question'. Their inclusion along with Estonia and Latvia in the note to Kolchak in May marked a shift in the same direction. Both Voldemaras and Martynas Yčas had been invited in late April to speak to a subcommittee of the Commission on Polish affairs, but refused as they had been invited only as individuals familiar with Lithuanian affairs, not as representatives of a Lithuanian government. When they did speak to the full Polish Commission on 10th May, they demanded recognition of Lithuanian independence. Their hearing at the Baltic Commission suggests that by the summer of 1919 it was at least possible for Lithuania to be regarded in Allied plans as part of a regional unit with Estonia and Latvia. The delegation that attended the Commission on 7th July contained members who had recently arrived in Paris from Kaunas, and the Commission were impressed with the picture they presented of the situation in Lithuania. In thanking them the Commissioners stated that they wanted to help Lithuania to form *like the other Baltic States* a stable government and to maintain a barrier against German influence on one side and Bolshevism on the other.

While issues concerning Russia's border states were much discussed in Paris, few were settled there. Other post-war peace treaties did more to determine the future of the Baltic states - Brest-Litovsk in 1918; Tartu, Riga and Moscow in 1920, and the Polish-Soviet peace of 1921. Lithuania's territorial disputes (over Vilnius and Klaipėda) were resolved by local coups, rather than by the extensive discussion of them at the League of Nations. The sheer range of issues to be considered in Paris; the ephemeral success of Admiral Kolchak's armies, and the lack of consensus within and between the British, American and French delegations

pushed discussion of Baltic affairs to the bottom of the agenda. What Paris did offer was the opportunity for Baltic diplomats to internationalise their cause. In response to one Latvian note Kammerer (the French representative on the Baltic Commission) commented that 'we can't respond to all these Latvian notes, there are really too many of them'. On the other hand, the memoranda submitted by Meierovics were on more than one occasion praised by Allied diplomats as being amongst the best they had read. Some of the better negotiators at the conference - Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, or Czech Foreign Minister Eduard Beneš, for example - significantly furthered their country's cause with effective diplomacy in Paris. On a lesser scale, effective lobbying in Paris enabled the Baltic delegations to raise the profile of their countries, and their cooperation embedded the idea of a

Baltic regional identity, however loosely, in Allied minds.

Dr Charlotte Alston is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Northumbria. Her research interests focus on international history in the period 1890-1945, media history, and the history of Russia and Eastern Europe. She is the author of 'Antonius Piip, Zigfrids Meierovics and Augustas Voldemras, (which the above article summarises, and which is reviewed in this edition of Tiltas), 'Russia's Greatest Enemy? Harold Williams and the Russian Revolutions', and articles on the British press and the Russian Civil War, Russian emigré organisations abroad, and Russia and the border states at the Paris Peace Conference. She is currently working on a study of the international Tolstoyan movement.