

The Baltic Patrol: From Counter-Revolution to National Liberation

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In November, 1918, following the conclusion of the armistice that ended the fighting on the Western Front of the First World War, Great Britain decided to send a squadron of light cruisers and destroyers into the Baltic Sea. The exploits of this force, known in Britain as the Baltic Patrol, are well known to historians of the region.¹ It is widely accepted that British naval intervention made an important, if not decisive, contribution to the achievement of independence by the Baltic states little more than two years later. The aim of this paper is not to evaluate the military operations carried out by the Patrol, but to locate them in relation to the evolution of British policy toward the revolutionary events that had been unfolding in Russia and Eastern Europe since 1917.

That Britain's interests in the Baltic at the end of the war were difficult to define almost goes without saying; though in this respect conditions there were no more obscure than they were across a vast stretch of territory, extending from the Rhine to Urals, and from the Baltic Sea to the Persian Gulf. The Great War had dissolved traditional structures of political authority and social order across this whole area, an outcome the victors had only dimly foreseen, and with which they were ill-prepared to cope. The armistice of November 1918 is remembered in the West as having brought the war's fighting to an end. But it did not so such thing anywhere within this enormous arc of chaos and revolution, where widespread violence would persist for years to come, sometimes on a scale exceeding that of the Great War itself.

In retrospect the efforts of the victors to limit, manage, or exploit the War's revolutionary consequences have mostly been regarded a lamentable. They are often held up as having sowed the seeds for a resumption of global war twenty years later, and for the persisting instability of places like the Middle East, where the consequences of Allied policy after 1918 are still readily visible on a map. These are perhaps excessively harsh judgments, given the scale of the problems the Allies confronted, which would have confounded the statesmen of any era. Nevertheless, however dark one may paint the prevailing strategic background, there is no question that the result of Britain's intervention in the Baltic stands out as

a genuine if modest and transient success. History has judged the work of the Baltic Patrol to have been, on the whole, good work, which is reason enough to consider what it did, and how it did it.

In doing so, however, it is also worth recalling how peculiar and selective historical memory can be. It is common for historical episodes to be interpreted in terms of their outcome, a reasonable point of view if the outcome is all you are trying to explain, but one that also risks distorting or obscuring the motives and expectations of those who were actually involved. What is less reasonable, and almost equally common, is the habit of supposing that the outcome in question was somehow the most likely result all along, and that whatever divergence may exist between the perceptions of contemporaries and those of the historian are owed to the fact that the people on the spot were not able to recognize the larger pattern of events—what Hegel called the “cunning of history”—as clearly as those who have the benefit of hindsight. This is a mistake, and one that can drain the sense of contingency from events that took contemporaries by surprise. The liberation of the Baltic states after 1918 was no more foreseeable, and was not in fact foreseen, any more than their re-emergence on the world stage after 1991 was foreseeable, or foreseen.

And indeed the two results bear some resemblance to each other, in that in both case conditions arose in which the policy of the Great Powers became temporarily paralyzed, by doubts about their own capacities, and by fear that decisive action on their part might set in motion some unwonted spiral of escalation. Their shared ambivalence and uncertainty allowed the initiative to pass, for a time, to smaller states in which the determination to act, given the opportunity, had been building for years, if not for generations. In both instances it was the willingness and capacity of small states to recognize the possibilities inherent in the unprecedented vacuum of power that had suddenly enveloped them that made the difference. Such outcomes may appear in retrospect to be overdetermined, but that should not blind us to the fact that they were completely unexpected almost until the moment they actually occurred. Unless we keep this in mind the conduct of the Baltic Patrol, and of the statesmen who sought to employ it as an instrument of policy, really does appear capricious and inexplicable.

Of what policy, then, was the Baltic Patrol an instrument? This is not an easy question. The orders provided to the squadron’s first commander,

Rear Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair, instructed him to “show the British flag and support British policy as circumstances dictate,”² a formulation that might politely be described as unhelpful. The one element of British policy that did not need to be spelled out was the requirement to blockade German shipping, an established feature of the naval war that had been underway since 1914, and which was now extended to the Baltic under the terms of the armistice. It was the extension of the blockade against Germany that in turn provided the legal basis for British operations against Russian ports in the Baltic, a seemingly exiguous observation, but one that comes up surprisingly frequently, along with a wide range of other legal technicalities, in inter-Allied diplomacy concerning the Baltic Patrol’s activities, which were viewed with considerable skepticism by Britain’s most important allies, the United States and France.

It is a further sign of how fragile and uncertain British policy was, that it should have sought to cloak itself in forms of legality that would normally have been brushed aside, as they routinely had been in the past whenever larger and more firmly grasped interests were at stake. As a practical matter British warships were able to enter the Baltic only because of the simultaneous collapse of both German and Russian power, a most unusual and unforeseen circumstance in itself. As a legal matter, their operations were justified by the continued state of war with Germany, and by the claim that Russia’s Baltic ports might provide a means for Germany to evade the blockade. The incongruities of this situation would become apparent once that state of war ended, however; which it does after Germany accepts the terms of the Versailles settlement in the summer of 1919. From that point on the demands for a clearer policy on the part of the British became more insistent—from its allies; from neutral states like Sweden, which had long felt aggrieved by Britain’s naval bullying; and from the British Admiralty, which evidently felt that it was important to be at war with somebody if you are going to go around sinking ships and that sort of thing.

A good deal of the ambivalence surrounding British policy in the Baltic arose from the fact that the armistice also required German forces in the East to remain in place and resist the further advance of the Bolsheviks. Like the British, Russia’s revolutionaries also sought to fill the vacuum of power created by Germany’s collapse. This unnerved the Germans along with everyone else. Thus, while Sinclair was being sent to the Baltic at least partly to contribute to the continued starvation of German civilians, his

presence had also been requested by the German commander on the scene, who feared that the Russian warships based at Kronstadt might pose a threat to the forces under his command.³

The idea that the real mission of the Baltic Patrol was to strike some kind of blow against Communism fit in naturally with the general drift of British policy since the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Yet the blow was clearly not intended to be decisive overall, and perhaps not even locally. By the time Sinclair's squadron was being dispatched thousands of British soldiers had already been committed against Red forces around Archangel and Vladivostok, fighting alongside White Russians whose leadership would certainly take exception to any aide conveyed to the Germans or to the Baltic nationalists—in practice, anyone other than themselves. Sinclair's squadron carried no soldiers, however, nor any gun with a caliber exceeding six inches.⁴ It was, in other words, a force ill-equipped to influence military events on land directly.

Both the composition of Sinclair's force, and the hemming and hawing that surrounded its military purposes, reflected the lingering ambivalence of British policy toward Lenin's government. Everyone in any position of power in Britain regarded a Bolshevik victory as a bad thing, but not all regarded it as the worst possible outcome. For many, the worst possible outcome would be one that somehow forged a lasting bond between Germany and Russia, even a restored, counter-revolutionary Russia. Roughly speaking, the Patrol's task was to do what it could to keep the Germans and White Russians fighting side by side against the Bolsheviks, while somehow holding them apart politically. Under the circumstances is easy to understand the impatience British sailors would display toward their political masters, who were perfectly capable of insisting, for instance, that White Russian forces could receive supplies from the British, but not from the Germans, whom the British were also supplying.

The conduct of British operations in Baltic would become an object of intense rivalry between the two leading figures in the Cabinet, the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, who wished to hedge every bet, and Winston Churchill, the Secretary of State for War, who would have preferred to steam straight into Kronstadt, damning the torpedoes along the way. When Sinclair was told, in his initial instructions, that any Bolshevik warship operating in the Baltic should be regarded as doing so "with hostile intent," it was the voice of Churchill that he was actually

hearing, since that instruction came from the Admiralty, and not from the Foreign Office.⁵ Nevertheless in war rules of engagement have a way of filling whatever gaps may arise in foreign policy, as Churchill knew perfectly well; and that is pretty much what happened in this case, though only for a while. In the end, it would be the hedged bet that would finally be played. In the meantime, the principal concern of the Baltic Patrol would be to sink enemy warships, an activity that came naturally to any British sailor, but one that, by its nature, could have only a limited effect on the course of politics ashore.

British assistance had also been requested by the Estonian National Council, the provisional government of Estonia to which Britain had accorded *de facto* recognition following the Russian Revolution of November 1917. Its representatives were told, on the day Sinclair put to sea, that his ships carried armaments destined for them and their compatriots in Latvia.⁶ In the final analysis it was the Baltic Patrol's capacity to insure a continuing flow of arms to Baltic nationalist forces that proved to be its most crucial contribution to Baltic independence. On this matter, however, even the British Admiralty was doubtful at first. Its view was that further deliveries of weapons should be withheld unless the British commander on the scene was convinced that "the Estonian or other Government is of a stable nature and can control [its] Army," a judgment that was to be reached while doing nothing to "interfere with local politics, nor give color for the assumption that Great Britain is favoring one party or another."⁷

When the Baltic patrol was first dispatched, the most likely outcome for the Baltic states, in the eyes of any informed observer, would not have been *de jure* sovereignty—unfettered national independence—but some form of *de facto* autonomy within a reconstituted Russian empire (or, as some imagined, a federation), Red or White; or alternatively as part of a new multinational East European Bloc extending from Scandinavia to Poland, an idea that was occasionally bruited about at the time. What made autonomy short of sovereignty the most likely outcome was simply that, as the British knew, such an arrangement would be acceptable to *any* Russian government, including Lenin's, if it came to that; which in turn explains why Whitehall felt no compunction about enlisting the Baltic nationalists in its anti-Bolshevik coalition. Their participation was essential from a variety of military perspectives. They provided additional manpower and a base for operations against St. Petersburg, and they also constituted a

bridge between Russia and Central Europe, which, if held, would stem the westward spread of Communism. And for all this the Baltic peoples could expect some kind of reward, even if it was not exactly what their leaders were hoping for. British policy in the winter and spring of 1919 included periodic diplomatic assurance of support for Baltic independence, but it is important to recall what this kind of language meant in this period, when it was also addressed, for instance, to Arabs, and Jews, and Kurds, and Armenians, and any number of other formerly subject peoples, all of whom were promised exactly the same thing. These were diplomatic formulae chosen with care, precisely because they could be made to appear consistent with a wide range of political outcomes.

An additional obstacle to a firm policy, beyond deep uncertainty about conditions on the ground in the Baltic, was presented by the depressed state of British public opinion. Britons at the end of 1918 were weary of war, skeptical of any claim that Britain had vital interests in Eastern Europe, and by no means universally unsympathetic to Bolshevism, whose atavistic and authoritarian nature was not yet clear. Shortly after the Baltic Patrol departed in November, the *Times* of London, a reliable voice of official opinion, published a series of editorials that portrayed the intervention against Bolshevism as a natural extension of the war that had just been won against Germany.⁸ In January, however, the *Daily Express*, a mass-circulation paper that made its money by echoing the sentiments of its readers, declared with Bismarkian thunder that “the frozen plains of Eastern Europe are not worth the bones of a single grenadier”—fair warning that political risk management would have to be an important consideration of whatever policy Britain might finally adopt.⁹

By the start of 1919 Lloyd George had in fact decided to withdraw the squadron altogether, a decision apparently driven by American demands that all foreign forces be withdrawn from Russia. Early 1919 also marked something of a low point in the theatre—Bolshevik forces captured Vilnius on January 5, and appeared on the verge of overrunning the entire region. In the end, however, the decision was not carried out, perhaps because the British squadron was already sufficiently engaged that its withdrawal would have required the kind of political explanation that would have alienated at least some of the forces the British were trying to keep in play; perhaps because its presence off-shore could be represented, for purposes of mollifying the Americans, as not being “in” Russia. In any event, by the end of 1918 Sinclair had already swept the Baltic clear of

Soviet naval vessels, capturing two of them in the process, which he turned over to the Estonians. His ships had also provided fire support to Estonian, German, and White Russian forces operating along the coast, and taken up station opposite the major coastal cities, affording a kind of ultimate sanctuary for regional governments, and a relatively secure base for their military operations. And of course he had delivered the first vital load of military materiel, by which the tide of the fighting on land would gradually be turned.

None of these advantages would survive the squadron's departure. Retaining them was simply a matter of maintaining its presence. In little over a month, Admiral Sinclair had achieved command of the Baltic Sea. It would fall to his relief, Rear Admiral Sir Walter Cowan, to consider what else might be accomplished with the forces as his disposal. Although Cowan was as eager as Sinclair to fight the Bolsheviks, it would not be until mid-May, more than five months after his arrival in theatre, that forces under his command would find occasion to do so. In the meantime he was chiefly preoccupied by the increasingly aggressive and indiscriminate conduct of German forces in the region, whose anomalous position—fighting under the terms of a settlement dictated by the victors in a war they had lost—had always represented a kind of trap-door underneath British policy. It opened during the spring of 1919, following the decision to place all German forces in the Baltic under the command of General Count Rüdiger von der Goltz, who had previously had charge of German auxiliary forces in Finland. It is scarcely possible, at this stage, to speak of the German government having a policy in the Baltic, but von der Goltz did. He believed that sufficiently stunning success there might help redress the balance of Germany's defeat in the West, improve its position in reaching what he believed (falsely) would be a negotiated settlement with Allies, and perhaps lead to the direct annexation, or at any rate subordination, of Russia's former Baltic provinces to Germany, where they might provide an attractive living for his own soldiers.

In April a force of Latvian Germans known as the "*Baltic Landwehr*" overthrew the Latvian government in Liepāja, forcing its leading members to seek safety aboard a merchant ship under British protection, a disconcerting but somewhat unfathomable development that might have been passed off as an internecine quarrel among Latvians. In May, however, von der Goltz's forces, fighting alongside Estonians and White Russians, succeeded in ejecting the Bolsheviks from Riga, a major success

that Cowan had directly supported, but whose sequel amounted, in the eyes of one British observer, to a “reign of terror” carried out by the Germans.¹⁰ The British, along with the Allied Council of Foreign Ministers in Paris and, most emphatically, the Baltic nationalists, now demanded that von der Golz and the German nationals serving under him leave the Baltic. This was not something that the British could do themselves. The defeat and expulsion of German forces would be the work of Estonian and Latvian armies, aided on occasion by British gunfire. Once it had been done Britain’s options in Baltic shrank appreciably.

From the beginning, the implicit objective of British naval operations versus the Bolsheviks in the Baltic had been the capture of St. Petersburg—implicit because it could not be accomplished by naval forces alone, but required the cooperation of allies whose forces would bear the brunt of the military risks, and whose interests had to be taken into account. In addition, the British were themselves divided over whether such an operation was a good idea. Churchill, agitated by the whiff of German self-assertion that arose from von der Golz’s rogue operations, had been clamouring for an immediate offensive against St. Petersburg since April. Others, less highly placed but more attuned to the politics of the region, wondered how such action could be reconciled with a policy whose watchword was non-intervention, and whose basis in international law was about to evaporate, now that the Germans had been presented with the terms of Versailles. They worried that any operation by White Russian forces against St. Petersburg, particularly if based in Finland or Estonia, would breed such phenomenal distrust in the region as to give the Bolsheviks another opportunity to revolutionize those countries. It might even lead to war between a new White government and Finland, owing to Finnish territorial claims in Russia, which would be advanced by Finland as just reward for its contribution to victory.¹¹

In the end Churchill got his way. The White offensive against St. Petersburg commenced in June, admirably supported by Cowan’s squadron, which had been supplemented for the purpose by an aircraft carrier and a coastal monitor mounting 15” guns. The British cabinet, deprived of its fig leaf of legality by the German acceptance of Versailles, even minuted (in response to an inquiry from the Admiralty) that “a state of war did exist between Great Britain and Bolshevik Government Russia,” a statement of no practical significance, since it was never made public.¹² By the time the Whites met their final defeat in October, British policy had settled down to

the notion that the most it could achieve, given the resources it was prepared to commit, was the neutralization of the Baltic. This was accomplished by informing the Baltic governments that they should consider themselves free to make a unilateral peace with Russians, on the understanding that they did so on their own authority, and at their own risk: an odd conclusion to a policy of “supporting” Baltic independence, perhaps, but one that corresponded both the limits of British power, and to the requirements of regional politics.

British policy drifted toward the Baltic Nationalists partly because they alone welcomed Cowan’s assistance unreservedly, to the point of openly inviting the establishment of a permanent British naval presence in the region (an option the British did not take seriously).¹³ At the same time, both the Germans and the White Russians were gradually disqualifying themselves as partners. In the German case the problem was simply that German aggressiveness became sufficiently indiscriminate in character that it threatened to become an incitement to the further spread of Revolution, rather than a barrier against it. The decline of the White Russians in British eyes was more subtle, and perhaps less deserved, since it was owed mainly to their inability to achieve the kind of victory against the Bolsheviks that British policy required. The scale and character of the forces that Britain was prepared to commit in the region were calculated to limit British liability, and provide a means of escape—what we now call an “exit strategy”—in the event that things went wrong. One need only consider what the history of the Baltic after 1918 would have been like if the British had sent an army there, rather than a naval squadron, to see the extent to which this is true. The White Russians, needless to say, had no exit strategy, and given the scale of the challenge they faced it was perhaps inevitable that their unceasing demands and their uncompromising (and generally reactionary) political attitudes would come to seem unmanageable in Whitehall.

The Baltic nationalists had no exit strategy either, unless one supposes that they would have accepted the kind of autonomy, short of sovereignty, that they themselves would have recognized, at the start, as the most likely outcome of their efforts to resist the Bolshevik ascendancy. At the end, however, such a settlement would have been a bitter disappointment indeed. There is little question that it was British intervention that made the difference between these two outcomes; which is not to say that the British chose or even desired the second one, merely that it was within

their grasp at the end, and served their purposes well enough. Baltic independence did not require that Bolshevism be overthrown, merely that its Westward spread be halted. British power proved sufficient to vindicate this relatively limited ambition, though it took them a while to recognize those limits themselves.

It is really only after the campaign against Saint Petersburg was abandoned, and with it the policy of regime change that underlay support of the White Russians, that British support for Baltic nationalism became, for the first time, a natural and coherent policy—one that would help secure Europe against the Westward spread of Bolshevism, and also draw a line under British intervention against Lenin's government, by depriving his White Russian opponents of the essential base from which St. Petersburg might be attacked in the future. Britain's decision to urge the Baltic states to make peace with the Bolsheviks effectively neutralized the Baltic with respect to Russia's larger quarrel with the West, and proved to be the first step toward the *de facto* normalization of relations between Britain and Russia that would follow a little over a year later; the ultimate pay-off for the Baltic Patrol's efforts. Its exploits may appear to be no more than a characteristic example of an old-hand maritime power seizing an opportunity to fish in trouble waters. That is a fair description of how the operation began. At the end, however, it had evolved into a kind of live-fire exploration of how far the British were prepared to go in their opposition to the Revolution. Whether they might have discovered that limit some other way is a good question; but it seems clear that they did in fact discover it by virtue of their intervention in the Baltic.

¹ On the operations conducted by the Baltic Patrol see Edgar Anderson, "An Undeclared Naval War: The British-Soviet Naval Struggle in the Baltic, 1918-1920," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 22, number 1 (April, 1962), 43-78; Geoffrey Bennett, *Cowan's War: The Story of British Naval Operations in the Baltic, 1918-1920* (London: Collins, 1964); and William A. Fletcher, "The British Navy in the Baltic, 1918-1920: Its Contribution to the Independence of the Baltic Nations," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 7, number 2 (1976): 134-44. On the politics surrounding those operations see Stanley W. Page, *The Formation of the Baltic States: A Study of the Effects of Great Power Politics upon the Emergence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959); Georg von Rauch, *Die Geschichte der baltischen Staaten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970); and Richard H. Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1917-1921*, 3 volumes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961-1973). There is an interesting, brief discussion of the Patrol's activities as exemplify the limited use of naval force in James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919-*

1991: *Political Applications of Limited Naval Force*, 3rd ed., rev. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 46-51.

² Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 47.

³ Anderson, "Undeclared Naval War," 43.

⁴ A six-inch naval gun of this period had a maximum range of about nineteen kilometers, and fired a shell weighing 45 kilos. The most distant targets bombarded by the Patrol, prior to its assault on Kronstadt in the summer of 1919 (by which point a ship mounting heavier guns had arrived) were in the western outskirts of Riga.

⁵ Bennett, *Cowan's War*, 144-45.

⁶ Anderson, "Undeclared Naval War," 44.

⁷ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations*, 2: 281.

⁸ Fletcher, "The British Navy in the Baltic," 137.

⁹ Quoted in the London *Times*, Obituary for Brigadier Roy Hill-Smith (21 August 1996), at <http://www.curiousymbols.com/john/brig/times.html>.

¹⁰ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet Relations*, 2: 256.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 256-64.

¹² Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 49.

¹³ Von Rauch, *Geschichte*, 63.