




KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7352-3713>

HEIDI RIFK**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2929-9520>


AN ETHNIC MINORITY IN A NATION STATE
THE BALTIC GERMANS
BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITARIANISM
IN ESTONIA, 1918–1940

Abstract

Like other democracies created in the territories of the former empires of Eastern Europe after the First World War, also Estonia experienced authoritarian rule in the 1930s. One of the main problems these newly formed national states faced was the challenge of fostering loyalty among its ethnic minorities. In 1925, Estonia garnered international acclaim for issuing a law on cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities. However, the fate of this law under the authoritarian rule of Konstantin Päts after 1934 came into question. With a focus on the German community in Estonia, the article shows how the situation changed for ethnic minorities following the emergence of a right-wing anti-German force during the economic crisis. Initially, the response of local Germans to Konstantin Päts' authoritarian rule in 1934 was surprisingly diverse. However, the economic elites swiftly adapted to maintain their status in the newly created corporate society. For conservative factions of the local German population, parliamentary democracy was never a matter of desire anyway. Despite the state's decidedly anti-German propaganda, which emphasised Estonia's historical 'great battle for freedom' against the Baltic Germans and promoted national cohesiveness, the system of minorities' cultural self-government remained largely intact. While this may have benefited German elites, we still do not know precisely how non-elite Germans experienced Päts' rule.

Keywords: Estonia, Baltic Germans, Era of Silence, interwar period, ethnic minorities, authoritarian regime, cultural autonomy, nationalism, National Socialism, Estonian Veterans' League

* School of Humanities, Tallinn University

 karsten.bruggemann@tlu.ee

** School of Humanities, Tallinn University

 heidi.rifk@tlu.ee

INTRODUCTION

On 26 November 1918, a remarkable meeting between Estonians and Germans took place in Tallinn, the capital of a newly declared independent republic. Representatives of the old German elites extended an offer of military support to their Estonian successors. On that day the participants agreed to collaborate in the interest of the future, leaving the past behind¹. Indeed, in November 1918, not even all Estonians were prepared to support 'their' national state. Many were reluctant to follow the call to arms issued by the Provisional Government of Estonia, which had assumed control of the country following the armistice of Compiègne on 11 November 1918. Yet independent Estonia faced lethal threat from the east. When the Bolshevik government in Moscow declared the Brest Treaty null and void on 13 November 1918, the Red Army commenced its advance to the west in order to spread revolution into Central Europe².

While Estonians were not enthusiastic about defending the fragile new state against Soviet Russia – whether due to their own revolutionary sympathies, war weariness, or the feeling that Russia might prove too strong³ – on 26 November an unexpected ally offered military assistance to Konstantin Päts, the Prime and War Minister of the Provisional Government. In the interest of 'defending the common homeland' against Bolshevism, Baltic German representatives agreed to establish a military unit (later known as the *Baltenregiment*) to fight under Estonian military command in exchange for material support⁴. Although nobody could say anything about the loyalty of the Germans to Estonia, whose future hung by a thin thread, the unit was soon praised for its discipline by the

¹ Eduard VON DELLINGSHAUSEN, *Im Dienste der Heimat! Erinnerungen des Freiherrn Eduard v. Dellingshausen, ehem. Ritterschafthauptmanns von Estland*, Stuttgart 1930, pp. 349–350.

² On the region in general, see Alexander PRUSIN, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992*, Oxford 2010, pp. 72–97; Klaus RICHTER, *Fragmentation in East Central Europe: Poland and the Baltics, 1915–1929*, Oxford 2020. On the foundation of the Estonian Republic, see Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, *Die Gründung der Republik Estland und das Ende des „Einen und unteilbaren Rußland“*. *Die Petrograder Front des Russischen Bürgerkriegs 1918–1920* (Veröffentlichungen des Osteuropa-Instituts München. Reihe Forschungen zum Ostseeraum, Bd. 6), Wiesbaden 2002. On the situation in November 1918, see Ago PAJUR, *Die Übernahme Estlands von der deutschen Besatzungsmacht im November 1918*, Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte, Bd. 15: 2020, pp. 142–168.

³ See the section written by Ago Pajur in the collective monograph *Eesti Vabadussõja ajalugu*, kd. 1: *Vabadussõja eellugu. Punaväe sissetung ja Eesti vabastamine*, toim. Lauri VAHTRE, Tallinn 2020, pp. 194–200.

⁴ On this cooperation agreement, see Wilhelm VON WRANGELL, *Geschichte des Baltenregiments. Das Deutschtum Estlands im Kampfe gegen den Bolschewismus 1918–1920*, Reval 1928, pp. 3–7; E. VON DELLINGSHAUSEN, op.cit., pp. 349–350. Cf. Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, *Von der führenden Schicht zur nationalen Minderheit. Zur Klärung der Rolle der estländischen deutschen Minderheit bei der Begründung der Republik Estland 1918–1919*, Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für

Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian army, Colonel Johan Laidoner, and set as a model for the entire Estonian army⁵.

In hindsight, this offer carried a revolutionary symbolic message. Among those Germans, the former masters of the Estonian lands⁶, who just a few weeks before had advocated for the annexation of the former Baltic provinces to the German *Reich*, were individuals ready to sacrifice their lives in the war against the common enemy. Moreover, they chose to serve a government that, as early as December 1918, decided to abolish the predominantly German-held manors and redistribute the land among Estonians⁷. This redistribution was proclaimed to make joining the ranks of the army more appealing, as it was promised that soldiers would benefit first. In a broader context, getting hold of 'our' land had been one of the most univocal demands uttered during the revolutionary year 1917 in Estonia and elsewhere in the Russian Empire⁸. The liberal minded Germans, who negotiated with Päts, including Georg von Stackelberg, who was also a member of the formerly ruling nobility, apparently agreed that it was time to relinquish the German monopoly on land. However, the agrarian reform, decided upon when the country was still fighting the Red Army in the autumn of 1919 by the predominantly left-wing Constituent Assembly, was decidedly radical. It sparked local and international protest against the 'Bolsheviks' in Tallinn⁹. The *Baltenregiment*, however, remained loyal during the years of the Estonian War of Independence, despite high moral pressure on the soldiers, as evidenced in their published diaries and memoirs¹⁰.

Regionalgeschichte, Bd. 4: 1995, H. 2, pp. 462–465; Armand TREI, *Unustatud rügement. Balti pataljon (rügement) Eesti Vabadussõjas*, Tallinn 2010.

⁵ Laidoner praised the discipline of that German unit during a session of the Estonian parliament, the Provincial Council (Est. *Maapäev* or *Maanõukogu*), on 27 December 1918, see *Maanõukogu protokollid. 1. koosolekust 1. juulil 1917 78. koosolekuni 6 veebruaril 1919. 1917–1919*, Tallinn 1935, p. 344. Cf. Olavi ARENS, *The Estonian Maapäev During 1917*, [in:] *The Baltic States in Peace and War*, ed. V. Stanley VARDYS, Romuald J. MISIUNAS, Pennsylvania 1978, pp. 19–30.

⁶ Still in 1918, 58 percent of the arable land belonged to manor holders who were predominantly representatives of the German upper classes, see Georg VON RAUCH, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten*, München 1990, p. 90.

⁷ The decision was made on 20 December 1918, see *Kodusõda ja välisriikide interventsioon Eestis 1918–1920. Dokumente ja materjale*, kd. 2, toim. Arvo ALAS, Tallinn 1986, p. 53.

⁸ On the Russian revolutions of 1917 in Estonia, see Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, *Yearning for Social Change: The Russian Revolution in the Baltic Provinces*, Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism, vol. 17: 2017, no. 3, pp. 358–368.

⁹ On the agrarian reform, see Tiit ROSENBERG, *Agrarfrage und Agrarreform in Estland 1919. Ursachen, Voraussetzungen und Folgen*, Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia toimetised. Humanitaar- ja sotsiaalteadused, kd. 43: 1994, no. 3, pp. 326–335; on German reactions, see Heidi LEPPLAAN, „*Mein Haus, mein Land, mein Erb und Eigen*“. *Deutsche Reaktionen auf das estnische Agrargesetz 1919*, Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte, Bd. 7: 2012, pp. 141–167.

¹⁰ Georg VON KRUSENSTJERN, *M.G.-Mann im Baltenregiment. Tagebuchblätter*, Tallinn 1938; Heinrich VON DEHN, *Heinrich von Dehni mälestused*, [in:] *Baltisakslaste mälestusi Eesti Vabadus-*

In the broader regional context, the search for compromises between ‘old’ and ‘new’ elites did not always yield positive results. In the aftermath of the Great War, the territories inherited by the defunct Romanov and Habsburg empires saw the emergence of several national states as a result of the bloody ‘wars after the war’, which haunted the region well into the early 1920s¹¹. While the notion of self-determination of nations was gaining traction at that time, supported (at least rhetorically) by figures as diverse as Vladimir Lenin and Woodrow Wilson, it was much less clear which self-proclaimed nations should be entitled to claim this right to establish their own nation states. Many observers deemed small entities like Estonia simply too weak to endure. Despite the myriad problems faced by the new governments during the initial transformational phase, including financial, economic, personnel, and border issues, one problem remained paramount during the entire era of their independent existence: how to ensure the loyalty of ethnic minorities to the national states. For the nationalists who now were in charge of ‘their’ states, political centralisation and ethnic consolidation were the immediate priorities, but the question remained: what to do with those outside the ruling ethnic community? Undoubtedly, the urgency of this problem was clearly related to the demographic composition of the newly created states and thus was more acute, for example, in Poland than in Finland. At the same time, as Estonian historian Liisi Veski reminds us, nationalising projects additionally ‘grew out of a perception of weak national identity and lacking loyalty of the majority itself’¹².

However, in states like Estonia, where the dominant ethnic group constituted nearly 90 percent of the inhabitants¹³, the issue of minorities was a focal point for local politicians and the public alike right from the start in 1918. In this regard, it was no coincidence that the manifesto of 24 February 1918, which declared Estonia an independent state, was consciously addressed ‘to all the peoples of Estonia’¹⁴. While undoubtedly inspired by Estonian mythology and aspirations for a democratic national future, the manifesto promised ‘ethnic minorities residing within the borders of the Republic [...] cultural

sõjast, toim. Leino PAHTMA, Tallinn 2023, pp. 21–178; Oswald HARTGE, *Me läksime sõjaväljale... Üheksa kuud kuulipildurina Balti pataljonis*, [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 185–214.

¹¹ Robert GERWARTH, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*, Falkirk 2016; *The Shaken Lands: Violence and the Crisis of Governance in East Central Europe, 1914–1923*, ed. Tomas BALKELIS, Andrea GRIFFANTE, Boston 2023.

¹² Liisi VESKI, *Towards Stronger National Unity: Statist Ideas in Estonian Nationalism during the “Era of Silence” (1934–1940)*, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 55: 2024, no. 1, p. 176.

¹³ On the ethnic composition of Estonia in the interwar period, see, e.g., *Estonia: Population, Cultural and Economic Life*, ed. Albert PULLERITS, Tallinn 1935, pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ *Declaration of Independence*, <https://president.ee/en/repUBLIC-of-estonia/declaration-of-independence> [accessed online 2 November 2023].

autonomy¹⁵. This promise was ultimately fulfilled by the Estonian Republic in 1925 with the enactment of the famous law on cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities (citizens of Estonia) that granted them significant autonomy, particularly in terms of education. The Estonian Germans promptly embraced this opportunity and established their *Kultursebstverwaltung*, as did the Jewish minority the following year¹⁶.

At that time, the Estonian state was shaped by a radical democratic constitution adopted in 1920, which did not even provide the republic with a nominal head of state. Instead, a 'State Elder' served as a *primus inter pares* among the ministers, with power theoretically vested solely in the parliament. With regard to the law on cultural autonomy, the management of ethnic minorities in Estonia is usually assessed as 'an exceptionally friendly gesture toward national minorities' given the international and regional context of the interwar period¹⁷. However, Estonia was not immune to the trend towards more authoritarian forms of governance that swept across the region as early as the mid-1920s (Poland and Lithuania). The country eventually succumbed to authoritarian regime in 1934, when Konstantin Päts, who had initially paved the way for parliamentary democracy acting as Prime Minister in 1918/1919, orchestrated a *coup d'état* in Tallinn. Ruling under a state of emergency, Päts disbanded parliamentary activities, dissolved political parties in early 1935 and curtailed civil liberties. Under this authoritarian regime, characterised by a clearly articulated nationalist ideology of an idealised 'national community' (Est. *rahvusterviklus*, Ger. *Volksgemeinschaft*) how were minority issues addressed?

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Russian and Swedish minorities were living territorially in close proximity and were thus able to exercise their minority rights within the local governments. Latvians living in the border areas had the option to attend either state school, in accordance with the school convention signed by the republics of Estonia and Latvia in 1922. On the Swedes, see Mart KULDKEPP, *The Estonian Swedish National Minority and the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law of 1925*, Nationalities Papers, vol. 50: 2022, no. 5, pp. 923–971; on the Russians, see David J. SMITH, *Select Retracing Estonia's Russians: Mikhail Kurchinskii and Interwar Cultural Autonomy*, Nationalities Papers, vol. 27: 1999, no. 3, pp. 455–474; in general, see Kaido LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus Eesti Vabariigis 1925–1940. Monograafia ja allikad*, Tallinn 2008, pp. 67–69; David J. SMITH, John HIDDEN, *Ethnic Diversity and the Nation State: National Cultural Autonomy Revisited*, London 2012; on the Jews, see Anton WEISS-WENDT, *Thanks to the Germans! Jewish Cultural Autonomy in Interwar Estonia*, East European Jewish Affairs, vol. 38: 2008, no. 1, pp. 89–104; Timo AAVA, *Jewish Autonomy in Interwar Estonia and the Life Trajectories of Its Leaders*, Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation, vol. 10: 2023, no. 1, pp. 37–56.

¹⁷ Kari ALENIOUS, *The Birth of Cultural Autonomy in Estonia: How, Why, and for Whom?*, Journal of Baltic Studies, vol. 38: 2007, no. 4, p. 445; David J. SMITH, *Estonia: A Model for Inter-War Europe?*, Ethnopolitics, vol. 15: 2016, no. 1, pp. 89–104. On the transnational origins of Estonia's law on cultural autonomy, see Timo AAVA, *Minorities and the State: Non-Territorial Autonomy in Estonia in the Late Tsarist and Interwar Periods* (Phil. Diss., University of Vienna), Vienna 2023.

Our article will thus delve into the emergence of authoritarianism in general and its impact on minority management during the Era of Silence (*Est. vaikiv ajastu*), a term that encapsulates Päts' authoritarianism in Estonian historical memory. How did the change of regime influence the management of minorities? Were there any modifications to the legislation of cultural autonomy or was this system altogether abandoned? What did Päts' authoritarian turn mean for the German minority in particular? In what follows, we will first examine the rise of authoritarian sentiments in Estonian politics going back to the years of economic crisis that culminated in Päts' coup. Subsequently, we will explore the level of political diversity among the German minority, thereby also raising the question about the influence of German National Socialism in the country. Following a brief overview of Päts' authoritarian regime and its handling of minority issues, we will closely examine the role played by the German minority during the Era of Silence.

Scholarly interest in the historical examination of the German minority in authoritarian Estonia dates back to 1975, when Arved von Taube discussed the pivotal moments 'when the paths of Estonians and Baltic Germans intersected or diverged' and argued that the latter have reason to remember Konstantin Päts with gratitude¹⁸. In 1996, in a compendium on the German minority group in interwar Estonia, Berndt Nielsen-Stokkebye focused on the political situation and elite relationships between the two national groups during the late 1930s¹⁹. Indrek Jürjo analysed interactions between Germans and Estonians based on archival data from the Political Police, who began showing interest in the activities of the Baltic Germans as early as the beginning of the 1920s²⁰. Kaido Laurits dedicated his research to German cultural self-government, with special attention to the tense period of 1933–1940²¹. Memoirs from Wilhelm von Wrangell and Oswald Hartge, prominent members of the German self-administration, offer insights into its role during a time when political parties

¹⁸ 'an denen die Wege der Esten und der Deutschbalten sich berührten oder auseinanderführten'; Arved VON TAUBE, *Konstantin Päts und die Deutschbalten. Zur 100. Wiederkehr des Geburtstages des Staatspräsidenten von Estland am 23. Februar 1974*, Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums, Jg. 25: 1975, pp. 22–29.

¹⁹ Bernd NIELSEN-STOKKEBYE, *Die politische Lage der deutschen Volksgruppe von 1934 bis zur Umsiedlung 1939*, [in:] *Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Estland während der Zwischenkriegszeit und aktuelle Fragen des deutsch-estnischen Verhältnisses*, hrsg. v. Boris MEISSNER, Dietrich A. LOEBER, Cornelius HASSELBLATT, Hamburg 1996, pp. 62–72.

²⁰ Indrek JÜRJO, *Das Verhältnis der Deutschbalten zum Estländischen Staat und dem estnischen Volk in der Zwischenkriegszeit (auf Grundlage von Archivakten der politischen Polizei)*, [in:] *ibid.*, pp. 185–202; K. BRÜGGEMANN, *Von der führenden Schicht*, pp. 469–474.

²¹ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroomavalitsus*, pp. 85–103.

were prohibited²². Wrangell has also compiled an unpublished comprehensive history of the German cultural self-administration²³. Additionally, historians Vesa Vasara and David Feest delved into the Baltic Germans' role in the Estonian economy, exploring the relationships of key figures like the banker Klaus Scheel with the Estonian political elite, including Laidoner and Päts²⁴.

ESTONIA'S WAY TO AUTHORITARIANISM

Towards the end of the interwar period, authoritarianism became the norm in the region. According to the American-Latvian historian Andrejs Plakans, the public in the newly established national states all shared a growing 'impatience with the sometimes cumbersome workings of liberal-democratic political institutions.' After the hardships of the war years, there was an expectation that once the national dream had been realised, the internal dominance of the titular nationalities secured, and the states internationally recognised, the future would be 'smooth sailing'. This utopian element fostered the illusion that the system of government could be fine-tuned until it met the 'nation's expectations'²⁵. Hence, calls for a 'single strong national leader' garnered widespread support, particularly because of the alleged inability of the government to effectively safeguard the country against economic crises²⁶. These calls were supported by two leading figures of Estonian democracy, Konstantin Päts, who was in charge of the Farmers' Assemblies (Est. *Põllumeeste Kogud*), and Jaan Tõnisson, the leader of the Estonian People's Party (Est. *Eesti Rahvaerakond*). A joint legislative initiative by the centre-right parties aimed at strengthening

²² Oswald HARTGE, *Lapsepõlvest ühe ajastu lõpuni: mälestused 1895–1939*, toim. Toomas HIIO, Tartu 2021, pp. 406–419; Wilhelm VON WRANGELL, *Baltisakslaste olukorrast Eestis kuni ümberasumiseni*, [in:] *Revali ja Peterburi vahel. Eestimaalaste mälestusi kahest sajandist*, toim. Henning VON WISTINGHAUSEN, Tallinn 2016, pp. 384–406.

²³ Wilhelm VON WRANGELL, *Geschichte der Kulturselbstverwaltung in Estland* (original MS, n.d.), Dokumentensammlung des Herder-Instituts, Marburg, 100 Wrangell, W., no. 2–12.

²⁴ Vesa VASARA, *Die deutschbaltische Minderheit in Estland in der Zwischenkriegszeit. Wirtschaft und Finanzen*, Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung, Bd. 44: 1995, H. 4, pp. 578–589; idem, *Das Bankhaus Georg Scheel & Co., Reval (1884–1940)*, [in:] *Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Estland während der Zwischenkriegszeit und aktuelle Fragen des deutsch-estnischen Verhältnisses*, hrsg. v. Boris MEISSNER, Dietrich A. LOEBER, Cornelius HASSELBLATT, Hamburg 1996, pp. 98–105; David FEEST, *Spaces of "National Indifference" in Biographical Research on Citizens of the Baltic Republics 1918–1940*, Journal of Baltic Studies, vol. 48: 2017, no. 1, pp. 55–66.

²⁵ Andrejs PLAKANS, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 319–320.

²⁶ Andres KASEKAMP, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia*, Houndmills 2000, p. 33; Raiko JÄÄRATS, *Die Öffentlichkeit in Estland vor dem „schweigenden Zeitalter“*, Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte, Bd. 11: 2016, pp. 133–134; Ago PAJUR, *Die „Legitimierung“ der Diktatur des Präsidenten Päts und die öffentliche Meinung in Estland*, [in:] *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa 1919–1944*, hrsg. v. Erwin OBERLÄNDER, Paderborn 2017, pp. 165–177.

the government was neither supported by the socialists nor by the extreme right and was declined in a referendum held in August 1932²⁷.

This marked the moment when an originally apolitical lobby organisation for the veterans of the independence war entered the arena of Estonian politics. The Estonian Veterans' League (Est. *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit*) advocated radical nationalism, anti-Marxism and anti-parliamentarism combined with a strong cult of the leader²⁸. Their opposition thwarted a second package of constitutional amendments in June 1933²⁹. Four months later, a third constitutional referendum, this time initiated by the Veterans themselves and supported by conservative elites, including Päts and Laidoner, passed with 72.7 percent approval. The Tõnisson government's attempt to suppress the Veterans by declaring a state of emergency on 11 August 1933 and banning them for their 'irresponsible agitation' deemed 'dangerous to democratic order and public safety' backfired. This led to public ridicule and Tõnisson's resignation while the Veterans continued to function largely unhindered³⁰. Temporarily, Päts assumed power until new elections mandated by the new constitution (scheduled to take effect on 24 January 1934).

When Päts carried out his coup on 12 March 1934, he utilised the powers granted to him by the new constitution. Speculating on whether the scheduled presidential elections would have resulted in a victory for the Veterans' candidate (Päts had actually declined to stand for election on the bill of the Veterans) falls beyond the scope of this article. While the Veterans achieved success in local elections in urban centres in early January, they never had the opportunity to test their popularity in rural areas. In his address to parliament on 15 March, Päts declared that the Veterans were 'undermining the authority of the state' and 'preparing a revolution' to seize power, even resorting to force if necessary, thus bringing Estonia to the brink of a civil war. Delighted that their adversaries, the Veterans, were arrested, the Estonian Parliament (Est. *Riigikogu*) approved Päts' actions and agreed to adjourn its session³¹.

If this episode usually is presented as an internal Estonian conflict, it is noteworthy that the German factor actually reemerged in public discourse. Following the Veterans' success in the referendum of October 1933, they encountered an unexpected but serious setback. In November, Victor von zur Mühlen,

²⁷ A. KASEKAMP, *The Radical Right*, p. 38.

²⁸ Idem, *Fascism by Popular Initiative: The Rise and Fall of the Vaps Movement in Estonia*, *Fascism*, vol. 4: 2015, no. 2, pp. 155–168.

²⁹ Idem, *The Radical Right*, p. 43. On the Veterans' League, see also Rein MARANDI, *Mustvalge lipu all. Vabadussõjalaste liikumine Eestis 1929–1937*, kd. 1: *Legaalne periood* (Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia, vol. 6/1), Stockholm 1991.

³⁰ A. KASEKAMP, *The Radical Right*, pp. 44–47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 101–102.

a former leading officer of the *Baltenregiment*, was elected new chairman of the Baltic-German Party in Estonia. According to reports in German media, in a speech on 26 November he confirmed that 'National-Socialist thinking has captivated our minds'. At the same time, he expressed his 'full sympathy' for the Estonian 'renewal movement' as he called the Veterans' organisation³². As noted by Canadian-Estonian historian Andres Kasekamp, this 'unsolicited expression of support [...] played right into the hands of the League's enemies'. The Veterans, seen as 'super-patriots', were now 'dammed by association' with the former colonial masters of the Estonian lands³³. The outcry in media was widespread and soon the Veterans faced serious challenges in refuting the (largely unsubstantiated) accusations of being financed by the National Socialist German Workers' Party³⁴.

In his speech, von zur Mühlen admitted that within the German 'ethnic group' (Ger. *Volksgruppe*) there was still considerable mistrust regarding National Socialism. He claimed that Baltic National Socialism was not merely an 'appendage of a *reichsdeutsche* party', but rather a locally genuine 'product of the soil' (Ger. *Scholle*). He deemed it necessary to openly declare that no member of the movement (Germ. *Bewegung*) was affiliated with the National Socialist German Workers' Party³⁵. In fact, the small German minority of approximately 16,000 individuals (1.5 percent of the inhabitants) was deeply divided in terms of political orientation.

In 1935, the Estonian Political Police had compiled an overview of the political movements among the local Germans³⁶. The spread of National Socialism in Estonia led to reorganisation and fragmentation of the previously cohesive political entity of Germans, which had been centred around the initially

³² '[...] auch das nationalsozialistische Gedankengut [hat] uns in seinen Bann gezogen [...]'; 'ganze Sympathie'; 'estnische [...] Erneuerungsbewegung'; *Umschau. Aus der Revalschen Zeitung*, Baltische Monatshefte, 1933, H. 12, pp. 696–697.

³³ A. KASEKAMP, *The Radical Right*, p. 52.

³⁴ See the parliamentary debates regarding alleged connections between the Veterans and the *Bewegung*: *Riigikogu V koosseis. Täielikud protokollid ja stenograafilised aruanded. III ja IV istungiärk. 65. koosolekust 27./28. juunil 1933 – 122. koosolekuni 16. märtsil 1934*, Tallinn 1934, pp. 1081–1105.

³⁵ 'Appendix einer reichsdeutschen Partei'; 'Produkt der Scholle'; *Umschau. Aus der Revalschen Zeitung*, pp. 697–698.

³⁶ Apparently, this overview was influenced by the newspaper article: Woldemar VON MAXDELL, *Die politischen Strömungen im Lager der Deutsch-Balten*, *Revalsche Zeitung*, 25 March 1933, no. 69 (Beilage der Revalschen Zeitung), p. 3. For the historical context, see Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, Katja WEZEL, *Nationally Indifferent or Ardent Nationalists? On the Options of Being German in Russia's Baltic Provinces, 1905–1917*, *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 20: 2019, no. 1, pp. 39–62.

liberal representation of the Baltic-German Party in the parliament. The report identified three main political groups:

1. *Alt-Balten* (mainly former nobility), who adhered to old Baltic (Est. *Vana-Balti*) traditions and were described as 'living in the past'. Conservative though they were, they did not oppose Päts' regime.
2. The Baltic National Socialists, the *Bewegung*, who had adapted National Socialism to local conditions. This group included 'the poorer bourgeoisie and the impoverished nobility'. Nevertheless, the new ideology also found support among the *Alt-Balten*.
3. 'Loyal Baltic Germans, primarily the younger generation', some of whom had immigrated to Estonia from Russia after 1920. This group sought 'a closer connection with Estonians, as the older generation of Baltic Germans had not done so thus far and had not considered it necessary'. One of the leading members of this group was Siegmund Klau, who established the Estonian-German National Association (Ger. *Estländisch-Deutsche Volksnationale Vereinigung*) in 1934³⁷. Klau and the Association emphasised 'strict loyalty' to the Estonian state, fought against class and professional biases, but also rejected 'formal democracy' and supported the concentration of state power³⁸.

Back in late 1933, von zur Mühlen's efforts to seek cooperation with Estonians, especially the Veterans, and his emphasis on cultivating a 'trustful relationship with the Estonian people'³⁹ proved unsuccessful. The parliamentary

³⁷ 'elab minevikus'; 'vaesem kodanlus ja vaesem aadel'; 'Lojaalsed balti sakslased, päämiselt noorem generatsioon'; 'tihedamat sidet eestlastega, sest senini pole seda balti sakslaste vanem generatsioon teinud ja tarvilikuks pidanud'; Eestis tegutsenud saksa rahvusest liikmeskonnaga organisatsioonide ja nende liikmete ning saksa rahvusest isikute nimekirjad, 1935–1938 (further cited as Eestis tegutsenud), Eesti Rahvusrhiiv, Tallinn (further cited as ERA), ref. no. 1.7.146, pp. 39–40, 45–46. Also published in: *Vähemusrahvuste kultuurielu Eesti Vabariigis 1918–1940. Dokumente ja materjale*, koost. Anni MATSULEVITŠ, Tallinn 1993, pp. 71–74; W. VON MAYDELL, op.cit., p. 3.

³⁸ B. NIELSEN-STOKKEBYE, op.cit., p. 69.

³⁹ 'Wir fordern ein friedliches Zusammenarbeiten mit dem estnischen Volke zum Wohle der gemeinsamen Heimat [...]'; VICTOR VON ZUR MÜHLEN, *Grundsätze der baltischen national-sozialistischen Bewegung in Estland*, *Der Aufstieg*, 25 June 1933, no. 26 (67). The editor-in-chief of the German newspaper *Revalsche Zeitung*, Axel de Vries, conceded that it was indisputable that 'our National Socialist group' committed very serious mistakes as they proceeded from false assumptions and inaccurately assessed their position both in relation to the currents among the Estonian people and within their own ethnic group. According to de Vries, these errors had negative consequences for the entire Baltic German group. However, he strongly objected the accusations of treason and hostility to the state, emphasising that 'there is no evidence whatsoever supporting this serious allegation' ('unsere [...] nationalsozialistische [...] Gruppe'; 'wo keinerlei Beweise für diesen schweren Vorwurf vorliegen'), see AXEL DE VRIES, *Rückblick*, *Revalsche Zeitung*, 19 December 1933, no. 291 (Beilage der Revalschen Zeitung).

majority equated National Socialism with communism and classified it as 'a hostile entity to the Estonian state order'⁴⁰. Consequently, in December 1933, *Der Aufstieg*, the newspaper of the movement, was banned, the *Deutscher Klub* (one of the local National Socialist organisations) was closed, and arrests, searches, and interrogations were carried out⁴¹. Von zur Mühlen and the entire new board of the Baltic-German Party resigned on 4 December 1933⁴². Only a day later, on behalf of the German-Swedish parliamentary group, *Riigikogu* deputy Carl Schilling clarified that they were not associated with these events in the Baltic-German Party and did not endorse them. He emphasised that 'the cultural self-government, as a non-political institution, has not affiliated itself with any political movement'⁴³.

However, Estonian politicians from both the left and right wings accused the German cultural self-government of being influenced by the *Bewegung*, and they demanded a revision of the law on cultural autonomy⁴⁴. Simultaneously, criticism of cultural autonomy intensified within Estonian nationalist circles. As early as 5 December 1933, the Veterans sent a letter to the State Elder regarding the national minorities. In this letter, they warned that if the local Germans were to exploit cultural autonomy as a pretext for implementing political autonomy, they would pose a threat to the state's internal security and independence⁴⁵. In February 1934, the Estonian Nationalist Club (Est. *Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubi*, ERK) presented a similar letter to Päts. They argued that cultural autonomy had not rendered the minorities 'friendlier and more loyal to the state' and, consequently, demanded greater government control over the activities of cultural authorities, particularly in minority schools⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ '[...] rahvussotsialistlikku liikumist tuleb võtta Eesti riigikorra vastase nähtena [...]'; *Riigikogu V koosseis*, Tallinn 1934, pp. 1096–1097, 1106. See also *Rahvussotsialismi vastukajad riigikogus*, Päevaleht, 7 December 1933, no. 334, p. 2; *Üksmeelne võitlus hitlerismi vastu Eestis*, *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴¹ *Löpp hitlerluse laiutamisele Eestis*, *ibid.*, p. 1. In addition to the National Socialists, the conservative and aristocratic *Baltische Brüderschaft* was accused of establishing an unregistered organisation with political objectives and engaging in its secret activities, see K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuromavalitsus*, pp. 82–83, 91.

⁴² K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuromavalitsus*, pp. 84–89; W. VON WRANGELL, *Geschichte der Kulturselbstverwaltung*, pp. 517–518.

⁴³ 'et kultuuromavalitsus kui poliitiline asutus ühendusse mingi poliitilise liikumisega, astunud ei ole.' Schilling added, 'to our knowledge, a far larger part of our German fellow citizens does not align with the results of the recent elections' ('meie teadmisel kaugelt suurem osa meie saksa kaaskodanikkudest viimaste valimiste tulemustega ei ühine'); *Riigikogu V koosseis*, pp. 1078–1079.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1094, 1096–1097.

⁴⁵ *Löpp sakslaste autonoomitsemisele. Vabadussõjalaste märgukiri Riigivanemale vähemusrahvuste asjus*, *Võitlus*, 7 December 1933, no. 117 (162), p. 1.

⁴⁶ 'meie riigile sõbralikumaks ja lojaalsemaks'; *ERK-ide Liidu märgukiri*, ERK: üld-, majandus- ja kultuuripoliitiline ajakiri, 1934, no. 2, pp. 44–45.

The government disbanded the German cultural council, the principal body of the cultural self-government⁴⁷, which is seen in historiography as a demonstrative gesture against various fascist movements by the government. In reality, however, the German cultural authority was able to continue its activities. Three months after the dissolution of the cultural council, a new board was re-elected with an almost identical composition. Besides, during their trial, members of the National Socialist movement received only relatively mild punishments⁴⁸.

AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN ESTONIA AND THE ETHNIC MINORITIES

Compared to other forms of contemporary authoritarianism in Europe, the Päts regime represented a relatively moderate variation. In 1938, Päts even reverted to formal democracy with a new constitution, which, while reinstating parliamentary activity, ultimately consolidated his dictatorship⁴⁹. In the spirit of the ideal of 'guided democracy' (Est. *juhitalv demokraatia*) it was argued that liberal democracy, with its emphasis on individualism which only eroded national unity, had reached its end – democracy, as was claimed, 'had to be protected against itself'⁵⁰. As mentioned, the concept of 'national unity' represented the ideal of the Era of Silence. Official propaganda, orchestrated by a newly formed state agency, considered the glorification of this unity to be a positive and necessary contribution 'to the cultural education of the people, the promotion of the national idea and the enhancement of national self-confidence'⁵¹. 'Estonianness' was to be promoted along with a 'true' version of the country's past. Anything foreign, including the surnames that often appeared to be linguistically foreign, frequently of German origin, had to be eradicated. It was believed that Estonian surnames would serve as reminders of people's ethnic belonging and their responsibilities toward the national community⁵².

In his statements, Päts repeatedly referred to a severe state of mental illness that had afflicted Estonian society. As Veski has argued, these 'metaphors of national illness were rooted in a wider discourse of national unity that utilized

⁴⁷ *Vabariigi Valitsuse otsus 6. detsembrist 1933*, Riigi Teataja, no. 105, 19 December 1933.

⁴⁸ They were given two to six months of imprisonment or fines ranging from 50 to 150 Estonian crowns, see K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroomavalitsus*, pp. 88–91.

⁴⁹ Rein TAAGEPERA, *Estonia: Return to Independence*, Boulder 1993, pp. 55–58.

⁵⁰ L. VESKI, op.cit., p. 186.

⁵¹ 'zur kulturellen Erziehung des Volkes, zur Forderung des nationalen Gedankens und zur Steigerung des nationalen Selbstbewusstseins'; as quoted in: A. PAJUR, *Die „Legitimierung“ der Diktatur*, p. 184.

⁵² L. VESKI, op.cit., pp. 185–186; more details in: Toivo U. RAUN, *The Movement to Estonianize Surnames in Interwar Estonia*, Acta Historica Tallinnensia, kd. 18: 2012, pp. 97–107.

an organicist interpretation of nationhood', a nationalist rhetoric not entirely novel, as it had also been utilised by the Veterans' League⁵³. Now, Päts intended to provide the people with a respite from political affairs. By the summer of 1934, a series of national festivals had been organised to showcase the strength of Estonians when acting in unity. Alongside the Estonian Games, which were a celebration of Estonian athletes and popular forms of sport, accompanied by folk dances and a mass play to demonstrate that Estonians are a 'people with history', the first Victory Day (Est. *Võidupüha*) was celebrated on 23 June 1934⁵⁴. This national holiday had been introduced by the *Riigikogu* shortly before Päts' coup in February 1934. 15 years earlier, on 23 June 1919, near Cēsis (Est. *Võnnu*; Ger. Wenden), the Estonian army, assisted by Latvian units, achieved a military victory of major symbolic importance against the Baltic-German *Landeswehr*, the so-called 'Baltic barons'⁵⁵. While the parliamentary debates surrounding the introduction of this holiday do not betray a heightened historical awareness of the deputies, whose primary goal was to give the constituents a potential day off, the celebrations in June 1919 displayed the state of national unanimity the country had allegedly achieved during the time of the Battle of Cēsis. Two years later, Päts declared 23 June as the day of the 'unification of the Estonian people into a nation, the return of the common will'⁵⁶.

Thus, Victory Day became the epitome of the regime's ideal of *rahvusterviklus*, the 'national whole', or *Volksgemeinschaft*. However, the unmistakable anti-German sentiments carried by these annual festivities were impossible to overlook. This was not only evident in the holiday itself, which celebrated the historical victory against the Baltic-German *Landeswehr* and contrasted it with the defeat suffered as a result of the Livonian crusades in early thirteenth century. Thus, Victory Day praised a historically just victory within the narrative framework of the Estonians' 'great battle for freedom'⁵⁷. Additionally,

⁵³ L. VESKI, op.cit., p. 178.

⁵⁴ See, also the following, Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, *Celebrating Final Victory in Estonia's "Great Battle for Freedom": The Short Afterlife of 23 June 1919 as National Holiday, 1934–1939*, [in:] *Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory*, ed. Marek TAMM, Houndmills 2015, p. 160.

⁵⁵ On this battle, see Ago PAJUR, *Der Ausbruch des Landeswehrkriegs. Die estnische Perspektive*, *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte*, Bd. 4: 2009, pp. 145–169; Kaspars ZELLIS, *Die Schlacht bei Cēsis, die Esten und das historische Bewusstsein der Letten*, *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte*, Bd. 4: 2009, pp. 170–189.

⁵⁶ 'Eesti rahva liitumist rahvuseks, ühise tahte tagasitulekut'; 1936. *Koguteos Võidupüha*, toim. Aadu TRUUVERE, Eduard SALURAND, Arvo TAIOSTE, Tallinn 1936, p. 2.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., the front page of the daily *Postimees* on 21 June 1934 with a drawing '1208–1919' that depicts battle scenes from the crusade and the *Landeswehr* war. On the narrative template of the 'great battle for freedom', see Marek TAMM, *History as Cultural Memory: Mnemohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation*, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 39: 2008, no. 4, pp. 499–516.

some of the actions the state propaganda agency suggested for the celebrations carried an overtly anti-German message. One of the central elements introduced to link Victory Day (23 June) with the traditional Midsummer bonfires on the following night of St John's Day was the concept of 'Victory fires'. The propaganda department now suggested burning foreign surnames during the bonfire programme 'by ceremonially throwing a list of local foreign names into the fire'⁵⁸.

Next to Estonian nationalism, during the Era of Silence anti-German sentiment knitted together a society that was deeply divided on its responses to modernity. Again, Päts largely drew on the motifs already used in the Veterans' propaganda. Nonetheless, minorities were called upon to contribute to Estonian state-building. In a typical dedication to the Victory Day in 1936, Päts vowed 'at the Victory fires' that 'we' will liberate ourselves from everything foreign and praised all things Estonian and that 'we' will 'continue to build the great national edifice' whose foundations were laid by 'our' heroes of ancient times and the War of Independence. At the same time, he paid homage also to non-Estonians: 'we solemnly proclaim, without any hatred or enmity, friendly cooperation with all the minority nationalities of Estonia for the good and the defence of our common homeland'⁵⁹. The unifying idea of the 'common homeland,' as we have seen, was brought forward as early as in November 1918 by the Baltic Germans. Päts used it in June 1936 to reassure the minorities, while the ethnic majority was mobilised in the name of the 'national edifice' with its Estonified names and beautified villages.

In a way, the minority-friendly rhetoric during anti-German national celebrations reflected the tensions present in real life. Indeed, albeit under the illiberal conditions introduced by Päts, the minority legislation as such remained largely intact. As David J. Smith and John Hiden aptly remarked, Päts himself was 'the least ill-disposed to the German former ruling class'⁶⁰. As early as in 1919, he was among the very few members of the Constituent Assembly who opposed the military conflict with the *Landeswehr* and argued against the radical agrarian reform. He wholeheartedly supported the law on cultural autonomy. Yet, under his rule, minority institutions increasingly fell under state control and lost their autonomous nature. Still, the tendency to restrict the

⁵⁸ 'heites pidulikult tulle kohalikest võõrapärastest nimedest koostatud nimestiku'; *II Võidupüha: 23. juunil 1935. Kava, põhimõtteid, materjale*, Tallinn 1935, pp. 5–6; Marge ALLANDI, *Kolm tuld: Jüriöö, võidupüha, laulupidu*, Ajalooline ajakiri, 2014, no. 2–3 (148–149), p. 185.

⁵⁹ 'Wõidutulede juures'; 'meie'; 'me'; 'ehitame edasi seda suurt rahwushoonet'; 'kuulutame pühalikult, ilma igasuguse wiha ja waenuta, sõbralikku koostööd Eesti riigi kõigile vähemusrahwustele meie ühise kodumaa heaks käekäiguks ja kaitseks'; Konstantin PÄTS, *Eesti rahwas!*, Päewaleht, 22 June 1936, no. 167, p. 5.

⁶⁰ D. SMITH, J. HIDEN, op.cit., p. 34.

rights of minorities, especially in the case of the Germans, became noticeable even before the coup, particularly in connection with the measures aimed at preventing the spread of German National Socialism in the country.

In this spirit, the number of pupils eligible to enrol in minority-language schools was administratively reduced. For example, new regulations for mixed marriages stipulated that if the father was Estonian, their children had to attend an Estonian school⁶¹. This influenced the enrolment numbers in German-language educational institutions, which were already declining due to unfavourable demographic trends (from 3,380 students in 1927/1928 to 2,807 in 1933/1934)⁶².

The shift in the composition of students in German-language schools was linked to new regulations determining nationality. In 1920, the Estonian Republic embraced liberal national policies, affirming that '[e]very Estonian citizen is free in determining their nationality'⁶³. However, in 1934, the government abandoned this liberal approach, imposing restrictions on individuals' freedom to determine their nationality, in certain cases without considering personal convictions. According to a government decree, citizens who (or whose father or grandfather) were listed in the parish community register, with exceptions in areas with a majority of a minority ethnic group, were considered part of the Estonian nation. Furthermore, once a citizen identified as Estonian, they could not change their nationality⁶⁴.

Another decree regulated the maintenance of a national registry (*Est. rahvusnimekiri*) requiring proof of nationality provided by the Ministry of the Interior, which was not needed before⁶⁵. Ethnic Germans rushed to register just before the decree adoption to avoid more complicated bureaucracy⁶⁶. In cases where parents belonged to different ethnicities, a child was deemed to belong to the Estonian nation if the father was of Estonian ethnicity⁶⁷, affecting a significant number of mixed families, particularly Estonian-German ones⁶⁸.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶² Kaido LAURITS, *Saksa Kultuuroromavalitsuse kooliameti tegevus baltisaksa koolielu korraldamisel Eesti Vabariigis 1918–1940*, Tuna. Ajalookultuuri ajakiri, 2006, no. 3, p. 53.

⁶³ *Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus. Asutawa Kogu poolt 15. juunil 1920 a. vastu võetud ja 'Riigi Teatajas' 9. augustist 1920. a. nr. 113/114 avaldatud*, Tallinn 1920, pp. 3–4 (§20).

⁶⁴ *Rahvusse kuuluvuse aluste määramise seadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 93, 2 November 1934.

⁶⁵ *Rahvusnimekirjade pidamise määramise muutmise määrus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 97, 16 November 1934.

⁶⁶ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus*, p. 93.

⁶⁷ *Rahvusse kuuluvuse aluste määramise seadus*.

⁶⁸ The percentage of mixed families among Germans (in most cases, Estonian-German) was the highest, around 34 percent, see *Rahvastikuprobleeme Eestis. II Rahvaloenduse tulemusi. Vihk IV*, Tallinn 1937, pp. 106–107.

However, families from different ethnic minority groups determined their children's ethnicity by parental agreement⁶⁹.

The 1938 constitution replaced citizens' freedom to determine their nationality with the right 'to maintain their nationality'⁷⁰. This legislation did not further limit the choices of the minorities but restricted ethnic Estonians from choosing a nationality other than Estonian⁷¹. The new law prioritised the ethnic background of the father (especially in the case of Estonians) over the mother's, possibly as a measure to preserve 'Estonianness'.

Simultaneously, the language law was enacted, regulating the usage of national minorities' languages in state central institutions, local governments, and cultural self-governments. According to the language law, citizens of ethnic minorities were allowed, in many instances, to address central state institutions in writing using their national language. Additionally, in a local government area where a national minority constituted the majority (mainly Russians or Swedes), the language of that national minority could be adopted as the administrative language of the local government. However, certain restrictions applied. For instance, correspondence between local government institutions and state institutions, in accordance with the 1920 constitution, always had to be conducted in the Estonian language. Furthermore, the bookkeeping of this local government and the minutes of council meetings had to be prepared in Estonian⁷². This does not seem to have imposed significant restrictions on the use of minority languages; rather it reflects the state's efforts to promote the use of the Estonian language and secure its position as the official language.

Although the 1938 constitution did not directly limit the right to native-language schools for national minorities, the determination of the scope of native- and state-language courses fell under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Education. The minister's draft from the same year envisaged teaching history, geography, and civics in the Estonian language, a proposal vehemently rejected by the German cultural self-government⁷³. The parliament attempted to increase Estonian-taught courses in minority schools as early as in spring 1934, during heated debates about the influence of National Socialism in German-language schools. However, Wilhelm von Wrangell, the president of the German cultural self-government from 1934 to 1938, successfully thwarted the bill with the support of Päts and other high-ranking Estonians. This case not only

⁶⁹ *Rahvusse kuuluvuse aluste määramise seadus*.

⁷⁰ *Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus. Rahvuskogus vastu võetud 28. juulil 1937. a.*, Tartu 1938, p. 3 (§19).

⁷¹ Germans perceived this as 'in strict contradiction' to the 1920 constitution, which asserted equality before the law for all citizens, see LEO VON MIDDENDORFF, *Politische Chronik. Estland*, Baltische Monatshefte, 1934, H. 10, p. 520.

⁷² *Keeleseadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 93, 2 November 1934.

⁷³ K. LAURITS, *Saksa Kultuuromavalitsuse kooliameti tegevus*, p. 53.

demonstrates Estonians' interest in preserving cultural autonomy rights but also serves as evidence of the trusting relationship between Wrangell, representing the local Germans, and (at least some of) the Estonian political elite⁷⁴. Consequently, the German-language school system faced (at least) in 1934 no significant restrictions from the state.

Certainly, other restrictive measures, such as the ban on political parties, limitations on freedom of expression, and control over universities⁷⁵ and youth organisations⁷⁶, had an impact on the entire society, including the ethnic minorities. Prior to Päts' coup, Germans had two representatives in the parliament advocating for their national interests⁷⁷. However, when the *Riigikogu* was in a 'silent existence', the president of the German cultural self-government became the sole political representative of local Germans. According to the 1938 constitution, only one member was designated to represent all national minorities in the upper chamber of the parliament, *Riiginõukogu*. In the other chamber, *Riigivolikogu*, Germans could not elect their representative due to the electoral system's limitations for dispersed populations⁷⁸.

The new constitution also restricted the extent of the autonomy granted to ethnic minorities, specifying that '[m]embers of national minorities may [...] establish local self-government institutions for cultural and welfare purposes'⁷⁹. Thus, the reference to autonomous institutions enjoying broader rights than self-governing institutions in the Estonian legal system disappeared. As Estonian historian Kaido Laurits has noted, while the cultural self-governments as public-law institutions continued to exist in practice, the legal foundation for the 'true' autonomy claims of national minorities was essentially removed⁸⁰.

THE BALTIC GERMAN MINORITY UNDER AUTHORITARIANISM

As previously mentioned, the liberal parliamentary system granted extensive and exceptional rights to minorities. However, this 'ultra-liberal' system was fundamentally unfamiliar to the more conservative Baltic Germans. All three German groupings active in the local political landscape, as listed in the

⁷⁴ W. VON WRANGELL, *Baltisakslaste olukorrast Eestis*, pp. 390–391.

⁷⁵ *Ülikoolide seadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 78, 1 October 1937.

⁷⁶ *Noorsoo organiseerimise seadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 82, 13 October 1936.

⁷⁷ In the 1929 and 1932 elections, Germans and Swedes collaborated on a common list to secure their representation, albeit modest, in the parliament, see Mati GRAF, *Parteid Eesti Vabariigis 1918–1934*, Tallinn 2000, p. 248.

⁷⁸ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus*, pp. 99–101.

⁷⁹ 'Vähemusrahvuste liikmed võivad [...] ellu kutsuda kultuurilistes ja hoolekande huvides omavalitsuslikke asutisi'; *Eesti Vabariigi põhiseadus*, p. 3 (§20).

⁸⁰ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus*, p. 99.

report from 1935, did not support 'formal democracy'. Therefore, we first ask how Päts' *coup d'état* and the subsequently established authoritarian regime resonated in Baltic German media?

Leo von Middendorff, a regular contributor to *Baltische Monatshefte*, regarded the Veterans' overthrow plans as 'probably more boasting than anything else'. In late March 1934, he expressed scepticism about the expected coup, considering the Veterans' favourable prospects in the upcoming elections. Middendorff questioned the constitutionality of postponing the elections, noting that the Päts government extensively used decree laws granted by the new constitution, primarily originating from the Veterans⁸¹. By the end of April 1934, Middendorff observed that 'Estonia is evidently moving more and more towards an authoritarian and centralistic form of government' and that the government now 'has a free hand to act'⁸². In November 1934, describing the forced termination of the parliament's session and its placement into a 'state of silence', Middendorff noted the extraordinary situation in which, at least theoretically, the *Riigikogu* still existed, but was effectively side-lined and reduced to a shadowy existence⁸³.

The editor-in-chief of *Revalsche Zeitung*, Axel de Vries, was less critical of the new government than Middendorff. In early June 1934, he acknowledged that the first post-war period 'was characterised by intellectual and political forces that were largely alien to our nature. The extreme democratic-liberal currents [...] were fundamentally foreign to our Baltic essence'. Still, de Vries recognised positive aspects of democracy, such as the old Estonian peasant courts before the First World War. He admitted that the new authoritarian system marked a fundamental transformation in the political thinking of the majority of the Estonian people. He suggested that this new thinking was significantly closer to the political views of Baltic Germans than the ideology of the first 15 years of Estonian statehood. Full of hope, he concluded: 'Without exaggeration, it can be said that now [...] the possibility of a mental-ideological rapprochement on a political level has emerged, as has not been the case before'⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Leo von MIDDENDORFF, *Politische Übersichten. Estland*, *Baltische Monatshefte*, 1934, H. 4, pp. 224, 226, 228.

⁸² 'Estland [gerät] offenkundig immer mehr und mehr in das Fahrwasser einer autoritären und zentralistischen Staatsführung'; 'freie Hand zum Handeln'; idem, *Politische Übersichten. Estland*, *Baltische Monatshefte*, 1934, H. 5, p. 288.

⁸³ Idem, *Politische Chronik. Estland*, p. 515.

⁸⁴ 'von geistigen und politischen Kräften getragen gewesen, die in vielem uns wesensfremd waren. Die extrem demokratisch-liberalen Zeitströmungen [...], die unserem baltischen Wesen, im Grund fremd waren [...] Ohne Übertreibung kann gesagt werden, dass nun an Stelle der rein praktischen politischen deutsch-estnischen Zusammenarbeit, die wir im Rahmen des estländischen Parlaments erlebt haben, sich die Möglichkeit einer geistig-ideologischen Annäherung auf

An apt reaction came from German estate owner Ernst Turmann, who was under surveillance by the Political Police. He hosted gatherings for young German scouts in the summer, during which, in 1935, he also commented on the political situation in Estonia. After delivering a speech about the Germans' tasks and aims in the Baltics, he remarked that while Mussolini had taken the photo and Hitler developed it, Päts made a copy⁸⁵.

As these examples illustrate, the Baltic German response to Päts' regime could be surprisingly diverse, with some even expressing scepticism and concerns about the authoritarian shift. Others, however, stressed positive aspects and saw the potential for a closer alignment of Estonian mainstream politics with Baltic German political views. It must be stressed that throughout the interwar period, the Baltic German elites played a significant role in the Estonian economy and high society. All this was despite the fact that, as has been aptly remarked by Estonian social scientist Martin Klesment, the ideas of economic nationalism gained strength during the Great Depression and evolved into state economic policy during the late 1930s. One of the popular demands was to diminish the role of ethnic minorities in economic life and make Estonian the sole language of business administration⁸⁶.

In this context, the ERK outlined its economic policy principles even before Päts' coup in 1933, emphasising state control over capital activities in order to strengthen 'Estonianness'. State control of major economic enterprises, often owned by Baltic Germans and Jews⁸⁷, was meant to prevent corruptive influences on the government⁸⁸. Concerns arose because Estonians allegedly dominated political and cultural spheres but not industry or trade⁸⁹. While not all measures suggested by the ERK were implemented, its influence grew⁹⁰.

politischem Gebiet ergeben hat, wie dies bisher noch nicht der Fall war'; Axel DE VRIES, *Klare Sicht*, Revalsche Zeitung, 9 June 1934, no. 128 (Beilage der Revalschen Zeitung).

⁸⁵ Eestis tegutsenud, pp. 29–30.

⁸⁶ Martin KLESMENT, *The Origins of Economic Nationalism in Interwar Estonia*, Acta Historica Tallinnensia, kd. 9: 2005, pp. 118, 121, 129; ERK-ide majanduspoliitilisi nõudeid. Esitatud riigivanem K. Päts'ule ja majandusminister K. Selter'ile 23. novembril s. a., ERK: üld-, majandus- ja kultuurpoliitiline ajakiri, 1934, no. 9–10, pp. 168–171.

⁸⁷ Although Estonians owned about half of the larger industrial enterprises (73 of 150), the number of workers in these constituted less than a third. German enterprises were also larger in terms of capital. Banking was almost entirely controlled by minorities, see Rein RUUTSOO, *Vähemusrahvused Eesti Vabariigis*, [in:] *Vähemusrahvuste kultuurielu Eesti Vabariigis 1918–1940. Dokumente ja materjale*, koost. Anni MATSULEVITŠ, Tallinn 1993, p. 19.

⁸⁸ *Eesti rahvuslaste klubide põhimõtteid*, Tartu 1933, pp. 5–6.

⁸⁹ Toomas KARJAHÄRM, Väino SIRK, *Vaim ja võim: Eesti haritlaskond 1917–1940*, Tallinn 2001, pp. 282–283, 297. It is estimated that despite comprising only 1.5 percent of the population, Germans owned at least 20 percent of the country's total wealth by the late 1930s, see K. LAURITS, *Saksa kulturomavalitsus*, p. 141.

⁹⁰ M. KLESMENT, op.cit., pp. 121–122.

A 1935 decree mandated the majority of companies' management and supervisory boards to be Estonian citizens proficient in the language⁹¹. Additionally, the bookkeeping of enterprises had to be in the Estonian language⁹².

However, Baltic Germans benefited from the corporatist system, inspired by fascist Italy, that replaced liberal capitalism during the Era of Silence⁹³. Päts advocated organising people into professional chambers, not political parties. By the end of 1936, 17 chambers, each representing different professions, had been established. Among them, the largest was the Chamber of Trade and Industry, established as early as in 1924⁹⁴. Even after 1934, Baltic Germans remained members of chambers such as the Chamber of Trade and Industry, including industrialists Martin Luther and Ernst von Rosen. Luther, in fact, headed the heavy industry department during the authoritarian era⁹⁵. A comparison of the Chamber's membership lists from 1925 and 1937 reveals no substantial differences in the level of German representation⁹⁶. Germans also secured strong representation in the other chambers based on their professional structure⁹⁷.

According to Finnish historian Vesa Vasara, most Baltic German industrialists had a very good relationship with the Estonian economic and political elite, especially with Päts and Laidoner. He argues that the entire development of the oil shale industry proves that 'Estonians and Germans worked in heavy industry together rather than against each other'⁹⁸. Likewise, Baltic German industrialists held leading positions in Estonian commercial organisations, while Estonians occupied high positions in Baltic German enterprises.

⁹¹ 213. *Aktsia- ja osüühingute juhatuste ja nõukogude koosseisu seadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 25, 15 March 1935.

⁹² Exceptions were made for foreign enterprises, see *Äriettevõtete raamatupidamise keele seadus*, Riigi Teataja, no. 109, 29 December 1934.

⁹³ On the corporatism during Päts' regime, see Andres KASEKAMP, *Corporatism and Authoritarianism in the Baltics: Päts' Estonia in Comparison*, [in:] *Corporatism and Fascism: The Corporatist Wave in Europe*, ed. Antonio Costa PINTO (Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right), New York 2017, pp. 257–271.

⁹⁴ In the first governing body of the Chamber of Trade and Industry, the Temporary Committee Presidium, Päts served as the chairman and the Baltic German banker Klaus Scheel as the chairman's assistant, i.e. the second most important person, see *Kaubandus-Tööstuskoda 1925–1935*, Tallinn 1935, p. 11; T. KARJAHÄRM, V. SIRK, op.cit., pp. 284, 306; M. KLESMENT, op.cit., p. 123; M. GRAF, op.cit., pp. 365–366.

⁹⁵ V. VASARA, *Die deutschbaltische Minderheit*, p. 587.

⁹⁶ *Kaubandus-Tööstuskoda 1925–1935*, pp. 85–87; *Kaubandus-Tööstuskoja Teataja*, vol. 12, 15 December 1937, no. 24, pp. 666–667.

⁹⁷ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus*, pp. 141–142.

⁹⁸ 'dass Esten und Deutsche in der Großindustrie eher zusammen als gegeneinander arbeiten'; V. VASARA, *Die deutschbaltische Minderheit*, p. 587.

Laidoner, for example, was a member of the supervisory board of the Estonian Oil Shale Company (ESTAG)⁹⁹ and, along with two other Estonians, a member of the supervisory board of the country's largest bank, the Scheel Bank. The fact that Scheel included Estonians in the supervisory board of his companies, including ESTAG, has been interpreted as a gesture to reassure 'the Estonian public of his loyalty'. According to German historian David Feest, Scheel 'had more in common with the *nouveau riche* of the country than with the traditional Baltic upper class', and it was important to him to be part of both, the German and Estonian societies. The banker's circle of supporters and good friends included not only Laidoner, but also the influential Estonian businessman Joakim Puhk¹⁰⁰.

In elite clubs like *Centrum* and *Actienclub*, members of Estonian and Baltic German high society regularly met, fostering mutual understanding¹⁰¹. The Rotary Club, founded in 1929 by Laidoner, Scheel and Puhk, further emphasised the growing connection between the two communities¹⁰². The symbolic act of choosing Päts as an honorary brother in 1937 of the Scheel-led Brotherhood of the Blackheads, an elitist Baltic German community of merchants, marked a significant step in overcoming historical barriers¹⁰³. According to the memoirs of Berndt Nielsen-Stokkebye, this act would not have been possible in the 1920s or even in the early 1930s¹⁰⁴, and Oswald Hartge also confirmed that '[b]oth sides worked hard to overcome barriers'¹⁰⁵. In his speech at the Blackheads' ceremony, Päts explained his duty in building the state 'as ensuring that each of our ethnic groups can claim the state as *their own*'¹⁰⁶. He expressed optimism, stating, '[o]f course, there are different orientations of thought among us, but the chauvinistic-nationalistic mindset has not found fertile ground in

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 583, 587.

¹⁰⁰ D. FEEST, op.cit., pp. 7–9.

¹⁰¹ B. NIELSEN-STOKKEBYE, op.cit., p. 72.

¹⁰² D. FEEST, op.cit., pp. 7–9. According to Oswald Hartge, there were only occasional mutual visits to German and Estonian clubs, see O. HARTGE, *Lapsepõlvest ühe ajastu lõpuni*, p. 411.

¹⁰³ Only two other individuals were admitted as honorary brothers during the interwar period, namely Crown Prince and later King Gustav Adolf of Sweden, and the president of the German cultural self-administration, Harry Koch, see Juhan KREEM, Urmas OOLUB, *Tallinna Mustpead: Mustpeade vennaskonna ajaloo ja varadest*, Tallinn 1999, pp. 46–47; Protokolle der Bruderschaft der Schwarzenhäupter, 1. Nov. 1938 – 4. Jun. 1940 (further cited as Protokolle der Bruderschaft), Tallinna Linnaarhiiv, ref. no. 87.1.16, pp. 1–12.

¹⁰⁴ B. NIELSEN-STOKKEBYE, op.cit., p. 72.

¹⁰⁵ 'Mõlemad pooled nägid vaeva, et barjääre ületada'; O. HARTGE, *Lapsepõlvest ühe ajastu lõpuni*, p. 411.

¹⁰⁶ Päts gave his speech in Estonian although for the rest of the evening he spoke German with the brothers. 'zu erreichen, dass jede unserer Völkerschaften vom Staate sagen kann, er sei ihr Staat' (highlighted in the original); Protokolle der Bruderschaft, pp. 10–12.

our state because our people are tolerant. And if you approach us, the majority people, in the same spirit, then there is no doubt that we will all grow together into one large family of the Estonian state¹⁰⁷.

In 1935, Estonian industrialists, among them the aforementioned Klaus Scheel, the textile manufacturer Andreas Knoop, and the furniture manufacturer Martin Luther contributed to the purchase of Oru Castle on the northern coast of Estonia, intended to serve as a summer residence for the president¹⁰⁸. This collective effort was meant as a joint endorsement of Päts' leadership. When President Päts, on his part, invited members of Estonian high society to formal state receptions at his residency in Kadriorg and other venues, Baltic Germans were included. Among the frequent guests were prominent Germans like Axel de Vries, Colonel Gustav Knorring, the military prosecutor from 1937 to 1939, Werner Hasselblatt, a former member of parliament who now served as secretary of the Association of German Ethnic Groups in Europe (Ger. *Verband der deutschen Volksgruppen in Europa*), and Hellmuth Weiss, the last president of the German cultural self-government. This practice highlighted the integration of Germans into the Estonian elitist society¹⁰⁹.

Yet Knorring, in his memoirs, remembered how problematic social interactions with Estonians at times felt: 'In our German society, there were influential ladies who did not want to see Estonians at their table. Not because they had to fear their limited social manners, but on principle. The fact that someone was Estonian was enough for a dismissive attitude'. Despite occasional social tensions, however, Knorring expressed hope for future generations to bridge social differences, drawing parallels with the evolution of the relations between Finns and Swedes in Finland¹¹⁰.

In general, however, the issue of interethnic social contacts needs further research, as we have only sketchy knowledge about interactions between the

¹⁰⁷ 'Natürlich ist auch bei uns das Denken verschieden gerichtet, doch hat die chauvinistisch-völkische Denkweise in unserem Staate keinen Boden gefunden, denn unser Volk ist verträglich. Und wenn Sie in denselben Geiste uns, dem Mehrheitsvolke, entgegenkommen, dann besteht kein Zweifel, dass wir alle zu einer grossen Familie des estnischen Staates zusammewachsen'; *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Ago PAJUR, *Konstantin Päts. Poliitiline Biograafia. II osa: riigimees (1917–1956)*, Tartu 2018, p. 599.

¹⁰⁹ Vastuvõttude, tseremooniate ja külaskäikude kavad 20.06.1939–24.02.1940, ERA, ref. no. 989.1.1802, pp. 33–34; Vastuvõttude ja külaskäikude kavad 01.04.1938–31.03.1939, ERA, ref. no. 989.1.1800, p. 16.

¹¹⁰ 'Meie saksa seltskonnas oli mõjukaid daame, kes ei soovinud näha eestlasi oma laua ääres. Mitte seepärast, et oleks tulnud karta nende väheseid seltskondlikke maneere, vaid põhimõtte pärast. Tõsiasi, et tegemist on eestlasega, piisas tõrjuvaks hoiakuks'; Gustav KNORRING, *Meenutusi keiserlikust Venemaast ja Eestist II*, Akadeemia, kd. 25: 2013, no. 11, p. 2074.

Germans from lower social strata, who did not belong to the elites and the demographic majority¹¹¹. Yet when in late 1939 the Baltic Germans left Estonia after the Secret Protocol of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact had declared the country to be in the Soviet 'sphere of interest', the Estonian public hardly expressed any compassion for the fate of their countrymen¹¹².

CONCLUSIONS

The interwar period witnessed a complex interplay between economic collaboration, societal integration, and evolving relationships within Estonian and Baltic German communities, especially among the elites. Despite all this, however, the idea of Estonian independence was underpinned by a historical antagonism towards the Germans, particularly cultivated under the Päts regime in the spirit of the 'great battle for freedom'. Yet in comparison with the situation of Latvia's German minority¹¹³, conditions in Estonia were much more favourable for interethnic understanding and the exercise of minority rights. This was particularly true in the second half of the 1930s when, in Latvia, the founder of the democratic republic in 1918, Kārlis Ulmanis, organised an authoritarian dictatorship based on ethnic nationalism and the populist slogan 'Latvia for the Latvians'.

The Estonian-German experience of the interwar period was clearly marked initially by the loss of local political and social power that German elites had

¹¹¹ The age and gender composition of the Germans favoured assimilation with other nationalities. Compared to other minorities, Germans had a relatively high proportion of interethnic marriages, primarily with members of larger ethnic groups, i.e. Estonians and Russians, see footnote 68.

¹¹² Jüri KIVIMÄE, „Aus der Heimat ins Vaterland“. *Die Umsiedlung der Deutschbalten aus dem Blickwinkel estnischer nationaler Gruppierungen*, Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte, Bd. 4: 1995, H. 2, pp. 501–520. Still, in retrospect, Wrangell described the *Umsiedlung* of Germans as a shock for Estonians, see W. VON WRANGELL, *Baltisaklaste olukorras Eestis*, pp. 400–401. Even in the nationalist press was stated that '[n]o one has driven away Germans from Estonia, and even those circles among the Estonians where national motives are prioritised have not gone this far in their thinking before [...]' ('Eestist ei ole keegi sakslasi ära ajanud ning ka need eestlaste ringkonnad, kus rahvuslikud motiivid on asetatud esiplaanile, ei ole läinud varem nii kaugele oma mõttekäikudes [...]'), see [K.] KARUS, *Lahkuva rahvusgrupi kavatsusi*, ERK: üld-, majandus- ja kultuurpoliitiline ajakiri, 1939, no. 6 (64), p. 263.

¹¹³ This topic is beyond the scope of this article, which is focused on minority policies in interwar Estonia. See, e.g., David J. SMITH, *Inter-war Multiculturalism Revisited: Cultural Autonomy in 1920s Latvia*, [in:] *From Recognition to Restoration: Latvia's History as a Nation State*, ed. idem (On the Boundary of Two Worlds, vol. 25), Amsterdam 2010, pp. 31–43; Marina GERMANE, *Exercising Minority Rights in New Democracies: Germans and Jews in Interwar Poland, Romania, and Latvia, 1919–33*, [in:] *Sovereignty, Nationalism, and the Quest for Homogeneity in Interwar Europe*, ed. Emmanuel DALE MULLE, Davide RODOGNO, Mona BIELING, London 2023, pp. 135–138.

previously enjoyed. However, the cultural autonomy law to some extent offered them a path for integration into the national state as a distinct ethnic minority. During the economic crisis, some of them were drawn to right-wing extremism or even fascism, much like their Estonian counterparts in the Veterans' League. Similar to Latvia, the Germans now faced 'anti-German National Socialism'¹¹⁴. At least in terms of politics of history, this left its mark on how Estonian history was popularised under Päts, emphasising a centuries-long struggle against the Germans. Even after 1934, when the autonomy of the German administrative institutions was somewhat reduced, the legal framework continued to exist during the Era of Silence. No doubt, given the demographic situation of a tiny minority, parliamentary democracy had never been a favoured solution for traditionally minded Baltic Germans. Instead, lobbying for the own interest through corporative structures was something very familiar for local German economic elites, remembering the centuries-long traditions of merchant guilds and artisans' corporations (Ger. *Zünfte*). Therefore, Arved von Taube's remark from 1975, that the Baltic Germans have every reason to remember the years under Päts with gratitude, is fully understandable. It corresponds with the mainstream Estonian view of the Era of Silence as a fairy tale of national blossoming, idealised particularly because of the subsequent terror brought by Soviet annexation in 1940.

However, our story cannot be complete for we still lack sufficient understanding of the attitudes of underprivileged Germans towards the authoritarian regime of Konstantin Päts. For instance, it is worth delving further into the activities and ideas of Siegmund Klau, who was born in Petersburg and chose to settle in Estonia in 1918. Klau initiated the aforementioned Estonian-German National Association, which primarily consisted of lower-middle-class Germans alienated from the local German elites. Klau's Association sought closer contact with Estonians and emphasised that 'Germans must treat Estonia as their homeland'. Klau actively campaigned against class biases and privileged status. Although the Association had only a few hundred supporters and never gained a significant momentum, it is noteworthy that according to the Political Police, the *Alt-Balten* and the National Socialists labelled it 'Siegmund Klau's traitorous movement'¹¹⁵. Despite Germans constituting only a tiny minority group, various political movements existed within the community, naturally resulting in diverse attitudes toward the Estonian state, democracy and authoritarianism.

¹¹⁴ Matthew KOTT, *Latvia's Pärkonkrusts: Anti-German National Socialism in a Fascistogenic Milieu*, Fascism, vol. 4: 2015, no. 2, pp. 169–193.

¹¹⁵ K. LAURITS, *Saksa kultuuroromavalitsus*, p. 92; *Eestis tegutsenud*, pp. 29, 39–40, 47.

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