

NEW MASTERS OF THE BALTIC

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ARTHUR RUHL

**NEW MASTERS
OF THE BALTIC**



A PEASANT FAMILY AND THEIR CABIN ON THE SHORE OF ONE OF FINLAND'S
INNUMERABLE LAKES

NEW MASTERS OF THE BALTIC

BY
ARTHUR RUHL



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INTRODUCTION

The four new republics on the eastern Baltic—Finland, Esthonia, Latvia and Lithuania—owe their independence to the World War and the Russian revolution. The breaking of the political tie with old Russia, which resulted almost automatically from the Bolshevik revolution, was followed, however, in each case, by a bitter internal struggle—a more or less clearly defined social revolution—for which their curious social and economic make-up had long been preparing them.

This curious social arrangement, and the tragic drama growing out of it, was similar in all four countries, different as they are in relative development and local scene. The characters and “lines” were unlike, but the plot, so to speak, was the same.

Each, as a more or less forcibly held province of old Russia, was subject in the old days to an external political rule. Internally, each was dominated socially and, to a certain extent, economically, by an aristocratic minority which was neither Russian nor “native.” The Swedes, or Swede-Finns, made up this minority in Finland; the Germanic Balt Barons in Esthonia and Latvia; in Lithuania it was the estate-owning Poles or Polonized-Lithuanians. In each, the under-dog “native” majority, serfs originally (except in Finland, where they were peasants), of late years peasants, with a gradually increasing middle-class, and now come

into their own, are more or less ruthlessly pushing aside the old aristocracy and making themselves masters in what they regard as their own house.

In Finland, modern and partially industrialized, this internal struggle took the form of a clearly defined class-war—a Red revolution and a White counter-revolution—and the subsequent adjustment (still in process) to a settled republican régime. Finland shows in miniature and with the cycle completed—and this makes it politically so interesting and significant—what happened, and might yet happen, on a vaster scale, in Great Russia itself.

In Esthonia and Latvia, both less politically developed, the social revolution took the less definite form of a seizing and parcelling of the nobles' estates. A landed aristocracy, for centuries secure, is now being brushed aside under the mask of a theoretically legal agrarian reform. In Lithuania, still less developed, the phenomena are similar, although the action moves more slowly owing to local differences which will later be explained.

Overshadowed by the Russia and Germany on either side of them, these border states, before the war, were little noticed in the West. Travelers hurried through them, so to speak, as Mr. Tarkington once complained they hurried through his beloved Indiana, with heads in novels or Baedekers, their Pullman curtains drawn.

Finland, to be sure, because of her sturdy fight for home-rule, had attracted a certain esoteric Western sympathy. University professors signed petitions, editors wrote bitterly. The Romanoff dynasty was an ogre at whom all liberals were privileged to heave

bricks, and little Finland—"just like ourselves"—a brave Jack-the-Giant-Killer, about whom superior people, untroubled as yet by such phrases as "bourgeois" and "proletarian," could indulge their taste for long-distance altruism. Most Americans, however, thought of Finland, when they thought of it at all, as a half-Arctic wilderness. They saw reindeer and ice instead of unspoiled lakes, round granite rocks and birch trees, where even Russians flocked to spend their summers, and they little recked of white-night enchantments, and still less, perhaps, of woman suffrage, co-operatives and socialism, and a capital city cleaner and more consistently well-built than any of their own.

Esthonia and Latvia, across the Gulf to the south (they were then the Baltic provinces of Esthonia, Livonia and Courland) were even less known. Western tourists rarely got so far from home as Reval and Riga, although these ancient Hansa towns had been looking out on the gray Baltic for seven hundred years. The manor-house life of the Esthonian and Livonian countryside might, so far as most Westerners were concerned, have been buried in the eighteenth century from which it had, in many ways, scarcely departed. These Balt barons and baronesses, although they read the books and reviews of Berlin, London and Paris, and spent their winters in Petrograd; old Reval itself—town and country both—were, indeed, a bit of the eighteenth century, forgotten here behind the peninsula which shut off the eastern Baltic into almost an inland lake.

As for Lithuania, it was but a vague, east-European region, whence came cannon-fodder for the industrial

battles of steel-mills and packing houses, or, to the very few, a place where somebody's titled Polish husband was said to have his estates.

The War lighted up this obscurity and the peace changed it completely. Allied Missions, mainly intent at the moment on drawing what was described as a sanitary cordon around Bolshevik Russia, established themselves in Helsingfors, Reval, Riga and Kovno. American food ships began to poke into the eastern Baltic all the way up to Viborg and almost within sight of Petrograd, and American flour, bacon and beans were carried even to the northern Finnish forests. Relief workers of various sorts—A. R. A., Red Cross, Y. M. C. A.—spread through the provinces and began to feel at home in such unfamiliar places as Pskov, Walk, or Narva, while Esthonian and Lettish boys began to study English and the game of baseball. Newspaper correspondents followed—when Litvinov came out of the mystery of Bolshevik Russia in the early winter of 1919, to start the first talk of peace with the border states, a flock of these nervous scouts descended on Dorpat, and that old university town, which the Balts were sometimes pleased to call the "Baltic Heidelberg," got into the western news.

Finland, having weathered a Red revolution, a White military dictatorship, elected a middle-ground President and kept its trade and industry going, seems now definitely to have established its independence, and taken its natural place alongside its sister Scandinavian states. It is hard to picture the Finns ever again bowing their square heads to the Moscovite. Even the United States, with its apparent policy of preserving the terri-

torial integrity of Russia, has recognised Finland and has its Legation and Consulates there.

Esthonia and Latvia have been recognised *de jure* by all the Allies with the exception of the United States; Lithuania has received *de facto* recognition from Britain and France and *de jure* recognition from several neutral countries. The future of these latter three states, set squarely as they are on Russia's road to the Baltic, and possessing several of old Russia's principal ports, is less certain than that of Finland. But whether or not they retain complete independence, or accept at some future time autonomy within a great Russia, they can never return to their position before the war.

The spell of the old political and social orders, however they may be patched up again, is broken. These new states fought for their independence, organized armies in the face of every sort of economic difficulty and drove the Russian Bolsheviki beyond their borders. They elected national assemblies, called back their intelligentsia from the ends of the earth and established governments which work. They are marching to new tunes now, and singing new national songs, and have even begun to celebrate the anniversaries of their independence. Real people are doing these things. The hot, intemperate enthusiasm of these new masters, the dismay and despair of the old; political realities destined to become more and more serious as Russia and Germany regain their strength, lie underneath what to most Westerners are mere names.

It is impossible to speak with finality of the future of these new republics, with Russia and Germany