

Twenty Years Agony

The Unpunished Crime, by Alfreds Berzins; Introduction by Senator Thomas J. Dodd. *New York: Robert Speller & Sons, 1963. xviii + 314 pp. \$5.75.*

A GREAT DEAL has been written and published about the Baltic countries since the extinction of their national independence and the enslavement of their peoples by Soviet Russia—began in 1939 after the fall of Poland and resumed in 1944 after the retreat of the Germans and the reoccupation by the Red Army. The Baltic question has been kept alive in such publications as *East and West* and *The Baltic Review* and in such books as *Das Verbrechen gegen die Baltischen Staaten* by Dr. Michael Walter, former Latvian Ambassador to Brussels, published in 1962, which describes the Russian programs of deportation and colonization and makes an eloquent but, alas, still unheeded appeal to the conscience of the West. Now in *The Unpunished Crime*, Alfreds Berzins, Minister of Public and Social Affairs in the last Latvian government, has brought the terrible fate of his own and other Baltic peoples to the attention of English-speaking readers. His account is based in part on his personal observation of Russian behavior during the first eighteen months of the Red occupation, supplemented by citations from official documents, diplomatic memoirs, newspapers, and other periodicals.

Mr. Berzins begins his book with a brief historical summary, which I find somewhat inadequate, since he neglects to show very clearly how the various Latvian provinces came to be annexed to the Romanov empire and the circumstances under which the Baltic nations gained their freedom after the First World War. (For a fuller survey of Latvian history the reader may be referred to the works of Bilmanis and Spekke.) But Mr. Berzins does show that for a century and a quarter after the annexation by Russia, which followed the Polish partition of 1795, the Latvians successfully resisted all attempts at the russification of their culture, retained their language and traditions, and even created a notable national literature and art.

When he comes to Bolshevik Russia Mr. Berzins exposes the flagrant contradiction between Communist theory and practice. Lenin had asserted

“the right of free self-determination of all peoples, even to the point of separating and forming independent states;” but the Red government had hardly established itself in power before it attempted the conquest of the Baltic states with the aim of destroying their newly won independence, only to be thwarted by the courage, discipline, and resolution of the Baltic armies. Under the treaty of Riga in 1920 the Bolsheviks reluctantly recognized the independence of Latvia, as a few months earlier, under the treaty of Dorpat, they had been obliged to acknowledge the independence of Estonia. Throughout the next nineteen years, however, the Red Army lurked on the borders, waiting the opportune moment to strike. The moment came in the late summer of 1939, after the collapse of the Anglo-French negotiations with Moscow and the simultaneous announcement of the Hitler-Stalin pact, to which had been appended a secret protocol providing for the division of Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Black Seas into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Soon after the beginning of the Second World War the Baltic peoples found themselves isolated and abandoned by the Western powers. In the Autumn of 1939 the Baltic governments were forced to accept the establishment of Red Army bases in their territories; early in the following year came full military occupation accompanied by the inevitable Red terror.

From personal experiences and citations from official documents Mr. Berzins discloses the role played by Andrei Vishinski, the notorious prosecutor of the Moscow purge trials, in the destruction of the Latvian nation. He came to Riga on the heels of the Red Army as the personal representative of Stalin. He compelled the legal government of the republic to resign and the constitutionally chosen parliament to dissolve and then set up a new parliament from a single roster of candidates drawn up by the Communists. A few weeks later this puppet parliament voted to apply for the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union. On the very same day Comrade Kalinin, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, announced that it had been graciously decided “to grant the request of the Saeima [parliament] of Latvia and to admit the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.” Meanwhile, those Latvian intellectuals who had been courageous enough to protest the rape and murder of the republic and to speak out in defense of democratic principles were arrested and shot or sent to Siberian slave camps. Thus, step by step, Mr. Berzins traces the pattern—later to be repeated in many other East European countries—pursued

by the Communist rulers in the destruction of a free nation.

With evidences drawn from Soviet statistics and from publications in Russian, Latvian, and other languages, Mr. Berzins describes the social and economic consequences that follow from the forcible application of Communist doctrine. The living standards of Latvian workers, relatively high in the years of independence, has been progressively declining for more than two decades and is now miserable indeed. The once prosperous peasants—Latvia since 1922 had been a country of small landowners—were almost immediately dispossessed of their holdings and other property and reduced to a condition of serfdom on the collective farms. The intellectuals fared even worse; they have been deported to various parts of the Soviet Union, along with innumerable others, representing almost all classes of the population. The deportees have been replaced by Russian and Asiatic colonists to be found in every Latvian city and village. Among what remains of the native elements the national consciousness and culture have been degraded almost to the point of extinction. An unceasing effort has been made to brainwash this ancient and once proud Indo-European people into the belief that, as a writer in *Sovietskaya Latvija* put it:

The power that cements the friendship of our countries is the Great Russian nation. It is the most gifted of all the peoples that belong to the Union. All peoples that inhabit our land are, therefore, unanimously recognizing the Russian nation as their oldest brother, friend and teacher.

Such is the Communist version of the doctrine of the superior race!

Mr. Berzins writes with an ardor for truth and justice and an agonized love for his native country. He makes no pretense of being a scientific historian, but his historical narrative, as far as it goes, is unquestionably authentic. The English translation of his book is admirable in its clarity and simplicity of style. It has already been widely read, but deserves a still wider reading.

Reviewed by H. TICHOVSKIS