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THE BALTIC PERSPECTIVES OF ESTONIAN TURNING POINTS

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Many turning points during the 20th century have been common to all three Baltic countries (e.g., occupation in June 1940). Some have been specific to one country (e.g., Estonian purge of around 1950 and Latvian purge of around 1959). Some have been common, but with shifts in timing (in 1988, developments in Lithuania tended to trail those in Estonia by 3 months but precede those in Latvia by 2 months) or other details (e.g., attitudes toward Bolsheviks and Germans in 1919). The paper catalogs various turning points and tries to ask "why?".

During the 20th century the two world wars and the two Russian collapses happened to impose broadly similar histories on Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. What will it be during the 21st century? The previous histories of these three nations offer wide variety. Is the recent convergence accidental and likely to be temporary, or are there some deeper historical commonalities? On the other hand, how deep-going are the superficial commonalities of the 20th century? Apart from the timing of appearance on the map, disappearance and reappearance, what is common and what is disparate? In particular, could the three Baltic histories supply, so to say, control experiments for each other regarding the following question: to what extent were they toys in the hands of broader forces and to what extent were they masters of their own destiny? With different attitudes and policies, could they have ended up like Finland – or like Belarus?

Book-size treatments that include the history of all three Baltic states have been few. Being few, they had to concentrate on the flow of events, leaving

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analysis and philosophizing to further studies. Von Rauch[1] presents the years of independence 1917–40. Rei[2] focuses on World War II. Misiunas and Taagepera[3] covers the period of Soviet occupation. For previous centuries there is little, although I understand that Toivo Raun is working on a comprehensive book on the history of the Baltic states. As almost ten years have passed since the restoration of independence, it is also high time to start work on a third installment of the series introduced by von Rauch, Misiunas and Taagepera (egged on by Christopher Hurst): *The Baltic States: Years of Independence 1990–2000.* The field is open!

In this paper I will first point out some age-old commonalities within widely disparate histories, without of course claiming any teleogical destiny of convergence. Thereafter, I will point out some divergences within the superficial commonality of fate during the 20th century. Some of these observations I have made earlier, and some others are implicit in a book by Misiunas and Taagepera.[4] The facts involved are well known, but their juxtaposition may offer some new insights.

UP TO 1900

The Baltic region that now forms Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia has shared some common and distinctive characteristics for the last thousand years. Along with Finland, this region is the only solidly non-Germanic and non-Slavic area east of Wales, north of Hungary and west of the Volga bend, and with minor exceptions (such as Karelians and ancient Prussians) this was the case already one thousand years ago.

After the christianization of Scandinavians and Russians, the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea also remained for several centuries the only animist slice within Europe, west of the Volga. The lack of linguistic kinfolk further south may have restricted the pool of missionaries able to communicate with the local people, in contrast to Germanic Scandinavians and Slavic Russians.

By 1600, all Finno-Baltic populations found themselves under the rule of linguistically foreign overlords: Swedes, Germans and Polonized Lithuanian aristocracy. And all these overlords were culturally western – Catholic and later partly Protestant. While hardly unique in Europe, this common outcome is striking in view of the extent to which the historical paths in the area diverged from 1200 to 1600, ranging from rather quiet submission in the north to the spirited but failed opposition in the center, and to the vigorous counterattack in the south.

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[1] **Rauch, G. von.** *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence 1917–1940.* Hurst, London and California University Press, Berkely, 1974.

[2] **Rei, A.** *The Drama of the Baltic Peoples.* Vaba Eesti, Stockholm, 1970 (First edition: 1961).

[3] **Misiunas, R. & Taagepera, R.** *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940–1990.* Hurst, London and California University Press, Berkely, 1993 (First edition: 1983).

[4] **Misiunas, R. & Taagepera, R.** *The Baltic States.*

The Catholic–Protestant struggle over the souls of the peasants also introduced a striking commonality of timing in the inception of printed literature in the native languages (Table 1). If we count the formation time as beginning with the first printed book and concluding with the publication of the full Bible, the averages of these two dates are strikingly the same for Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian, while Finnish markedly precedes and Saami markedly trails this group. The commonality is the more remarkable, given that Lithuania remained Catholic, Estonia became Protestant, and Latvia split.

Table 1. From the first book to The Good Book: birth of printed literature in the Baltic

	Finnish	Estonian	Latvian	Lithuanian	Saami
First printed book	1543	1535	1585	1547	1619
Complete Bible	1642	1739	1694	1735	1811
Midpoint	1592	1637	1640	1641	1715
Lag time	0	**45 yrs.**	**48 yrs.**	**49 yrs.**	123 yrs.

Sources: Mainly *Eesti (Nõukogude) Entsüklopeedia*.

Why did it crystallize into four different literary languages rather than two (Finnic and Baltic) or even more than four? The Gulf of Finland split the Finnic area geographically. The Lithuanian–Latvian split was determined by the extent of durable German contest. Under slightly different circumstances Žemaitia could have joined the Latvian sphere, or Zemgale Lithuania (with fateful consequences hard to postdict). More surprising, in view of the later developments among the eastern Finno-Ugrians, is that no more than four literary languages prevailed, considering the strong initial showing of southern Estonian and the religious and administrative isolation of the Latgolan.

While previous inroads from the east had remained occasional, within one century (from 1721 to 1815) all of the eastern Baltic littoral became officially Russian. Thus a further layer of eastern government officials was superimposed to the previous sandwich of local peasants plus western socioeconomic overlords. While far from being unique in the world and showing wide disparities in detail, from Lithuania to Finland, this commonality still sets the Finno-Baltic area apart from the immediately neighboring areas.

The major developments of the 19th century – the rise of language-based nationalism and economic modernization – were of course parts of much wider processes. So was the emancipation of Russia's non-Orthodox borderlands in 1917–20. This was the time when the notion of "Baltic states" arose, to designate the three new republics which on the map looked like three peas in the same pod. Finland stood apart, first by its geographical size and even more so after successful reassertion of its independence during World War II. The common

disappearance of its three southern neighbors from the political map in 1940 and reappearance in 1991 reinforced their label of "Baltic states".

I certainly do not intend to imply that such a commonality was in the heavenly cards already one thousand years ago, nor that from now on it is bound to be preserved. However, during the 20th century the two world wars and the two Russian collapses happened to impose broadly similar histories on the three nations. It is now time to shift gears and start pointing out subtle differences within this common pattern.

THE TURNING POINT OF 1917–20

During World War I Lithuania was quickly occupied by German forces, while Estonia remained under Russian rule up to 1918. As often in previous history, Latvia was split, with the front remaining on the Daugava for several years. Thus the turning point of the collapse of the Russian tsarist regime found the three peoples in very different circumstances. In Lithuania, Russia was out of the immediate picture. While offering Poland autonomy as a counterweight to Russia, Germany also offered autonomy to Lithuania as a counterweight to Poland. Estonia successfully negotiated for autonomy with the Russian Provisional Government. Latvia, split as it was, had little bargaining power at either side. The Russian Bolshevik counter-revolution also impacted only Estonia and northeastern Latvia.

The German occupation of the northern half of the future Baltic states in early 1918 uniformized the conditions in the area. German collapse and withdrawal of its armed forces enabled the provisional governments of all three republics to start operations almost simultaneously. True, Lithuania had proclaimed independence in February 1918 under conditions of German occupation and Estonia on the eve of such occupation, while Latvia's declaration followed only in November. But except for symbolism, organization of independent statehood could begin only after German collapse and in face of Bolshevik invasion from Russia. Conditions still varied.

Popular support for the Bolsheviks was widespread in Latvia, appreciable in Estonia and limited in Lithuania. The Germans pulled out rapidly from Lithuania and Estonia but remained in Latvia. The Russian White forces presented problems in Estonia and later in Latvia. Lithuania's main problem was its Polish allies in the struggle against the Bolsheviks, in view of Polish nostalgia for a joint Polish–Lithuanian state. National independence forces carried the day in all three countries, and the question is, why? – in contrast to Ukraine or Georgia. Was independence a geopolitical inevitability? What mistakes on the part of the national forces could have produced a Bolshevik victory or otherwise blocked independence? The two parts of the question are not identical, given that Lithuania risked incorporation in Poland and Latvia faced German predominance.

The key area may have been Estonia, because no power would have pushed the Russian Bolsheviks out of Estonia, had Estonia's front or rear collapsed. In Lithuania's case the Poles gladly would have undertaken such a task. Indeed, the Estonian and Polish units once made contact in eastern Latvia, demonstrating that a weakness in the center could be bridged. The Germans could and did intervene in Latvia. The tentative conclusion is that only an Estonian collapse could have given the Bolsheviks control of any part of the Baltic area, but national independence was potentially under threat in Lithuania and the risk was very real in Latvia.

Actually, several crucial steps toward sound statehood were taken by Estonia markedly earlier than in Latvia or Lithuania (Table 2). The symbolical declaration of independence came in Lithuania and Estonia practically simultaneously, while Latvia trailed. Estonia managed to proclaim land reform in the midst of war of independence, thus giving a large proportion of soldiers a personal stake in the outcome, while Latvia did so only after the peace treaty was signed, and Lithuania did so still two years later. The Constitution also was hammered out in Estonia during the war, while its neighbors did so about three years later. Peace treaty with Soviet Russia, meaning the first *de jure* recognition, came half a year earlier for Estonia, despite objections from the Western powers. On the average, Latvia trailed by about 16 months and Lithuania by about 19 months. One should not take these figures overly precisely, because further events could be added, and all events do not carry the same weight. On the other hand, they should not be discarded simply because one feels uncomfortable with numbers. These numbers do tell something.

Table 2. Establishment of Baltic statehoods, 1918–22

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Declaration of independence	24.2.18	18.11.18	16.2.18
Land reform decision	~7/1919	9/1920	1922
Constitution adopted	6/1919	1922	1922
Peace treaty with Soviet Russia	2.2.20	1.8.20	12.7.20
Mean date	4/1919	~8/1920	~11/1920
Lag time	0	~16 mos.	~19 mos.

PATTERNS OF THE 1930s

Success in achieving statehood was matched by proof of immaturity in handling democracy, not unlike many countries further south, but unlike Finland (Table 3). Was it an accident of domestic politics that democracy collapsed eight years earlier in Lithuania, or did the same deeper forces operate in a semi-random

Table 3. The authoritarian period in the Baltic States

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Collapse of democracy	1934	1934	1926
Signs of redemocratization	1938	–	1938?
Duration of hard authoritarianism	4 yrs.	6+ yrs.	12 yrs.

way? On the other hand, both Lithuania and Estonia showed signs of limited relaxation of authoritarianism by 1938. True, appreciable window-dressing was involved, but Latvia did not offer even that much as yet, before the Soviet occupation interrupted the domestic processes.

In foreign relations the Baltic states strived at neutrality, and the efforts doubled as European politics heated up (Table 4). Democratic Lithuania was the first to sign a non-aggression pact with the USSR (thus giving an extra argument to the opponents of democracy), followed by Latvia and Estonia (also during the last years of democracy). Non-aggression pacts with Germany followed in quick succession, Lithuania being the first one, but hardly by its own choice: the pact was imposed by Germany as part of a package that involved cession of Klaipeda. The declarations of Baltic neutrality were practically simultaneous.

Table 4. Baltic attempts at neutrality

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Non-aggression pacts:			
With the USSR	1932	1932	**1926**
With Germany	6/1939	6/1939	**3/1939**
Declaration of neutrality	**12/1938**	**12/1938**	1/1939
Mean date	1936	1936	1935

THE TURNING POINT OF 1940–45

The process of Soviet occupation (Table 5) began with the demand for military bases, which was first put to Estonia (September 1939), and concluded with the demand for unlimited entry of Soviet armed forces, which was first put to Lithuania (June 1940). Why such reverse order? It had probably little to do with the behavior of the particular countries.

In both cases the degree of proximity to Germany may have been the main factor. The Secret Protocol of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (MRP) was hazy regarding the freedom of action of the parties to the pact in their respective spheres of influence. Moreover, part of Lithuania remained in the German sphere.

Table 5. Soviet occupation

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Yielding bases to the USSR	**28.9.39**	5.10.39	10.10.39
Military occupation	17.6.40	17.6.40	**15.6.40**

Thus Stalin may have thought it prudent to make his first demands far away from Germany, while keeping clear of the well-prepared Finland, so as to test German reactions at a safe distance. Estonia's small population and failure to mobilize even partly during the campaign in Poland probably were secondary considerations.

For his Baltic ultimatums of June 1940 Stalin picked a time when Germany was busy in the west (conquering France) and could not possibly respond immediately. It made sense to present Germany with a *fait accompli* right at its border, including the part of Lithuania assigned to Germany by MRP. Sealed off by occupation of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia could be handled later on.

Later Soviet measures were mostly taken simultaneously in the three states, from fake elections in July 1940 to deportations in June 1941. Total human losses during the Soviet occupation of 1940–41, however, were markedly higher in the north, due to the speedy German advance in Lithuania that slowed down in Estonia. Table 6 presents my estimates. The major component that entered in Estonia (but hardly so in Lithuania) was Soviet mobilization of young Balts. In contrast, German executions of Baltic citizens (please note the shift from total losses to deaths!) were much heavier in the south, due to the larger concentration of Jews. Among non-Jewish Balts deaths were roughly proportional to the respective populations.

Baltic attitudes toward the German occupation varied markedly (Table 6). Lithuanians avoided service in the German army and hence were more extensively dragooned into labor service in Germany, though with limited success. In Latvia and Estonia military service predominated. Latvia's total contribution was the largest, due to labor dragooning in Latgola (Catholic eastern Latvia) and the long duration of German occupation in western Latvia (up to May 1945). The same orientations show up in the flight to the West in 1944–45. With Germany being the only practical option, few Lithuanians fled, while many Latvians did (partly due to the long period available). The equally extensive flight from Estonia aimed at Sweden and Germany.

I think the contrasts pointed out here are real. However, the specific figures offered are often guestimates rather than fairly trustworthy estimates. One of the purposes of this paper is to generate dissatisfaction and egg historians on to refine these figures now that the Soviet archives are open to an unprecedented degree. Such research should not be done in isolation. Baltic comparisons are valuable, and hence the categories and methods should preferably be coordinated, so that country-to-country comparisons can become precise.

Table 6. Estimates of Baltic human losses in 1940–44 – selected details

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Total losses under Soviets, 1940–41			
In thousand	60	35	35
Percent of population	5	2	1.5
Deaths under the Nazis, 1941–44			
Jews (thousand)	1	70	180
Other Balts (thousand)	9	20	20
Total	10	90	200
German use of Baltic human power			
Labor in Germany (thousand)	15	35	75
(% of population)	1	2	3
German army (thousand)	70	150	50
(% of population)	6	7	2
Total (thousand)	85	185	125
(% of population)	7.5	9	5
Escape to the West, 1944–45			
Thousand	60	100	50
Percent of total population	5	5	2

Based on **Misiunas, R. & Taagepera, R.** *The Baltic States.*

The same applies to figures in Table 7. They present an overview of Baltic human losses, first for the war years, and then also for the entire period from 1939 to 1955, which includes Stalin's postwar war against the Baltic peoples. For detailed categories out of which these estimates emerge, please refer to the above-cited book by Misiunas and Taagepera. Regarding the total period, the losses in all three states seem to add up to about one-third of the prewar population, though the specific categories differ widely (cf. Jews in Table 6, for instance). In retrospect, my estimate of 1949 deportations in Estonia seems excessive. The same may be true of some other categories; once more the need for better figures must be stressed.

Table 7. Estimates of Baltic human losses in 1939–55

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Population in early 1939 (million)	1.1	2.0	2.8
Relative population loss 1939–45, %	25	30	15
Deaths as % of population	8	9	9
Relative loss 1939–55, %	33	36	32

Source: **Misiunas, R. & Taagepera, R.** *The Baltic States.*

Further interesting contrasts during the Soviet occupation of 1945–90 could be pointed out, but I will by-pass them so as to focus on the last turning point, that of 1986–94. Among the secondary turning points purges of the republican Communist Party organizations and of cultural elites may have been the most important. Such a purge took place in Estonia under Stalin and under Khrushchov in Latvia – but it never happened in a major way in Lithuania. The "why?" still remains to be explored.

Let me just point out one consequence of the Estonian purge, the "historical gap" (*ajalooline auk*) in Estonian culture, as it came to be called in Estonia ten years later. While the notion looks highly qualitative, I succeeded in measuring some aspects of it quantitatively[5] – see Figs. 1 and 2. If similar measurements were carried out on comparable Latvian and Lithuanian collections, one might obtain an estimate of the relative impact of the general devastation wrought by Stalinism and the specific effect of the Estonian purge. The depth of the freeze produced by the Latvian purge might then be estimated in a similar manner.

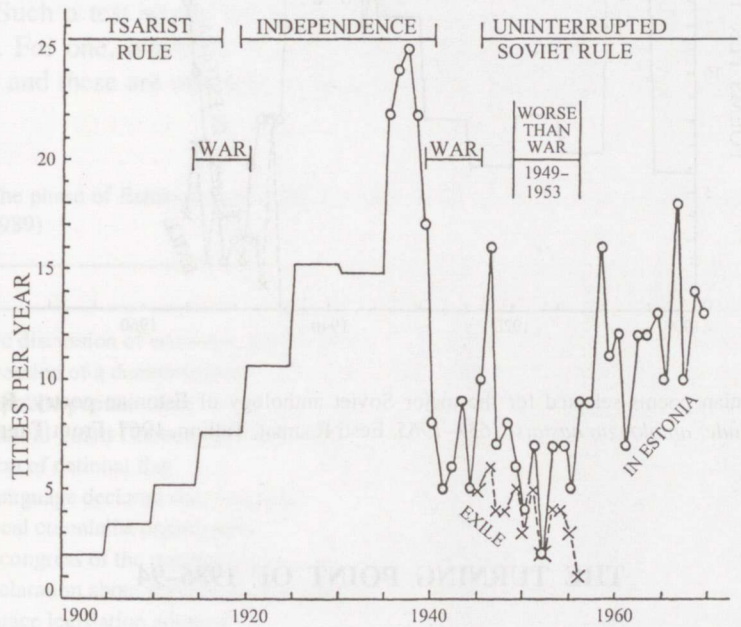

Fig. 1. Estonian literary works mentioned in **Nirk, E.** *Estonian Literature.* Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1970. From **Taagepera, R.** A portrait.

[5] **Taagepera, R.** A portrait of the 'historical gap' in Estonian literature. – *Lituanus*, 1980, **26**, 73–86.

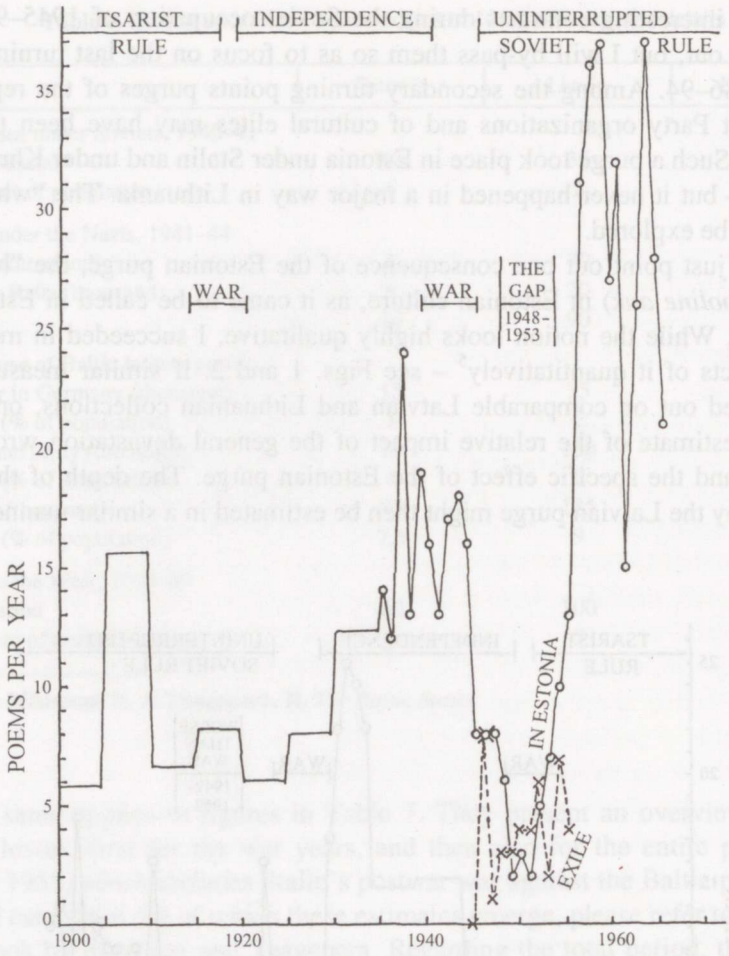

Fig. 2. Estonian poems selected for the major Soviet anthology of Estonian poetry, **Rummo, P.** (ed.) *Eesti luule: antoloogia aastaist 1637–1965.* Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1967. From **Taagepera, R.** A portrait.

THE TURNING POINT OF 1986–94

This turning point extends from the first major ecology protests in Lithuania and Latvia in 1986 to the withdrawal of the last Soviet/Russian occupation troops. The culminating event certainly was recognition of Baltic independence by the USSR and admission of the Baltic states to the United Nations in September 1991. But it might be argued that the crucial period was 1987 to 1989, when patriotic activities surpassed anything witnessed during the previous 40 years and built up to such levels that only major application of force could supress them.

This period could arguably be divided into three phases according to which Baltic nation was leading the way:[6]

– Latvian phase (late 1986 to August 1987);
– Estonian phase (September 1987 to February 1989);
– Lithuanian phase (March 1989 to March 1990).

The sequence reflects the size of the Russian civilian garrison in the respective republics. The colonists were major irritants that spurred Latvians, then Estonians to action. But as the civilian garrisons also mobilized, they became a serious impediment to further progress, except in Lithuania.

The validity of such periodization should be tested. The study of each republic gains insights through comparison of the three cases (and, of course, the rest of the former Soviet realm). I have fair semi-quantitative evidence only regarding the Estonian phase. As shown in Table 8 a listing of 11 important events from September 1987 to February 1989 shows Estonia consistently ahead of Lithuania and Latvia. On the average, Lithuania lagged Estonia by 3.5 months, and Latvia did so by 5 months. Prior to this time period, in contrast, Estonia tended to lag behind the other two countries, while later on Estonia trailed Lithuania.

One may wonder whether a different selection of events might undo the pattern. Such a test would be highly welcome, but it is unlikely to change the outcome. For one, omission of any of the milestones listed would not alter the pattern – and these are certainly among the major milestones. Addition of further

Table 8. The phase of Estonian leadership during restoration of independence (September 1987 to February 1989)

	Estonia	Lithuania	Latvia
First public discussion of economic autonomy	9/87	5/88	10/88
Last suppression of a demonstration	2/88	9/88	3/89
Birth of republic popular front	4/88	5/88	6/88
Removal of old-guard Communist Party chief	6/88	10/88	10/88
Legalization of national flag	6/88	10/88	10/88
National language declared state language	6/88	11/88	9/88
Birth of local colonialist organization	7/88	11/88	9/88
Founding congress of the popular front	10/88	10/88	10/88
Formal declaration about republic sovereignty	11/88	5/89	7/89
State language legislation adopted	1/89	1/89	5/89
Legal registration of popular front	2/89	3/89	N.A.

Source: **Taagepera, R.** Estonia's road to independence.

[6] **Taagepera, R.** Estonia's road to independence. – *Problems of Communism*, 1989, **38**, 11–26; and **Misiunas, R. & Taagepera, R.** *The Baltic States*.

events that took place in all three republics may well alter Lithuania's and Latvia's average lag times, but hardly their direction. The last question is whether there are crucial events of overriding importance that occurred in one republic only. Until specific examples of that type are pointed out, Table 8 remains the best measure we have.

CONCLUSIONS

I hope to have reinforced the assertion that the history of any one of the Baltic states can be better understood by keeping comparisons with the other two in mind. In particular, such comparisons make us ask: Could the history of, say, Estonia, have taken a somewhat different course, if one specific factor, possibly an accidental one, had been different?

Two periods have been pointed out where Estonia was setting the trend: 1918–22 and a brief spell around 1988. At other times Latvia (1987) or Lithuania (1926–34, 1989) led the general trend (for the better or for the worse), and others could be mentioned. This is not a competition for historical equivalents of Olympic medals but simply a matter of getting the overall pattern clearer.

PÖÖRDELISED SÜNDMUSED EESTI JA TEISTE BALTI RIIKIDE AJALOOS

Rein TAAGEPERA

Mitmed ajaloo pöördepunktid on 20. sajandil olnud kõigile kolmele Balti riigile ühised, nagu hõivang juunis 1940. Teised jälle on puudutanud ainult mõnda maad, näiteks ideoloogiline puhastus Eestis 1950 ja Lätis 1959. Samad sündmused on vahel toimunud eri ajal: Leedu areng jõudis 1988 samade verstapostideni ligikaudu kolm kuud hiljem kui Eesti oma, ent kaks kuud varem kui Läti oma. Mõnikord on olnud erinevusi üksikasjades, nagu suhtumine enamlastesse ja sakslastesse 1919. See uurimus toob välja riikide arengut suunanud pöördepunktid ja katsub leida vastust küsimusele "miks".