

H-Diplo

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<http://www.hauspublishing.com/product/229>

H-Diplo Review Essay on:

Charlotte Alston. *Piip, Meierovics and Voldemara: The Baltic States*. London: Haus Publishing Limited, 2010, viii + 224 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, further reading, index. ISBN 978-1905791712 (hardcover, \$19.95).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Haus-Baltic.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Artis Pabriks**, Riga International School of Business and Administration, and Minister of Defence of Latvia

An intriguing question one can ask is what role an individual plays in great historic moments of revolutions, wars, or struggles for human rights. It was a question I asked myself while walking down the Meierovics Boulevard in the old Art Nouveau city of Riga, the city where one of the main heroes of Charlotte Alston's book, Zigfrīds Meierovics lived and worked during the most active years of his life.

Every nation has its political and military heroes who have played outstanding roles in certain historic events. Their names are engraved on numerous monuments, and streets and ships are named after them. For the Latvian nation, Meierovics (1887-1925) is one of such heroes. The same applies to his two contemporaries in Estonia and Lithuania, namely, Ants Piip (1887-1942) and Augustinas Voldemaras (1883-1942). All three were chosen by Charlotte Alston for a comparative analysis of their impact on the foundation and development of the independent states of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania after the First World War.

The three distinguished personalities were born almost in the same historic time, in comparable social and political circumstances, and close geographic locations in the shared environment of the Baltic Sea. Their activities were also determined by common

geographic area and similar political visions. As with many other Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians those days, they acquired good and competitive education if compared to other subjects of Russian Tsardom. Ants Piip studied education, Meierovics studied commerce and later also worked as a teacher in Riga School of Commerce. Piip started his education in the territory of contemporary Latvia where he also earned his first employment as a teacher in the town of Aluksne. Both Piip and Voldemaras later continued their education in the University of St.Petersburg; Piip in the Faculty of Law while Voldemaras graduated from the Faculty of History and Philosophy with a golden award.

Piip, Meierovics and Voldemaras were among the leaders of their young political nations aspiring for civic, political, and national liberties when such opportunity arose during World War One. One of the events where they all met to promote this goal was the Paris Peace Conference which dealt with the post-war order and had to determine, among other matters, also the future of the three Baltic nations. The author pays a great deal of attention to these events in European history. The situation at Versailles was complicated, and at the early stage nobody among the global political heavyweights cared about the three small emerging political entities at the Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. The future seemed uncertain and grim for the people who had experienced the impact of continuous front line fighting in their native lands for almost 6 years (1914-1920). Hundreds of thousands refugees had fled their native lands, and the Baltic region suffered from overall destruction and poverty. At the same time, the idea of self-determination of the Baltic nations had been born and strong native elite representatives like Meierovics, Piip, and Voldemaras tirelessly pursued this goal on behalf of their nations.

Their efforts proved to be worthwhile - soon after the international recognition of the states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia in 1921, these nations, toughened by the difficult post-war circumstances, recovered economically with significant speed. At the time, the Baltic nations did not know they would have to repeat this miracle once again during 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and released the Baltics from the iron grip behind the once not - destroyable iron curtain. From today's perspective the fast WWI post-war recovery sets a pattern. Today, Estonia has succeeded in joining Eurozone and the Baltic nations are regarded as the most successful liberal democratic reformers in the former Soviet ruled part of Europe.

While portraying the three personalities, Alston deepens our knowledge about the struggle of Voldemaras, Piip, and Meierovics for gaining the international recognition of their newly- born political nations. The book reveals that the political hesitation of the West to recognize the Baltic States to a great extent was caused by indifference and double standards in international affairs and later also in the application of the concept of human rights making the three States grant significantly wider human rights to their minorities than other Western countries did at the time. Only after the success achieved in the Eastern Front against the Soviets, when the young Baltic nations succeeded to *de facto* secure their borders, came the long expected political *de jure* recognition from the Western Allies. This *deja vu* was repeated in late 1980s and 1990s when the powerful Baltic national movements demanded the independence for their countries and reintegration in Europe once again. At that time many Western diplomats also hesitated to step over the red

political lines drawn by Stalin and Hitler in 1939. Indeed, individuals play a role in the history of their nations and the world, and it is what the book of Charlotte Alston also attests to.

However, Soviet ambitions regarding the three Baltic States during the period between the two World Wars cast a threatening shadow over their independence and the prospect of long-term existence. Alston briefly touches upon this situation in her tenth chapter which discusses the loss of independence in 1939-1940. However, the grave experience was the major driving force for all three nations to implement the reforms needed to be accepted in the EU and NATO in 2004. The Baltic nations refused to be buffer-states between the West and the contemporary Russia. The only security guarantee that the Baltic nations saw in the post-*Perestroika* period was to become an integrated part of the European society. In essence, it was the same one that Voldemaras, Piip, and Meierovics had attempted to achieve in the post-World War One period.

Among the three, Meierovics can be probably regarded as the most active promoter of regional policies and regional cooperation. While serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, he initiated the Bulduri conference (1920) with the aim to promote the closer cooperation of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland. Despite various contradictions among the countries and an unsuccessful outcome of the conference, the efforts in the area continued. Today, the Baltic countries are among the most mutually integrated countries in the EU and NATO. The Baltic Sea region is experiencing increased cooperation, and doubtless the efforts of Meierovics contributed to today's success.

In three major parts of the book, Charlotte Alston discusses the Baltic lands, the peace conferences in which the three personalities played a role and, their legacy. In the context of international politics, the book touches upon an issue which was relevant back then and continues to be highly significant in contemporary Europe and in the world: minority rights and politics. For the Baltic countries, one of the outcomes of the international negotiations was the introduction of minority autonomy laws, and the legacy of this accomplishment is evident there today. It can be argued that the Baltic countries, particularly Estonia and Latvia, granted wide autonomy for their ethnic and religious minorities after hard negotiations in the peace conferences. By doing so they set a high standard for minority rights, in fact, a standard so high that many leaders of the Peace Conferences, who demanded the policies from the young Baltic States, were not ready to implement them in their own countries. Here again, a sense of *déjà vu* is apparent. After 1991, the three Baltic States continue to grant many rights to their minorities and immigrants, despite the convincing arguments of a number of leading Western European politicians about the death of multiculturalism in contemporary Europe.

Piip, Voldemaras, and Meierovics are personalities whose lives and achievements have been analysed by a number of authors other than Alston but there are not many contributions on this topic in English. This is a drawback for many smaller and medium size nations, for their heroes are no less exemplary than those of large nations. To tell the international community about them is one of author's great contributions. Another one is the description and analysis of political and international events in the Baltic region during

and after the World War One, despite the fact that at some points a careful reader would wish for more precise descriptions of the interaction and interrelation of the historical events and the above-mentioned personalities.

In any case, Meierovics, Piip, and Voldemaras are great enough personalities to be engraved on the wall of the world history, not only on that of the three Baltic States of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Even the Soviet invaders in 1940 understood their historic and political significance. It was the ultimate reason why both Antonius Piip and Augustinas Voldemaras were executed in 1942 by the Soviets after their arrest and deportation to prisons in Soviet Russia. Without doubt, Meierovics would have joined them in their last journey if not for his premature death in an accident in 1925.

Indeed, personalities can play an important role in politics, history and life in general. Our duty is to recognize them in a timely manner and set them as an example to future generations. Charlotte Alston has managed this task with care and thus her book should be placed among others in the shelves of lovers of history, politics, biographies and the three nations of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania.

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