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'The Shadow in the East'

Aliide Naylor on Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front

By Emily Couch

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Author Aliide Naylor **Filip Stanis**

Restive Russian-speaking minorities, contentious memory politics, and turbulent Europeanization. No, we are not talking about Ukraine, but the Baltic states: Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, and these are just some of the themes that Aliide Naylor covers in "The Shadow in the East: Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front."

In this riveting debut, Naylor combines lyrical personal observations with insightful political analysis to offer a timely and comprehensive picture of the complex societies, economies, and political landscapes of this frequently overlooked region.

Q: You spent four years working in Russia, with many of your previous publications focusing on Russian culture, politics, and society. What made you decide to make the Baltics the topic of your first book? How did covering Russia, and indeed living there inform your perspective on the region?

A: It was part of a natural progression. I was living and working in Russia in 2014, and after Euromaidan in 2013-2014 and the annexation of Crimea I started to look towards the Baltic states and contemplate what the international response (or lack thereof) meant for them. I visited Latvia and Lithuania for the first time that summer. I have familial ties to Estonia, so my first trip there was in the 2000s. Estonia has always been a background presence in my life and, while I'm British, my name is Estonian.

Before 2017 I was writing more about art and protest in Russia than the Baltics, but it was after U.S. President Donald Trump's election that I started thinking about the region again, perhaps with a degree of what one interviewee termed "Yaltaphobia" – the fear that the fate of the Baltic states would be decided by global superpowers. The book stemmed from an article I wrote on this very topic.

Q: The Shadow in the East is a riveting combination of personal narrative and political analysis. Did your experiences in the Baltic states simply serve to confirm your analyses, or did you find yourself drawing new conclusions from your observations?

A: I drew 100 percent new conclusions from my observations. While I had familial ties to Estonia, my knowledge of Latvia and Lithuania was much weaker. Like most writers, I'm on a constant quest for originality and spotting new patterns. If I had set out with preexisting notions of what I would find, I would have likely been blinkered in my journey. One major, if surprising, takeaway was the number of native Baltic people who seemed to support Putin – and conversely, the number of native Russians who were not remotely sympathetic towards the Russian government. I'm not saying they comprise the majority, but there was still a surprising number in each camp. I tried to be open in the introduction about my own background so that readers can draw their own conclusions about my subjectivity.

Q: The Baltic States occupy a very limited space in the consciousness of the general 'Western' public, if any at all. Why do you think that the region is so often overlooked by both the general public and policy makers?

A: I don't think it's completely overlooked; the article on which I based the book was the third most read on the website that year, so clearly there is a degree of interest among those watching the former Soviet Union. Right now, there is no active armed conflict, so it is hard for the general public to care too much, especially given that they are such small nations. However, the nature of Russian incursions abroad was seen in these countries long before ideas of Russian interference in the U.K. and U.S. ever took hold. Active armed conflict seems unlikely in the immediate future, but the region shouldn't be sidelined because they have a wealth of experience handling these contemporary issues.

Q: Chapter 1 addresses the compelling and contentious issue of memory politics. The story of Silvia Foti's grandfather - both a 'freedom fighter' and a 'Nazi collaborator' - is a particularly vivid illustration. Based on your personal experiences in the region, how pervasive are memory debates in Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian society? Did you notice different attitudes among the younger generation?

A: It does seem to depend on the generation in some ways. People my age have no direct memory of the Soviet occupation, just family histories, so they approach the era with a degree

of emotional distance that the older generations don't necessarily have. This is the case even if they have an inherent interest in, or loyalty to, the regional cultural heritage. I brought up memory politics a lot with my interviewees. If the younger generations don't think about it as much on a surface level, I certainly made them think about it. On future trips, it could be interesting to ask more open-ended questions and see to what extent memory politics emerged organically in conversation.

The generations alive in the 1940s had a more visceral response. One older displaced person I spoke with, who unfortunately didn't make it into the book, had left her family in Australia (where she ended up as a refugee) to move back to Latvia after the U.S.S.R. collapsed. The conflict she felt between seeming to physically need both her former homeland and her family was heartbreaking.

Q: The Western press regularly covers the endemic corruption in countries like Ukraine and Romania. Chapter 6 of "The Shadow in the East" is particularly interesting because it highlights that the Baltic states also suffer from this Soviet legacy. Why do you think that corruption in, for example, Latvia receives less attention than that in other former communist countries?

A: I don't know why that is. I think Latvia does need to do more to address corruption, but it has been improving steadily. In 1998 it was only five places above Russia (Estonia has always been much, much higher) according to Transparency International's statistics, and below Romania and Bulgaria. The 2019 report put Latvia at 44 and Russia at 137, and solidly above both Romania and Bulgaria. So, nowadays, I would simply say because it is improving. EU membership has effected Latvia quite strongly, with local actors using EU anticorruption agendas for political progress. There also seems to be growing dissatisfaction with "corrupt elite" among the Latvian population as a whole.

Q: Since the accession of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the European Union in 2004, it is easy to assume that they are now simply 'normal' European countries. "The Shadow in the East, "however, demonstrates that this assumption does a disservice to the complexities of the region. To what extent do you think that we should analyze the Baltic states through the 'post-Soviet' lens versus through the same 'European' lens through which we would consider countries like France?

A: The book also mentions that it does them a disservice to see them as 'post-Soviet' when it has been three decades since the U.S.S.R. collapsed! It's frustrating for them to be interpreted through the prism of the former occupying force, while channeling ideas of a modern "New East" culture feels like something of a soft power tool to keep such countries tethered to present-day Russia. But, willingly or not, they are very much post-Soviet in a way that large swathes of Europe are not, and that needs to be recognized. Perhaps they should be seen individually, with influences from a multitude of pasts – wheter Teutonic, Tsarist, Swedish, or Soviet – without perpetually being forced to fit the East vs. West narrative.

Q: In the Conclusion, you suggest that the West has a lot to learn from the Baltic states in fighting Russian disinformation. What particular lessons do you think the West should draw from the region's experiences?

A: The Baltics neither under- nor over-estimate Russia, which is the sensible approach to take. They have experienced Russian tactics first-hand, but also recognize that an important element of disinformation is to provoke a response. Admittedly, by citing Russian outlets in their domestic media, the Baltics themselves do not necessarily always address disinformation sensibly.

'Trust me: if you scratch any Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian of my generation, and you ask them who was worse – the Soviets or the Nazis? – the Soviets were way, way worse,' says Felicia, an eighty-year-old woman via Skype from southern California. She has a halo of thick white hair, eyes nearly as round as her glasses, and is surprisingly glib about an illness which she believes will kill her. When the Soviets occupied Lithuania in the 1940s as part of Joseph Stalin's plan to annexe the Baltic states, she was bundled out of the country as a refugee to spend a chunk of her childhood in displaced person camps in Germany. She was only eight or nine when she left. 'It was kind of an exciting trip,' she says. 'For my sister it was sheer misery. And my parents, the poor things.'

Her bleak history is almost hard to believe; she is merry to the point of being ethereal and now owns the vast collection of dolls she once longed for as a child. Her twinkle is perhaps indicative of her youthful lack of awareness in the 1940s, blind to the full harshness of wartime Europe. But her story, and that of her family, is one of many similar tales that shape the modern consciousness of Baltic residents and refugees alike – however mythologized or imagined they might be.

There were two Soviet occupations of the Baltic states: the first in 1940–1, and the second from June 1944 which lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1941, the Nazis broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact overnight – the secret nonaggression agreement between Hitler and Stalin (which saw Lithuania initially fall on the German side before a revision in September 1939). 'All of a sudden … we hear these artillery shells and shots going on, and it turns out the Germans just had their blitzkrieg,' Felicia recalls, adding that they thought 'thank God' when the stormtroopers arrived. They were 'very polite and they were very nice, and they were kind, and they were clean. And they were all the things that the Soviets were not.'

Felicia pauses, realizing the gravity of what she is saying. She takes a moment to emphasize that she is only speaking on behalf of the 'ethnic' populations, rather than the Jews. She mentions 'barbaric' thievery and rape.

The memory of the Second World War and beyond is still deeply etched into the fabric of modern society in every single Baltic state – in public space, education and art (to name just a few). The brutality of accounts from the era is horrifying, and undoubtedly helps sculpt present-day Baltic attitudes to contemporary Russia. They provide a dominant narrative of Baltic residents being cornered into self-defence after victimization at the hands of two militarily superior invading forces. It's hardly surprising they take on this tone; conservative estimates suggest that, in total, Soviet mass deportations saw at least 200,000 people forcibly removed from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and taken to Siberia and Kazakhstan. Higher estimates put the figure closer to 371,000–400,000.

In the Museum of Occupations in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, people of around the same age

as Felicia recollect similarly dismal experiences of having been displaced after fleeing the Baltics. Others who stayed in the country during and after the war recount the grim events to which they bore witness. Magnus Kald from the largest Estonian island, Saaremaa, died in 2014, but every twenty-five minutes or so, his voice still echoes through the glass-walled building on loop. 'Soviets tortured people at the castle – the hands of most of the women were tied behind their backs with barbed wire, breasts amputated.' As his voice circles, a steady rotation of tourists take the three seats in front. He says that pins were pushed into their noses and under their nails, and that in another building, orchestras played to drown out the sounds of screaming.

The personal and inherited memories of violence from the era unsurprisingly spill over into the literary canon. In Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen's 2008 novel Purge, both a guarded elderly woman and one of her younger relatives are subjected to sex crimes at the hands of Russians. The book describes the elderly woman's attempts to isolate herself from society while simultaneously managing to silently identify fellow survivors. 'From every trembling hand, she could tell – there's another one. From every flinch at the sound of a Russian soldier's shout and every lurch at the tramp of boots. Her, too?' The semi-autobiographical "A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile" by Latvian author Agate Nesaule also details similar, graphic experiences of acts of sexual violence committed against Latvian women at the hands of the Soviet soldiers during the Second World War, and how she learned as a young child that women easily become prey during conflict. In the book, Nesaule's own mother encouraged her to move to the front of a queue to be shot so she could avoid witnessing others being tortured.

Note: For ease of reading, footnotes have been deleted from this section.

Excerpted from "The Shadow in the East. Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front" by Aliide Naylor, published by I.B. Tauris.

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For more information about Aliide Naylor and her book, see the publisher's site.

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