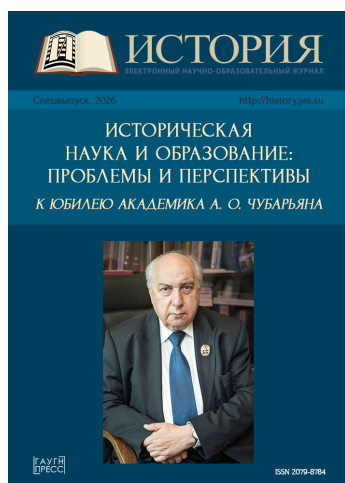




ISTORIYA. 2013-2026

ISSN 2079-8784

URL - <http://history.jes.su>

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Special Issue Volume 17 - Historical Science and Education: Problems and Prospects. To the Anniversary of Academician Aleksander Chubaryan. 2026

Failed “Finlandisation”? Stalin and Baltic States during the Second World War

Geoffrey Roberts

*University College Cork
Ireland, Cork*

Abstract

This article examines Stalin’s abortive effort in 1939—1940 to create a benign sphere of influence that would enhance both Baltic sovereignty and Soviet security. In return for acceptance of Soviet security hegemony, Stalin guaranteed the domestic sovereignty of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — a relationship akin to that between Finland and the USSR after the Second World War. Stalin’s plans were upset by the so-called ‘Winter War’ and by the stunning success of Hitler’s invasion of Western Europe in summer 1940. Stalin moved to shore up Soviet security in the Baltic area. The initial aim was to install pro-Soviet governments and enhance the Red Army’s presence in the region. But the overthrow by Moscow of the region’s authoritarian governments created internal political upheaval, which was interpreted as a revolutionary mood that warranted the incorporation of the Baltic States as socialist republics of the USSR.

Keywords list (en): USSR, Second World War, Baltic States, “Finlandisation”, Josef Stalin

Publication date: 14.10.2026

Citation link:

Roberts G. Failed “Finlandisation”? Stalin and Baltic States during the Second World War // ISTORIYA. 2026. Vol. 17. Special Issue.

URL: <https://history.jes.su/s207987840040116-6-1/> DOI: 10.18254/S207987840040116-6

Introduction

Western perceptions of Stalin's policy towards the Baltic States during the Second World War are dominated by the view that in summer 1940 the Red Army occupied Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which were then annexed and forcibly incorporated as Soviet Republics of the USSR.

² An alternative view, espoused by Soviet and part of Russian historians, is that the Baltic peoples freely joined the USSR following Moscow's overthrow of the region's reactionary, authoritarian regimes, whose governments had been conspiring to ally with Nazi Germany.

³ A third view focuses on the domestic impact of the Red Army's takeover of the Baltics, which spurred local leftist agitation for unification with the USSR — an aspiration reported and supported by radically inclined Soviet diplomats, and welcomed in Moscow as evidence of an authentic people's revolution¹.

⁴ Whatever the intrinsic merits of these differing assessments of the nature of the so-called "Baltic revolution", there is another, equally important story about Moscow's relations with its Baltic neighbours: Stalin's abortive effort in 1939—1940 to create a sphere of influence designed to enhance both Baltic sovereignty and Soviet security. As Stalin told the leader of the Communist International, Georgy Dimitrov, in October 1939: "We think we have found the right form to allow us to bring a number of countries into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. But for that we have to maintain a consistent posture, strictly observing their internal regimes and independence. We are not going to seek their sovietisation"².

⁵ After the Second World War, the type of benign sphere of influence that Stalin seems to have envisaged came to be labelled "Finlandisation" — a term denoting a small state's external security alignment with a Great Power in exchange for non-interference in its domestic affairs.

⁶ Ironically, Finland was the one Baltic country that, in 1939, actively resisted incorporation into Stalin's sphere of influence. Stalin preferred to achieve his territorial and security goals through diplomacy, but opted for military action when the Finns proved obdurate. The so-called "Winter War" was costly for both sides, but in March 1940 Helsinki signed a peace treaty that conceded the territory and military bases demanded by Stalin.

⁷ Finland sided with Nazi Germany during the Great Patriotic War, but claimed to be fighting a "Continuation War" for the recovery of its lost territories and defined itself as a "co-belligerent" rather than an ally of Hitler's. For the Soviets that was a distinction without much difference, given the extent and depth of Finnish collaboration with the Germans.

⁸ Finland surrendered in September 1944 but remained unoccupied by the Red Army. Postwar Soviet-Finnish relations were framed by the 1948 Treaty of Friendship, Co-operation and Mutual Security. During the cold war, Finland served as both a buffer and a bridging state — protected by a Soviet security guarantee but free to manage its

own internal affairs able to pursue a policy of active neutrality. The key to the success of this mutually beneficial bargain was that Stalin, and his successors as Soviet leader, trusted the Finns to insulate their domestic politics from Western interference³.

⁹ It seems that in 1939 Stalin harboured similar hopes relative to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. But, as we shall see, his calculations were upset by the war with Finland, an unexpected turn of events that led him to embrace outright territorial expansion into the Baltic States as the means to maintain Soviet security.

¹⁰

Prewar Soviet-Baltic Relations

Stalin's somewhat surprising championing of Baltic sovereignty was, in fact, a continuation of prewar Soviet diplomatic practice. As shown by Magnus Ilmjärv's voluminous researches on Baltic-Soviet relations in the 1920s and 1930s, Moscow viewed the Baltic States as weak and vulnerable to outside interference, including the danger of their becoming a platform for a military attack on the USSR⁴. The Soviets countered this threat by doing what they could to bolster Baltic independence — actions that Ilmjärv characterises as self-serving — which they undoubtedly were — but Soviet support for their sovereignty also served Baltic interests.

¹¹ Soviet security fears in the Baltic area intensified after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. During the negotiations for the so-called “Eastern Locarno” in the mid-1930s, it was the Soviets who pushed hardest for collective security guarantees of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The “sole real guardian of the independence of the Baltics”, claimed foreign commissar Maxim Litvinov in April 1934, “is the USSR”⁵.

¹² These negotiations for an East European collective security pact failed because of German and Polish opposition, but in 1939 Moscow returned to the idea of security guarantees for the Baltic States in the context of the triple alliance negotiations with Britain and France. Indeed, Baltic security was the cornerstone of Moscow's proposal for a collective security system in Europe that would contain German expansionism.

¹³ In June 1939, Litvinov's successor as foreign commissar, Vyacheslav Molotov, wrote to his ambassador in London that “The question of the three Baltic States is a question without whose satisfactory solution it would be impossible to bring the [triple alliance] negotiations to a conclusion”.

¹⁴ The problem was that the Baltic States did not want to be guaranteed against German aggression, preferring to stick to a neutral course they hoped would keep them out of the war when Hitler attacked Poland. But Molotov insisted on the guarantees and the Balts' objections were circumvented by listing them in a secret protocol attached to the proposed trilateral mutual assistance pact between Britain, France and the USSR⁶.

¹⁵ As is well-known, the triple alliance negotiations broke down in August 1939, ostensibly because the British and French were unable to guarantee their Polish ally would freely allow the Red Army to cross its territory in the event of a German attack. Moscow's demand for strategic access to Polish territory accorded fully with Soviet strategic plans for war with Germany. Less noted is that the Soviets also sought military transit rights across the Baltic States. Indeed, the contingency of a German attack on the

USSR via Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland was a dominant feature of Soviet military planning throughout the 1930s⁷.

¹⁶ While Moscow felt the Western powers were primarily responsible for securing Polish consent for the Red Army's right of passage, in 1938—1939 the Soviets themselves tried to improve their relations with Poland, latterly with a view to making the triple alliance more palatable to Warsaw. Arguably, Moscow's failure to achieve a Soviet-Polish détente was critical to the collapse of the triple alliance negotiations in August 1939⁸.

¹⁷

The Soviet-German Pact

With the failure of the triple alliance negotiations, Stalin turned to a deal with Hitler that would keep the Soviet Union out of the war when Germany invaded Poland. Famously, the secret agreement attached to the Soviet-German non-aggression treaty of 23 August 1939 augured the partition of Poland. Yet the very first clause of the protocol concerned the Baltics: "In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in the areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR".

¹⁸ What that agreement would mean in practice was initially unclear. Stalin was fixated on what would happen to Poland. It was Germany's rapid crushing of the Poles in September 1939 that prompted him to propose mutual assistance pacts to each of the Baltic States, including provisions for the establishment of Soviet military bases.

¹⁹ Lithuania had been designated part of the German sphere of influence but on 25 September Stalin and Molotov proposed to Berlin the country's transfer to the Soviet sphere. As Molotov later said to the Lithuanians: "Lithuania has a long frontier with Germany" and "was more important than either Latvia or Estonia" for Soviet security⁹.

²⁰ Reich Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop flew into Moscow on 27 September. At a meeting with him that same day Stalin and Molotov revealed their preference for a Soviet-German division of Poland along ethnographic lines *id est* a demarcation that separated ethnic Poland from the predominantly non-Polish ethnic areas bordering the USSR.

²¹ What the Soviets had in mind was a version of the so-called "Curzon line" — the ethnographic frontier between Poland and Russia envisaged by the League of Nations in 1919. That would mean territorial transfers from the Soviet sphere of influence in Poland to the Germans' sphere. In exchange, Stalin wanted Lithuania's re-allocation to the Soviet sphere.

²² With regard to the Baltic States, Stalin told Ribbentrop that Estonia had already accepted the establishment of Soviet military bases on its territory and agreed to the conclusion of a Soviet-Estonian treaty of mutual assistance. Latvia would be offered similar terms. If these were rejected by Latvia, the Red Army would "deal" with the matter.

²³ Ribbentrop asked “whether the Soviet government was thereby proposing a slow penetration of Estonia and, possibly, of Latvia. Mr Stalin replied in the affirmative, adding that the present government system in Estonia, as well as ministries and other institutions, would be left in place for a time. An analogous proposal would be made to Latvia. If Latvia opposed a pact of mutual assistance on the same conditions as Estonia, the Soviet army would quickly ‘deal’ with it. As to Lithuania, Stalin declared that should there be an appropriate agreement with Germany on an ‘exchange’ of territories, the Soviet Union would incorporate Lithuania. (In the first part of the conversation, Stalin’s intention to seize Lithuania had not been clear)”.

²⁴ At a further meeting, on 28 September, Ribbentrop asked again about Soviet intentions in the Baltic. Stalin “repeated that there was no intention so far of changing the present political and economic system in Estonia and introducing a Soviet system there. For now, the Estonian Constitution remained valid and ministries will continue to go about their business. For the time being Estonia would be free to manage her own foreign affairs”¹⁰.

²⁵

Soviet-Baltic Negotiations

Soviet moves in the Baltic had begun on 24 September with the arrival in Moscow of Karl Selter, the Estonian Foreign Minister. The visit was supposedly about trade but the Soviets switched the conversation to political matters. According to the Estonian diplomat, Voldemar Ojansoon, the talks were conducted in a “calm” atmosphere. The Soviets wanted to establish some naval bases on Estonian islands, he told the Latvian ambassador in Moscow, in return for which they would respect Estonia’s independence and protect it from communist propaganda. The Soviet proposal was by no means an ultimatum, noted Ojansoon; indeed, Selter would have accepted, but he didn’t have the authority to do so¹¹.

²⁶ Actually the conversation was more fraught than Ojansoon knew, or, perhaps, wanted to reveal.

²⁷ According to the Estonian record of the meeting with the Soviets, Molotov was brutally frank with Selter that he had no choice but to sign a mutual assistance treaty with the USSR: “You can be sure that the Soviet Union one way or another will safeguard its security. If you do not agree to our proposal, the Soviet Union would take security measures of another kind, according to its own wishes and without the agreement of Estonia”.

²⁸ Speaking softly as well as wielding a big stick, Molotov also said: “Don’t worry, the assistance agreement with the Soviet Union does not represent any threat. We do not intend to infringe your sovereignty or system of government. We do not intend to impose communism upon Estonia. We do not want to infringe the economic system of Estonia. Estonia will retain its independence, its government, parliament, foreign and internal policy, army and economic system. We won’t infringe any of these”¹².

²⁹ Molotov repeated these assurances at a second meeting that same day, pointing to further Soviet concessions: the territory of the Soviet bases would remain Estonian,

the mutual military assistance in the proposed pact would not be automatic, but on request, and only aggression in the Baltic region would call for assistance¹³.

³⁰ The Estonians returned to Tallinn for consultations and arrived back in Moscow on 27 September, armed with instructions to accept a mutual assistance treaty but to try to alleviate its terms. However, they were presented with an escalation of Soviet demands: Moscow's military bases were to be protected by 35 000 Soviet troops. At this point Stalin became involved in the negotiations and in response to Estonian protests he agreed to reduce the number of troops to 25 000 and also to the proviso that they would only remain in the country for the duration of the European war. Stalin also agreed to locate the proposed Soviet naval base at Paidiski rather than Tallinn and accepted that mutual assistance would only apply in cases of aggression by a Great Power. Stalin added his own reassuring words to those of Molotov: "Do not be afraid of these garrisons. We have assured you that the Soviet Union does not want in my way to affect Estonian sovereignty, her government, or her economic system, nor her internal life or foreign policy. We do not want to act the way Germany has in Czechoslovakia. Consequently, the Soviet troops will refrain in everything that is not in harmony with these promises"¹⁴.

³¹ The Soviet-Estonian Pact of Mutual Assistance, together with a confidential protocol on its military aspects, was signed on 28 September 1939. Among the treaty's articles was a pledge that the pact would not "to any extent whatsoever" affect Estonia's political and economic "sovereign rights".

³² It was the Latvians' turn next. A delegation headed by Latvia's foreign minister, Vilhelms Munters, arrived in Moscow on 2 October. The Latvians were presented with the same demands as the Estonians had been, and treated to a similar display of brutal frankness on the part of the Soviets. At the first meeting, on 2 October, Molotov told Munters: "We cannot permit small states to be used against the USSR. Neutral Baltic States — that is too insecure." At the same meeting, Stalin said: "I tell you frankly there has been a division into spheres of influence. When I said to the Germans we have to honour the peace agreement, their reply was that if we don't occupy you, they will. But we want no abuse"¹⁵.

³³ At a second meeting, on 3 October, Stalin told Munters: "The Germans might attack. For six years German fascists and the communists cursed each other. Now in spite of history there has been an unexpected turn, but one cannot rely upon it, We must be prepared in advance. Others, who were not ready, paid for it"¹⁶.

³⁴ The Soviet-Latvian Pact of Mutual Assistance and confidential protocol was signed on 5 October. Its terms were to all intents and purposes identical with those agreed by the Estonians.

³⁵ Negotiations with the Lithuanians were complicated by Lithuania's claim to Vilnius, seized by Poland in 1920. Moscow had long supported that Lithuanian territorial claim and since Vilnius lay within the Soviet sphere in Poland, Stalin was willing and able to transfer the city to Lithuania. However, under the terms of the secret protocol to the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty of 28 September 1939, Moscow had also agreed to transfer a strip of Lithuanian territory to Germany.

³⁶ Lithuania's foreign minister, Juozas Urbsys met Molotov and Stalin on 3 October. Molotov told him that the Germans had agreed that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were in the Soviet "zone of influence". That meant there had to be a mutual assistance pact between Lithuania and the USSR. But there would be no encroachments on Lithuania's independence, which the Soviet Union was pledge to preserve.

³⁷ When Urbsys, pushed back against transferring territory to Germany and rejected the stationing of Soviet troops in Lithuania on the grounds that the country would then, in effect, be occupied. Stalin responded that the USSR was not threatening Lithuania's independence and argued that the stationing of Soviet troops would guarantee its security. He also said that the number of troops could be reduced to 35 000 and the agreement would expire at the end of the European war¹⁷.

³⁸ Following consultations in Kaunas, Urbsys returned to Moscow on 7 October and presented a set of counter-proposals to the Soviets: There would be a mutual assistance pact but no Soviet garrisons in Lithuania. Soviet forces would only enter Lithuania in the event of an attack on the country. In the meantime various forms of military consultation and cooperation could be developed between the two states.

³⁹ Molotov rejected the Lithuanian proposals, telling Urbsys that "Lithuania should not forget under what conditions Europe is now living. The present war has just got started, and it's difficult to divine what will happen... If they are victorious the Germans could turn against the USSR, and the aims of England are not clear in the event of Germany's defeat"¹⁸.

⁴⁰ The next day, 8 October, Stalin re-joined the talks and explained to Urbsys the difference between the "German method" and the 'Bolshevik method'. If Lithuania had been in Germany's zone of influence it would be a German protectorate, whereas the Bolsheviks would protect Lithuania's independence and support its internal stability: "if the Lithuanian communists make trouble, the Soviet Union will immediately call them to order", promised Stalin.

⁴¹ But Stalin insisted on Soviet military bases in Lithuania, telling Urbsys, they were "the most precious element in the service of Lithuanian security". He appreciated there was opposition to stationing Soviet forces in Lithuania, but recalled that the recent Russo-German pact had also been unpopular with some Soviet people, until they understood its *raison d'être*¹⁹.

⁴² On 10 October the two sides re-convened and the Soviets presented their final version of the proposed treaty. Among its most notable points were the combining of the Vilnius transfer and mutual assistance treaties into one, joint defence of Lithuania's borders, including the stationing of 25 000 Soviet troops, and a strengthening of the provision concerning non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

⁴³ Thus ended the Soviet-Baltic negotiations of autumn 1939. During these talks the Soviets made plain they were fully prepared to use force to achieve their goals — a threat backed by tens of thousands of heavily armed Red Army soldiers deployed along Baltic borders²⁰. At the same time, there were no limits to the commitments Stalin and Molotov were willing to give about the continuation of capitalism and of the existing

internal regimes in the Baltic States. According to Urbsys, Stalin swore on his Bolshevik word of honour that there would be no Soviet subversion of the Baltic States²¹.

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Soviet Goals in the Baltic

Were the Soviets serious about respecting the domestic independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania?

⁴⁵ The evidence shows that until spring 1940 Soviet goals in the Baltic area were primarily geopolitical and limited to a sphere of influence based on military bases and mutual assistance pacts. While the Soviets retained the perspective of socialist revolution in the Baltic States, that was seen as a long-term project and a matter for the Balts themselves. As Stalin told the American journalist Roy Howard in 1936: "We Marxists believe that revolution will occur in other countries as well. But it will come only when it is considered possible or necessary by the revolutionaries in those countries. Export of revolution is nonsense. Each country, if it so desires, will make its own revolution, and if no such desire exists, no revolution will occur. To assert that we desire to bring about revolution in other countries by interfering with their way of life is to speak of something that does not exist, and which we have never preached"²².

⁴⁶ Even so, revolution was on the mind of some Soviet diplomats in the Baltic States, but definitely not on the agenda of their boss, Molotov, who was intent on honouring Moscow's pledges of non-intervention. On 14 October he instructed N. G. Pozdnyakov, the Soviet diplomatic representative in Lithuania: "Any approaches and contacts with left wing circles are to cease. Maintain contact only with the government and official circles, remembering always that an envoy is accredited by the government and not by anyone else"²³. On 20 October Molotov angrily telegraphed his representative in Estonia, K. N. Nikitin: "I have read the report ... on 'The Situation in Estonia' by TASS's Tallinn correspondent. From this report it is clear that the author is trying to play up harmful sentiments concerning the 'sovietisation' of Estonia. This correspondent's thoughtlessness can only play into the hands of enemies of the Soviet Union, of anti-Soviet provocateurs... [You] must remember that the USSR will honestly and punctiliously implement the mutual assistance pact and will demand the same from Estonia... The said correspondent will be recalled by TASS"²⁴.

⁴⁷ On 21 October Molotov felt moved to remind Pozdnyakov of Soviet policy: "You and all the embassy staff ... are categorically prohibited from interfering Lithuania's internal affairs... Idle chatter about the 'sovietisation' of Lithuania should be rejected as provocative and harmful"²⁵. On 23 October it was Nikitin's turn to once again suffer Molotov's wrath: "You do not understand our policy in Estonia in connection with the Soviet-Estonian pact of mutual assistance ... you have been carried away by the mood favouring Estonia's 'sovietisation', which at root contradicts our policy. You must finally understand that any encouragement of this mood concerning the 'sovietisation' of Estonia or even mere non-resistance to this mood plays into the hands of our enemies"²⁶.

⁴⁸ Molotov spelt out the same message in his speech to the Supreme Soviet on 31 October 1939: "These mutual assistance pacts in no way imply any interference by the Soviet Union in the affairs of Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. On the contrary, all

these pacts strictly stipulate the inviolability of the sovereignty of the signatory states and the principle of non-interference in each other's affairs. They are based on mutual respect for the political, social and economic structure of the contracting parties and are designed to strengthen the foundations for peaceful neighbourly co-operation between our peoples”²⁷.

⁴⁹ Molotov's instructions to his diplomats were paralleled by those from defence commissar, Kliment Voroshilov, to Soviet armed forces stationed in the Baltic States. On 25 October the following order was issued to units in Estonia: “The treaty of mutual assistance with Estonia is bound to assure durable peace in the Baltic area, security for both Estonia and the Soviet Union. All our units must understand that in accordance with the pact on mutual assistance, they will be quartered and will live on the territory of a sovereign state, and they have no right to interfere in its political affairs and social system. All kinds of anti-Soviet provocateurs will try to present the stationing of our units in Estonia as the beginning of its ‘sovietisation’. These and similar sentiments and talk about sovietisation of Estonia contradict conflict the policy of our party and government...The Soviet Union will honour and punctiliously implement the pact of mutual assistance and expects Estonia to do the same... Talk about ‘sovietisation’ must cease...it plays into the hands of the enemies of the Soviet Union and Estonia”²⁸.

⁵⁰ Similar orders were issued to Soviet forces serving in Latvia and Lithuania²⁹.

⁵¹ From Moscow’s point of view, Soviet policy towards the Baltic States was a model of propriety. There was no meddling in Baltic politics by either Soviet diplomats or the Red Army. There was no encouragement of the pro-Soviet left in the Baltics. Moscow turned a deaf ear to leftist agitation for Vilnius to remain under Soviet control and made no protest when a number of Lithuanian communists were arrested and imprisoned. In terms of inter-state relations, Moscow made no further demands, save for the signature of trade treaties. According to the Baltic-American historian, A. N. Tarulis, “despite the lack of freedom of decisions in many a field of domestic and foreign policies, the Baltic States, in the Spring of 1940, outwardly remained independent. They could by no means be considered as Soviet-occupied countries”³⁰.

⁵² In early summer 1940, however, Moscow's policy in the Baltic States underwent a sudden, dramatic and radical change. In rapid succession the governments of the Baltic States were toppled, the countries occupied militarily, pro-Soviet regimes installed and then incorporated into the USSR. This period of upheaval and transformation lasted less than 12 weeks.

⁵³

Impact of the Winter War

At the root of this abrupt policy turn were the reverberations of the war with Finland. The Red Army’s invasion generated a wave of international sympathy for the embattled Finns, not least in the Baltic States, where hopes were high that Finland would be able to resist the Soviet onslaught. The initial failure of the Red Army’s attack on Finland damaged the USSR’s reputation as a Great Power and encouraged talk of a German comeback in the Baltic States.

⁵⁴ “In the world press there is unfolding an orchestrated campaign of attack against the USSR”, complained Stalin to the chief of Estonia’s armed forces in December 1939, “which is accused of carrying out an imperialist expansion policy... Widespread rumours allege that the Soviet Union in its negotiations with Britain and France required for itself the right to seize Finland, Estonia and Latvia”³¹.

⁵⁵ Towards the end of December, Moscow’s *polpred* in Riga, I. S. Zotov, reported that the Latvian leadership did not view its agreement with the Soviet Union as an “act of friendship and mutual aid, but as a means to escape the clutches of an aggressor... Ruling circles have repeatedly revealed themselves as sworn enemies of the USSR. Their conduct and views in relation to the Finnish events show the extent of their hostility to the Soviet Union”³².

⁵⁶ Zotov’s missive was one of a number of disquieting communications from Soviet embassies in the Baltic States that reported growing anti-Soviet sentiment, nationalist intrigues against the USSR, and hopes in ruling circles that changes in the international situation would facilitate their freedom of manoeuvre³³.

⁵⁷ Soviet intelligence operatives in the Baltics were reporting much the same thing. In March 1940 the NKVD *resident* in Tallinn noted Estonian expectations that sooner or later the Soviets would seek to curtail Estonia’s independence. In response, the Estonians were busy promoting nationalist ideology, impeding the use of the Russian language and the spread of Soviet culture and disseminating disinformation about bad behaviour by Red Army personnel³⁴.

⁵⁸ When the Winter War ended in March 1940, the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian foreign ministers convened in Riga for the 11th conference of the Baltic Entente — the first such meeting in nearly a year — where they reasserted their neutrality and made clear their determination to defend their countries’ independence³⁵.

⁵⁹ Publicly, Moscow was still sanguine about Soviet-Baltic relations. “Our experience during the six months that have elapsed since these Pacts of Mutual Assistance were concluded has enabled us to draw very definite positive conclusions concerning these treaties with the Baltic countries”, reported Molotov to the Supreme Soviet on 31 March. “The Pacts with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are being carried out in a satisfactory manner and this creates premises for a further improvement in relations between the Soviet Union and these countries”³⁶.

⁶⁰ The international situation was freighted with danger, however. The Red Army had forced the Finns to their knees, but the threatened intervention of an Anglo-French expeditionary force prompted Stalin to seek an early peace and a deal that gained territory and military bases but precluded regime-change in Helsinki.

⁶¹ The main strategic aim of the projected Anglo-French intervention in the Winter War was to seize control of Sweden’s iron ore fields en route to Finland. Since the Germans could not allow such a vital resource to come under enemy control, they would inevitably mount a counter-intervention and the European war would spread to Scandinavia and — in all likelihood — engulf the Soviet Union as well.

⁶² Stalin’s peace with the Finns saved Sweden from Anglo-French invasion but not Denmark and Norway, which Germany pre-emptively occupied in April 1940, fearing

British and French blockage of its Swedish iron ore imports. Then, in May, Hitler invaded Belgium, France and the Netherlands. By mid-June the British Expeditionary Force had fled the continent and France was on the verge of surrender.

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Occupation and Incorporation

Against this backdrop, Stalin hardened Soviet policy towards the Baltic States. The pretext was provided by a telegram from the Soviet embassy in Lithuania on 24 May about the recent disappearance of two Soviet soldiers. In a diplomatic note the next day, Moscow accusing the Lithuanian authorities of aiding those who enticed Red Army soldiers to desert and demanded the immediate return of the disappearers. The Lithuanians denied Moscow's allegations and offered to cooperate with Soviet authorities in securing the return of any missing soldiers³⁷.

⁶⁴ To defuse the row the Lithuanians sent a delegation to Moscow to negotiate directly with Molotov. Headed by Prime Minister Antanas Merkys, the delegation arrived in Moscow on 6 June and had its first meeting with Molotov the next day. At this meeting and at further conferences on 9 and 11 June the Lithuanians discovered that Moscow's dissatisfaction went far beyond the issue of the harassment of Soviet forces in Lithuania. They found themselves accused of general anti-Sovietism, of anti-working-class activities and, most crucially, of being the organizers of a secret Baltic military alliance directed against the USSR. Lithuanian denials, protests and reassurances were summarily rejected by Molotov³⁸.

⁶⁵ However spurious these charges may have been, they fitted in with what Moscow's diplomats and intelligence officers had been saying for months and were in line with the latest batch of alarmist reports from Soviet officials in the Baltic States that had arrived in Moscow in early June. Of particular importance may have been a lengthy letter from a senior TASS correspondent on 2 June that attacked the Baltic Entente as a front for an anti-Soviet conspiracy³⁹.

⁶⁶ By mid-June the Soviets were poised for action in the Baltic States. But what kind of action? On 14 June Molotov cabled a briefing note to his envoys in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, informing them that the Baltic Entente had developed into a military alliance directed against the USSR⁴⁰. That same day Molotov met Urbsys and issued him an ultimatum demanding the formation of a new, pro-Soviet government in Lithuania and the opening of Lithuania's frontiers to allow military occupation of major population centres. The stated rationale for the ultimatum was breaches of the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance treaty, namely the abduction of Soviet service men and the transformation of the Baltic Entente into an anti-Soviet military alliance. When Urbsys asked if these additional Soviet forces would interfere with Lithuania's domestic affairs, Molotov replied in the negative but added that since Moscow was pro-Lithuania it expected the new Lithuanian government to be pro-Soviet. When Urbsys enquired about the composition of the new government, Molotov said that was difficult to say who should serve in it, but it had to honestly, completely and actively implement the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual defence agreement⁴¹.

⁶⁷ Lithuania soon caved into the Soviet demands and within hours the country was under Soviet military occupation. Similar ultimatums were given to Estonia and Latvia on 16 June. The countries' two governments resigned and Soviet forces occupied Estonia and Latvia the next day⁴².

⁶⁸ To oversee regime-change, Moscow dispatched special emissaries to each of the Baltic states — to Estonia went Leningrad party secretary, Andrey Zhdanov, to Latvia and Lithuania went, respectively, deputy foreign commissars Andrey Vyshinsky and Vladimir Dekanozov. It is evident from their initial reports to Moscow that they had no precise instructions, apart from securing the appointment of governments that would comply with Soviet wishes⁴³.

⁶⁹ On 17 June Comintern leader Georgy Dimitrov radioed the Lithuanian Communist Party that “for the time being, the programme of the Communist activity should not exceed the tasks and principles of people's democracy [and] the establishment of the people's democratic government”. Dimitrov also said that “immediate participation of Communists in this government was not expedient”⁴⁴.

⁷⁰ Dimitrov's use of the terms “people's democracy” and “people's democratic government” had two sets of connotation. Firstly, a harking back to the Comintern's popular front policy in the 1930s. Dimitrov's aim then had been broad anti-fascist unity and progressive left-wing regimes, such as the popular front governments that came to power in Spain and France in 1936. Secondly, there was the so-called “People's Government of Finland” headed by the Finnish communist, Otto Kuusinen. In effect, the Kuusinen government was a puppet government-in-waiting ready to take charge of the country when the Helsinki regime collapsed as a result of the Red Army's invasion. As Stalin told Dimitrov in January 1940: “World revolution as a single act is nonsense. It transpires at different times in different countries. The Red Army's activities [in Finland] are also a matter of world revolution”. However, in the same conversation Stalin also said: “we have no desire for Finland's territory. But Finland should be a state that is friendly to the Soviet Union”⁴⁵.

⁷¹ Initially, it seemed the Soviets would settle for popular front regimes in the Baltics: the new governments, selected and sanctioned by Moscow in the period 18—22 June, were composed of left-wing democrats, with very limited communist participation, and were committed only to immediate programmes of social and economic reform, including the introduction of civil and political liberties.

⁷² But July saw a further radicalisation of Soviet policy when elections to new people's assemblies were held. The only permitted candidates were those supporting the new Baltic governments and standing under the auspices of communist-led popular alliances of the left. When these people's assemblies met they voted to request admission to the USSR — a request that was duly granted by the Supreme Soviet in early August.

⁷³ It seems clear that Stalin's takeover on the Baltic States in summer 1940 was prompted by Soviet security concerns. But why was sovietisation and incorporation also deemed necessary? True, there was the precedent of Eastern Poland's sovietisation in autumn 1939 and the incorporation of Western Belorussia and Western Ukraine into their respective Soviet republics. But Stalin had never claimed the territory of the Baltic

States, nor given any sign he was contemplating the creation of three completely new Soviet Socialist Republics.

⁷⁴ The answer lies, perhaps, in the enthusiastic reports home of Soviet representatives in the Baltic States, which painted a picture of mass demonstrations against the old regime, of enthusiastic welcomes for the liberators of the Red Army, of paeans of praise for Stalin and other Soviet leaders, of agitation for sovietisation, and of popular demands that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania become Republics of the USSR⁴⁶.

⁷⁵ In embracing incorporation and sovietisation Moscow was responding to the perceived mood and movement in the Baltic States. The Soviet overthrow of the authoritarian regimes sparked internal political upheavals in all three countries — which convinced Moscow's emissaries and representatives that a socialist revolution was sweeping the Baltic area. Soviet leaders in Moscow, it seems, shared the revolutionary dreams and of Soviet diplomats, local communists, and militant workers, intellectuals and dissatisfied ethnic groups in the Baltic States agitating for radical change.

⁷⁶ The ecstatic mood in Moscow was captured by Molotov's remarks to the new Lithuanian foreign minister, Vincas Kreve-Mickevicius, in early July 1940: "Your Lithuania along with the other Baltic nations, including Finland, will have to join the glorious family of the Soviet Union. Therefore you should begin now to initiate your people into the Soviet system, which in the future shall reign everywhere, throughout all Europe".

⁷⁷ Since Molotov's words are those recalled by Kreve-Mickevicius in his testimony to a postwar US congressional committee on communist aggression, it is reasonable to assume a degree of politically driven hyperbole, but there is documentary evidence that Molotov was saying similar things at the time i.e. that the Soviet Union was planning to incorporate Lithuania into the USSR⁴⁷.

⁷⁸ Moscow had good *raison d'état* for going with the grain of the aforesaid radicalism in the Baltic States. Sovietisation was seen as the best guarantee that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania would remain firmly in Moscow's grip. That same pattern repeated itself after World War II, when — in the context of the incipient cold war — Stalin decided that Central and Eastern Europe should come under communist control, thereby creating a geo-ideological Soviet sphere of influence⁴⁸.

⁷⁹ **Conclusion** Moscow's initial goal in 1939—1940 was to draw Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania into its sphere of influence. There is no evidence that Moscow had any plans to Sovietise the Baltic States and it made plain the limits of its ambitions both to Baltic leaders and its own diplomats, who tended towards the advocacy of a more radical policy.

⁸⁰ The so-called "Baltic conspiracy" may have been exaggerated, or even a myth, but Moscow's belief that the Baltics were lining themselves up militarily against the USSR had a powerful impact on its perception of the situation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Soviet fears were compounded by the difficulties and dangers posed by the war with Finland and fed by a stream of alarming reports from Moscow's messages from Soviet intelligence officers and diplomats about anti-Soviet machinations in the Baltic States.

⁸¹ Spurred to action by Hitler's crushing defeat of France, Moscow moved to shore up its military-political position in the Baltic. Initially, the aim was simply to install pro-Soviet governments and to increase the Soviet military presence in the region. However the overthrow of the authoritarian governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania created internal public upheavals that Moscow's representatives on the ground enthusiastically interpreted as a revolutionary situation. Itself carried along by the tide of events, Moscow decided to Sovietise and incorporate the Baltic States into the USSR.

⁸² The Soviet takeover of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in summer 1940 likely made little or no difference to the course of Germany's invasion of the Baltic coastal lands a year later. However, had Stalin persevered with his proto-Finlandisation policy, it might have led to less Baltic nationalist collaboration with the Nazis and more support for the Soviets when the Red Army returned in 1944—1945. In that scenario, the Baltic States may well have regained their domestic sovereignty and independence and, like Finland, enjoyed the postwar benefits of friendly relations with the Soviet Union. In due course, a new term to describe benign spheres of influence might have entered the international political lexicon — "Balticisation".

Remarks:

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Failed “Finlandisation”? Stalin and Baltic States during the Second World War

Робертс Джеффри

Университетский колледж Корка

Ирландия, Корк

Аннотация

This article examines Stalin’s abortive effort in 1939—1940 to create a benign sphere of influence that would enhance both Baltic sovereignty and Soviet security. In return for acceptance of Soviet security hegemony, Stalin guaranteed the domestic sovereignty of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — a relationship akin to that between Finland and the USSR after the Second World War. Stalin’s plans were upset by the so-called ‘Winter War’ and by the stunning success of Hitler’s invasion of Western Europe in summer 1940. Stalin moved to shore up Soviet security in the Baltic area. The initial aim was to install pro-Soviet governments and enhance the Red Army’s presence in the region. But the overthrow by Moscow of the region’s authoritarian governments created internal political upheaval, which was interpreted as a revolutionary mood that warranted the incorporation of the Baltic States as socialist republics of the USSR.

Ключевые слова: USSR, Second World War, Baltic States, “Finlandisation”, Josef Stalin

Дата публикации: 14.10.2026

Ссылка для цитирования:

Робертс Д. Failed “Finlandisation”? Stalin and Baltic States during the Second World War // Электронный научно-образовательный журнал «История». 2026. Т. 17. Специальный выпуск. URL: <https://history.jes.su/s207987840040116-6-1/> DOI: 10.18254/S207987840040116-6