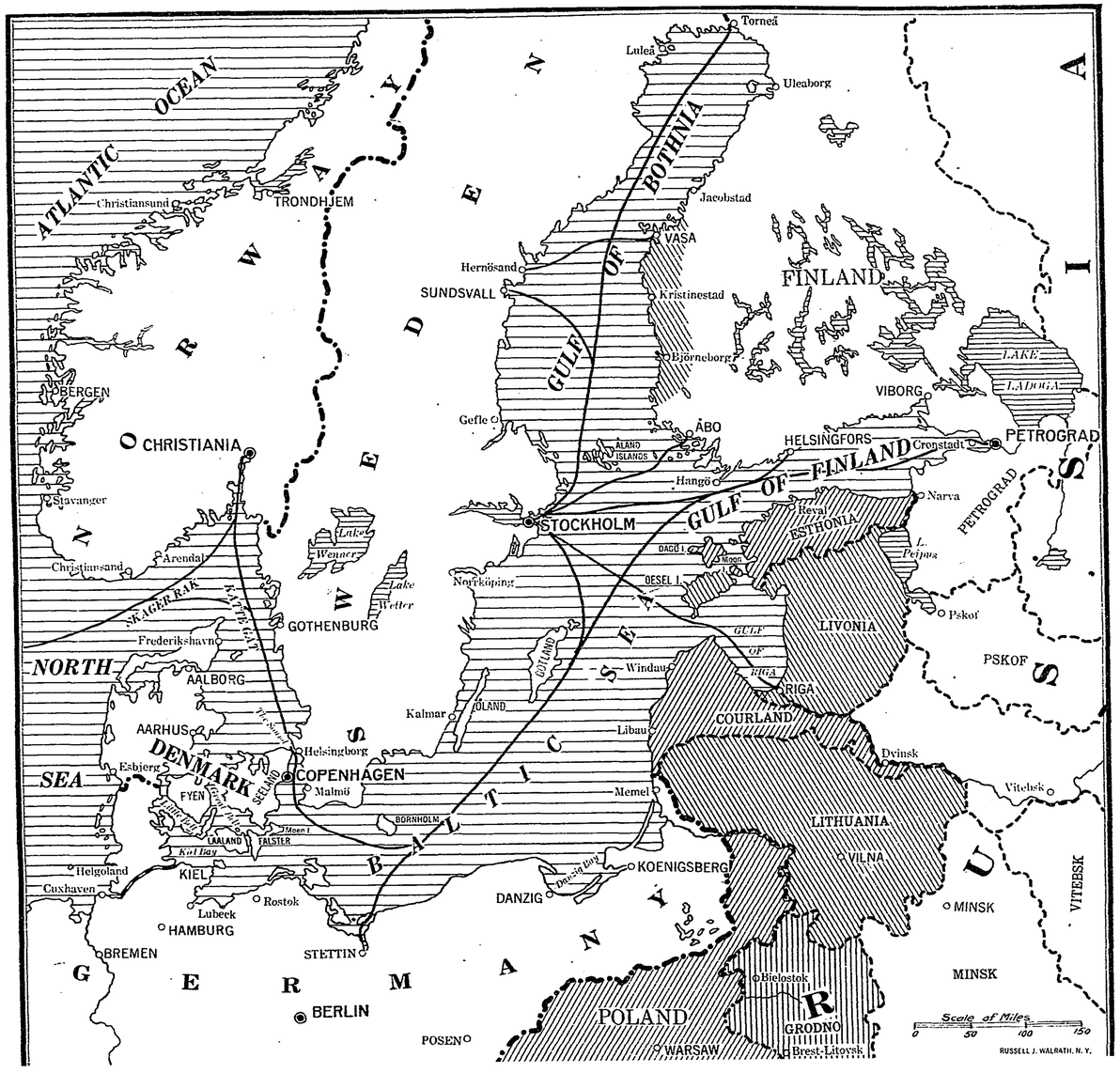
Uneasy Sweden and the Menace of Prussianism

An Analysis of the Scandinavian Situation in View of Kaiser's Reported Ambition to Make the Baltic a German Lake



The Baltic Sea and Adjacent Lands. Shaded Area Is Now Occupied, Wholly or in Part, by Germany. It Includes the Aland Islands, Situated in the Direct Steamship Lanes of the Baltic and Constituting a Serious Menace to Sweden.

By AN AMERICAN CITIZEN OF SWEDISH BIRTH.

AFTER a brief respite following the disintegration of the Russian Empire, the eyes of the Swedish and Norwegian peoples on the Scandinavian Peninsula are turning apprehensively toward the east. Their Danish neighbors are also standing guard more anxiously than ever at the German frontier. Czarism, with Pan Slavistic dreams of world empire and a Russian outlet on warm western seas via Scandinavia, has passed into history. Did this peril fade only to be superseded by the spectre of Prussia committed to a scheme of making the Baltic an inland sea?

There is much circumstantial evidence that, with defeat staring her in the face on the western front since America's entry into the war, Germany is endeavoring to appease home sentiment and stir her half-starved folks to greater sacrifices by preparing to seek new conquests along what the Prussian strategists probably regard as a line of lesser resistance.

To persons familiar with this remote section of Europe there should be nothing far-fetched in the suggestion. Ethnology, language, the geographical lay of the land, a far stretch of turbulent political history reaching well back into the Dark Ages—all would seem to furnish an incentive to Teuton greed and Teuton ambition. With this possibility established, there opens to the seeing eye a wide vista, with the Scandinavian countries drawn into the turmoil of the world conflict and the lengthened battle lines of the Entente allies, extended to the Arctic Circle and beyond, hammering away at the German Empire from the north and east, as well as from the south and west.

A far and distant prospect? Perhaps not. Is it within the realm of probability that the Scandinavian countries could view with complacency an advance of Germany's military forces through Finland toward the Swedish frontier—a sweep that would bring them within easy striking distance of the richest iron ore deposits in all the world and a base on the Atlantic which for a century or more was the goal of Imperial Russia's ambitious dream?

In the news dispatches there is nothing as yet to show positively that Germany is contemplating military operations of magnitude in this direction. But who is there to belive that Germany at bay would balk at such an adventure extraordinary and profitable enough to kindle the imagination and enthusiasm of her depressed multitudes at home? To discourage the belief there is nothing but Germany's assurances, and the value of these assurances must be appraised in the light of Belgium and Brest-Litovsk. The Scandinavian Governments, while compelled through their present isolation to impose upon themselves a self-restraint readily open to misconstruction, are distrustful of Germany's purposes. That is evident. It can be read between the lines of every cable dispatch coming from a Scandinavian capital since German military forces landed on the Aland Islands.

If Germany decides to set herself up as an autocratic neighbor on adjacent Finnish soil, she will forthwith give a severe wrench to the already cooling friendship between the Swedish Government and the Government of the Kaiser. It is not at all certain that Sweden could go much beyond the protesting stage, in the absence of material and military aid from Germany's enemies. What may turn out, after all, to be but the initial step in a comprehensive scheme of conquest—the landing of German forces on Aland—was accomplished with nothing more than a mild protest from the Swedish Government, though Sweden already had an armed force on the islands and vital interests to guard. But behind Sweden's gentle protest is a world of rancor, which could not safely be expressed. It may find future expression, should Sweden be fortified by aid and assurances from the Entente Powers. For the first time since the war began Prussian military ambition—through the Aland episode—has established a grievance common to Sweden and the Entente Allies.

In short, the Aland incident may prove the opening wedge for a split between Sweden and Germany. It may bring about, when the fullness of Prussian purpose is clearly seen, an approachment between the Scandinavian countries and the Entente Allies, to which Sweden's friendly attitude toward Germany so far has been the principal obstacle.

Germany, with the Aland Archipelago secure in her possession, might readily turn it into a new Heligoland that would threaten the inlet to Stockholm, the Swedish capital and naval base, and tend toward complete Teuton mastery in the Baltic. The Aland group is composed of some 300 little islands, no further distant from the Swedish coast than is Sandy Hook from the Statue of Liberty. It lies directly in the steamer lane used in the extensive trans-Baltic traffic between Stockholm and the seaports of Southern Finland and Petrograd. It stands sentinel at the entrance of the Gulf of Bothnia, the maritime gateway to the north of Sweden.

The islands were a Swedish possession until 1809, when, with the Grand Duchy of Finland, they were ceded to the Czar through the Treaty of Fredrikshavn, after a war in which Russia had been the victor. Approximately 90 per cent. of the population of about 20,000 is of Swedish origin or ancestry, and the Swedish language is used more extensively by the islanders than the tongue of the mother country. When the Treaty of Fredrikshavn was concluded, Sweden strongly urged that the islands should remain unfortified, but was unable to enforce her demand on the conqueror. Soon after gaining possession, Russia set about erecting fortifications which were regarded in Sweden as a challenge and a menace to her wonted freedom of action in the Baltic. Later came the Crimean war and with it the bombardment and demolition of Bomarsund, the strongest fortified point in the Aland Archipelago, by an Anglo-French fleet.

That was in 1854. Will the thunder of British and French guns, with American naval ordnance joining the chorus for better measure, again burst on the ears of the islanders in 1918, in an effort to dislodge the German usurpers and restore the Aland group to the undisturbed possession of its peaceful population of simple farmers and hardy fishermen?

Nothing could be more nearly calculated to make the Baltic a theatre for naval warfare or to rouse Great Britain into a convincing demonstration of her supremacy on the sea than the German occupation of Aland. For many years prior to the Crimean war the British Government had protested in vain against a military establishment on the islands. In 1856, through the so-called "Aland Convention," which afterward was incorporated as an integral part of the Treaty of Paris, concluded in the same year at the end of the Crimean struggle, it was stipulated that "the Aland Islands shall not be fortified and no military and naval establishment shall be created on them." Lord Palmerston, as head of the British Government, speaking in the House of Commons, pronounced the clause a triumph of British diplomacy and a provision for "a barrier between Russia and the north of Europe," the permanency of which the Government of Great Britain would undertake to enforce.

Aland has figured in more recent diplomatic history. Russia of the Romanoffs, as was demonstrated in 1906, had no intention of keeping inviolate her pledge regarding Aland. On a pretext of stopping smuggling, a considerable naval and military force made its appearance in the islands in that year, and soon it became clear that fortification of the group was not only in contemplation but actually begun. This provoked a protest from Great Britain and France, signatories with Russia, to the "Aland Convention" and the Treaty of Paris. For a time it looked as if Russia's conduct would lead to an international episode of grave complexion. But soon the late King Edward began the work of bringing about that closer understanding between Great Britain and Russia culminating in the formation of the Triple Entente.

Germany inspired the most recent protest against the use of the Aland group for belligerent purposes. This was directed against Russia and was filed by Sweden with that country and her allies. Satisfactory assurances were forthcoming that the Russian plans were merely a temporary war measure. Great Britain undertook to guarantee that Russia's military establishment on Aland would not be continued beyond the duration of the war. Thus, entirely aside from selfish reasons, Great Britain and her allies in a real sense are pledged to Sweden to frustrate any permanent Prussian scheme of occupation, and as a result of representations made by the occupant power itself.

To gain that complete mastery of the Baltic which recent cable dispatches indicate to be Germany's aim would involve such a vast undertaking and be a project so fraught with grave danger to Germany that any attempt to realize it might well be regarded a madman's dream. It would require the military subjugation of the Scandinavian countries to give Germany control of the western inlet of the Danish Sound, and would add three new nations to the already long list of Germany's enemies.

But Germany, throughout this war—except on the western front—has pursued a wild policy of adventure and hazard, and most of her hazardous ventures have ended well. Witness the Serbian and Rumanian campaigns, the campaign in Courland, the capture of Riga and Reval, the headlong advance into Russian territory, well toward the troubled heart of Russia! It is merely possible that, inflated by much unmerited success, the masters of Prussia's military strategy may have concluded that this is the psychological moment for carrying out Prussian designs in the North, and that the Scandinavian countries, stripped of food and many other things essential to the successful conduct of war through the allied embargo, will fall an easy prey to a ruthless invader. This might be a safe theory if it could be taken for granted that the Scandinavian countries would be left to fight it out alone, even though between them they can muster a military force aggregating 1,500,000 men, and a campaign in Sweden and Norway, aside from purely military resistance, would offer strategic difficulties which no invader could well afford to overlook. But there are the Danes to be considered. Denmark might be more readily overrun by Teutonic forces than the other Scandinavian countries, but here Germany would be in danger of finding herself face to face with seasoned forces of the Allies, well equipped to give battle and landed on the coast of Jutland under the protection of the Entente fleets. A disaster to German arms on Danish soil might readily mark the beginning of the end, for the victorious Entente forces could reach the northern boundary of the German Empire by a few hours of forced marching.

On the eastern shores of the Baltic, even should the policy of "self determination" be applied, recent developments have afforded Germany opportunities that undoubtedly she will improve by creating spheres of influence, which, when peace comes, will mean as much to her as would conquered provinces. In the Baltic Provinces a large portion of the population is of German origin, anyhow. In Courland 75 per cent. of the land-owning class are an offshoot of Prussian junkerdom. Livonia, for long periods during the Middle Ages and after, was under the domination of the German military orders—the Teuton Knights and the Knights-Swordbearers. At a later period, when the Hanseatic League flourished, intimate and constant trade relations existed between the Hanseatic cities in Northern Germany and the commercial settlements in both Livonia and Esthonia. The influence of that intercourse has not wholly vanished, even after centuries of Swedish, Polish, and Russian rule. Until the "Russification" that began during the reign of Alexander III. German was more frequently heard in the street and the market places of cities like Riga and Reval than either Russian or the native tongues. The dominant religion, too, prior to that period, was the Lutheran, the State Church of the German Empire.

After a hundred years of oppression under Russia's despotism, succeeded by months of anarchy or Bolshevist license, when the "Red Guard" supplanted the Cossacks of the Romanoff rule and no person's life or property was secure, is it any wonder that the German troops in many places have been hailed as liberators? To the harassed inhabitants the German régime represents, if not liberty, at least law and order and the uprooting of Bolshevism.

In Finland, too, the German military force already landed—if not by invitation, at least with the consent of the more responsible element contending for de facto control of the Finnish Government—was hailed by this element as a welcome antidote to the Bolsheviki, the "Red Guard," and the native exponents of extreme socialism or unbridled anarchy. In Finland, Czarism had labored and brought forth the Finnish Socialist Party, which at the time Finland proclaimed her independence controlled the Finnish Diet by a narrow margin and the Finnish Senate by a more ample majority. Oscar Tokoi, who until a couple of years ago wielded a pick in a Montana copper mine, was Vice President of the Senate and Premier of Finland.

The "White Guard," to whose support in the effort to subdue the Bolshevist "Red Guard" the German forces ostensibly were sent, has drawn for its strength principally on the Swedish Party, the bourgeoisie, the cultured classes, and an element among the masses not yet converted by the Socialist and anarchist teaching so much in vogue in that country during recent years. The elements that enter into the "White Guard" ever since Finland became the victim of "Russification" have contended for the maintenance of the law-bound liberty assured to the country through a Constitution to which the father of the last Romanoff was the latest Russian ruler to pledge his support, and they have suffered martyrdom and exile for their stanch courage and their patriotic fervor. It has been openly charged that the Russian Government, which under the Romanoffs would not suffer anarchy or socialism to exist in Russia proper, looked with tolerance on both in Finland during their early ascendency, as a helpful diversion from the forces that kept contending for Finland's constitutional rights and for liberty under the guarantee of law.

The "material, political, and moral tutelage" that Germany, according to a recent cable dispatch, is preparing to exercise in Finland if the "White Guard" prevails with her aid, may have an immediate and practical result with a distinct bearing on the present war. It will provide what virtually will amount to a fast, all-land route from the rich ore deposits in the north of Sweden to the German smelting furnaces, ammunition factories, and ordnance plants.

Maybe the fears of the Scandinavian peoples and the nervous tension said to exist in the Scandinavian Chancelleries are unfounded, and that Germany would balk before the grandeur of the scheme and the extreme hazard of an invasion of Scandinavia, even though she would not hesitate at a betrayal of friendly neutrals, who would be handicapped in the conduct of a defensive war, partly as a penalty for their former friendly neutrality toward the invader. It may be that the group of fortresses erected by Sweden near the Arctic Circle, where Swedish and Finnish territory meet, to ward off aggression, inspired by Russia's Pan Slavistic dream of world empire, will not be called into action at this time to repel an invasion or to serve as an added bulwark in the great conflict to make the world safe for democracy. It may be that Germany, with the big task she has on hand and content with what she has already achieved on the eastern shore of the Baltic, will bide her time while the Teutonic war lords toast "The Day" that shall dawn on her ripened projects for new aggressions on the other shore. No man can tell what will be the next move of Prussian diplomacy and Prussian militarism. But it is safe to assume that Sweden will not yield willingly to Teuton aggression.

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