SWEDISH RESPONSES TO SOVIET MOVES EAST OF THE BALTIC SEA: THE BALTIC STATES IN SWEDISH MILITARY PLANNING, 1939–41

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With the German attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 the three Baltic countries became an active theatre of war and, consequently, the strategic significance of the Baltic Sea region changed. From a Swedish point of view the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 1918 had created a buffer zone, or a cordon sanitaire, between itself and the new Soviet Russia. The Soviet army no longer had direct access to the Baltic coast and the Russian navy was more or less enclosed in its base at Kronstadt, deep within the Gulf of Finland. Throughout the interwar era the Swedish military focused its attention on Finland. Both states discussed plans for future cooperation between the Swedish and Finnish armies in case of war with Soviet Russia and also made plans for a Swedish occupation of the Åland islands.1 Finland had direct military contacts with the Baltic States, mainly Estonia.2 It was Sweden's intention to draw Finland towards the Scandinavian countries. However, any suggestion that these would, or could, give the Baltic States any kind of military support was regarded as unrealistic. For Stockholm it was far better if the three Baltic countries entered some kind of alliance with Poland, by far the strongest link in the chain of buffer states along the western borders of the Soviet Union. For numerous reasons, not least owing to the Vilna conflict, none of these hopes were ever realised.3 Sweden did, however, have

some military contacts with the three Baltic republics, mainly through the exchange of officers.⁴ In this way, and via the traditional links through military attachés, Sweden gathered information about the military situation in the three states.⁵

Within the Swedish navy, one of the possibilities examined in the mid-1920s, in the case of a military alliance between Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, and Finland, was that the navy would not only protect troop transports between Finland and the Baltic States, but also in some situations move Swedish army units to Estonia or Latvia. The establishment of an advanced Swedish naval base on the Estonian island of Ösel (Saarema) was discussed. These naval plans faded away with the growing strength of the Soviet Baltic Fleet during the 1930s.⁶ Despite the growing political, economic, and cultural contacts between Sweden and Estonia and Latvia,⁷ the Swedish military leadership was never misled by wishful thinking. In the summer of 1934 Lieutenant Colonel Axel Rappe, the strategy expert on the Parliamentary Defence Commission, argued that Sweden would not be able to counter any future Soviet attack against the Baltic States. This could only be done with Western naval support, as had been the case between 1918 and 1920.

A Swedish involvement to support Estonia and Latvia was thereby rejected for both practical and strategic reasons. But the Swedish General and Naval Staffs were divided in these matters. At a conference in 1934 the army argued that a Soviet expansion via the Baltic countries would probably proceed along the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea. However, the navy thought that a Soviet advance would be directed westwards, towards Sweden herself. The latter interpretation of the Soviet military planning was, of course, also a part of the then intense rivalry between the army and the navy. A scenario which included a westward Soviet advance towards

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⁵ See information about the military capability of the three Baltic countries, in Arméer, flottor och flyg. Uppgifter om utländska försvarsorganisationer utarbetad inom försvarsstabsens underrättelseavdelning, II (Stockholm 1939), as well as articles about the military organisation in the three countries in the magazine Vårt försvar, Nos. 1–3 (1932).