

The Disappearance of Baltic Germans and the Issue of Russian-Speaking Populations Ethnic Migration in 1939 and Estonia and Latvia

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Introduction

Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the military situation in Europe has changed significantly. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO is emblematic of this shift, while developments such as the strengthening of border defenses in the Baltic states and repeated airspace violations by Russian military aircraft have frequently made the news. In the Baltic states as well, preparations against Russia have continued to intensify, including the initiation of rotational troop deployments by NATO countries following the 2014 Crimea crisis.

The Baltic states are geographically surrounded by Russia (both its mainland and Kaliningrad oblast) and Belarus, and their military vulnerability has been noted since they regained independence in 1991. Although part of Lithuania¹ borders Poland, if this corridor were to be cut off, the country would effectively become isolated. Compounding these concerns is the large number of Russian-speaking people living in Latvia and Estonia. If, as in the Crimea crisis, a pro-Russian government were to be established and Russian forces were deployed to Latvia or Estonia under the pretext of responding to a request from such a puppet regime, the situation would become highly complex. Under such circumstances, it would be difficult to reach the political consensus necessary for collective defense under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The large number of Russian-speaking populations stems from the annexation of these two countries, along with Lithuania, into the Soviet Union in 1940. Behind the influx of Russian-speaking people lay the tragedy of the mass deportation of the original inhabitants to Siberia and the Far East, one of the factors behind the low level of favorable sentiment toward Russia. Meanwhile, the fact that German ethnic groups disappeared from the Baltic states during the same period is not widely known in Japan. Although this region became integrated into European history from the late twelfth century onward, for much of the several centuries that followed, it was Baltic Germans—a German ethnic group—who reigned as the ruling class in the region.

The disappearance of the Baltic Germans from the Baltic states occurred over a very short period, from October 1939 to January 1941. Regarding the reasons for this, ONODERA Yuriko wrote in her memoir that

they were “ordered to repatriate to Germany immediately.”² Onodera, a renowned translator known for her translations of works such as Finnish author Tove Jansson’s *Moomin* series, was in Sweden during the Second World War accompanying her husband, ONODERA Makoto, who served as a military attaché, and assisted in his duties. They had also been in Latvia for his service prior to the outbreak of World War II, and she should have been well acquainted with local conditions. Nevertheless, this description that they were “ordered” to leave raises questions. Legally, the Baltic Germans were citizens of Latvia and Estonia, so on what basis could the German government issue such an order?

In addition to addressing this question, this paper provides an overview of the history of Latvia and Estonia and examines the sequence through which the present situation emerged. In Japan, there was an incident in 2022 in which the Baltic states were described in the media as “former Soviet countries,” prompting a protest from the Embassy of Estonia in Japan. The embassy asserted that the term “former Soviet countries” is historically and legally inaccurate and that the Baltic states are not successor states to the Soviet Union.³ This stance reflects a strong aversion to the Soviet Union, despite the large number of Russian-speaking people in Estonia. This paper seeks to clarify the relationship between the issue of Russian-speaking populations and the historical developments that gave rise to the current situation.

Historical Background: The Northern Crusades, the Battle of Tannenberg, and the Great Northern War

From a historical perspective, the Baltic states were among the regions in Europe that were relatively late to undergo Christianization. While Kyivan Rus—considered the root of modern Ukraine and Russia—adopted Christianity as its state religion at the end of the 10th century, “pagan” beliefs were still practiced in the Baltic region even into the 12th century. This religion appears to have been a form of polytheism centered on nature worship and animistic beliefs, though its details remain unclear due to the lack of surviving written materials. During this period, enthusiasm for crusades was growing within the Christian world. However, this was not limited to Jerusalem; the Baltic region, with its large non-Christian population, also became a target. During the Second Crusade, German nobles preferred launching expeditions to the nearby Baltic region rather than traveling to distant Jerusalem. The Baltic region offered lower expedition costs and the possibility of acquiring economically valuable territory. If the religious prestige associated with crusading could be considered equivalent to that of campaigns in Jerusalem, then such a choice would have been a rational one. The campaign carried out in 1147 is known as the Wendish Crusade. Unfortunately for the participating nobles, it ended without any particularly notable achievements.⁴ Around this same period, the city of Lübeck (in present-day Germany) was founded in the southwestern Baltic Sea region. Lübeck would later prosper greatly as the leading city of the Hanseatic League.

Among the Northern Crusades, the particularly well-known Teutonic Order⁵ was formally organized as

a military religious order in 1198. Such orders combined the religious mission of monastic life with the military role of knighthood. From 1225 onward, the Teutonic Order advanced into the Prussian region along the southern coast of the Baltic Sea (Preußen, in what is now northern Poland).⁶ There, the Order expelled non-Christians while advancing eastward colonization.

Meanwhile, the Northern Crusades in what are now Estonia and Latvia were initially led by another military religious order known as the Livonian Brothers of the Sword. This order was founded in 1202 by Albert von Buxhoeveden and was composed primarily of second- and third-born sons of lower-ranking nobility from northern Germany. The term "Livonia" refers to a region encompassing most of present-day Latvia and southern Estonia (see Figure 1). Based in Riga, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword expanded their control across the Livonian region.

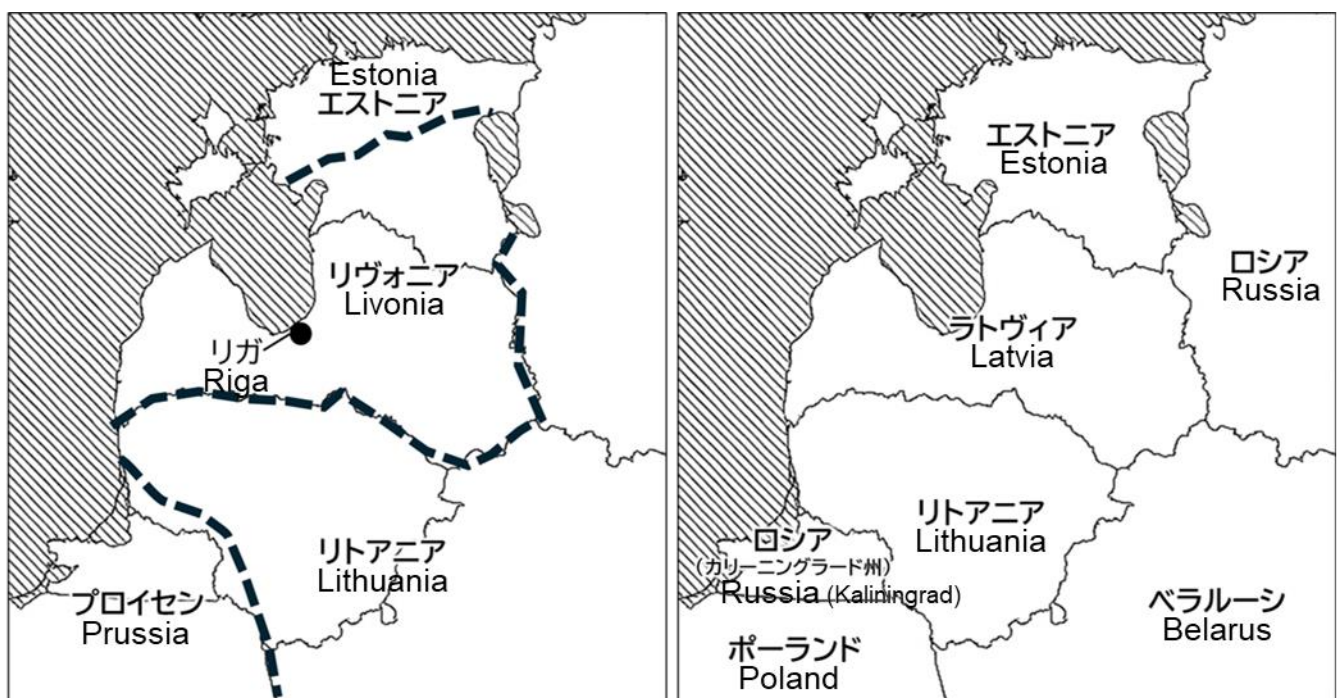


Figure 1. Extent of Livonia and surrounding place names Figure 2. Current national borders (for reference)
 Created with reference to YAMANOUCI Susumu, *Kita no Jujūgun* [The Northern Crusades] (Kodansha, 1997), 109.
 *Solid lines indicate current national borders

The Livonian Brothers of the Sword extended their campaigns of conquest further south, and in 1236, following a papal bull issued by Pope Gregory IX proclaiming a crusade against Lithuania,⁷ they launched a full-scale invasion. However, at Saule (in present-day northwestern Lithuania), the order was defeated by local forces and annihilated. As this defeat wiped out key figures, including the grand master, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword were dissolved and, in the following year (1237), reorganized as the Livonian Order under the authority of the Teutonic Order. In 1242, the order attempted further eastward expansion and invaded Novgorod (in present-day Russia), but was repelled by Prince Alexander Nevsky of Novgorod. This so-called "Battle on the Ice" is also well known through the film *Alexander Nevsky* directed by Sergei Eisenstein.

In this way, the territories of the Teutonic Order expanded into the regions of present-day Estonia and Latvia. Meanwhile, Lithuania had undergone Christianization and formed a personal union with Poland, meaning that the Teutonic Order's original role of subjugating pagans had largely come to an end. Nevertheless, conflict between the Teutonic Order and Poland–Lithuania continued over control of trade routes and territorial expansion. In 1410, King Władysław II of Poland and Grand Duke Vytautas⁸ of Lithuania launched an invasion, and the Teutonic Order, which opposed them, was defeated. As a result of this clash—known as the Battle of Tannenberg—the Teutonic Order was significantly weakened and entered a steady decline. Eventually, in 1525, its lands were secularized into the Duchy of Prussia, under Polish suzerainty.⁹ Meanwhile, Poland–Lithuania went on to reach its peak after this period.

Although the Livonian Order continued to exist after the Teutonic Order lands became the Duchy of Prussia, it was defeated by Russia in 1561 and subsequently dissolved. This conflict, known as the Livonian War, also involved intervention by Sweden and Poland–Lithuania, resulting in Livonia and Estonia coming under Swedish control. In the early 18th century, the Great Northern War broke out between Russia and Sweden, and as a result, Livonia and Estonia became part of the Russian Empire as the “Baltic provinces.” At that time, the population of these provinces had declined due to war, famine, and other factors, creating room for an increase in the Russian population.

In addition, as a result of the three partitions of Poland–Lithuania, parts of Lithuania were incorporated into Prussia, while the remaining territories became part of the Russian Empire. The Baltic states would not achieve independence until the end of World War I.

Baltic Germans in the Russian Empire

Even after the Baltic provinces became part of the Russian Empire, the Baltic Germans—descendants of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword—continued to serve as the ruling elite in Estonia and Latvia. Within the Russian Empire, the Baltic provinces were relatively advanced and had high levels of education, frequently producing individuals who played prominent roles in the imperial center. Notable examples include Michael Barclay de Tolly and Friedrich Wilhelm von Buxhoeveden during the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁰ Barclay served as commander-in-chief of the Russian army when Napoleon launched his invasion of Russia in 1812 and is known for implementing a scorched-earth strategy. His passive approach to war fell out of favor with the emperor and led to his dismissal, resulting in him being less well known and less highly regarded than his successor, Mikhail Kutuzov. Kutuzov in fact followed Barclay's strategy and continued the scorched-earth policy, ultimately forcing Napoleon into retreat. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Barclay was one of the key figures responsible for Napoleon's defeat. Buxhoeveden, although one of those held responsible for the defeat at Austerlitz, later restored his reputation in the war against Sweden. Another Baltic German from Estonia was Paul von Rennenkampf, who took part in battles such as the Battle of Mukden during the Russo-Japanese War. Rennenkampf is also known as the commander of the First

Army, which suffered defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg in the early stages of World War I. Beyond military personnel, it is said that Baltic Germans accounted for roughly one-eighth of the high-ranking officials in the Russian Empire until its collapse in 1917. This was largely due to Peter the Great's desire for capable administrators well versed in the latest European knowledge.

In the 19th century, national consciousness began to awaken in this region, which had been treated within the empire as the "Baltic provinces." Instead of identification based on individual provinces, a new concept—"Latvia"—emerged, referring to the area inhabited by speakers of the same language, grounded in linguistic commonality and Catholic faith. Subsequently, national epics were created in both Latvia and Estonia. At the same time, the historical view that "civilization had been brought to the Baltic region—once undeveloped and barbaric—by the Northern Crusades" began to be reassessed. Inequalities under the system of serfdom were gradually improved, and in urban areas a new municipal law was introduced in 1877. Although property limitations remained, it significantly expanded suffrage, thereby undermining the political base of the Baltic Germans, whose support base was narrow despite their wealth.

In 1917, the Russian Empire collapsed, and following a period of German occupation, the Baltic states achieved independence in 1918. Although there were subsequent incursions by the Soviet Red Army after Germany's surrender, independence was maintained with support from Britain and others. Political power shifted from the Baltic Germans to Latvians and Estonians, and land redistribution was carried out. As a result, the number of middle-class farmers increased, and the Baltic Germans fell from being a ruling elite to a mere ethnic minority, though they still remained relatively affluent.

The German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the Repatriation of Ethnic Germans

The factor that decisively shaped the subsequent fate of the Baltic Germans was the secret protocol attached to the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939. The sequence of events was as follows. Firstly, on August 23, 1939, the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact was concluded. Having thereby neutralized, for the time being, the threat posed by the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany invaded Poland on September 1. Two weeks after the German invasion, the Soviet Union also launched its invasion of Poland, and on September 28, the defenders of Warsaw surrendered, leading to the conclusion of the German–Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty. The secret protocol appended to the German–Soviet Nonaggression Pact stipulated the partition of Poland and the delineation of Soviet spheres of influence. As of August 1939, the boundary line had been drawn along the northern edge of Lithuania, placing only Estonia and Latvia within the Soviet sphere. However, upon the conclusion of the Boundary and Friendship Treaty, the secret protocol was revised, and Lithuania was also incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence.

Immediately thereafter, a repatriation program for ethnic Germans, including the Baltic Germans, was initiated. Ethnic Germans lived not only in the Baltic region but in various parts of Europe, and the term refers collectively to these populations. The presence of ethnic Germans within the Soviet sphere could have posed a future diplomatic obstacle, and there also appears to have been an intention to gather Germans as a source of labor and military manpower. Professor TAKEI Ayaka has characterized this repatriation program as “a de facto forced migration.”¹¹

Nazi Germany concluded agreements with the governments of countries where ethnic Germans resided regarding their repatriation (resettlement). Under these agreements, migration was not formally compulsory and was, in principle, left to individual free will. However, the period allowed for relocation was short, and after that, the rights previously granted to them as an ethnic group would be revoked. Furthermore, if their areas of residence came under Soviet control, there was a risk that Soviet authorities would regard them as collaborators with Germany. As a result, those concerned had little time to deliberate.¹² Other factors have also been noted, such as sympathy with Nazi ideology and expectations of enjoying prosperity and security under German rule. Under these circumstances, although the repatriation program was not a legal order, the surrounding social and political conditions effectively deprived individuals of any real choice. From the perspective of those involved, it was tantamount to a command. Accordingly, the description by ONODERA Yuriko mentioned at the beginning of this paper of being “ordered to repatriate to Germany immediately” can be regarded as an accurate portrayal that captures the atmosphere experienced by those involved.

Although it was termed a “repatriation” program, most Baltic Germans were not sent to Germany proper; instead, the majority were relocated to western Poland. As noted earlier, Poland had been partitioned by Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1939, and the repatriation program began as early as the following month, in October. It is difficult to imagine that adequate preparations had been made at the resettlement sites within this short period. On this point, Takei also notes that “the promised farmland and housing were not sufficiently provided.”¹³ Following Germany’s defeat in 1945, the Baltic Germans were expelled from Poland as well, thus facing a harsh fate. However, because they were categorized as “Germans,” they have rarely attracted attention as victims of the war. Ultimately, just under 60,000 Baltic Germans from Latvia and approximately 20,000 from Estonia left the Baltic region through the repatriation program.¹⁴ As for the real estate and other property left behind by the Baltic Germans, it was to be liquidated by the German Resettlement Trustee Company (Deutsche Umsiedlungs-Treuhand-Gesellschaft m.b.H., DUT). However, due to the disruption caused by the war, this process was not carried out as planned, and the assets were ultimately confiscated by the Soviet Union (more precisely, by the constituent republics of Latvia and Estonia).

Subsequent Impacts

In the 1930s, the proportions of German and Russian populations in Latvia and Estonia were as follows. In Latvia, Germans accounted for 3.2% and Russians for 10.6%, while in Estonia, Germans accounted for 1.5% and Russians for 8.5%. Even at that time, the Russian population was larger, and Baltic Germans constituted only a minority.¹⁵ However, despite their small numbers, the Baltic Germans were a wealthy class, and their disappearance had an impact that far exceeded what the figures alone might suggest. The loss of many property owners made it easier for settlers from other regions to move in. At the same time, forced deportations of Latvians and Estonians were carried out by Soviet authorities, while Russian-speaking populations were resettled in their place, further increasing their proportion. Against this background, after regaining independence from the Soviet Union, Latvia and Estonia adopted strict policies under which individuals who had migrated from other parts of the Soviet Union after June 1940, when Soviet occupation is considered to have begun, and their descendants were not automatically granted citizenship.¹⁶ As a result, a large number of non-citizens emerged in both countries.

This policy was unacceptable to Russia. At the time, negotiations were underway regarding the withdrawal of Russian troops stationed in the region, but President Boris Yeltsin temporarily halted the withdrawal, citing “deep concern” over the treatment of Russian-speaking residents. Furthermore, tensions escalated when attempts were made to assign a new role to the stationed Russian forces as peacekeeping units. As a result, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)¹⁷ intervened in Latvia and Estonia. The OSCE mission recommended that both countries relax their naturalization criteria and foreign resident registration requirements to levels comparable to those of EU member states. The governments of both countries subsequently revised their domestic laws largely in line with these recommendations, and tensions were alleviated to some extent.¹⁸ The OSCE missions continued until 1998 in Latvia and until the end of 2001 in Estonia.¹⁹

Today, Russian-speaking residents are gradually being integrated as citizens of Latvia and Estonia. Nevertheless, even in 2017, more than a quarter century after the restoration of independence, the population ratios remained significant. In Latvia, ethnic Latvians accounted for 62.0% and Russian-speaking residents for 25.4%, while in Estonia, ethnic Estonians accounted for 68.7% and Russian-speaking residents for 25.0%.²⁰ Moreover, treatment of Russian nationals has become even stricter following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Recently, in October 2025, the Latvian government ordered the deportation of 841 Russian nationals residing in the country. The reason given was their failure to meet Latvian language proficiency requirements and to pass mandatory security screenings.²¹

The “historical rupture” represented by the disappearance of the Baltic Germans was closely intertwined with the subsequent large-scale settlement of Russian-speaking populations. The word “order,” as recorded in the memoirs of ONODERA Yuriko, aptly captures the urgent reality of people whose livelihoods were stripped away overnight by the ambitions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The secret agreements between the two powers brought about a dramatic transformation in the region’s

demographic composition, forming a deep underlying cause of the issues surrounding Russian-speaking populations in present-day Latvia and Estonia, and, by extension, their tense relations with Russia. Even more than 30 years after the restoration of independence, the demographic structure continues to be perceived as a source of vulnerability in terms of security.

¹ Known as the Suwałki Gap.

² ONODERA Yuriko, *Barutokai no Hotori nite: Bukan no Tsuma no Daitoa Senso* [At the Banks of the Baltic Sea: The Great East Asia War of an Attaché's Wife] (Kyodo News, 1985), 60–64.

³ "TBS ni Esutonia taishikan ga kogi "kyu Sobieta no kuni to yobu no wa yamete moraemasu?" [The Estonian Embassy protests TBS: "Could you please stop calling Estonia a former soviet country?"] *Tokyo Sports Web*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.tokyo-sports.co.jp/articles/-/156593>.

⁴ YAMANOUCHI Susumu, *Kita no Jujigun* [The Northern Crusades] (Kodansha, 1997), 77–91.

⁵ The Teutonic Order is counted among the three major military orders alongside the Knights Templar and the Knights Hospitaller.

⁶ Yamanouchi, *Kita no Jujigun*, 153–159.

⁷ At this point in time, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania had not yet adopted Christianity. Grand Duke Mindaugas converted to Christianity during this period, but he was assassinated amid opposition, and his religious stance was not carried forward. The Christianization of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania took place in 1387.

⁸ In 1401, he was granted the title of Grand Duke of Lithuania by Władysław II (Jogaila).

⁹ The Duchy of Prussia later expanded its power as the Kingdom of Prussia and ultimately achieved the unification of Germany in the 19th century.

¹⁰ Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, translated by KOMORI Hiromi and SHIGEMATSU Hisashi (Akashi Shoten, 2014), 120. Note that Barclay was a descendant of a noble family that had migrated from Scotland to Riga.

¹¹ TAKEI Ayaka, "Kyosei iju to zaisan iten — minzoku Doitsujin no "kikan jigyo" o rei ni" [Forced migration and property transfers: The 'repatriation' of ethnic Germans], *Study of Modern History*, no. 60 (2014): 1–19.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 195.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Until December 1994, it was known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

¹⁸ NAKANO Junya, "Roshia no OSCE seisaku no henshen to sono yoin" [The evolution of Russia's OSCE policy and its factors], *Gaimusho Chosa Geppo* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Research Bulletin], no. 3 (January 2006): 35–57.

¹⁹ Mark Kramer, "NATO, the Baltic States and Russia: A Framework for Sustainable Enlargement," *International Affairs* 78, no. 4, (October 2002), 731–756.

²⁰ Horiguchi Daiki, "Intabyu chosa ni motozuita Baruto sangoku no Roshia-go kei jumin no gengo jokyo no kosatsu" [An analysis of the language situation of Russian-speaking residents in the Baltic states based on interview research], *Slavic Culture Studies* 16 (2018): 1–21.

²¹ "Ratobia, Roshia-jin happyaku yonjuichi-nin ni taikyo meirei — gengo anzen shinsa no genkakuka de" [Latvia orders 841 Russians to leave amid stricter language and security screening], *Nikkei*, October 13, 2025, <https://www.nikkei.com/article/DGXZQOCB1307I0T11C25A000000/?msockid=32aa98381a1964f218db8ceb1bae6582>.

PROFILE

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