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International Affairs and Latvia's Baltic Germans

MARTYN HOUSDEN

The history of independent Latvia in 1918–40 is in the process of being re-examined and so the contribution of Latvia's national minorities to the state is also ripe for review. Current knowledge suggests that Latvia's foreign policy, in the first place, was created by the ethnic Latvian officials of the Latvian Foreign Ministry; so why should this book discuss Baltic Germans who were outsiders to the policy process? Baltic Germans were Latvia's citizens who, on their own behalf, contributed to international affairs on national, European and even world stages. Although their influence on Riga's foreign policy was not always easy to trace, certainly they exercised influence in Berlin (with the German Foreign Ministry) and Geneva (with the League of Nations). As such, Baltic Germans were an important element of the Latvian *demos*, which the government of the day had to take into account as it made *all* of its policies, including *foreign* policy.

Who were the Baltic Germans?

From medieval times, German knights, missionaries and traders arrived in the Baltic region. Bringing no serfs with them, they formed an upper class which owned land, monopolised social power and relied on the local peoples for labour. The Baltic Germans retained their multiple privileges when the Baltic lands were absorbed by the Russian Empire during the eighteenth century. From this point, the Germans' chivalrous orders (*Ritterschaften*) ruled the region loyally for the Tsars.

Never more than 10 % of the region's population, the Baltic Germans were always cosmopolitan. Their *Ritterschaften* embraced Estonia, Oesel, Livonia and Courland. Education took them to Germany and Russia alike. Trade and imperial administration drew them across the Russian Empire wherever opportunity or duty dictated. Equally, over the centuries, waves of immigrants from the German heartland swelled the number of Germans in the region. Baltic Germans, then, comprised a social group that was always part of something bigger – and,

historically, its members always looked both East and West. In this connection, they also believed they were the inheritors of a “mission”: namely to promote “Western,” “civilising” values in the face of “Eastern,” “Asiatic” chaos.

Latvia’s independence and international networks

The Baltic Germans did not fit easily within an independent Latvia. During the Interwar period they were described as anti-modern, exhibiting a pre-capitalist, pre-democratic mentality and subject to agrarian-corporatist thinking. As the Tsar’s former leadership caste, many felt little natural affinity with the small, new nation state. During the First World War and its aftermath, too many Baltic Germans had, first, co-operated with the German occupation and, later, worked with the Niedra government. For too long the post-war National Committee, made up of former Baltic German elites, refused to recognise an independent Latvian state. It is ironic, therefore, that the Baltic German *Landeswehr* played a signal role in liberating the new state’s territory when it stormed Riga on 22 May 1919, overthrowing the Bolshevik occupation. About a month later, however, the *Landeswehr* was itself prevented from advancing on Wenden by combined Latvian and Estonian forces.

With the collapse of empire, everything changed for the Baltic Germans. Without the Tsar, increasingly they looked to Berlin for sponsorship. Tens of thousands emigrated to Germany where, amongst other things, some lobbied they government over its “Eastern policy” (*Ostpolitik*). The community that remained in Latvia was all but devastated by the twin processes of decolonisation and Latvian state-building. Previously, ethnic Germans had owned 57 % of agricultural land in Latvia, but agrarian reform removed 2.7 million hectares from them. German community property was confiscated as organisations were closed. The German community lost control of both the Jakobi Church and Riga Cathedral.

In the terms of the post-war peace treaties, the Baltic Germans transitioned from being ruling elites to “national minorities.” The new status provided them with a modicum of international protection as guaranteed by the League of Nations. In return, the “minority” was expected to live loyally in its new home. Certainly many contemporary Germans believed the scale of the changes presented them with a grave crisis of material existence and identity, but at least a few progressive voices (most notably Paul Schiemann) urged constructive engagement with the new state. The minority was represented by

eight parliamentary deputies. At various times it provided Ministers of Finance and Justice. Furthermore, as the new state was in the process of forming itself, the German community put itself at the vanguard of framing its multi-ethnic structure by promoting autonomous education for national minorities as defined by the schooling legislation of 8 December 1919. Thanks to this, the number of ethnic German schools rose from 46 in January 1920 to 93 in January 1922. This educational project always had an international dimension because, as early as May 1920, the ethnic German Wolfgang Wachtsmuth travelled to Berlin to secure funding for his community's schools.

The impact on foreign affairs as delivered by Latvia's Baltic Germans came not, therefore, from direct influence on policy-development in Riga's Foreign Ministry but: first, by the way the community sought to construct itself autonomously within the new Latvian nation state; and second by the way subsequently it attempted to gain a distinctive and independent purchase in international affairs. It pursued the latter aim by more elaborate strategies than just capitalising on good connections with Germany's Foreign Ministry. Latvia's Germans were just one of a series of ethnic German minorities left scattered around Central and Eastern Europe after 1918. In 1922, ethnic German community leaders from Estonia (Ewald Ammende) and Romania (Rudolf Brandsch) attempted to bring these communities together in the Association of German National Minorities in Europe. During the 1920s, this was a peaceful organisation dedicated to promoting common ethnic German interests and the autonomous development of ethnic German culture. For Latvia's German community, Paul Schiemann quickly carved out a leading position in the organisation.

More ambitious still was the European Congress of Nationalities, which first met in Geneva in autumn 1925. Again the work of Ammende, the organisation provided a platform for all of Europe's organised national minorities. In the event, most heavily represented were minorities from the states of Central and Eastern Europe which was home to the new and expanded states covered by post-war minority treaties administered by the League of Nations. The congress met in Geneva specifically to lobby the League. In time, it drew representatives from minority communities numbering as many as 40 million people. It was a considerable undertaking and ethnic Germans from Latvia, such as Schiemann and Baron Wilhelm Firks promoted their community's values from its platform, as did several of Latvia's Jewish community leaders.

BARON WILHELM FIRKS was co-presenter of a petition to the League of Nations in 1925 which argued that land reform discriminated against the Baltic German minority.

He was born in Kovno district in 1870 and went to school in Mitau before studying mining in Serbia, Spain and the Urals. Between 1911 and 1916 he owned the estate of Wattram in Livonia and came to believe that historic land ownership offered something fundamental to Baltic German identity. Personally, Firks was badly affected by agrarian reform. Thereafter, he was closely associated with organisations promoting Baltic German agrarian interests. In independent Latvia, he was a leading figure in the Baltic German National Party, deputy leader of the German party fraction and a member of the National Committee.

Firks' traditional conservative always put him at odds with the rise of Nazism.



Photo: *Baltische Monatshefte* (Ernst Plates: Riga, 1934), collection of the National Library of Latvia

Between Riga and Berlin

With their own autonomous community established inside Latvia, with the League of Nations offering some international guarantees for minority rights, and with networks of international political connections, it was natural that the Baltic German community influenced Latvia's international situation in a number of ways.

Part of something bigger

"For us [Baltic Germans], the German Reich certainly is much more than a large powerful neighbouring state. Above all, in the German Reich we see the heart of the entire great German nation. We Balts are just a tiny part of this and want to remain so."¹

The link between Latvia's Baltic Germans and the German state could not be ignored by Riga's policy-makers. For Baltic Germans, Germany was not just a nearby state, but a cultural community which they felt they belonged to, and to which they wanted to keep on belonging. The sentiment found some resonance in Berlin, with figures such as Prussian Minister of Culture Carl Becker recognising in 1919 that German foreign policy had to involve "policy towards Germanism abroad." Unsurprisingly, therefore, following Wachtsmuth's early success in acquiring funding for ethnic

PAUL SCHIEMANN was arguably the most important Baltic German of the Interwar period. As well as practicing politics in Latvia, he also developed theoretical ideas about the structure of multi-ethnic states. His arguments maintained consistently that the German community should modernise.

During the First World War, Schiemann served as an officer in the Russian Army. In 1917 he fled Bolshevism, but soon found himself at odds with the German occupation authorities in the Baltic on account of his liberal democratic ideas. Expelled from the Baltic, he went to Berlin where, in 1918, he returned to his career as a journalist. That October, he co-authored a memorandum for Reich Chancellor Prince Max of Baden which demanded elected bodies for Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian territories.

With peace, Schiemann returned to Riga. Here, he championed the Democratic Party, began editing *Rigasche Rundschau*, and also became a member of the National Assembly, the Constituent Assembly and the Saeima. Internationally he had excellent government connections in Berlin and also met the General Secretary of the League of Nations, Eric Drummond. Schiemann became a member of the Association of German National Minorities in Europe and the European Congress of Nationalities.

Schiemann developed a particularly strong reputation as “the thinker” of the national minority movement. He developed a theory of the “anational state,” in which culture and politics should be separated. Then people could share territory based especially on common political requirements, whilst pursuing separate cultural lives according to each community’s national customs. As a democrat and a proponent of liberal tolerance, in the early 1930s Schiemann spoke out loudly against German National Socialism, criticising especially its anti-Semitism and general racism. As a result, soon he was sidelined in the Association of German National Groups in Europe, the European Congress of Nationalities and *Rigasche Rundschau*.

The anational state

- a. “Whoever has the will to belong to a national community does not need to belong to it racially and historically. By its very nature, the national community is a community of feeling.”
- b. “That the nation as a national community can have no relation to territory arises from the fact that it cannot be delimited definitively in territorial fashion. This is because every territorial delimitation has to exclude a smaller or larger part of the national community.”*

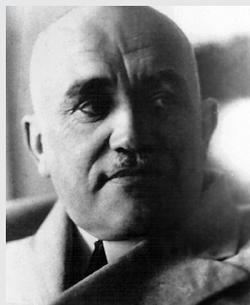


Photo: State Archives of Latvia
(collected by John Hiden)

* Paul Schiemann, “Volksgemeinschaft und Staatsgemeinschaft,” *Nation und Staat*, September 1927.

German schools, subventions just kept on flowing from Berlin. Between 1923 and 1928, the German state financed roughly 25 % of the budget deficit run up by Latvia's German schools. Nor were subventions limited to education. The Gustav Adolf Association supported church organisations while the Concordia Literary Organisation (actually a front for German government funding) subsidised *Rigasche Rundschau*. Owing to the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's support for ethnic Germans abroad always had to be delivered carefully and within limits; but even though only relatively small amounts of money were supplied, they were enough to enable Latvia's Germans to consolidate their community.

In terms of geo-strategy, Berlin wanted to build good relation with the so-called "borderland states" (*Randstaaten*) lying between it and Russia. In the future, perhaps they could be used as a "springboard" for trade with the massive Russian market. Latvia offered good possibilities in this connection because, not least, much of the state's industry historically had been owned by ethnic Germans and operated closely with Germany's own industry. No surprise, therefore, that between 1919 and 1930, the proportion of Latvia's imports sourced from Germany never fell below the considerable figure of 39 %. In terms of trade and industry, Germany and Latvia were drawing close together at this time, and the Baltic Germans had to be included as part of the process.

Furthermore, at this point Latvia's Baltic Germans even wielded some influence on policy in Berlin. Paul Schiemann enjoyed some access to the corridors of power in the German Foreign Ministry and eventually met with Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann. Most likely under Schiemann's influence, thereafter Stresemann produced a famous memorandum which recognised the significance of ethnic Germans to German trade policy, as well as recognising the importance of culturally autonomous social organisation for Europe's national minorities.

The League of Nations: rights and petitions

If their national identity gave Baltic Germans some purchase in Berlin, their status as a "national minority" ensured them a hearing in Geneva. National self-determination lay at the heart of the First World War's peace treaties. It provided the justification for the dismantling of old Empires in favour of nation states. But what of the national minorities left in the new, smaller structures? The Allied Powers decided that such minorities should be

protected by a series of treaties and agreements entered into by the new and enlarged states of Central and Eastern Europe, with the League of Nations guaranteeing their implementation. The first such treaty was agreed by Poland on 28 June 1919.

Latvia sought membership of the League on 14 May 1920. Like Poland, it was expected to subject its minority policy to international guarantee. The step, however, was unpopular with Latvia's new political leaders because it implied giving up some state sovereignty to the League, promised international interference in Latvian domestic affairs and (since the Great Powers had signed no such treaties) spoke of unequal treatment of the League's members. So although Latvia became a member of the League of Nations on 22 September 1921, its declaration about international minority protection was only made on 7 July 1923. It is important to note that the Baltic German community was *not* an integral part of Latvia's negotiations with Geneva. Baltic Germans served only as commentators on the process and a pressure group attempting to influence events from the outside.

The Latvian view of international minority rights delivered to the League of Nations in 1922

"... as far as they [the principles of minority protection] have been clearly defined by the Treaties [ending the First World War], these general principles have always been observed by Latvia, which has moreover accorded better protection to Minorities than is the case in many other countries. The memorandum presented by the Latvian government to the League of Nations concerning Minorities is evidence of Latvia's firm desire to continue to observe the general principles which she has accepted and also of her profound wish to contribute to the solidarity of all nations.

I assure your Excellency that Latvia will always be glad to help in the establishment of a positive law for Minorities clearly drawn up and applicable to all countries, and guaranteed by the League of Nations."²

The unwillingness of Latvian policy-makers to include minorities directly in discussions of the international guarantee of minority rights perhaps reflected how minority spokesmen had begun to use the League's systems to put pressure on the new state through the presentation of petitions of complaint. As early as September 1921, Lucian Wolf (secretary to the Joint Foreign Committee of Jewish Deputies and the Anglo-Jewish Association) petitioned the League about anti-Semitism in Latvia. Latvian diplomats responded to the petition with gravity, but no procedures were actually changed within the country as a result of it. Four years later, Baron Firks and Manfred von Vegesack prepared another

petition about the treatment of ethnic German landowners as a result of agrarian reform. Two months later the Latvian government replied to the Firks-Vegesack petition, telling the League that agrarian reform was an absolute social necessity for the new state and that national minorities were not being discriminated against. Critical of the government's position, Robert Cecil (League of Nations representative for the UK) observed that 96.5 % of the expropriated land had *not* belonged to ethnic Latvians and that persecution could not be turned into social reform by the use of clever words.

Cecil is not persuaded

"Viscount CECIL thought that the [League of Nations] Committee was faced with a question of fact. It made very little difference what the Government had done with the expropriated land. There remained the fact that 96½ % had belonged to non-Latvians. Oppression could not be converted into a social reform by a mere change of name. It was evident that the Committee must further discuss the matter with the Latvian Government and, failing agreement, consult the Permanent Court."³

The League found in favour of the petitioners and its officials were told to approach Riga to arrange compensation for former landowners. The Latvian government responded by emphasising that land reform was essential to the stability of Latvia and warned that changes to the *status quo* could encourage sympathy for communism. For their part, the Baltic German elites appeared ready both to take the issue to the Permanent International Court at The Hague and to use it for political ends. Given the difficult situation, the case was suspended, but never closed. Despite everything, however, compensation to former land owners remained minimal.

Schiemann discusses land reform with Eric Drummond, Secretary General of the League of Nations, 27 February 1925

"I saw Dr. Schiemann, the leader of the German faction in the Latvian parliament today. He said that things on the whole were going quite well. There were now only two outstanding questions which were of considerable importance.

1. The first was the payment to be made for the land which had been expropriated. The German landowners quite understood the necessity of agrarian reform; but they felt that they ought to be given either an increased price for the land taken, or – and this was the best solution put forward – that they should be allowed to retain larger holdings than was the case at present....

I asked him how much had been offered by the law which had been proposed, but which had been defeated, owing to the German Minorities Party.

He replied that all that had been suggested was a two-hundredth part of the real value."⁴

The limits to Berlin's support

Although the Baltic Germans clearly spoke for themselves to the League of Nations, within Latvia, a perception endured that they were always prepared to promote Reich German interests. Such accusations came to the fore, for instance, in 1927 when Baltic German support for the Latvian-Russian Treaty was said to be in Berlin's interest. Although such ways of thinking were evident in the Latvian press, they were too simple. Key Baltic German leaders in Latvia were prepared to build on the foundations of the new nation state. Both Firks and Schiemann understood well that the future of the Baltic Germans had to depend on co-operation with the Baltic peoples.

Furthermore, despite the considerable mutual interest existing between the German state and Latvia's Baltic Germans, in fact Berlin's commitment to the group had distinct limits. Germany could not construct its foreign policy on a foundation provided by the Baltic Germans alone because they were not its final purpose. So although German state interests certainly did recognise the need to secure the welfare of Latvia's Baltic Germans, more important still was the aim of the economic penetration of Eastern Europe. In this light, while Berlin wanted positive relations with Latvia's German minority, even more important were good relations with the Latvian government.

Likewise, when German Ambassador to Latvia (1923–28) Adolf Koester spoke of the need to bind Latvia to Germany, he was not just recommending benefits for the Baltic Germans, since his arguments contained more general economic, political and cultural ideas. In fact, Koester was explicit that the creation of a strong bond between the Baltics and the Reich called for co-operation between Baltic Germans and Latvians in order not to upset the achievement of bigger aims. German representatives in Riga understood well, therefore, that their policies towards the Baltic governments and the Baltic Germans had to move together as harmoniously as possible. On a more personal note, as a convinced social democrat Koester did not support hereditary landownership by the Baltic Germans (*Bodenständigkeit*) and was not terribly concerned if some German farmers in Latvia's rural areas faced assimilation by the majority ethnic group.

Lobbying Berlin with Koester

"We travelled together and I spent 3–4 days with him [Ambassador Koester] and Schiemann in Berlin. It wasn't very easy for me to keep up with my colleagues who both rejoiced in a considerable lust for life and had a tremendous

capacity for consuming alcohol. We arrived at the 'Russischen Hof', opposite the Friedrichstrasse railway station. My expectation that we would pursue our affairs in the Foreign Ministry straight away on the day after our arrival proved not to be correct. For two or three days until late into the night we visited restaurants and all kinds of places of pleasure. Koester found acquaintances everywhere. He was thoroughly amusing and witty and filled with an indestructible vitality."⁵

1930s: "Nationalismus überalles"

Among the Baltic Germans, there were always people who disliked being termed a "minority." For them, being labelled based on the number of members of their community de-valued the quality of the historic contribution they had made to the Baltic area. They wanted to be respected as a "national group." The national pride sometimes associated with German heritage only increased throughout the 1930s as, first, Hitler approached political power and, then, began to build the Third Reich. His virulent politics crossed political borders to infect Europe's ethnic Germans.

Germany for the Germans! Latvia for the Latvians!

"Germany for the Germans! What a well-known sound for every politician in the East! Latvia for the Latvians! Poland for the Poles! Romania for the Romanians! Greater Serbia for the Serbs! It is the call to arms of 'national' economic policy across the whole of East and South East Europe! Economic autarky and nation state thinking are the foundations of this policy. A policy which threatens to bring a series of new states to the edge of economic breakdown through corruption and lack of productivity.... A policy against which especially the German minorities at the Geneva nationalities congress have protested particularly forcibly and with good reason."⁶

Some brave individuals stood firmly against Nazism. In 1932, Paul Schiemann gave a strongly anti-Nazi speech to the Association of German National Groups in Europe (renamed from the Association of German National Minorities in Europe). He denounced "the new nationalist wave" crashing across Europe from West to East which was damaging Baltic German youth. Unfortunately, fine words were not enough and Nazism found willing accomplices among Latvia's Germans, especially Erhard Kroeger who led "the Movement." In his memoirs, Kroeger denied "the Movement" (founded in 1933) took its orders from Berlin, but certainly during the 1930s he made connections with Reinhard Heydrich (Chief of the Reich Security Head Office) and Heinrich Himmler (Reich Leader of the SS). Although

older traditional conservative Baltic Germans generally remained sceptical about Hitler, as the Third Reich became stronger, so the appeal of “the Movement” grew.

New nationalist wave

a. “This is the nationalism of contemporary Europe which has received a considerable boost from the obvious victory of nationalist thinking in the world war. The proclamation of the right to national self determination has given new theoretical foundations to the aim of creating an identity which brings together membership of the national group and membership of the state. The fight about national law, which we are called on to fight, has no other goal than, in consciousness of Mankind, to destroy the necessity of this identity.”

b. “There is a new nationalist wave, which slowly but surely has crashed over this ideological moment and which now has transferred the idea of the powerful nation state into our region.”

The Ulmanis coup took place on 15 May 1934 and quickly the new regime took steps to ban the Nazi movement and its newspaper, *Rigaer Tageblatt*. In 1936, leading Nazi sympathisers were arrested temporarily, but more general steps were also taken against the German community. Autonomous German schooling had been under political pressure since 1931 when Education Minister Kēniņš began a quest to create a unified Latvian culture, but now more decisive steps were undertaken. In July 1934, the existing system of school autonomy was abolished and direct administration of German schools by the Ministry of Education was applied. Further laws followed which restricted the use of German language in the public sphere, limited the number of Germans able to practice law and made it difficult for Germans to buy land. At the same time, steps were taken to impose state ownership on private industry, with German and Jewish enterprises being nationalised with disproportionate enthusiasm.

Once, Ulmanis commented that limiting Baltic German power was one of his most important tasks. More dramatically, Latvia’s Ambassador to Warsaw Ēķis once described to Foreign Minister Munters how Latvia’s Germans were a bridgehead for a foreign power and could be used to pressurise the Latvian state at home and abroad. For such Latvian figures, the anti-minority and specifically anti-Nazi measures of the 1930s were necessary steps for self defence. German figures, however, saw things differently. In spring 1936, German Ambassador to Riga Schack reported to Berlin about a “campaign of annihilation” against the German minority. When Munters met German Foreign Minister von Neurath in June 1936 he denied there was a

ERHARD KROEGER founded “the Movement.” He liaised with SS offices in Berlin and played a leading role in organising the resettlement of the Baltic Germans to Warthegau in 1939–40.

Kroeger was born in Riga on 24 March 1905. He matriculated from a German grammar school in Latvia before studying at universities in Germany and Riga. By the end of the 1920s, Kroeger had begun writing articles about the cultural mission of the ethnic Germans. He favoured some kind of Führer-principle over parliamentarianism and ideas like this brought him into conflict with the traditional conservatives who headed Latvia’s Baltic German community. In 1933 he founded “the Movement” which aimed to build a national community based on principles of German socialism and under a united leadership. He took inspiration from Nietzsche’s philosophy.



Photo: National Archives of Estonia

In June 1933, the Latvian state rejected the Movement’s application to be recognised as a political party and thereafter Krieger had to organise illegally. In March 1934, pressure was increased on Kroeger as the Saeima agreed the dismissal of all officials in key civic offices who belonged to the Movement. Two years later, Kroeger and some associates were arrested temporarily for pro-Nazi activities.

Following the establishment of the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in Berlin in 1936, Kroeger intensified his contacts with government and Nazi Party offices in Germany, and stepped-up especially his youth work in Latvia. During late 1938, personnel changes at the head of Latvia’s German community which gave Kroeger a significant powerbase within it. Swiftly he was promoted to *SS-Standartenführer* in order to help organise the fateful resettlement action. In January 1940 he was appointed member of the *Reichstag* for Wartheland.

During the Nazi attack on Russia, Kroeger led *Einsatzkommando Nr. 6 in Einsatzgruppe C* under *SS-Brigadeführer* Otto Rasch. Later he was involved with the Vlasov Army and in January 1945 was appointed SS-General.

He died on 24 September 1987 without ever becoming a democrat.

policy directed specifically against Baltic Germans, but also complained that they kept on demanding special rights.

Latvia’s new laws certainly sought to decrease ethnic German power in society, but the diplomatic interactions suggest the Ulmanis government wanted to avoid antagonising Berlin as much as possible during the process. The desire not to provoke Hitler became more marked in 1938. That March, German Foreign Ministry official von Mackensen told Latvian Ambassador Celmiņš that attacks on Baltic German economic life would have serious

consequences for German-Latvian relations. The warning was repeated by a German diplomat to Munters in May 1938. Then came the Munich Agreement at which point the burgeoning of Reich power in Central and Eastern Europe was clear for all (except perhaps some English statesmen) to see. Apparently Munich provoked a policy re-think in Riga, such that a German-Latvian trade agreement was concluded in November 1938 and some domestic anti-German initiatives were discontinued.

But the framework for ethnic German politics was changing all the time, with the scope for independent action being supplanted. In 1933, the European Congress of Nationalities fell apart over the treatment of Jews in Germany. It was never the same again. Soon thereafter, Sudeten Germans seized control of the Association of German National Groups in Europe, sidelining the interests of “Germans abroad” (*Auslanddeutschen*) in favour of those of “borderland Germans” (*Grenzlanddeutschen*). Efforts to instrumentalise ethnic Germans for Berlin’s politics took a big step forwards in 1936 when the Ethnic German Central Agency (*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* or *VoMi*) was established. With this step, the SS put itself at the vanguard of ethnic German politics. Corresponding to the new mood, late 1938 saw significant changes in the personalities leading the German national community in Latvia. The old guard of traditional conservative power-brokers was pushed aside and space was created for Kroeger and his acolytes.

A few months later, on 19 April 1939, the leader of Latvia’s Baltic Germans, Alfred Intelmann, met with Ulmanis and requested autonomy for his community. This was, however, rejected since following the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia attitudes had once again changed within the Latvian government. The United Kingdom had issued its guarantee to Poland on 31 March 1939 and the step encouraged a feeling of assertiveness in the Latvian government. By this point, however, the time for discussion was all but past and Latvian views of Baltic Germans were all but irrelevant.

Resettlement

Contacts between Erhard Kroeger and the *VoMi* were increasing all the time. In Autumn 1939 he was promoted to *SS-Standartenführer* and designated local leader of the resettlement of ethnic Germans from Latvia and Estonia to the German sphere of interest. Kroeger’s ascendancy reflected the secret clauses of the Hitler-Stalin Pact which allocated the Baltic States to a Soviet

sphere of interest. Apparently Kroeger contributed to the resettlement project, meeting Himmler in Zoppot on 25 September 1939 and advising that *all* Baltic Germans would be endangered by a Soviet occupation owing to the community's historic anti-communism. Within two days, Hitler had decided to "return" all the Baltic Germans to the Reich. By this point, the German community was largely demoralised and most of its number agreed they had to leave their historic homeland. With this, the centuries' long history of a community was brought to a close.

The decision

"25.9.39

The goal of our journey was reached. The Kasino Hotel in Zoppot, the most lovely hotel of the Ostsee Baths was Führer HQ, the centre of the greatest military and political power in Europe. Security was not strict and Dr.Buchardt's SS pass was good enough for us both.... Behind a glass door left ajar there was, in a side room, a roundtable discussion visibly in excited conversation. I recognised Adolf Hitler, beside him Himmler, then Keitel, Ribbentrop and others. We sat ourselves at one of the little tables and waited for what would happen to us. Soon Walter Schellenberg appeared, liaison officer with the *Reichsführer-SS*, and said Himmler had been told about me and that the discussion would still take place tonight...."

"26.9.39

At around 10 o'clock I was invited by Heinrich Himmler to a second short discussion. The result was unequivocal: during the night Himmler had put the question of the Baltic Germans to the Führer and Reich Chancellor and had reported about our conversation. The Führer was basically in agreement with the evacuation of the whole of the Baltic German population but wanted the action to happen in agreement with the Soviet government...."⁸

Very few Baltic Germans failed to leave Latvia for Warthegau, but Paul Schiemann remained. During the Nazi occupation of the Second World War he was put under house arrest, but still managed to save a Jewish girl from the Holocaust. As a result, Israel honours him as one of the Righteous Among Nations.

Conclusion and wider questions

National minorities have been described as both "disturbers of peace" and "bridges of understanding." During the Interwar years, the Baltic Germans played both positive and negative roles in Latvia's history, influencing foreign

affairs accordingly. Nonetheless, much scope remains for work to analyse more precisely and fully the group's impact on foreign policy development. Not least, did Latvian politicians have any ideas about how best to use the Baltic German community as an asset for bridge-building with Germany? And what was the detail of Latvian government responses to the League of Nations' minority protection system, both as it negotiated its declaration and as it responded to petitions? These are open questions.

More generally, this discussion of foreign affairs has highlighted wider questions about the place of the Baltic Germans within independent Latvia. This essay has given the impression that pro-German action was really only undertaken by Latvian governments when it was necessary pragmatically. Hence the schooling legislation of 1919 was agreed when the state was still young and finding its way, likewise anti-German policy was only stopped in 1938-39 as a result of Hitler's increasing power in Central and Eastern Europe. But did sympathy for Baltic Germans ever go beyond pragmatics in Latvian politics? Were German statesmen ever included in parliamentary coalitions for reasons other than just the game of building parliamentary majorities? Did Latvian voters ever support German political parties for reasons other than protesting against what Latvian parties were offering? And was there ever meaningful overlap between Baltic German and Latvian politicians in the field of ideas? To provide answers here, we await the necessary detailed research.

Endnotes

¹ Wilhelm von Rüdiger, *Aus dem letzten Kapitel deutsch-baltischer Geschichte in Lettland 1919–1945* (Eggenfelden: self published, 1954), p. 40.

² A letter dated 17 January 1922 from Mr. Walters (Latvian delegate to the League of Nations) to Mr. Hymans (President of the Council), League of Nations Archive, United Nations Library, R 1666. R 41 / 18732 / 15782.

³ Meeting of League of Nations representatives from the UK, France and Sweden on 2 July 1923, League of Nations Archive, United Nations Library, Geneva, S 340, Minorities Committee.

⁴ League of Nations Archive, United Nations Library, Geneva, S 342 Minorities.

⁵ Wilhelm von Rüdiger, *Aus dem letzten Kapitel deutsch-baltischer Geschichte in Lettland 1919–1945*, 38.

⁶ Paul Schiemann, "Nationalismus II," *Rigasche Rundschau*, 29 November 1930.

⁷ Paul Schiemann, "Die neue nationalistische Welle," *Nation und Staat*, September 1932.

⁸ Erhard Kroeger, *Der Auszug aus der alten Heimat* (Tübingen: Verlag Deutschen Hochschullehrer-Zeitung, 1967).