Aivars Stranga. *Latvijas – Padomju Krievijas Miera Līgums 1920. Gadā 11. Augustā. Latvijas – Padomju Krievijas attiecības 1919.–1925. gadā* [The Peace Treaty of 11 August 1920 Between Latvia and Soviet Russia. Latvian-Russian Relations Between 1919 and 1925]. Rīga: Fonds Latvijas Vēsture, 2000. Pp. 258.
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Traditionally the Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – are treated as a uniform region, though actually they do not maintain close ties. There is even a tendency to accentuate their dissimilarity. Furthermore, recently interpretations have begun to appear claiming the homogeneity of the region was formed artificially in Soviet times. On the contrary, the Soviet authorities were interested in the estrangement rather than in the rapprochement of the three republics. In the first place they tried to tie them to the centre, i.e., Moscow and Leningrad, while among themselves, like other republics, they were loosely bound.

Being again independent, the Baltic states have begun to perceive their mutual interests and common geopolitical situation; even so, they do not exploit the advantages of co-operation. These chances are not being exploited in the sphere of economy, politics and even in culture. Latvia and Lithuania, being neighbours and cognate countries (Lithuanians and Latvians are the only surviving Baltic peoples), maintain only occasional contacts in the mass media and research. Lithuanian historians are better acquainted with the works of their Polish and German colleagues than with those of the Latvians or Estonians. Historical works written in the national Baltic languages are not easily accessible to Western readers. This presentation of Stranga's book is a modest attempt to fill the above-mentioned gaps.

Aivars Stranga is professor at the University of Latvia and head of the Department of the History of Latvia; he is author of several monographs and has also produced a valuable solid collection of documents jointly with Inesis Feldmanis and Juris Goldmanis on the annexation and occupation of Latvia in 1939–1940 in Latvian and English. His monograph on the Jews and dictatorships in the Baltics has awakened general interest and provoked lively debate.¹

¹ A. Stranga, *Ebreji un diktatūras Baltijā (1926–1940)* (Riga, 1997).

The book under review is the first historical work specifically devoted to a very important topic – the Peace Treaty between Latvia and Soviet Russia, which has not always been objectively and accurately treated in historical scholarship. Even the date of signing the Treaty is incorrectly given as 1 August 1920 by such well-known political scientists as Anatol Lieven, Romuald Misiūnas and Rein Taagepera.²

In Stranga's monograph the Treaty is examined in the context of international relations, its prerequisites and consequences, and the analysis of the relations between the two countries until 1925 is presented. It must be noted that Stranga's work is a continuation of a similar study, undertaken by Česlovas Laurinavičius with respect to an analogous treaty between Lithuania and Soviet Russia.³ In his book Stranga refers to this work. Thus both studies, presenting jointly a more comprehensive analysis of the international inter-war situation of the Baltic region are still more valuable.

Stranga makes use of other works, his study is firmly rooted in archival research, in the first place, of materials kept in the Latvian State Historical Archive. In this review an attempt is made to collate the statements of the Latvian researcher with those which could be made on the basis of the materials which the reviewer has collected in Lithuanian and Russian archives.

At the very beginning of his book Stranga stresses that the peace treaty with Russia was one of the most significant treaties concluded by Latvia in the entire inter-war period. Perhaps it could be considered the most important international event, comparable with the *de jure* recognition of Latvia and its acceptance to the League of Nations (p. 7). The author quotes the Latvian minister of foreign affairs Vilhelms Munters, who stated in 1938 that the peace treaty with Russia, rather than the Treaty of Versailles, directly solidified and legitimized the independence of Latvia. Of course, such statements are not groundless, because the Russian peace treaties with Latvia and other Baltic countries were the recognition of statehood on the part of their former suzerain for all times without any reservation. In the words of contemporaries, it was a kind of a birth certificate for these countries.

This book consists of an introduction, three chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter deals with the truce, the second with the peace, and the third presents an evaluation of Latvian-Soviet relations between 1921 and

² A. Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven and London, 1993), p. 59; A. Lieven, *Pabaltijo revoliucija* (Vilnius, 1995), p. 59; R. Misiūnas, R. Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940–1980* (Los Angeles, 1983), p. 9; R. Misiūnas, *Baltijos valstybės: priklausomybės metai 1940–1980* (Vilnius, 1992), p. 18.

³ Č. Laurinavičius, *Lietuvos – Sovietų Rusijos Taikos sutartis* (Vilnius, 1992).

1925. The chapter on the truce shows that at the turn of 1918–19 the Bolsheviks had penetrated into all the three Baltic countries, Latvia being nearly completely occupied with the exception of Liepāja and its environs. Of the three countries Estonia was the first to get rid of the Bolsheviks, who were driven out from the country in the summer of 1919. Therefore the Estonians were the first with whom the Soviets offered to start peace negotiations. The first unofficial proposal was made in the spring of 1919 through the mediation of the foreign minister of Soviet Hungary Béla Kun and the offer was repeated directly at least twice in August. Meanwhile, no proposals were made to Latvia and Lithuania, because the Bolsheviks were still there. Besides, they were keenly interested in staying in these countries, whose territory they intended to use as a bridge for the export of the revolution to Germany.

Nevertheless, on 28 August 1919 Lenin decided to offer peace talks to all the three Baltic countries, and at his insistence the Politburo of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party resolved to propose such an offer to Latvia and Lithuania on 11 September (a similar proposal had been made to Estonia earlier – on 31 August).

In Stranga's opinion, three factors made the Soviets take that step. Firstly, by proposing peace negotiations they aimed to neutralize the Baltic states and prevent their support for Yudenich in his attack on Petrograd. Secondly, in this way they intended to weaken Polish influence in the Baltic countries and preclude their participation in the impending action against Soviet Russia on 26 August. That campaign had been planned by the head of the British military mission in the Baltic, F. G. Marsh; in addition to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland his plan included the forces of Yudenich and Bermond-Avalov. Lenin was very much concerned about the possible crusade of the fourteen states, organized by the Allies against the Soviets. Thirdly, a peace treaty with the Baltic states (in the first place with Estonia) could facilitate the development of trade with Western countries.

This kind of explanation is quite convincing, and it only could be added that the Soviets feared less the planned but not really implemented campaign of the Allies than the Baltic states proper, the armed forces of which amounted to 150,000 troops. It must be taken into account that Yudenich with only a tenth of that number had almost captured Petrograd. In the autumn of 1919 Lenin himself reconciled with the defeat and indicated that the Bolsheviks should renew their underground activities. Afterwards, taking into consideration the Baltic states, he wrote; 'If all those small states had risen against us ..., without any doubt we would have lost'.⁴

Such fears are also attested by materials in Russian archives, including the minutes of the Politburo, showing the unanimous vote of all its

⁴ В. И. Ленин, *Полное собрание сочинений*, т. 40 (Москва, 1981), с. 175.

members for the peace proposals for Latvia and Lithuania.⁵ Only three Latvian Communists, headed by their leader Pēteris Stučka, voted against, and the head of the Lithuanian Communists, Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas, abstained. After the ballot Stučka and his colleagues insisted on delaying the implementation of the decision and submitting that issue for discussion at a plenary session of the Central Committee. After heated discussions one more ballot was held, and the motion of the Latvian Communists was rejected outright.⁶ Mickevičius-Kapsukas, having behaved more moderately at that session, had his revenge and was no less obstinate at the signing of the Peace Treaty of 12 July 1920 between Lithuania and Soviet Russia. On that day staying in Smolensk, he dispatched a speedy telegram requiring the conclusion of the treaty to be postponed until he arrived in Moscow and presented his 'weighty political arguments'.⁷

These facts illustrate the role of the Baltic Communists in concluding the peace treaties with Russia, and Stranga pays considerable attention to this aspect, devoting a special sub-chapter 'The Latvian Communist Party and the Latvian-Russian Peace Treaty' in his book (pp. 73–83).

A detailed analysis of the reactions of the Baltic states to the Soviet peace proposals reveals their differences. Estonia was the first to start negotiations, while Latvia and Lithuania waited for the respective reaction of the Allies. Besides, in 1919 the eastern part of Latvia – Latgale – was still under Bolshevik rule of the Soviet government of Stučka. Nevertheless, the Baltic states agreed to start negotiations with the Soviets not individually, but collectively. However, they did not manage to formulate joint requirements to be submitted to the Soviets. Estonia and Lithuania disagreed to include Latgale into the joint territorial claims, and Latvia and Estonia ignored the issue of Vilnius. Besides, the Soviets themselves rejected the idea of collective negotiations – they wanted to conclude separate treaties so that they could exploit the disagreements between the Baltic countries and manipulate them.

Thus, on 5 December 1919 Estonia started separate negotiations with the Bolsheviks in Tartu. Shortly Latvia established secret contacts with them. Stranga ascertained that Latvian representatives used to meet Soviet envoys in secret in the streets and cafes of the city. During one of such meetings they were caught by the Estonian secret police in Tartu. (p. 27).

In the first place Latvia and the Soviets held talks about the truce, since they were still in a state of war. In January of 1919 Latvian forces together with Polish troops had cleared Latgale of the Red Army, but the Soviets continued laying claims to that region, offering to neutralize it and

⁵ Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории, ф. 17, оп. 3, д. 26, л. 1.

⁶ Ibid., л. 1–2.

⁷ Ibid., оп. 84, д. 65, л. 16.

let its population decide to which state they would like to adhere. Stranga convincingly refutes the arguments of Soviet historians that the then leaders of Russia had agreed to cede Latgale to Latvia, but the Latvian government did not want to regulate that issue peacefully and occupied the region by force.

On 30 January 1920 Latvia and Soviet Russia signed a truce agreement, which both sides agreed to keep in secret. In his work Stranga argues with the famous Latvian émigré historian Edgars Dunsdorfs, who maintained that the truce was more favourable to the Soviets than Latvia, since it stopped 'a further offensive' against Russia.⁸ Stranga argues that such a statement is senseless, since Latvia was not going to capture Russian lands, it only wanted to take back its own territory. In the truce agreement the Soviets renounced any claims to Latgale, and that was the most important matter for Latvia.

The text of the secret truce agreement shows that actually Latvia undertook to maintain a favourable neutrality towards Soviet Russia. By Clause 13 of the agreement it pledged itself not to allow any movement of the Estonian, Lithuanian or Polish troops in the direction of Russia and promised to exact that pledge by all possible means at its disposal including the military force.⁹ Taking into account this fact, one could be more tolerant in evaluating Lithuania's commitments in the Peace Treaty with Russia. As is known, Clause 2 of the secret appendix to the Treaty defined a stationing of the troops of the Red Army on a specially assigned territory not as a breach of the Treaty. Although Lithuanian commitments seem far more extensive in comparison with Latvian ones, they are paradoxically similar and, besides, adequate to the then ratio of forces: Latvia was then the attacking side and it had at least 25,000 troops on the eastern front, while Lithuania practically had nothing there.

The second chapter covers Latvia's preparation for the peace talks, and that process was more thorough than in Lithuania. Particularly detailed were Latvia's economic requirements for Russia. Six governmental commissions calculated the damages done to Latvia by the Russian army at the start of the First World War and during the Bolshevik occupation in 1919. The damages were enormous, amounting to two billion gold roubles (30,000 railway carriages alone were taken from Latvia to Russia). It was senseless to expect that Russia would pay all the damages. Estonia, being the first of the Baltic countries to sign a peace treaty with Russia (2 February 1920), recovered only 15 million gold roubles. Nevertheless, the Latvians placed great hopes on Russian compensation and created grandiose plans for the reconstruction and development of their national

⁸ E. Dunsdorfs, 'Latvijas un Krievijas 1920. gadā miera līgums' *Ceļa Zīmes*, no. 60, 1978, p. 295.

⁹ Архив внешней политики Российской Федерации, ф. 0150, оп. 4, п. 1, д. 3, л. 126.

economy. They developed a project for a forty-year concession to be granted by Russia for Latvia to connect the Daugava and Volga rivers with a canal and to allot 70,000,000 gold roubles for the deepening of the Daugava by five metres. In that way Latvia intended to have access to the oil of the Caspian Sea (Baku) and to reach the Pacific via the Volga and Siberian rivers.

Nearly four months were spent on the preparation of that project. The Latvians intended to start negotiations with the Soviets in February 1920, but their delegations went to Moscow only in April. There was some delay also due to the fact that Latvia hoped to hold the talks with the Soviets together with Poland, Finland and Lithuania. Latvia was more energetic in arranging collective negotiations than the two other Baltic countries or Poland. Besides, for some time Latvia insisted on having the talks in Petrograd (where the Latvian Communist Riflemen were active) rather than in Moscow.

Nevertheless, the Latvian delegation, consisting of 34 members and headed by J. Zebergs, started the negotiations in Moscow with the Soviet representatives, led by Adolf Ioffe on 16 April 1920. In the monograph the process of the negotiations is divided into two periods according to their place – those of Riga and Moscow. In the Moscow period the Latvian delegation primarily endeavoured to achieve the Soviet recognition of the aggression committed against Latvia and related damages. The Soviets, however, rejected both issues. Therefore subsequently the talks dealt mainly with the delimitation of the boundary between the two states and the Latvian neutrality in the then Polish-Soviet war.

Stranga's statements are supported by the minutes of the talks kept in the Russian Federation Foreign Policy Archive. They show, *inter alia*, that the Latvian delegation was more stubborn than the Lithuanians in the analogous talks. On the very first day of the talks Zebergs declared rather impudently that Latvia had suffered greater losses than Russia, which had attacked 'the young democratic Republic of Latvia'.¹⁰ Ioffe retorted that Latvia itself fought against Russia and it did so together with the British and Denikin, while Latvian ports had been built by the whole of Russia. The debates became particularly acrimonious when Ioffe refused to mention the 1918 declaration of Latvian independence, arguing that Latvia did not yet exist, its territory was not yet defined and it was still in the state of separation from Russia. Zebergs insisted on a different treatment of the situation: there were two belligerent parties, between which a peace treaty had to be concluded and the boundary fixed. Ioffe disagreeing, on 27 April the Latvian representatives declared that they had to interrupt the talks to consult their government in view of the Soviet refusal to acknowledge the parity of the delegations.¹¹ Stranga remarks that Zebergs even wanted

¹⁰ Ibid., ф. 150, оп. 3, п. 2, д. 8, л. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., л. 52.

to break off the negotiations and asked the Latvian foreign minister, Zigfrīds Anna Mejerovics, to come to Moscow (p. 53).

At the request of the Latvian delegation the negotiations were transferred to Riga on 15 July. After arriving in Riga, for some time Soviet representatives avoided starting the negotiations (at least until 31 July); they expected that the Red Army would soon occupy Poland and consequently there would be no need to conclude a peace treaty with Latvia as it would be possible to sovietize that country again. Besides, a congress of the Second Comintern, fostering the plans to export revolution, was to open in Moscow on 19 July. Meanwhile Latvia endeavoured to activate the talks and for that purpose it appointed a new head of the delegation, Jānis Vesmanis, and new experts. To tell the truth, Stranga also found out that some members (left-wing Latvian politicians) paid more attention to their own interests than those of the state. Thus, the Social Democrat Fricis Menders approached the head of the Soviet delegation Ioffe with a request to guarantee his personal safety, i.e., that he would not be victimized by the Bolsheviks, should Riga be re-occupied.

In general, the Soviets satisfied only a fraction of Latvian economic requirements in the Riga period of the talks. They agreed to return only a part of the sequestered property (e.g., only 1,140 railway carriages instead of the requested 14,000), a small part of the archives and libraries, and permitted the cutting of some timber (of the 100,000 *desiatinas* of the forest) and paid 4,000,000 gold roubles. In this context it is interesting to note that the Politburo had made a decision to earmark 5,000,000 gold roubles both for Latvia and Lithuania, but in the talks with the delegations Ioffe personally made up his mind to economize, especially at the expense of Lithuania (Latvia received 4,000,000, while Lithuania only 3,000,000). This fact is also an indicator of the toughness of the Latvian behaviour in the talks compared to the Lithuanians.

Finally the peace treaty between Latvia and Soviet Russia was signed on 11 August 1920. At first the Soviets insisted on having the treaty signed in Moscow, but afterwards they yielded. The Treaty was signed in Riga, and only the exchange of the instruments of ratification took place in Moscow.

In the book the text of the peace treaty is analyzed in a separate section (pp. 62–73), and it is concluded that in essence it was beneficial for both sides. Although only a small part of Latvian economic requirements were satisfied, the country was content with its eastern border. Actually all Latvian ethnic lands were united by the Treaty. After the occupation of 1940 Stalin ‘corrected’ that boundary by tearing away a part of the county of Abrene (ca. 1,200 km²). At present these lands are still occupied by Russia.

Although the Latvian and Lithuanian peace treaties with the Soviets are very similar, Stranga manages to find some differences. The Latvian-

Russian treaty stated that the war was stopped by both sides, while the Lithuanian-Russian treaty made no mention of a war – presumably it was considered that there was no war between those two states. Stranga remarks that taking into account the phraseology of the latter document it might be called a treaty of friendship (p. 63).

Further the monograph presents a detailed analysis of the aftermath of the peace treaty, the establishment of diplomatic relations and diplomatic missions, accreditation of the heads of missions, their activity, etc., up to 1925. A special section covers economic ties, which as well as political contacts were usually normal. Complications developed mostly due to the intentions of the Soviets to keep the Baltic states in their sphere of influence and to dictate their terms to them. Stranga is one of the first historians to reveal the scope of Soviet interference in the internal affairs of Latvia and other Baltic states, to regulate the political processes and to influence the political parties and individual politicians of those countries. Attention is drawn to the relations between Moscow and Latvian Social Democrats, the Estonian leader Konstantin Päts and the Lithuanian Nationalists (*tautininkai*), and the activities of Soviet intelligence in the Baltic countries are taken into consideration as well. The book's appendices contain the biographies of Soviet officials who worked in these republics (pp. 231–246). The subversive activities of the Communist parties are presented in some detail. A separate section is devoted to the Bolshevik putsch in Tallinn on 1 February 1924 and its consequences; a special related document – the 2 December 1924 report of the Latvian ambassador in Estonia Jānis Seskis – is also included.

In the book attention is drawn to the fact that the Soviets co-ordinated their policies in respect to the Baltic states with Germany. The two great powers had common interests in this region and strove to defend them by joint actions throughout the whole inter-war period, and not only in 1939. Several examples of this kind of Soviet-German co-operation are only the beginning of a promising research in this field.

Certainly not all the statements of the work under review are equally acceptable. The author sometimes emphasizes close relations between Lithuania and the Soviets and Germany too categorically, blaming Lithuania for not acting responsibly enough and destroying the unity of the Baltic states. Possibly not well-grounded is his statement that Lithuanian politicians were not quite confident about the boundaries of their state after the First World War: 'Lithuanians themselves did not know where the boundaries of Lithuania were – they were haunted by the mania of Vytautas the Great', Stranga ironically remarks (p. 18). It must be stressed that many contemporary Lithuanian politicians accentuated that they laid no claim to the historic boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and demanded only ethnic Lithuanian lands with minor corrections of strategic or economic nature.

Stranga is also critical with respect to the contemporary policies of Poland. 'Having defeated the Bolsheviks at Warsaw, Poland started fancying itself to be allegedly the fifth great power ..., outsmarting the real superpowers by arrogance and conceit. The arrogance of Warsaw, stronger than that of Moscow or Berlin, repelled the young states and prevented the creation of a collective system of security, ...' (p. 8).

All in all, the issue of security is widely discussed in the book. Stranga indicates that the Soviets, exploiting the disagreements between the Baltic states, obstructed the formation of their defensive alliance (p. 10). However, he soon adds that neither Russia nor Germany were to blame for that situation – the Baltic states themselves did not want that union (*ibid.*). In general, the creation of a union is looked at very sceptically and unfavourably. The issue of the Baltic union was 'hopeless from the very beginning', 'it had no future'. The author asks whether it is not characteristic that even today, after having experienced the tragedy of 1939–1940, the Baltic states are not creating their own system of mutual aid, and instead they orientate themselves towards the European Union and NATO (p. 20).

The opinion of the reviewer on this issue is less categorical. In his view, the rapprochement of the Baltic states, their closer co-operation and even a union, would not be an obstacle, that would even facilitate their integration into the defensive and political structures of Europe.

These and some other arguments by Aivars Stranga are by no means any shortcomings of the book. On the contrary, they should encourage discussion and lead to further research. In general, the book is worth the attention of all those interested in the problems under consideration.

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