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Some Aspects of the Nationality Question in the Lutheran Church of Estonia, 1918–39

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Estonian church history in this century is not a well-researched field and our scholarly knowledge is rather limited. It is based on only a few books and some articles, most of which were written after the Second World War. These treat the subject on a rather general level and mostly neglect any deeper analysis. Understandably it was not easy to make a comprehensive and objective study of Estonian church history at a period when almost all the primary sources were in closed archives in Soviet Estonia. Now the archives have finally opened for almost everyone interested. This study is based on material found in Estonian, German and Swedish archives.

Today most Estonians are not officially members of any Christian Church. In 1995 no more than about 12 per cent of the Estonian people were members of the Lutheran Church, and for the Orthodox Church the number was even lower. A hasty conclusion would be that atheistic education had achieved its goals; but that is only a partial truth. All in all, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Lutheran Church is the national Church of Estonia. Neither can we say that for the Orthodox Church, which is deeply divided into an Estonian and a Russian part.

The situation was very different in the 1920s and the 1930s, when Estonia was an independent state for the first time in its history. At that time almost 80 per cent of the population belonged to the Lutheran Church. The remaining 20 per cent were for the most part Orthodox. The numbers suggest that we could rightfully regard the Lutheran Church at that period as the national Church of Estonia. This conclusion, however, would not be correct. It would be more accurate to say that the Lutheran Church of Estonia was on the verge of becoming a truly national Church when the Second World War and the Soviet occupation following the war put a definite stop to that development. Why did the Church take so long to reach that stage? What prevented it from assuming a positive national role earlier? The answer lies in the ethnic composition of the Lutheran clergy. In 1919, one year after Estonia had declared its independence, more than half the Lutheran clergy were Baltic Germans.[1] Of the overall population the Baltic Germans made up just about two per cent. Their influence within the Church was thus rather disproportionate.

Previous research has given quite a harmonious picture of the relations between the Estonian and the Baltic German clergy within the Lutheran Church in Estonia. I believe that the reality was quite the opposite. I would even go so far as to claim that for the Estonian Church in the interwar period the nationality question was one of its biggest problems. I believe that understanding the nature and history of the

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nationality question in the Estonian Church is of the utmost importance in understanding the situation today. It will help us perceive that the idea of a national Church or a people's Church did not really have enough time to take root at the one period when it should have been possible, the period between the two world wars. I shall concentrate on the main problems in the relations between the two nationalities. The first was the change of power after the First World War and the remodelling of the church hierarchy that followed. The second was the quarrel over the ownership of certain churches. The third was the reorganisation of theological education. My study shows that the relations between the nationalities reached their lowest point in the middle of the 1920s and then improved gradually until in the latter half of the 1930s they finally reached a kind of normality. It would, incidentally, be very intriguing to compare the situation within the Lutheran Church to that within the Estonian Orthodox Church at the same period. The issues involved were profoundly similar in nature. The Lutheran Church had to fight against its German past, the Orthodox Church against its Russian past. However, I shall restrict my presentation to the Lutheran Church.

The First World War brought about fundamental changes in all the Baltic provinces, which until then had been part of the Russian Empire. After the fall of the tsarist regime Estonia declared its independence in February 1918. Subsequently the German army occupied the whole of the Baltic territory, and the consolidation of the Estonian state could begin only at the end of that year, after the Germans had surrendered to the western powers. However, the war was not yet over: the Estonians still had to fight the Bolsheviks, who had invaded Estonia after the Germans had left. The peace treaty with Soviet Russia was signed in February 1920. The Estonians even had to fight the Germans once more: this short-lived war was called the war against the Landeswehr and took place in June 1919.

Up until 1918 Estonia had not been ruled by its indigenous people. The ruling upper class since the thirteenth century, both in society and in the Church, had been Baltic Germans. Following the end of the German occupation the Baltic Germans had to surrender their leading role and accept the status of a minority group. In 1922 Estonia had a little over one million inhabitants. The Baltic German community comprised about 18,000 people (1.7 per cent of the total population); the largest minority group in Estonia was the Russian, which numbered about 91,000 (8.2 per cent). At the beginning of independence a widely-recognised need was to undermine the political influence still exerted by the Baltic German upper class. The most effective way to achieve this was deemed to be the undermining of their economic position. An agrarian reform was introduced in 1919, which duly impoverished the large Baltic German landowners. The political goal was thus attained. This reform was, however, disastrous for the Church as well, as it lost almost all of its land, which had been its main economic source.[2] In the first years of Estonia's independence Estonians thus soon came to occupy the leading positions in society and the Baltic Germans were pushed aside. However, nationalisation did not stop at government and education; it soon affected the Lutheran Church as well. Before the First World War the Lutheran Church in the Baltic provinces had been under virtually complete Baltic German control. A great majority of the pastors had been Baltic Germans, with the Estonians entirely excluded from the upper levels of the church hierarchy. In the spring of 1917 the First Estonian Church Congress was held in Tartu. Major reforms in the church constitution and in parish life were initiated, but due to the war and the German occupation the realisation of these ideas had to be postponed.

The 1917 Church Congress gave birth to the idea of the Free People's Church, which became a slogan for the nationalists: 'Free People's Church' meant free both from the clutches of the state and from its German past.[3] The slogan also had theological connotations in the sense that the nationalists demanded that the Church liberalise its doctrine. To many Estonians traditional Lutheranism was a German faith. In their opinion the Church could not become a truly national Church until it had got rid of its outmoded and stifling German faith and theology. The follow-up to the 1917 congress, the Second Estonian Church Congress, was held in Tallinn in 1919. This time the nationalist-minded initiators of the reforms were more successful. After a heated discussion the congress publicly condemned the Church's German legacy despite fierce protests on the part of the Baltic German pastors. The Estonian participants in the congress considered this move essential if the Church were going to enjoy the confidence of the Estonian people. The congress then proceeded to dismiss the consistory, which was the supreme administrative authority in the consistorial district of Estonia. At this stage the consistory comprised both German and Estonian members. The new consistory subsequently elected was completely Estonian.[4] According to the old church constitution the head of the consistorial district was the general superintendent. At the 1919 congress the Baltic German general superintendent, Wilhelm Kentmann, was practically forced to retire, and on the basis of the new church constitution the congress elected a new leader of the Church, who from then on was to bear the title of bishop. The new bishop, Jakob Kukk, was an extremely nationalist-minded Estonian.[5] He was installed by the archbishop of Sweden in Tallinn in 1921.

It is remarkable that after a humiliation like the 1919 Church Congress the Baltic Germans did not quit the Church. The option was much discussed, but in the end they chose to remain within the Church. It is hard to judge whether they did this because of religious or political motives. They themselves claimed they did not wish to break up the Church. They also regarded themselves as the Estonian Church's link to the motherland of the Reformation and as an outpost of western civilisation in the 'Wild East'. They also expressed their wish to protect the rest of Europe against the spreading of Bolshevism. One possible explanation is that the Baltic Germans hoped they would one day regain their former elite status with a little help from the conservative wing of the Estonian clergy, whom the Baltic Germans regarded as their allies.

The German congregations of Estonia were organised as a German deanery of the Estonian Church. The few Swedish congregations were organised in a similar fashion, but they never came into conflict with the central church government. Instead the Swedish pastors often tried to act as intermediaries between the Estonians and the Baltic Germans. The German deanery comprised the congregations of the largest cities of Estonia: Tallinn, Tartu, Pärnu and Narva. There were German congregations in the smaller towns too, but the consistory did not allow them to join the deanery. On one or two occasions the Estonians in these small towns were so infected by national passions that they forbade the Germans the use of the local church.[6] Some of these small-town German congregations registered as independent organisations outside the Estonian Church when this became possible in the mid-1920s.

The worst crisis in the relations between the two nationalities came soon after the Estonian parliament had approved the Law on the Cultural Autonomy of the Minorities in 1925. This law was considered very progressive in its time and it brought much international praise to the Estonian state for its tolerant attitude

towards the national minorities. The crisis was caused by the expropriation of the Lutheran cathedral in Tallinn. The cathedral, which stood in the vicinity of the parliament, had been used by a Baltic German congregation for centuries, but the new Estonian bishop had made it clear in 1921 that he wanted for himself a church that would suit his position as leader of the Church.[7] Understandably, he chose the cathedral. However, the congregation was not prepared to let go of its shrine. To them it was much more than a place of worship; it was an inalienable part of their national identity as well. The congregation would readily have allowed the bishop to celebrate in their church whenever he wanted, but to the bishop this was not quite enough. After long negotiations with the congregation the bishop finally grew impatient and turned to the government for help. In February 1925 the minister of the interior decreed that the cathedral was to pass under the government's supervision, and at a later date was to become the bishop's church.[8] The congregation naturally did not approve of this decision and filed a complaint with the Court of Impeachment. The ensuing legal struggle lasted nearly two years and ended in the overturning of the congregation's complaint. In the end the cathedral was forcibly expropriated by officials of the Ministry of the Interior, who even had to break into it after the leaders of the congregation had refused to turn over the keys.[9] This deed caused angry quarrelling, especially in the press, and ethnic relations deteriorated. It also attracted much negative publicity for the bishop from around Europe, especially from Germany, Finland and Sweden. The Baltic Germans accused the bishop outright of stealing the church from them. The German ambassador in Tallinn protested by staying away from the official independence day festivities.[10] The dean of the German deanery regarded the expropriation as the final proof that the Estonian Church did not really value the Baltic Germans' loyalty and cooperation. The late 1920s were for the Baltic Germans a time of deepest mistrust and suspicion towards the leadership of the Estonian Church.

Relations between the Estonians and the Baltic Germans did gradually improve, although some points of disagreement still existed. The last major conflict occurred in the early 1930s, when the Baltic Germans opened a private theological academy, the Luther Academy (*Luther-Akademie*) in Tartu, in 1931.[11] Its aim was to give complementary theological education to the Baltic German theologians who suffered from the handicap of a lack of fluency in Estonian and of thus being unable to benefit fully from the mostly Estonian-language teaching at the state university. The Luther Academy was heavily criticised by Estonian students and some politicians who demanded its immediate closure. They regarded the founding of a German academy as a premeditated insult to the University of Tartu and especially to its theological faculty. The Luther Academy was also suspected of being an outpost of new German imperialism in Eastern Europe.[12] In order to be able to carry out its work the Luther Academy had to change its name to the more modest Luther Institute (*Luther-Institut*). It was financed by the German government from the mid-1930s and continued its work until the autumn of 1939.

Otherwise, no major disagreements surfaced. The death of Bishop Kukk in 1933 also made things easier, because the new bishop, H. B. Rahamägi, was for practical reasons much more sympathetic to the Germans. Although he understood the Germans' position better than his predecessor, the Estonian Church was in fact turning more and more towards the English and Scandinavian Churches. The Germans would naturally have liked to see the Estonian Church pursuing closer ties with the Protestant Church of Germany.

The nationalistic problem largely vanished when in 1939 Hitler invited all the

Baltic Germans to Germany. At that time there were still about 49 Baltic German pastors in Estonia, working in both German and Estonian parishes, mostly in northern Estonia. There were altogether a little over 200 pastors in the Church of that time, so the Estonian clergy lost 25 per cent of its members in autumn 1939.

My conclusion, then, is that the Lutheran Church of Estonia simply ran out of time as far as strengthening its national character and assuming a positive national role was concerned. In the late 1930s the Church was about to achieve its goal of becoming a truly national Estonian Church – a people's Church. The Second World War and the Soviet period which followed it put a tragic end to this development. Its failure is a significant – but not the only – explanation for the fact that atheistic education had such a pronounced effect on the Estonian people. The Lutheran Church had not enough time to establish itself as an essential part of the Estonian people's national identity. If it had, atheistic education probably would never have taken root to the depth it did.

Notes and References

1 Mikko Ketola, *Kansallisuuskysymys Viron evankelis-luterilaisessa kirkossa 1919–1931* (*The Nationality Question in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, 1918–1931*), an unpublished licentiate's thesis in General Church History, Theological Faculty, University of Helsinki, 1997, p. 163.
2 *ibid.*, pp. 14–16.
3 *ibid.*, p. 13.
4 *ibid.*, pp. 25–27.
5 *ibid.*, p. 28.
6 *ibid.*, p. 148.
7 *ibid.*, p. 85.
8 *ibid.*, p. 89.
9 *ibid.*, p. 116.
10 *ibid.*, p. 119.
11 *ibid.*, p. 191.
12 *ibid.*, p. 189.