Book Review:


By Eric A. Sibul*

Donald Stoker’s Britain, France and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic 1919 - 1939: Grand Strategy and Failure provides new insight to international relations and military and naval affairs in the Baltic area during the interwar years. These are areas where there is a dearth of academic research, and the conditions and events in the region during this period are frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted by scholars studying the larger question of why the security system developed at the end of the First World War collapsed and why Europe was plunged into another world war.

Stocker’s work provides two cautionary lessons currently applicable for the small and medium powers in the Baltic region. Firstly, the importance of active cooperation between small and medium powers to build an effective security and defence system and, secondly, friendly larger powers, in the provision of armaments and equipment might be acting more in the interest of trade and their domestic defence industries, rather than what of the best interest of their small clients and regional security.

The pioneering work on the history of Baltic international relations and military and naval affairs can almost solely be attributed to the late Edgar Anderson who was on the history faculty of San Jose State University in California from 1957 to 1988. Through Anderson’s meticulous research, ability to track down obscure source material, linguistic abilities in the Baltic languages as well as German, French and Russian and ability to write in a clear and concise manner, his work still remains the primary core of scholarship for the Baltic diplomatic, military, and naval history from 1918 to 1940. As there still very few scholars working within these specializations, the Stoker’s work provides new material to a sparse field.

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Britain, France, and the Naval Arms Trade in the Baltic 1919 – 1939: Grand Strategy and Failure was published as part of the Cass Series on Naval History and Policy edited by Geoffrey Till. The book was initially researched by Stocker as a doctoral dissertation in military and diplomatic history at Florida State University under the guidance of Paul G. Halpern who specializes largely in twentieth century British naval history. Stocker is currently an associate professor of Strategy and Policy at the US Naval War College.

The book is divided into eleven chapters and the chapters are generally divided to cover British and French policy towards Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland on an individual basis. The first chapter provides a background of gaining of independence of countries on the eastern Baltic littoral to set the stage for discussion of naval policy during the 1920s and 1930s. Chapter two covers the naval developments in the Baltic from 1918 to 1922. The newly independent countries quickly developed navies generally from former Tsarist Russian and German vessels for service in their independence wars. Soviet Russia continued to be a threat to the security of the Baltic nations and it was in the interest of Britain and France to curb Soviet expansionist policies in the Baltic. Despite this communality of interest and active British and French naval support to Baltic countries in 1918 – 1919, assistance to develop the Baltic navies was not readily forthcoming. Britain refused requests to train naval officers in Great Britain, although the French were more accommodating in this regard. None of the allied great powers would turn over or sell at reasonable prices surplus naval vessels to the small states. This was largely out of hope that the newly independent would purchase new vessels providing contracts to British and French shipyards which were suffering from the postwar economic downturn and a decline of domestic naval contracts.

By 1923, a delineation of naval influence was in place. The Finns and Estonians cooperated with British, while the Latvians and Poles developed naval ties with France. The third chapter covers the unintended effects of the Washington Naval Conference of 1921 which placed a ten-year moratorium on construction of battleships by the former entente powers. It also forbade the sale of all used vessels. While the treaty which meant to curb a naval arms race between the great powers such had taken place before the First World War and hence was
hoped to bring greater stability in the Europe as well as the Pacific. The effect was the opposite, the treaty hindered smaller nations from developing their navies which ultimately could be used only for defensive purposes, while the major powers rushed to build new smaller combatants not covered by the Treaty. Furthermore, it forced small nations to conclude contracts with foreign powers if they wanted continue developing their navies, principally benefiting British and French shipyards.

The next chapter deals with competition for the naval contracts between Great Britain and France in the Baltic littoral states from 1923 to 1925. Rather than concern of about building an effective collective security system in the Baltic, British and French diplomats and military representatives competed with each other to develop political and economic interests in the Baltic capitals. Naval arms sales were clearly and principally seen as a way to advance these interests. These representatives, the French in particular, were not above the bribery of government officials to receive naval contracts. The fifth chapter covers the military mission to Finland of British General Sir Walter Mervyn St. George Kirke in 1924 – 1925. The Finns requested advice from Britain how best use their meager defence budget and particularly how to develop sea and coastal defence and use air power. The effects of the mission were mixed. The Finnish naval high command largely rejected the naval and coastal defence recommendations, while the Finnish army and air force whole-heartedly accepted many recommendations which focused on land defences and air force development.

The mission also served to increase British influence vis-a-vis the French in Finland and its positive work for the army improved the perceptions towards Great Britain of Finnish “jager” officers who had served with German forces in the First World War. The sixth chapter deals with competition for naval contracts between Great Britain and France between 1926 and 1932. Estonia remained strongly under British influence, while Latvia retained under influence of the French. Poland became increasing dissatisfied with French because of the high cost and poor quality of the vessels they provided. The next chapter deals with the Finnish development of submarines based on German designs and constructed in Finland, 1926 – 1934. This building programme was covertly financed by Germany which was limited by provisions of the
Treaty of Versailles from constructing submarines. The benefit to the Germans was that they could continue developing submarine technology and use the Finnish boats to covertly train submarine crews. This represented a great defeat for British and French policy. Not only did they lose political and economic influence in Finland, the Germans where able to develop submarine technology and train submariners before their renouncement of the Treaty of Versailles. The eighth chapter deals with final British and French arms sales in the Baltic 1933 – 1939. The market for British and French naval arms sales to this region began drying up. The countries of this region found that it was preferable to construct their own vessels than trying to deal with the British and French governments and the various industrial firms of those nations. To a certain extent, the small states developed new methods of financing naval construction such as public subscription. Chapter nine covers the effects of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, where the British agreed to the Germans rebuilding their fleet with the hope that they could control or limit German naval construction and could maintain eroding British naval superiority through negotiation.

The agreement undermined British influence in the Baltic region as well as weakened the political and military position of the small Baltic nations which were dependent on Britain offsetting German and Soviet influence in the area. The tenth chapter is entitled, “Grand Strategy and Failure,” and outlines the failure of Anglo-French strategy in the area. By May 1939, Britain rediscovered the strategic importance of the Baltic, however efforts to establish a solid collective security system in the area and strengthening the Baltic nations’ militaries came too little and too late. By this time, Poland, France’s best client in the region, lost faith with French irresolute policy makers and largely went its own way.

The final chapter serves as an overall conclusion outlining the failure of British and French grand strategy in the Baltic region during the 1920s and 1930s. The principal reason for this failure was that British and French policy was driven mainly by selfish economic interests and the desire to counter the other’s political and economic influence than to construct a firm post-First World War security system. Although American naval arms sales policy is mentioned in passing by Stoker in the conclusion, the United States should share castigation as well. Despite Josef Stalin’s brutal purges and genocidal Soviet policies in the Ukraine,
civilian officials in the Roosevelt Administration approved a Soviet request to purchase a battleship and destroyers from American manufacturers. The purchases were only blocked through the protests of the US Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral William D. Leahy, who objected due to the strategic implications of such arms sales. Despite these sales being blocked, the Roosevelt Administration approved numerous sales of American industrial goods to the USSR facilitating the development of the Soviet military-industrial complex. This is a different issue aside from the focus of Stoker’s work and perhaps should be further researched by other scholars.

Errors and omissions in Stoker’s work are relatively minor. On page 137, Admiral Herman Salza is identified as the replacement to Admiral Archibald von Keyserling as a commander of the Latvian Navy. Salza was actually the commander of the Estonian Navy. Keyserling’s replacement was Captain Theodor Spade. This was correctly stated on earlier pages and could be caught if the publisher perhaps had a more careful editor. In fairness, the complex array of Estonian, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish names is very difficult to deal with, especially to a novice to the region’s history. The replacement of Spade with von Keyserling was an interesting case. Von Keyserling resigned amidst a scandal in 1932. During a return trip of the Latvian fleet from Estonia, members of the Latvian Social Democratic Party observed the transfer of a large quantity of liquor from another vessel to the Latvian flagship Virsatis. Although Stoker states on page 127 that it was unclear what von Keyserling intended to do with the liquor and speculates that he had a drinking problem.

However, it is fairly clear that the incident was related to Finnish prohibition. Like the United States and Canada, Finland had laws prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol during the period. As the Latvian fleet was conducting combined fleet maneuvers the illicit cargo would have most likely been transferred to a Finnish naval vessel at sea and was perhaps no more than a token of camaraderie and friendship to the Finnish navy whose personnel would hardly enjoy the forbidden elixir. In August 1920, the Estonian Air Force had had its own liquor scandal. Two Second lieutenants were caught with one hundred liters of spirit abroad their hydroplanes on a training flight across the Gulf of Finland. The Estonian Minister of War had the two pilots reduced in
rank to privates and confined for a month. The commander of the naval aviation detachment, Lieutenant Rudolf Schiller, was also dismissed from his post. In the case of the von Keyserling, who was from a German aristocratic background, the liquor incident was perhaps just a convenient excuse for anti-German politicians to push for his replacement with an ethnic Latvian. Interestingly, Salza was also from a Baltic-German background, but had dropped the ‘von’ from his name out of a strong personal conviction that aristocratic titles were improper in a republic.

The only questionable issue regarding Stoker’s research in preparation of the manuscript is the lack of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish archival sources. As the dissertation was written in the 1990s, Baltic archives were open to researchers. However, dealing with the confusion of newly open national archives and difficult languages were obstacles to the use of these sources. The author did make extensive use of British, French, American and Finnish archival sources.

This work certainly has great value, in a field where new literature is all too sparse. Stoker paints a picture of Britain and France pursuing narrow and short-sighted national interests where comprehensive and cooperative grand strategy was necessary. Much of the equipment sold to small powers was of limited utility and lacked interoperability with that of their other small neighbors. Stoker’s work provides very much a cautionary tale for the small nation in contemporary times. Arm sales and military assistance policies of a larger power may be based more on the interests of its own domestic industry and does not take the true defence interests of the small nation at crux. For the large power policy makers, it also has a clear message. In the greater context of grand strategy it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice narrow national economic and political interests in the short term, in order to nurture and sustain the security and defence measures of its smaller partners.