

William Tyler | Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia" Playthings of the Great Centuries

- I'm delighted to be talking this evening about the Baltic states. I find them fascinating. And I think I should begin, and I don't wish to teach my grandmother to suck eggs, but I think it's helpful for everyone if I just give a clear definition. The Baltic states is a modern term. It's not an official term. It means anything other than an unofficial term that links three states on the Baltic coast. The three states from south to north are Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. And I sent a map, and I hope you've got that or you've got access to your own map. And for those of you who haven't visited the area, if you've visited it, you will know all of that, but if you haven't visited, sometimes it can be confusing. And I'll try and unconfuse the story.

In his authoritative history of the Baltic states, a man called Andrejs Plakans, it's in the Cambridge Histories series and it's on my blog if you want to look it up, it's simply "The Baltic States" by Plakans, and he begins with the early history and he wraps it up in a paragraph. And I thought this is the easiest way for me to do it. "The story," he says, "of present-day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania must begin "not at the time when countries bearing those names appeared "on the European map, "but when a group of stateless people settled permanently "on the eastern shore of the Baltic "during the fifth and sixth centuries AD. "At that time to the south, "the Roman Empire already dissolved. "And in what was to become France, "the Merovingian and Carolingian kings were trying "to form a successor state. "Much later in the mediaeval period, "only one of the Baltic Sea coast peoples, the Lithuanians," that's the ones furthest south and nearer to Germany, "the Lithuanians succeeded in creating a state of their own. "The other two, the Estonians and Latvians, "lost such political leaders as they'd ever had "by the end of the 1200s "and until the 20th century remained subordinated "to German, Swedish, and Russian-speaking, "land-owning aristocracies. "The Lithuanians too lost their mediaeval state "through a voluntary union with Poland "that created a so-called commonwealth, "in which the Poles were "the dominant force politically and socially." Now, the link between Lithuania and Poland is an important one, and it's an important one in the geopolitics of 2022 as I will eventually explain. I've also mentioned that Germans, there's a large proportion of what they call German Baltics or Baltic Germans in Lithuania, Latvia, and to a lesser extent Estonia. In Estonia and Latvia, there are many Russians or there were. So there's a mixed population.

During the 18th and 19th century, these three Baltic states, as they are to become Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, were ruled by others as Plakans said by the Swedes, by the Germans, and by the Russians. Only in the 20th century, I nearly said our century, I find it's still

difficult to think that we're in the 21st, only in the 20th century did these three states break through. And that freedom itself was doomed only to last for a brief period of time. That is to say in the interwar years between 1914 and 1939. Sorry, 1919 and 1939. In the interwar years, they were free. But when World War II came, they were again subjected to both German and Russian rule. And when World War II ended, they were again subjected, all three, to Russian rule. It is important I think at this beginning of this talk to emphasise that the three Baltic states are very different. Estonia is the most different. Its language is linked to Finnish and Hungarian and certainly not to Lithuanian and Latvian. Latvia had perhaps the most obvious Russian involvement. It was used in the end of the tsarist period as a holiday resort. And if you go to holiday Baltic coast resort of Jurmala outside of the capital, Riga, you'll see the most magnificent 19th century houses built for the Russian aristocracy today occupied by Russian oligarchs with rather threatening men at the gates armed with Kalashnikovs. We were on a bus trip, my wife and I, when we were there, and we suddenly came across these guards. They looked very threatening indeed.

o the three countries have three distinct languages, three distinct cultures, of which Estonia is very different, massively different. Estonia, by the way, is the place that Finns go at weekends. It's not a long trip by boat from Helsinki. And they go to Estonia to get stoned. They go into a hotel and they drink vodka, which is cheap, and they stay there all the weekend and then go home again. And when I went, I went as a member of a Council of Europe party, and they were very careful in selecting the hotels. That is to say, our Estonian guests were, because they didn't want to put us in a hotel with Finns. And they said, "If there are Finns on your floor "in the hotel we booked you in, "do not go out into the corridor." Interesting connections between Finns and Estonians. One commentator on the Baltics has simply written this, and this is to tie what I've said up together. "There is no Baltic identity with a common culture, "common language, or common religious tradition." It's different. So although we call them the Baltic states, remember I said that's an unofficial term, they are in fact three distinct cultures. It's only in the West that we push them together in that way. But I'm going to concentrate in this thought on modern history. Why? Well, because it's so important in the geopolitics of 2022. Now, for those of us who live in northern Europe, the Ukraine still feels a long way away. The Baltic states do not. And if you are German, or Polish, or Finish, or Swedish, or Norwegian, you are petrified that Putin may seek to recover the three Baltic states, which after the Second World War until the end of the Cold War were an integrated part of Russia. Not independent. Not colonies. A part of Russia in the same way that Ukraine was part of Russia. So that's why I've chosen to talk about modern history.

And you might say, "Well, when does modern history begin?" Well,

perhaps the best date to take is 1795 when the Russian Empire finally gained sovereignty over the territory of all three, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. In doing this, Russia inherited a large population of Baltic Germans. Many of these men arose to positions of power in 19th century Russia. If you study the history of 19th century tsarist Russia up to the revolution, you will find German statesmen, German generals, German scientists, and German administrators working for, well, not working for, they would have seen themselves as Russian, but they were German. In fact, one of the two German commanders in 1914 that pressed into Prussia at the beginning of the war was himself a German Baltic. Moreover, he was by birth, although not by religion, a Jew. He had dropped his, or maybe we should say he, whether he dropped it or he hid it, he hid his religious commitment to Judaism because he wouldn't have been able to rise in the army to the rank of general. At the beginning, that is to say in the early 1800s, Russian sovereignty was exercised with a light touch. Why? Well, because the Baltics were profitable and they, well, the Russians thought they wouldn't cause too much trouble. And that was true in the case of Estonia and Latvia but less true in the case of Lithuania. The people that ran the Baltic states were not Latvians, were not Estonians or Lithuanians, but were in the main German aristocratic landowners. It's a feudal society in which not the local population but the German population held power. In Finland, by contrast and interest, it was a Swedish landed gentry that held power in Finland.

So the stories right across this northern part of Europe is very different. So do not forget this German element because if you've got Germans and Russians together, that is a recipe for potential conflict. And that of course is exactly what we saw in the two World Wars of the 20th century. Russia remained supreme in the first half of the 19th century because Germany was not united by Bismarck until 1870. And Sweden was now the land of Abba rather than the land of Charles XII. And Sweden was not a big power. The big power was Russia. The emerging power was Germany. But Russia held all three Baltic states. As an example of what a light touch the Russians had, in 1801, when Alexander I became czar, his inclination was to reform and in particular to reform the archaic system of serfdom. And he was unable to do that in Russia itself because of opposition from the Russian aristocracy. But he was able to do it in Estonia and Latvia. And at the end of the Napoleonic Wars by 1820, serfdom had been abolished in both Estonia and Latvia. It wasn't abolished in Russia until 1861, and it wasn't abolished in Lithuania until that same year of 1861. So it shows there the division between the two northern states, or what has become states, Estonia and Latvia, and the southern one, Lithuania.

And why was there a difference? Well, Lithuanians had been better educated than Latvians and Estonians. They had this history of the commonwealth with Poland. And mainly I think because of the Poles, they had a hatred of Russia, and there were more Germans in Lithuania. There was resentment to Russian rule that burst forth in revolt in

1830, first in Poland and then it spread to Lithuania. And this is what Plakans writes of this revolt by the Poles and by the Lithuanians in 1830. He writes this, "In November 1830, an outright struggle began in Poland "against the Russian political and military presence. "By March 1831, the confrontations have spread to Lithuania. "In both places, however, "the fighting ended by October 1831, "and the so-called revolution was defeated." It was defeated by military force, by Russian occupation. Now, 1830 was a year of revolution elsewhere in Europe, in France and Italy for example. And why? Because after the Napoleonic Wars, the ideas of the French Revolution, liberte, egalite, fraternite, and in particular the right of nations to choose their own governments was rife across the intellectuals of Europe. And as I just said a moment or so ago, Poland and Lithuania had intellectuals, whereas Latvia and Estonia did not to the same degree. And therefore it was the Poles and Lithuanians that raised the flag of rebellion against the Russians. That division between Lithuania and Latvia and Estonia is there to a greater or lesser extent from 1830 to 2022. Again, emphasising that you must not treat these three Baltic states as one. They are not. They are three distinctive ones. And there is I think a clear divide between the two northern ones of Estonia and Latvia, and the southern one of Lithuania.

One historian has written this following that Polish-Lithuanian revolt. "The tsar, Nicholas I, "issued what was called the organic statute in 1832. "According to which, "Russian-occupied Poland would lose its autonomy "and become an integral part of the Russian Empire. "Warsaw had its university closed "and became little more than a military garrison." And you wonder why in 2022 the Poles hate the Russian so much. There's a lot of history in the 20th century, but in 1830 they are integrated within Russia and Warsaw became the third largest city after Moscow and St. Petersburg in the entire Russian Empire. Tsar Nicholas not only imposed stringent controls on Poland, but during his reign of 30 years between 1825 and '55, he sought to return Russia to old-fashioned, pre-French Revolutionary autocratic rule. And certainly, reform was now firmly off the agenda. I said what happened in Poland, and this is what happened in Lithuania where the Russians also imposed a draconian rule. And I read, "In 1814, Tsar Nicholas ordered that such terms "as Lithuania were not to be used in official discussions "or correspondence. "In Vilnius," the capital, "In the Vilnius province following the rebellion of 1830, "just under 4,000 revolutionaries were tried "and 150 gentry estates owned by Germans were confiscated. "The Russian government then proceeded "with a wholly predictable series of repressive measures. "New taxes were imposed. "Censorship was expanded. "The Polish army in Lithuania was dissolved. "And in 1832, the university of Vilnius was closed. "In 1840, Lithuanian law was replaced by Russian law. "Russian language became the official language "of all public institutions. "And most public posts were now held by Russians." They even, the Russians, Orthodox Christians, the Russians interfered with the Catholic Church of Lithuania. Every sermon preached by a Catholic priest had first to

be sent to a Russian sensor to ensure that there was no political message within the sermon. So you begin to see, I hope, that the Russian occupation from 1795 of the three Baltic states, in particular Lithuania and in parenthesis Poland as well, was to lead in this area even in the 19th century to a very anti-Russian stance. An anti-Russian stance, which is alive and very much alive in 2022.

There is in the first half of the 19th century as a result of the ideas of the French Revolution, even in Latvia and Estonia, let alone Lithuania, a gradual resurgence in national pride, in their own languages, in their own cultures, in their own folk tales. Folk tales in northern Europe were extraordinarily important in terms of creating a sense of national identity. If you know the history of Denmark, then you know that Grundtvig was a man who invented the concept of Danishness. If you are interested in German history, you know that Grimm's fairytales did the same. If you are interested in Finnish history, you know that the Kalevala collection of early stories did exactly the same. There is a rising sense of nationalism. But the nationalism in these three Baltic states is underground because it faces opposition from the Russian occupying forces. We know what the Russians didn't know in 1850 that it's these nationalist forces, which are to create three independent states after the end of World War I and in the 21st century, again, three independent states after the end of the Cold War. So these changes don't come from nowhere. They come from a gradual realisation that they have a culture of their own. The Russians never dealt well with the Baltic states. They are later to deal well with Finland because Finland was part of the Russian Empire, was not an integrated part, it was a grand duchy. And in the Grand Duchy of Finland during the late tsarist period, the primary school taught in Finnish. And then, the teacher training colleges in Finland taught in Finnish. And really, the Russians had no answer to Finnish nationalism, and they didn't try and crush it. That they attempted to live with it, whereas the story of the three Baltic states is they sought to crush it. They saw this as Russian territory.

Now, we've seen all of this played out on the other side of Europe where the Russians, or Putin's Russia, seized the Ukraine as Russian territory. And that's the problem in 2022. What does Putin feel about the Baltic states? Well, I don't think you have to be a genius to work out that he sees them as Russian territory. The Finns are anxious, of course, always anxious. But it's different. I really think it's different because Finland was the Grand Duchy of Finland and managed to escape Sovietization after the end of the Second World War. Its independence came with the Russian Revolution in 1917, and it's been there since. I think even Putin would have to admit that Finland is lost. I doubt whether he admits that Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are lost. If any of you are dining with Mr. Putin in the Kremlin in the near future, you might ask him the question. But I think it might be unwise to ask the question. 1855 was a moment of change. In 1855, the Tsar Nicholas I died and was succeeded by Alexander II. And those

of you who did Russian history with me will remember that Alexander II was a reforming tsar. The tsar who did abolish serfdom in 1861 and the tsar who might have made a difference if it hadn't been for his assassination. And his successors, the autocratic Alexander III and the incompetent Nicholas II. Alexander II was a positive figure. Because of his positivity, there was a growing political awareness in the Baltic states, even amongst the Baltic Germans. And this is what Plakans says about a growing political awareness. He writes this, if I can find the right page, I will even read it to you. "The 1848 revolutions across Europe, "though viewed as unsuccessful, "toppled the old regime of intellectual control "and left a generation of European nationalists "with a deep craving for a springtime of peoples. "The national unification of Italy in 1860 "and of Germany in 1870-71 created models "for those in Europe who were living "in multinational empires under lead "of a different nationality and language." And that of course is exactly the position in the Baltics. They were living in the empire of Russia. And now, they've seen nationalism prove successful in two major areas of Europe, in Italy and in Germany. There was never, however, as in Germany and in Italy, any intention of forming one Baltic state.

I've said that the differences were too many, greater than the differences between the land of Germany, despite the division between Protestantism and Catholicism, and even wider than the divisions between north and south in Italy. They were not looking for unification of a Baltic state. They were looking for the independence of each of the three nations from Russian control. But the ideas of nationalism are swinging around intellectual circles in Europe by the middle of the 1850s, 1860s, second half, if you like, of the 19th century. Desire for this change politically and of independence emerged across all three of our Baltic states. By the end of the 19th century, this desire for independence is clear and obvious to any visitor that would go to the three Baltic states. In 1863 for example, there's a further Revolt against Russian rule in Lithuania. Again, part of a wider Polish revolt in the same year of 1863. So like 1830 but 36 years on, there's a further Polish-stroked Lithuania revolt against Russia. And Plakans writes in this way, "The overall situation "in the Baltic states became more anomalous "with each decade as a rapidly changing society took "on the features of modern life "while confronting a political system," the Russian, "that appeared determined to resist all efforts "to modify the hegemony of narrow elites. "The continuing confrontation "and frustrations it produced eventually led "to an ongoing loss of human capital "as thousands from the Baltic provinces "of Russia sought greener pastures "in the interior provinces of Russia "while other thousands, particularly from Lithuania, "departed to the promised lands of North America "and indeed to Britain." And it may be that some of you listening who are Jewish had relatives that fled the Russian pogroms of that period and landed up in the States or landed up here in Britain. But change wasn't to come in the 19th century. It was only to arrive in the 20th

century, and it was only to arrive then because of that huge event in European and world history, the First World War, 1914–1918. And in the midst of that war, the other huge event of the early 20th century, the Russian Revolution of 1917. Why in the latter tsarist period was there such a determination? Well, I've mentioned one reason, and that is the emergence of nationalism as a good thing originally in both Italy and Germany, a sense of national identity. But we all know what happened in Germany. That's another story. But to begin with, it wasn't that sort of story. Also, the Russians, particularly under Alexander III, went back to a policy of Russification, the Russian language, Russian teaching, everything was Russianized. They were also opposed to the Baltic German elites, the people that held the land, hence why they confiscated land in the aftermath of the Polish–Lithuanian crisis of 1830 and 1863. And there was a lack of job opportunities now. And so many went to St. Petersburg or Moscow or Warsaw to find work in new factories, in jobs. Whereas many Jews, as I've said, fled because they faced the additional horror of the tsarist pogroms of Alexander III. There was also greater urbanisation, which lent to a greater middle, an increasing middle class who in, like Europeans across the continent in the late 19th century, would meet in intellectual discussion groups of one sort or another. And in those groups, as long as they could dodge the tsarist spies, they could talk openly and speak their own language openly.

When the Russian Revolution came, they, all three, and Poland and Finland, saw their opportunities to escape Russia. Poland and Finland did so. Poland is again under not Russian control as such, but as part of Russia's greater Soviet Empire after 1945. Finland as I said a moment or so ago, once it gained its freedom in 1917 has been free ever since. We're interested in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. They begin to declare their independence from Russia in 1918. Russia was withdrawn from the war before it ended in Europe in November 1918. They were taken out of the war by Trotsky and Lenin. The result of that was that the Germans occupied the Baltic states by the end of the war, which presented the Baltic states with a problem. They had declared their independence from Russia, only to find that they had German armies there. And when the war in the west ended, they had Russian armies trying to re-occupy. Because you remember at the end of the war, the Russians go into a civil war. And so the three Baltic states faced three potential enemies, the German Army, one, the Red Army of Trotsky and Lenin, two, and the White Armies opposing Lenin in the Russian Civil War, three. So Estonia and Latvia and Lithuania really are in an appalling situation in what are known as the Independence Wars. They're part of, and it's best to see them as part of the Russian Civil War at the end of the First World War. They had no armies of their own. And so they had to establish armies pretty quickly in all three countries. They managed in the end to throw the Germans out. They managed to throw the White Armies of Russia out. And finally, by 1920, they had achieved really an incredible feat, they had thrown the Red Armies out. They are free. But to the north or to

the east, however you want to say it, to the north is Russia, the victor in World War I, although now Bolshevik Russia, which was not at the peace treaties at the end of the war because Trotsky and Lenin had taken it out of the war, and to the south, Germany, defeated. But as we well know, defeated but not defeated all at the same time. So these two powerful powers to the north and the south are as it were threatening these three Baltic states. Let's give some detail. The Estonians were the most successful. They managed to throw the Red Army out by February of 1919. It was much more difficult in Latvia. There were more Russians in Latvia. The Russian Army, the Red Army, occupied Riga, the capital, in January 1919 and within a few weeks had reconquered, that's the right word, the whole of Latvia. In Lithuania, the situation was equally difficult. The Red Army managed to capture by January 1919 the capital of Vilnius in the north of Lithuania and the territory around it. The fighting was severe. And when finally peace came, Estonia and Latvia are free of Russians and established democratic governments backed by Britain. Incidentally, when I was with the Council of Europe tour in Estonia, the Estonians told me that it was Britain that first recognised the freedom of Estonia in 1918, and it was Britain that first recognised the independence of Estonia in 1991. And they were terribly cognizant of that fact. And I was with other Europeans. I was the only Briton. And they were insistent on talking to me about it as though I'd been responsible for the British Navy to have come to protect at Narva Estonian independence from Russia on two occasions. So Britain's bank account, if you like, is high in Estonia. The country that was worse off was Lithuania. Why? Because the Polish army had thrown the Russians out of the North in Vilnius and refused to give it back to the Lithuanians who had to set up another capital in Kaunas, K A U N A S, in the south of the country.

So in fact, when we say the three countries gained their independence by 1920, that is correct in the case of Estonia on the maps today, in the case of Latvia on the maps today, but not in the case of Lithuania where the north was held by Poland, which was true, was democratic and independent in the interwar years, but nevertheless, they held that part of Lithuania. I told you the relationship between Lithuania and Poland is another complexity of this area. And that division between Poland and Lithuania was actually agreed by the League of Nations. The League of Nations has subsequently been seen, because of the rise of Hitler, as a complete failure. It wasn't. It negotiated this peace which held until World War II and frankly I think would've held forever had World War II not intervened. So it's one of those pluses, if you like. You might say there aren't many, but there are more than people think of the League of Nations. Now if I'm looking like that, it's because my watch says one time and my clock says the other, and I've got TO remember that my clock is slow and I'm further on in time when I thought I was. Never mind. You know, so let me just read you this little piece from the book we've been using. "Lithuanian-Polish border. "An agreement was reached in February 1923, "and it placed it

between the border "between Poland and Lithuania, "between Kaunas, held by the Lithuanians, "and Vilnius, held by the Poles. "Thus at the end of the Wars of Independence, "Poland continued to control "about a fifth of Lithuanian territory, "including its capital at Vilnius." But the three Baltic states were now free. And in the case of Estonia and Latvia for the first time in, well, really modern history at any date post mediaeval history, they're now free. And they successfully established democracies. They established the infrastructure of democracies, for example education, very quickly particularly in Estonia. Why in Estonia? Because Estonians were different. Their culture was very different, and the Estonians were supported by Swedes and by Finns. They're pulled in to that Scandinavian network in a way that Latvia wasn't. But the success was to be short-lived. Because the three states could not remain untouched by World War II when both German forces and Russian forces occupy all three of the Baltic states. And at the end of which in '45, Russia reintegrates all three into holy Mother Russia itself. But the story of course is worse than that.

The Baltic states were invaded and occupied in June 1940 by the Soviet Union. Why? Well, as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact between Russia and Germany. Germany handed them over to Russia. But that pact only lasted for a year because in June 1941, the Germans, as you know, launched Operation Barbarossa against the Russians, and they attacked the Soviet armies in the three Baltic states and within weeks had defeated the Red Army. And now, the Germans are in control. And in July, one month after Operation Barbarossa began, in July 1941, Hitler announced that the Baltic territories were then to be called the Reichskommissariat Ostland, the Eastland. They issued coinage and all sorts of things to emphasise that this was now Germany. In 1944, the Red Army is on the advance, and the Red Army invade the Baltic states and trap the remaining German forces. And eventually, there's a small pocket of German forces left in the Baltic state by the time of the surrender of all German forces in May 1945. So the story is first of all, the Russians come in because of the agreement with Germany. Then the Germans come in when they break that agreement with Operation Barbarossa. Then the Russians come in again as a result of the advance of Berlin in 1945, 1944-45. And then, the Russians are effectively in control, and there's nothing the Americans, or the British, or the French, or Western Ally could do about it but accept it as a fait accompli that the three Baltic states are now part of Russia again. There was nothing other than a Third World War, an American-British advance through Germany but, Churchill had that mad idea, was very quickly squashed by the Americans but also by his own cabinet. There was no way that the American or British public would've tolerated, even if we could have won, a war against Stalin's victorious forces in East Germany and in the Baltic states. Once more in charge, the Russians introduced now not only Russification but Sovietization. Communism. They attacked local culture, they attacked freedom of religion, they attacked freedom of expression. All the things we know

about Soviet Russia are now applied to the three Baltic states. There was some resistance in the forests of the Baltic. The so-called Forest Brothers fought a guerilla campaign, which is little reported. But we are left with horrifying figures. The Soviets carried out massive deportations between 1940 and '41 and again between 1944 and '52. In March 1949 alone, Soviet authorities organised a mass deportation of 90,000 people from the Baltics. The total number deported by the Russians between '44 and '55 has been estimated at over half a million, 124,000 Estonians, 136,000 Latvians, and 245 Lithuanians. But that's not the end of the horror as many, many, many of you know.

Now, Trudy is going to talk about the horror of the Holocaust in I think Latvia and Estonia. And she is the expert, and your questions can be directed towards her because she will know the answers that I do not know. But I cannot and will not leave the story without the reference of the appalling nature of the Holocaust in all three Baltic states, which began after the German invasion of June 1941. By the end of 1941, the 40,000 Jews remaining in Lithuania were incarcerated in ghettos and subsequently murdered. Most Latvian Jews had been murdered by the Germans by the end of 1941. And in January 1942, the German High Command in Estonia reported back in Berlin that Estonia was this appalling word, judenfrei. Free of Jews.

Now, one of the stories that must be told about Ukraine, incidentally, as well as about the Baltic states. At a time when the West sees Ukraine in black and white terms, everything about Ukraine is white, everything about Russia is black, and the same applies to the Baltic, we must not forget the history of the Holocaust. The day after the German invasion in June '41, even before the Germans arrived to take control in the Baltic states, in Lithuania, the southernmost state, in Lithuania, major Jewish settlements were attacked and murders committed of women and children as well as men by Lithuanians against Jews. Not Germans, not Russians. Lithuanians. And that's what makes it uneasy in the Europe of the 21st century. It makes it uneasy with Ukraine, and it makes it uneasy with the Baltic states. There is blood on their hands. Let me just read you a sentence here that I've got. "The victims in Lithuania were led "from Vilnius and its vicinity to pits. "They were shot by Germans and Lithuanians and thrown in. "Few survived the massacres and of those, "hardly any manage to elude the local Lithuanian population. "From July '41 to '44," German occupation, "more than 70,000 people, nearly all of them Jews, "were murdered around Vilnius." A Jewish historian has written, "Not only were hundreds of thousand of people murdered "by the German occupiers and their local helpers, "these events also brought "to an abrupt end a centuries-old Jewish culture "and tradition in the Baltic states. "While few Jews settled in Estonia, Latvia, "and especially Lithuania were known "as centres of Jews in East Central Europe. "Last but not least, "Vilnius was considered the Jerusalem of the North." So a simplistic view of history is to say, "Oh, those poor Baltic states. "They've done wonders "to create an independent democracy today." Yes,

true. But, and it's a huge but, in Lithuania, a massive but, they happily, joyfully even, took part in the horror of the Holocaust. And I don't know, I'm not Jewish, and to me, I can't come to terms with how we deal with them as friends in that sense, how we move on from that. And if you are Jewish, it must be far more difficult for you. Maybe it is because I'm of a certain generation and maybe younger, non-Jewish Britons wouldn't feel the same. Maybe they don't know. There's very little written. Because it doesn't fit, as it were, the national histories. The Russian occupation we can regard as lasted from 1944 until the end of the Cold War in 1991. It was Gorbachev who refused to send troops in, you remember, to put down the Estonians and the Latvians and Lithuanians when they rose finally in rebellion. And they formed this Baltic chain, literally hand in hand, to defy the Russians. And an adult educator in Estonia told me, and I've told some of you this story before, but it's a true story, they thought that Gorbachev would order the tanks in. And he said, "My wife and I were too old "to go back under Russian rule." And so he was a professor of adult education. "So we went to the parliament "because it symbolised Estonian freedom, "and we formed a chain around it. "Inside were young men with any rifles or pistols, "anything they could find. "And we knew that the Russian tanks would come, "and my wife and I knew we would be killed. "But we both thought that to be killed was better "than going back under Russian rule. "So we held hands, a chain around the parliament building." And another Estonian adult educator told me that she, as a young woman, she was out in the fields holding hands, right this chain across the Baltic. And they saw Estonian, Red Army Estonian helicopters come. And they thought, "They're going to shoot us." Instead, they had loud hailers and said, "The Estonian army will stand with you. Stand firm. "But the Russian tanks are nearly at the border. "Stand firm." And she said, "We were prepared at that moment to die. "We knew we couldn't do anything, "but we were prepared to die." And at the last moment, Gorbachev sent them back. And we all know the rest of the story. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania become free once more and remain free today. And they remain free as members of the European Union and as members of NATO. So if Russia attacks them, it's not like Ukraine. Because all of NATO has to defend them. But on your map, you will see a small town called Suwalki. S U W A L K I. And there is a famous stretch of land called the Suwalki Gap, which is on the border of Lithuania and Poland, between Belarus and the enclave of Russia in Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad is this Russian enclave in the middle of the EU. The Suwalki Gap is a border of only 40 miles. 40 miles between Russian-supporting Belarus and the Russian territory in Kaliningrad. And if Putin is going to make a move, it's through that gap. 40 miles, 40 miles. Could it be defended? Well, there are NATO troops there, true. And if there is going to be a Third World War, it will break out on the Suwalki Gap because we cannot, we cannot allow the three Baltic states to become Russian again because they're members of NATO. And because if we do that, then Russia may start at Finland, at Sweden, at Norway, and even God forbid, Germany. We have to defend the Suwalki Gap. So it's a grim story in many ways, and I

didn't want leave on a grim note.

I'm going to leave you with a Baltic joke. I hope no one will be offended. I began by saying much of the history of the Baltic states. The Baltic states were playthings of the great powers, and they still are. Russia threatening from the north, America defending it from across the seas, and Germany, ever sort of questionable in terms of how Germany might act. And the Baltic joke goes like this, that Biden, Putin, and the German Chancellor Scholz were standing on the shores of the Baltic Sea having a talk. And Biden said, "American submarines can stay submerged for 10 days "in the Baltic before needing air." Putin replies, "That's nothing. "Russian submarines can stay submerged in the Baltic "for up to a month." Scholz is rather embarrassed and says nothing. And suddenly, a submarine emerges in front of the three leaders, and a hatch opens and an officer puts his head out of the hatch and says in German, "Heil Hitler. Is the war over?" I'll leave you with that. That should end this.

I'm sure I've got questions, ooh, lots.

Q & A and Comments

Absolutely. Marilyn, many Jewish Lithuanians went to South Africa. "When did they make this move?"

Oh, I was hoping you were going to tell me that. I'm not sure. I'm sure there must be Lithuanian South Africans or someone who could tell me the answer. I'm not going to answer that because I'm not sure of the answer.

- Around about 1910, I think.

- Yeah, so under the pogroms of tsarist Russia. In other words, yes. Thanks, Wendy. Oh, yes. I love it.

Someone from Britain is talking about our new prime minister. Someone from America is talking about who replaces Biden. One of the things about history is it brings you back to the present always. Because if we are going to have a problem on the Suwalki Gap, is Biden or Trump or Liz Truss or Scholz the people we want in charge? It's a frightening position.

Somebody says, "Hi, William. Don't you like Truss?"

No, I don't. I think she's really extraordinarily thick. And for someone who was educated at Merton, I can't believe it.

Oh, people are commenting on the conversation I was having with Wendy. "I'm happy to see you back. "At a time when the world is so ugly here

in the States, "and you are talking about a part of the world I taught in "as the Russians were leaving them in ruins." Oh, right. The other people are commenting on the stories I'd said about the environment in Norway. Somebody says, "You should, it's not worth," hang on, I've lost that bit now.

Someone says, "You shouldn't go to the Columbia Icefield in the Rockies. "It's no longer worth even stopping to look at "because it's unfreezing."

Q: "When you say German Baltics or Russian Baltics, "what do you mean? "Are they German or Russian "by language or religion or what?"

A: No, they're German and Russian by ethnicity. Sorry, I didn't make that clear. The German Baltics are Germans. Russian Baltics are Russians who live in the Baltics and may, in many cases, have lived there for generations.

Q: "Who named Lithuania and why that name?"

A: Oh, you're all on form tonight. I don't know the answer to that, I'm sorry.

Q: "Could I name that German-Jewish Russian officer?"

A: Simonov.

Q: "William, could you so repeat "how German-speaking people came "to be living in the Baltic, "having no border with Germany?"

A: Well, there wasn't a Germany. And it's easy. Think about the Hanseatic states, for example, Hanseatic League. The Germans were all over that area business-wise, and they simply buy up estates.

Oh, somebody's Mona again, "Amazing the difference between Estonians "and Latvians or Lithuanians. "So exciting to me that you are talking "about a part of the world that I had so much to talk about, "but it wasn't fascinating to people like talking "about Italy or Spain."

Yes, Mona, you are right. People don't know about the Baltics. I guess the audience tonight probably know more than the general audience simply because of the horrors of the Holocaust and of the earlier pogroms. But you are right. In general, people don't know this history. I think they should because I think this is an extremely dangerous part of the world.

Q: "Do you know the reason for the conflict between Germany and Russia and the 19th century?"

A: It goes right back to the earliest days. It's a clash between Slav

and Teuton. The clash between Christianity and paganism. It is the clash between Protestant and Catholicism and Orthodoxy. It is the clash between the Knights Templar and the Russians. I'm sorry, the Teutonic Knights and the Russians. It's deep, deep, this division between Germany and Russia. In the 19th, in the 19th century, it is the threat of Russia.

Oh, Robert said, oh no, I wasn't, I'm sorry. No, that's a very good point. If you can, can you, I think he means can I speak of the Courland in Latvia. There was a Jewish community, very German and proud. No, well, I can't do it now as it were. But Courland is an interesting part of history, not least because they had imperial designs.

Oh, Irene. Hello, Irene. "My husband's ancestors were from Ukraine and Lithuania, "whereas my ancestors came from Poland. "I used to tease him by calling his lot lick backs "and he called my forebears peasants. "Bit silly really seeing that most of the family have been in the UK since the middle of the 19th century, but spouses need to be able to tease each other."

Well, that's true enough. There was, as we, that's Wendy interrupted, correct me and rightly so, to answer the question about South African Lithuanians. It is the pogroms in Russia, and remember at the time Poland and Ukraine are part of Russia.

Q: "Can you please recommend a book dealing "with Russian history?"

A: Well, if you go on my blog, you will see that I have lots of blogs about Russian history and books when we did Russia.

Q: Have I ever thought of teaching a class on what-ifs?

A: Yes, I've done what-ifs. Teaching history is difficult in adult education because students are so widely read, have even experienced it, and you are brought up sharp. If you do what-ifs, you get massacred. That's the truth. Because everyone says, "Oh, it wouldn't have been like that. "It would've been like this."

Q: "Were Jews involved in the rebellions?"

A: Yes, they were. I haven't got a figure of the population of all Baltic states, sorry. And you can easily find that on Google. Just ask for the population of the three independent countries and do a sum. Sorry, I don't mean to be rude. That isn't meant to be a rude answer, James. I haven't got the figure. And that's the quickest way. You'll get the most up-to-date figures. If you want to, maybe you don't know if you are not American, there is an extremely good site, which is operated unbelievably by the CIA. It's not political. There is a CIA site, which is a factual site about every country in the world. And I

mean factual. It simply states, and it will give you the up-to-date figures. The BBC also runs sites. If you put CIA statistics plus, I don't think you should put Baltic states. I think you'd have to put 'em individually, then you will get a huge amount of information about the population as it is.

Stan says, "My Jewish family came from Latvia and welcomed the Germans in World War I as they stopped the pogroms."

Well, that, Stan, is a very, very interesting point and not one that would be widely, widely known or widely accepted. The Germans in World War I are not the Germans in World War II. Nazism in World War II is the horror. The Germans in World War I is an old-fashioned 19th century war. I could go on for a long time, I won't. You make, Stan, an extremely important point.

Q: "How did Konigsberg, Kaliningrad, fit into the history "of the three Baltic states?" says Stuart.

A: One, it began as Konigsberg as the headquarters of the German order of German Teutonic Knights. It then became part of Prussia because the Teutonic Knights leader converted to Protestantism and wrote to Luther and said, "Look, I'm now a Protestant and so are much of my followers. "What do we do because we're a Catholic order?" And Luther said, "Well, just proclaim yourself a prince." And his name was Hohenzollern, and that's the Prussian and German royal house. Kaliningrad is established at the end of World War II because it was Russian occupied and then fitted nicely into the picture of Russian-occupied Baltic states, Russian-occupied Belarus, and Russian-occupied Poland. The problem arose at the end of the Cold War. The Russians remained in Kaliningrad and we therefore have this problem. And the Suwalki Gap is the huge problem connected. Also, Putin's first wife, well, only wife, I mean, he's had mistresses since he's divorced, but his wife actually came from Kaliningrad, and I think that made a difference to his view and probably does today.

Oh, I'm sorry. I really can't go into the history of Ukraine. It is a very complicated history, and I cannot answer in five minutes. I wish I could.

"My mother said she grew up in White Russia, Belarus. My parents who met and married in South Africa were Lithuanians, Jews. My late wife was also Lithuanian. My son told me that our surname, Golden, is Russian."

Yes, there would be nothing odd in that. It could indeed be Russian or German. And originally, it might well have been a Jewish surname, which was Russianized, and the family simply kept the Russification of their surname. That seems quite likely with the beginning of the surname as Gold that it was probably, my guess would be it was a

Jewish surname, which was Russified, and the family simply kept the Russified name when they left.

"All my eight grandparents were from the tsarist empire "in Lithuania."

You know, it's incredible, isn't it? When you're teaching this history, always incredible to me, that it's close. Grandparent. Your grandparents lived in the tsarist empire under Jewish persecution.

"My mother's parents were born in Bethnal Green and Liverpool, respectively. My great grandmother by 1918 and widowed took her family to South Africa, and her father's parents moved to South Africa in 1908 with three children and had four more," well this is the Jewish diaspora in one family. My father's family left in early 20th century, spent one night in the Jewish temporary shelter in London before getting on a boat to Cape Town. He worked and sent for my mother. She joined him. They set up home in Cape Town, had seven children."

Well, I always loved it as an Englishman, I loved the Jewish story that the Jews who weren't very bright and landed in London en route to America thought that London was America and stayed. It was only the intelligent Jews, oh, I should remember, I've got a job, I've got a live audience, it was only the intelligent ones they say who thought, "Yes, this is London. We don't want to stay here. We got to get out," and went to America. I love that story.

Tim says, "My Jewish family came from Lithuania in the 1800s. I think they were trying to escape from not ideal. They came to Ireland."

Wow, which is where I'm from and lived. I guess they left not in the early 1800s but the later 1800s. But to go to Ireland, that's a strange place to go given the poverty in Ireland and would not have been much better than the poverty they have been in Lithuania. I'm not sure about what the antisemitism would've been in the late 19th century in Catholic Ireland. Pretty grim, I guess. That's a most interesting story, Tim. There can't be many Jews that did that.

Kaliningrad, I've said something. Oh no, it's the Treaty of Versailles. Yeah, it's the Treaty of Versailles and the accompanying treatise, which established the independence of the Baltic states and Poland. Well, no, that's not quite true. Poland is in Versailles. The three Baltic states are after the events of 1920. So it's later, 1923. And Belarus, I answered. I'm glad I got that right. Lena, I can get some things right.

"The Lithuanians were outwardly antisemitic? In Poland, they told us the prince of Poland," I didn't know they had one, "gave Vilnius, then Vilna, I think to his Lithuanian girlfriend. Very romantic, very true."

Not a story I'm familiar with. Now, the Lithuanians were antisemitic, that is because they were Catholic and that also why I was hesitant about Ireland.

Q: "Where were Balts deported into Russia?"

A: Eastward into Russia.

Q: "Is there a strong anti-Russia theme in Baltic states?"

A: Yes. Can I tell my story? Some of you will have heard it, it's too good to miss. On a Council of Europe jolly to Estonia shortly after 1991, we went to the border at Narva, which is the seaport border between Estonia and Russia, and the Estonian host, we were at a reception by the mayor, the Western European party in the castle, and it has now gone dark. And the Estonian said, "You are British." And I said, "Yes I am." They said, "Would you like to come with us? We want to show you something." So they took me out. I subsequently discovered my friend, my German friend, she was horrified and thought they were going to shoot me or something, but they took me out and they took me down a road. And there was a river, not a very wide river to be honest, in front of us with a bridge over it. And there was no traffic going over. There were lorries parked up both sides of the bridge, obviously waiting to go over, I thought, in the morning. And I was right. And so they said, "Do you know what you are looking at?" "I said, "Well, I'm looking at a bridge and there are lorries waiting to go over." And they said, "Yes, because that's Russia on the other bank." I said, "Really?" They said, "Oh yeah, look. You can see the Russian soldiers over there marching up and down," which we could. And they said, "Look, we'd like you to stand here and shout in a very posh English accent, 'fuck off.'" I said, "I'm doing no such thing." When I told my German friend, she said, "You didn't!" I said, "Of course, I didn't." "They could have open fired on you." No, they do not like the Russian. But there's a problem about that because they've downed, the Russians who live, for example, in Estonia have fewer rights than Estonians. And there is a problem about them. They're not treating the Russians who live there well.

Well, I have answered the Kaliningrad question. They hold onto it because it was not resolved. It was part of the Russian Empire, 1945, and was not an integral part and was not resolved in 1991. And there was no way it could be resolved in 1991.

Yes, Ed. You are absolutely right. Lithuanians killing Jews, Ukrainians killed Jews. There's a new book being produced about the horrors of World War II and Ukrainians involved in Holocaust. The whole story is horrible, but you are absolutely right. Ukrainian story mirrors the Baltic or the Baltic mirrors the Ukrainian. My point was these were not Germans, not Russians, but they were also, they were

also the indigenous population of Estonians, Lithuanians, and Latvians, and Ukrainians. And that was the horror. And that's why it's difficult to get your head around it all in 2022 because we are, as I said, we are presented with this marvellous man, Zelensky, and all the rest of it. And you think, hang on, it isn't actually like that. The story is more complex than that. We're back to World War II and the greater evil of an alliance with Stalin. It's what Churchill said, "I'm prepared to sup with the devil if necessary." But it's difficult.

Eileen writes, "For information on history of Jews in Latvia and Estonia, go to Jewish and Latvia research division webpage." Bless you. That's a very good thing to do.

Oh, Sheila also writes, Sheila writes, "Ruta Vanagaite, wonderful Lithuanian author "who has written extensively on Lithuanian involvement in the Holocaust. Some of her books are available in English now."

Well, I have not read any of those, but that sounds really interesting.

Q: "Did the Baltics raise arm to fight with the Nazis?"

A: Yes, they did. This is one of the other problems we face.

No, as far as I know, there's been no truth and reconciliation, Phil, in the Baltic states. Yes. No, Vilna and Vilnius, one in the same place. The names are interchangeable.

Oh, Guido says, "I think the way to come to grips with the current status vis-a-vis the horrendous Holocaust legacy is to hang onto the thought that collective guilt is inappropriate. And if possible, "intergenerational collective guilt is even more inadmissible."

I think the answer is respond in no fewer than 5,000 words. It's difficult. Well, maybe I'm alone in finding it difficult, but I don't think so.

- William,

- Yes?

- I'm going to jump in with everything.

- I'm sorry. This has been so interesting.

- It's amazing and I'm really, really so sorry to interrupt you.

- [William] Bye, everybody. Bye bye.

- See you in half an hour. Very good. Take care, bye.