



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 33/16

Project manager: Per Bolin

Project title: Academia in the midst of ethnic controversy. The 'politics of belonging' in respect to Latvians and Baltic Germans in interwar Latvia, 1919-1939.

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

The main case of the project, the investigation of the struggles between the Latvian and Baltic German educated elites about the status of the German-speaking Herder-Institut zu Riga has shown that this constituted a formative moment in the relations between the two ethnic groups. The insistence from the Baltic Germans that the H-I should be given formal university status drove a wedge between the educated elites of the two groups. From that point onwards, the Latvian educated elites turned decidedly more nationalist, embracing various educational and scholarly projects in order to enhance and promote Latvian history and culture, thus supporting the nationalizing agenda of the Latvian state.

These results question the gist of current research on the established cultural autonomy of the ethnic minorities in interwar Latvia. During the last two decades, research on cultural autonomy in Latvia and Estonia has almost exclusively focused on its supposedly beneficial character. Cultural autonomy has been portrayed as a successful form of minority politics, giving ethnic minorities the right to organize separate school systems and be safeguarded against assimilation into the titular nation. However, the case of the Herder-Institut zu Riga shows that the insistence on cultural autonomy from the Baltic German side could not coexist easily with the nationalizing ambitions of the Latvian state: instead, these ambitions opened up a chasm between the two ethnic groups that continued to widen during the early 1930s. The Baltic Germans were accused of wanting to create a "state within a state", and their loyalty towards the Latvian state was increasingly questioned. Consequently, institutionalized cultural autonomy in interwar Latvia cannot be seen as the "success" and model for contemporary society that much of the previous research has stated.

Another case in the project concerns cooperation and conflict between Latvian and Baltic German academics over cultural heritage. Here, we investigate in particular the dealings between the government body for the preservation of monuments, historical buildings and cultural artefacts, the *Pieminekļu Valde*, and the Baltic German association *Gesellschaft für Geschichte und Alterstumkunde*. While the relations between these two organisations were initially fairly consensual, very much due to the fact that the officials in the severely understaffed *Pieminekļu Valde* were in great need of the expertise and library of the *Gesellschaft*, these relations soured markedly towards the end of the 1920s. Conflicts emerged both about the definition of what constituted monuments and cultural heritage, the priorities regarding the means for preservation, and eventually also who were the rightful owners of cultural heritage in Latvia: the Baltic German associations or the Latvian state.



A pivotal figure here was Francis Balodis, archaeology professor at the University of Latvia and Director of the *Pieminekļu Valde* from 1932. Balodis has been very little noticed in previous research, but was actually the driving force behind a national turn in Latvian academia from the late 1920s. Holding also key positions at the Historical museum and Historical Institute, Balodis gathered around him a circle of young archaeologists and started a programme of reconstructing a supposedly glorious Latvian past before the coming of Germans in the 13th century. Together with nationalist historian Augusts Tentelis, Balodis used his influence in the *Pieminekļu Valde* to appropriate Baltic German cultural artifacts, starting with historical records and the artifacts kept in Baltic German museums in 1935, and ending with large-scale confiscations of historical objects when the Baltic German population left Latvia in the autumn of 1939. The *Pieminekļu Valde* under Balodis's Directorship thus became a central nationalizing government body.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

During the past two decades, international research on cultural autonomy and, more specifically, the relations between the Baltic German ethnic minority and the titular nation, the Latvians, has painted an unduly rosy picture. The British research group around John Hiden, Martyn Housden, and David Smith have produced very solid historical research – but have at the same time made a far too positive evaluation of the institutionalized cultural autonomy of Estonia and Latvia during the interwar period, even suggesting this to be an adequate model for minority politics in contemporary Europe. Among both Latvian and German historians there has lately also been a tendency to emphasize the cooperation and consensus between the two ethnic groups rather than friction and conflicts. Among Latvian historians, this tendency is to some extent connected to the fundamental critique of previous Soviet scholarship, where Baltic Germans were cast consistently as class enemies and Nazis. However, in our project we have shown that the initial consensus around cultural autonomy gradually gave way to hostile relations between the two groups and a politization of ethnic difference.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

A vital contribution to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe is our findings on the problematic aspects of institutionalized cultural autonomy for ethnic minorities during the interwar period. This contributes both to the understanding of minority politics in Latvia during this time-period, as well as to the larger and rather thorny question of establishing minority rights within nationalizing states, countries with governments intent to ensure the cultural predominance of the titular nation. Another contribution is new knowledge on processes around contested cultural heritage in interwar Latvia, a previously underexplored field but at the same time a research area that has recently become of utmost relevance in contemporary Eastern Europe.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The project's findings indicate that the increasing friction between the educated Latvian and Baltic German elites from the late 1920s also was an important element in Latvia's trajectory towards authoritarian rule, in Latvia implemented by Karlis Ulmanis in 1934.



The ‘national turn’ among the Latvian educated elite buttressed and legitimized the contention among nationalist ideologues that a completely Latvianized Latvia could not be achieved within the framework of parliamentary democracy. The widening gulf between the two ethnic groups also led to a situation where ethnic difference became increasingly politicized. For Latvian political parties, criticizing the Baltic Germans and their supposedly undue political, cultural and economic power became a vote-catcher, which in turn created a spiral of worsening relations between Latvians and Baltic Germans. The latter group was increasingly seen as disloyal to the Latvian state, especially so after Hitler’s ascent to power in 1933. Summing up, our contention is that the conflicts in the cultural arena between Latvians and Baltic Germans should also be analysed as a part of the Latvian trajectory towards authoritarianism.

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

The findings from project’s main case, the struggle between Latvian and Baltic German elites over the status of the German-speaking Herder-Institut zu Riga, have been presented at several conferences, primarily within the Baltic Studies network, at IRES in Uppsala and at CBEES Annual Conferences at Södertörn University.

The main results have been published in an anthology from the Central European University Press:

Douglas, Christina & Bolin, Per (2022) ”The Sokolowski Affair. Testing the Limits of Cultural Autonomy in Interwar Latvia” i *Defining Latvia. Recent Explorations in History, Culture, and Politics*, red. Michael Loader, Siobhán Hearne & Matthew Kott, Budapest/Vienna/New York: Central European University Press.

A theoretical contribution to nationalism studies, and to the research on the interethnic relations between Latvians and Baltic Germans, has been printed in the *Journal of Baltic Studies*:

Bolin, Per & Douglas, Christina, (2017) ”’National indifference’ in the Baltic territories? A critical assessment” *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 48:1.

The project’s second case, on the cooperation and conflicts over cultural heritage between Latvians and Baltic Germans, has not yet reached its final state. This case became very much delayed, partly because of the Covid pandemic which made it impossible to do archival research in Latvia, but primarily because one of the project members unfortunately developed a very serious chronic disease, leading to long periods of sick leave. However,



especially during 2023 a great deal of empirical work has been done with archival sources in Riga, so we are confident that we will put together two articles on this case during 2024.

A third case we have begun working on concerns the conflicts between the Latvian and Baltic German elites regarding access to the prestigious summer villa communities of Rigasche Strand /Jūrmala and Ogerpark/Ogre. Here some preliminary works have been published on the summer villa culture among the Baltic German elite:

Douglas, Christina, (forthcoming 2024) "Drömmen om den oförändrade platsen: den tyskbaltska borgerlighetens sommaridyll runt sekelskiftet 1900", *Föränderliga platser*, red. Magnus Rodell & Leif Runefelt.

Douglas, Christina (2019) "En kolonial elits sista strid. Tyskbalternas sommartillvaro vid Rigaschen Strand runt sekelskiftet 1900" *Tidskrift för Genusvetenskap*, 40: 2.

Here too, we have collected much material, primarily using Baltic German and Latvian newspapers, which will be used for a scholarly article during 2024.

Conference papers and presentations

"Creating Pure Latvian Knowledge. Academia under the Ulmanis Regime, 1934-1940". Per Bolin. Presentation at the CBEES Annual Conference, Södertörn University, 1-2 December 2022.

Presentation at the research seminar with historians at Åbo Akademi, Finland, 20/5 2021. Per Bolin. "Fascism "light" eller auktoritär agrarianism? Perspektiv på etablerandet av regimen Ulmanis i Lettland, 1934-1940".

"A rude awakening?! Latvian nationalists' disillusion with democracy, 1925-1934". Per Bolin. Presentation at the panel "Disinterest and disillusion with democracy in Latvia and Lithuania, 1905-1934. CBEES Annual Conference, Södertörn University, 29-30 November 2018.

"The Nationalizing State versus Minority Rights: The Controversy surrounding the *Herder-Institut* in Riga in the 1920s." Joint presentation with Christina Douglas at "Latvia at a Crossroads: The Centenary of the Latvian State", Institute of Russian and Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, 10-12 October 2018.

"The Sokolowski Affair: Cultural Struggles between Baltic Germans and Latvians in the 1920s". Joint presentation with Christina Douglas at 12th Conference of Baltic Studies in Europe, 19-21 June 2017, Riga, Latvia.



Per Bolin and Christina Douglas. Participants in the roundtable discussion: “‘National Indifference’ – A Category for Assessing Perceptions of Belonging in the Baltics?” 12th Conference of Baltic Studies in Europe, 19-21 June 2017, Riga, Latvia.