

"Away with German and Russian influence!" Ethno-political considerations in the reorganisation of the Estonian school system in the early 1920s

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The downfall of Russian Czarism opened the possibility for Estonians to begin constructing the country's school system on new foundations. In September 1917 Russia's interim government granted permission to change over to teaching in the native language, and the change was implemented during the following months. True, Estonia was under German occupation from February to November 1918, during which time German was mandated as the language to be used in all except elementary schools. After this intermediate phase, Estonia's interim government was able to continue renewal of the school system in November 1918 in now independent Estonia.¹ Essential legislative decisions were made during the following two years.

The new legislation takes shape, 1918-1920

The main objective of Estonia's interim government in renewing the school system was to guarantee teaching of Estonians in their native language at all levels of the school system. The plan of action declared by the government on 27 November 1918 was worded in such a way that "in popular education, the interim government is forced above all to end its attempts at Russification and Germanisation".² The temporary school regulations set into force by the government a few days later (2 December 1918) specified that without delay, however no later than 1 January 1919, the teaching language in all of Estonia's schools was to be the native language of the pupils (§ 1) and that all public schools were to be reorganised on an ethnic basis (§ 2). The second article further specified that, wherever there was a sufficient amount of pupils, separate schools or parallel classes should be created for the children of minority nationalities.³

¹ LEMBIT ANDRESEN: Eesti kooli ajalugu. Algusest kuni 1940 aastani [A History of Estonian School. From the Beginning to 1940], Tallinn 1995, p. 167.

² Provincial council protocol 27 Nov 1918, in: Maanõukogu protokollid [Provincial Council Protocols], Tallinn 1919, p. 340.

³ Estonia's interim govt.'s regulation 2 Dec 1918, in: Vähemusrahvuste kultuurielu Eesti Vabariigis 1918-1940. Dokumente ja materjale [The Cultural Life of Minority Nationalities in the Republic of Estonia, 1918-1940. Documents and Materials], ed. by ANNI MATSULEVITŠ, Tallinn 1993, p. 31 (hereafter VKEV).

The powerful possibilities in the area of ethnic cultivation that were opened through the school system were well known⁴, and Estonia's government acted accordingly. Yet in the European atmosphere of the time, ensuring that ethnic groups were taught in their native language was a clear objective, and therefore there was nothing unusual in the fact that the Estonians began to implement such policies as soon as possible. Their actions hardly differed from those of the leaders of other independent nation-states in the situation after World War I.

In addition to the native language, it was also necessary to regulate the use of foreign languages in Estonian schools. According to the new regulations, voluntary teaching of foreign languages was allowed from the fourth grade of elementary school. Nevertheless, Estonian was compulsory for everyone. In mid-December 1918, Estonia's Ministry of Education specified that Estonian was to be taught four hours a week beginning in the fourth grade of elementary school and the first grade of middle school in schools and classes where the teaching language was not Estonian.⁵

Thus, on the whole, minorities were given equal rights to education in their native language with the Estonians. In addition, few classes were required in Estonian, so that it could not be said that there was an attempt to Estonianise school-aged youth who spoke a different language. Some degree of compulsory teaching in the official language was justifiable on the basis of the monolingual policy chosen by the public administration, and no public protests were raised against it. Since Estonian had been raised to a new status, it was sensible also from the viewpoint of the minorities to acquire at least passable skill in the language. Of course, compared with the situation in the previous decades, the change may have been emotionally difficult for many Germans and Russians. Never before had they needed to learn the language of the peasantry, towards which they had a dismissive attitude.⁶ At the same time, the possibilities of using their own language in public life shrank significantly.

During December 1918 the Ministry of Education added a few more specifications to the regulations concerning the teaching language in schools. Participation in school teaching in one's own language was not only the right of all students, it was also their obligation. Exemption had to be requested from the school board of the municipality or town. According to the instructions of the Ministry of Education, permission to attend a foreign-language school could be granted if there were not enough pupils belonging to a certain ethnic group in a locality to warrant establishment of a parallel

⁴ About schools as a tool for ethnic shaping since the 1800s, see e.g. ERIC HOBSBAWM: *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 91-96.

⁵ Estonia's interim govt.'s regulation 2 Dec 1918, Ministry of Education's regulation 17 Dec 1918, in: VKEV (cf. footnote 3), pp. 31-32.

⁶ ANDRESEN (cf. footnote 1), pp. 102-103, 137.

class. The bottom line in interpreting the articles was not primarily the native language of the pupils, but their nationality that had been reported to the authorities. Thus, for example, a pupil whose nationality was German was in principle required to attend a German school, regardless of his/her language skill, if there were enough Germans in the locality to warrant establishment of their own school or class. If the native language of said German pupil happened to be Russian, for example, he/she most likely was allowed to attend a Russian school. The pupil's native language or most familiar language was sufficient grounds for choosing a school in all cases except in the case of an Estonian. A pupil whose nationality was Estonian was allowed to attend a foreign-language school only if he/she did not understand Estonian at all.⁷ In practice, there were few such cases. Thus, it can be said that the Estonians did not have any freedom to choose a school, while the possibility of selection was greater with other nationalities.

It is slightly paradoxical that it was thought that granting other nationalities greater freedom than Estonians to choose a school helped the Estonians' cause. Nevertheless, all out promotion of Estonianism was one of the primary, general goals of the Estonian government, and for this reason, in legislation and interpretation of statutes, the Estonians were considered at least *primus inter pares*, best of all the country's ethnic groups to whom, in principle, the Estonians were ready to grant equal rights. Therefore, it was logical that the Ministry of Education's instructions made it as difficult as possible to "relinquish" Estonianism. The purpose of directing all pupils defined as Estonians to Estonian schools was to prevent the pupils' Russification or Germanisation by attending a foreign-language school. This was a timely issue also during the initial phases of independence, although in the early 1900s the Estonians' going to school no longer necessarily led to Germanisation or Russification, as the situation had essentially been until the second half of the 1800s.⁸ As it is apparent from the statutes, the country's leaders were not as concerned about protecting the "national integrity" of pupils belonging to other nationalities as they were of Estonian pupils.

Estonia's school system legislation was supplemented twice more in 1920. First of all, national minorities' rights to be taught in their native language was confirmed in conjunction with the framing of the constitution in the summer of 1920 (§ 12). Around the same time the parliament also passed a separate law concerning compulsory education, which among other things specified the conditions under which the Estonian state was obligated to arrange education for national minorities in their native language. As seen

⁷ Eesti Riigiarhiiv [Estonian State Archives, hereafter ERA], Ministry of Education's circulars to school boards, 6 Dec 1918 and 7 Dec 1918, F. 1108, 8, 182, 3.

⁸ TOOMAS KARJAHÄRM: Eesti vaimne eliit 20. sajandi algul [Estonian Intellectual Elite in the Beginning of the 20th Century], in: Eesti haritlaskonna kujunemine ja ideed 1850-1917 [The Formation and the Ideas of the Estonian Literati, 1850-1917], ed. by TOOMAS KARJAHÄRM and VÄINO SIRK, Tallinn 1997, pp. 149-206, here pp. 155, 194.

above, the temporary school law passed in December 1918 only spoke of a "necessary amount" of minority pupils. Now the new law specified the boundary at 20 pupils living in the same locality. The government did not need to arrange education in the native language for smaller groups nor otherwise support them monetarily, even though representatives of the minorities proposed such a supplement to the law.⁹

In this context the school law was specified to concern only Estonian citizens. Thus, those who were "temporarily residing", for example most of the approximately 20,000 Russian emigrants, were left outside the law, and they had to arrange teaching for their children with their own money. The Estonians' motivations were above all economic and practical. It was thought that arranging separate teaching for small groups of pupils would be unreasonably costly and difficult, and besides the government was deemed responsible for taking care only of its own citizens. On the other hand, the decisions perhaps also reflected a slight unwillingness to support education of minorities as widely as those of ethnic Estonians. The legislators did not accept a proposal according to which teaching would be arranged by a private agency. That would have meant that small groups of minority schoolchildren would have been supported only with an amount that would have already been allotted for the upkeep of said schoolchildren in a normal public school.¹⁰

Disputes over the application of the new legislation

Practical application of the new school laws caused an abundance of disagreements and public controversy; above all in the spring of 1919. Apparently, in December 1918 Estonian schools had mostly continued operating on the basis of the old system up to the end of the autumn semester. Problems related to reorganisation became timely and immediately came to a head after the turn of the year. Indeed, the changes were implemented quite painlessly in a majority of Estonia's schools. Most commonly, only the number of classes in the various subjects was changed to comply with the regulations (e.g. the number of compulsory German classes was decreased). In most schools a majority of the pupils were Estonians, and the teaching language had been changed to Estonian immediately after the German occupation, so there was no longer any need for such a change in 1919. Parallel classes in other languages were opened if a "necessary amount" of pupils belonging to a different nationality were found. Teaching in Russian-speaking municipalities took place in the customary manner in Russian. The situation was probably such in the schools of nearly all the rural

⁹ Minutes of Estonian National Assembly, No. 107 (10) (17 Feb 1920), pp. 381-387; No. 127 (8) (4 May 1920), pp. 330-333; No. 154 (35) (31 Jul 1920), pp. 1501-1514, in: Asutawa Kogu protokollid, Tallinn 1920.

¹⁰ Minutes of Estonian National Assembly, No. 107 (10) (17 Feb 1920), pp. 381-387.

municipalities and most of the towns. The towns, particularly Tallinn and Tartu, were the places where the most problems arose. First of all, these towns had the most mixed schools in terms of nationalities, and secondly, these towns had the most parents who for one reason or another wanted their children to attend a foreign-language school.

The publicly most visible individual case of dispute concerned Tallinn's Russian private secondary school. In conjunction with the dispute, many kinds of opinions more widely associated with ethnic identity and arrangement of school matters were voiced. For this reason a closer examination of this case is justified. Only about half of the secondary school's five hundred or so Estonian students voluntarily moved to the town's Estonian schools, and the same amount of students wanted to remain or their parents wanted them to remain in their former school. Pointing to the law, Tallinn's education department exhorted the principal of the secondary school to make sure that either all the school's Estonian and German students moved to a school of their own language or native-language parallel classes were opened for them in the school in question. Neither alternative happened, although in this case the law was unambiguous. Instead, a couple of weeks later the parents of the school's Estonian students held a meeting with the result that a petition was sent to the town's school authorities requesting that the Estonian students could continue attending the school in question. The request was justified by the children's difficulties in adapting to the circumstances of a new school in the middle of the academic year and by the financial burden that purchasing new textbooks would place on the parents. The parents also protested against a mandatory change of schools, because in their minds it contradicted general civil liberties. Separation of schools and classes on an ethnic basis was accepted as such, but they desired that the freedom of choice be ultimately left to the students and their parents.¹¹

In principle, the bodies that were responsible for municipalities' and towns' schools had the right to decide on questions of school choice in individual cases, but since this was a question of precedent affecting a large group of students, the education department of Tallinn turned to the Ministry of Education. The reply came at the end of January. A letter signed by School Counsellor F. Mikkelsaar stated in an irritated tone that letting the Estonian students remain in the Russian school was impossible for the simple reason that it would be against the law. Secondly, the counsellor was indignant because the parents dared to protest against the law, and because they themselves agreed that native-language teaching was correct in principle. According to Mikkelsaar, educational viewpoints were also definitely on the side of native-language teaching: in his opinion the parents' decision to place their children in a foreign-language school was therefore not freedom of

¹¹ ERA (cf. footnote 7), Tallinn's education dept.'s letter to Tallinn's private Russian secondary school's principal, 8 Jan 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 3; Parent-teacher meeting's memo to the education dept., 19 Jan 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 5-6.

choice, it was arbitrariness. Finally, the school counsellor rebuked the parents for not actively requiring the opening of Estonian classes. Parallel classes would have at least circumvented the problems resulting from changing schools.¹²

Though the letter from the Ministry was delivered directly to the principal of the school in question, he once more petitioned the education department to grant exceptional permits. Because the law allowed exemptions in exactly such cases, the education department did grant permission to a few students to remain in the Russian class. Their nationality was recorded as Estonian but they did not understand Estonian. The education department was also irritated by the insubordination of the Russian secondary school's management, and in the beginning of February it demanded in sharp tones that the principal obey the law. The parent-teacher association of the secondary school did not relent at this stage; the very next day it turned to the Minister of Russian Ethnic Affairs Aleksei Sorokin (though not yet been confirmed for the post) and asked him to "do everything possible", so that the Estonian students could finish their education in a Russian school.¹³ However, they did not receive his support. It would have been difficult for Sorokin to pursue an illegal issue without jeopardizing his position and the possibility to supervise the broader interests of his constituents. As far as is known, no Estonian or German parallel classes were opened in Tallinn's Russian private secondary school, and regardless of their resistance, most of the non-Russian students had to move to native-language schools during the spring semester of 1919.

The process described above vividly relates the different viewpoints associated with the schools' language questions. On the one hand were Estonia's government and central administration, whose attitude toward the law was unconditional. Once laws were passed, they had to be obeyed and the citizens' protests were considered dubious. The representatives of the government felt the laws were not passed simply for the sake of passing laws, but in this case native-language education was supported by national ideals and overall educational viewpoints. Thus, from the standpoint of a person's natural growth and development, it was considered reasonable to guide all ethnic groups to native-language education, at least in name. A student's actual native language or most familiar language had no significance unless the student did not happen to understand the "ethnic" language at all. Perhaps the most thankless task of the government and the highest body of civil servants in the circumstances of 1919 was to convince the lower level of public administration, and above all ordinary people, of the reasonableness of the chosen school system policy.

¹² ERA (cf. footnote 7), Ministry of Education's (Education Counsellor F. Mikkelsaar's) letter to Tallinn's education dept., 25 Jan 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 8.

¹³ ERA (cf. footnote 7), Education dept.'s letters to the principal, 31 Jan 1919 and 5 Feb 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 7-10; Parent-teacher association's letter to A. Sorokin, 6 Feb 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 11.

In early 1919 the policy pursued by the government and the content of the laws was not fully clear even to decision-makers at the municipal level. For example, in the beginning of January, school matters in Tallinn were handled at meetings attended by officials from the town's education office, representatives from the local German teachers' associations and parents of German students. Before the above-mentioned process had been examined, Tallinn's school authorities felt that students with Estonian nationality who wished to continue attending a German or other foreign-language school could do so: in any case it was not considered necessary to apply particular pressure to change the situation. The authorities felt this principle applied to private schools. However, because establishment of "schools aiming for ethnic assimilation" was not considered the responsibility of the town, public schools maintained with town funds were required to comply with the principles of native-language teaching.¹⁴ The school laws passed in December 1918 and their specifications did not, however, differentiate between public and private schools. It appears that it was a question of an overly liberal interpretation of the law. At the same time it speaks of the more flexible attitude of Tallinn's school authorities toward the schools' language questions compared with that of the government. They had a desire to obey the law in terms of their own caring for public matters, but otherwise they did not show much principled concern over possible Germanisation or Russification of Estonian children who attended a foreign-language school. On the other hand, there are opposite examples of attitudes toward school issues at the municipal level. For example, according to newspaper accounts, in the spring of 1919 Valga strictly followed the government's regulations on the placement of students of different nationalities in native-language schools.¹⁵

The third Estonian party in Tallinn's school dispute were the parents of the children in the Russian private secondary school. The parents were divided into two roughly equal groups on the basis of their reactions. Some were ready to obey the law without any desire to argue with the authorities. Did they do so only because they were law-abiding, or did they experience some kind of national awakening when Estonia gained her independence, or was it a question of calculating that there would no longer be any future benefit from German or Russian education? It may be that all the above factors affected each family to various degrees when deciding on a school change. Their children were originally placed in a Russian school most likely because bilingualism was an advantage under the circumstances of czarist Russia. Now that Estonia had separated itself from Russia and Estonian had become the country's only official language, a command of Russian did not guarantee good starting points for social advancement. If such arguments were central

¹⁴ Saksa õpekeele koolide küsimus [The Question of German-Language Schools], in: *Maalet* [Countryside Newspaper], 8 Jan 1919; Von der Städtischen Volksbildungskommission, in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 10 Jan 1919.

¹⁵ *Rajalane* [Borderland Dweller], 1 Mar 1919.

in making the decision, it can be said that viewpoints based on nationalism did not have much significance to the Estonians in question. The same can be said if the school change was done only or mainly because of general respect for the law.

It is also possible, although not easily provable for individual persons, that some Estonians might have changed their attitude toward nationalism when Estonia gained her independence. In that case there would have been a personal ethnic awakening behind the school change, which alone may have not gotten people to change schools, but together with the new laws the change in circumstances would have been enough to precipitate the decision.

In any case, people whose children attended a Russian (or German) school at the time of Estonia's independence were characterised by a weak feeling of nationalism. Otherwise it is doubtful that the children of such families would have been placed in a foreign-language school, where more or less complete estrangement from their own ethnic group was expected.

Germanisation or Russification instead of bilingualism or preservation of Estonianism were quite probable developments in Estonia during the period of Russian rule, since a command of Russian and German was key to social advancement. Naturally, advancement enticed many, as is even apparent from the number Estonians attending Tallinn's Russian private secondary school. The situation was simply that, since language was already quite commonly considered the most important mark of nationality¹⁶, it was nearly impossible to fit strong Estonian nationalism and foreign-language education together. Either ethnic values or values related to career advancement had to be prioritised.

The secondary school students' parents who were prepared for a drawn-out dispute in the question of school attendance, as has been described, did not appear to hold the Estonian ethnic viewpoints important at all. In their own words, in principle, they also considered native-language education worth supporting and thereby acknowledged the significance of nationalism on a general level.¹⁷ Nevertheless, they were apparently quite estranged from Estonian ethnicity and identified more with the Russians. Another possibility is that nationality and language were insignificant to them personally, and securing economic and social advancement were priorities. In that case, they had to calculate that continuing Russian education would best advance their objectives. Estonia's independence was still on unsure foundations, and it was not unrealistic to think that Russian rule would return.

¹⁶ For more on the relation between nationalism and language, see e.g. HOBBSBAWM (cf. footnote 4), pp. 51-63, 93-100; SERGIU VILFAN: Introduction, in: *Ethnic Groups and Language Rights. Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850-1940*, vol. III, ed. by IDEM in collaboration with GUDMUND SANDVIK and LODE WILS, Dartmouth 1993, pp. 1-15, here p. 9.

¹⁷ ERA (cf. footnote 7), Parent-teacher meeting's memo to the education dept., 19 Jan 1919, F. 1108, 8, 182, 5-6.

Some Estonians who felt this way apparently could be found in Tallinn and elsewhere, but it does not seem that there were very many of them. True, in the case of Tallinn's Russian private school up to half of the Estonian parents persistently wanted their children to get a Russian education, but this was a special case that can not be generalised. On the one hand it was a question of a higher-level school, a secondary school that not many Estonians attended, and on the other it was exactly the type of private school sought by Estonian families seeking social advancement through Russification.¹⁸ No evidence has been preserved indicating that there would have been wide-scale opposition elsewhere in Estonia, and especially in compulsory education schools, in which Estonian parents would have refused to transfer their children to Estonian education.

The minorities' viewpoint

Germans and Russians were the fourth and fifth significant parties in Estonian's school disputes. The Germans in particular expressed their views in public discourse. They initially feared that implementation of the native-language school system and raising Estonian to the only official language would cause a steep decline in German teaching throughout the country. What awakened particular uncertainty was the fact that the number of pupils needed to establish a separate school was not defined in the law until 1920. In principle, the ambiguity of this article of the law left room for arbitrariness. Nevertheless, the worst misunderstandings were corrected and the greatest fears were assuaged at meetings with Tallinn's school authorities in January 1919.¹⁹ German schools in other parts of the country were able to continue in largely the same manner as before, although their non-German pupils mostly had to transfer to other schools. Establishment of German parallel classes did not seem to cause major problems either. Again, there exists no evidence indicating that children whose nationality was German had to attend a foreign-language school after the spring of 1919. This was possible in the rural municipalities, where there were only a few German schoolchildren. Considering the Germans' high average level of wealth and national pride, it is probable that even then the children were given private lessons rather than have them attend a German private school in a neighbouring locality.

Nevertheless, in 1919-20 the Germans protested against the new school system. Misgivings may have been caused by the fact that, compared with Czarist rule and the German occupation in 1918, the status of the German language in schools and teaching weakened when Estonia became independent. They also contended that the government and the municipalities were unwilling to support German schools financially. For example, the

¹⁸ KARJAHÄRM (cf. footnote 8), pp. 152, 170-172.

¹⁹ Ein Wort an die Temp. Regierung, in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 30 Dec 1918; Von der Städtischen Volksbildungskommission, in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 10 Jan 1919.

Deutsche Partei in Estland adopted as one of its election themes in the spring of 1919 that public funding corresponding to the education needs of the Germans must be channelled to the German school system.²⁰ The Germans' private school system, traditionally extensive, appears to have functioned contrary to the financial interests of the Germans. Since a significant number of Germans already attended their own private schools, it was hardly necessary to establish new schools or finance parallel classes with public funding. Understandably the Germans considered the new situation to be a drawback. Yet in fact references to German "education needs" or Germans' requirements for "social support" were a clever move. Since the Germans' average level of education was already quite high, Germans would be given more funds than corresponded to their share of the population. The upkeep of middle- and higher-level education and small teaching units (schools and parallel classes) was of course more costly than for basic education in large units.

Nevertheless, the main reason why the Germans were against a school system strictly tied to nationality must be interpreted as pertaining to the Germans' national interests. Because relatively many Estonians traditionally put forward socio-economic reasons for placing their offspring in German schools, the new school system signalled a major change. Now, Estonians who were sympathetic toward the Germans or ethnically indifferent could no longer acquire a German education if they wanted to; they were forced to transfer to Estonian education. Throughout Estonia there was perhaps a few thousand pupils registered as Estonians who attended a German school²¹, and whom the Germans hoped would switch over to the ageing and diminishing ranks of Germans. In the Estonian language such "national defectors" were called "juniper Germans", and they were objects of ridicule and anger in old Estonian nationalist circles; after all, they threatened a drain of educated Estonians over to the German side.²²

The German newspapers admitted that, in principle, the native-language school system was correct. Other positions were unthinkable in an officially monolingual country; the alternative would have been complete Estonianisation of the school system. According to the *Revaler Zeitung's* interpretation, the law was "natural" and in 98 percent of cases it also functioned

²⁰ Sprache und Schule, in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 13 Feb 1919; Zur Schulfrage, in: *Deutsche Zeitung*, 25 Mar 1919; Die Autonomie der Schule, in: *Deutsche Zeitung*, 27 Mar 1919; Programme of Deutsche Partei in Estland, publ. with the title "Richtlinien zur Schulfrage", in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 31 Mar 1919.

²¹ KARJAHÄRM (cf. footnote 8), p. 155.

²² According to the 1922 census, Estonia had a little under 9,000 Estonians whose everyday language was not Estonian. At least some of these were surely "juniper Germans". Undoubtedly there were also some pupils who attended a German school among those who reported Estonian as their everyday language. 1922. a. üldrahvalugemise andmed. Vihk I ja II [The Results of the 1922 Census, vol. I and II], Tallinn 1924, pp. 31, 34.

well. The problem lay, though, with the remaining two percent (as such, perhaps a realistic ratio). The newspaper complained about the compulsory nature of the law and that the opinions of the parents were not accorded any weight. Why was there no freedom to choose, since in any case nearly all children attended a native-language school and did not wish foreign-language education? The newspaper also mentioned the openness to interpretation associated with the specification of nationality: with what criteria was an individual person categorised as belonging to a certain ethnic group? Were religion, name, belonging to a certain community, and everyday language decisive? Did the authorities rather than the person him or herself have the final say? According to the *Revaler Zeitung* (and also *Dorpatser Zeitung*), only the parents were able to decide in which ethnic group their children (and they themselves) belonged.²³

The German newspaper articles touched on a timely question that was difficult to resolve. What were the criteria of nationality, and who could decide to which nationality a person belonged? There is a widely accepted understanding in scientific circles that nationality is not an unambiguously definable issue, but that nationalities and nations are more "imagined communities", and that the criteria for belonging vary. However, human life is much more than science, and theories formulated in scientific circles do not always have much influence on how people arrange their relationships and perceive the world in practice. In the world of politics, to which the questions of nationality are closely linked, the criteria of nationality are often interpreted from the standpoint of people's own group-specific interests. Nevertheless, not even in politics is any single criterion of nationality, not even a person's own opinion, considered an adequate basis for specifying nationality. Thus, there was no absolutely satisfactory answer to the questions presented by the German newspapers. However, the widespread ideals of the time, fostering "ethnic purity" and the importance of ethnic values, were clearly evident in the school policy chosen by the Estonian government.²⁴ Yet the general public and lower level public officials who carried out the government policy did not always necessarily think in the same way or hold ethnic values as possessing such high priority.

In any case it appears that both the Estonian government's and the German population's stand on the new school law depended on how the law was seen to promote the implementation of their own ethnic interests. Of the other ethnic groups living in Estonia, the Russians' interests were essentially equivalent to those of the Germans, as the Russian schools had a moderate

²³ Sprache und Schule, in: *Revaler Zeitung*, 13 Feb 1919; Zur Orientierung in unserer jetzigen Lage: Staatszugehörigkeit, Nationalität, Rasse, Kultur, Volkstum, Sprache, Religion, in: *Deutsche Zeitung*, 4 Mar 1919.

²⁴ BENEDICT ANDERSON: *Imagined Communities*, in: *Nationalism*, ed. by JOHN HUTCHINSON and ANTHONY D. SMITH, Oxford 1984, pp. 89-94; HOBBSBAWM (cf. footnote 4), pp. 1-13, 46.

amount of pupils who spoke another language, but there were hardly any Russians in non-Russian schools. Thus, like the Germans, the Russians would have benefited from a greater freedom of choice.

However, the stance of the other minorities was similar to that of the Estonians. For example, it was in the best interests of the Swedes to demand unconditional adherence to the principle of nationality, because that way they hoped that all Swedes would receive a Swedish education. Under a more flexible system it was probable that some of the Swedes would attend Estonian schools for the same socio-economic reasons that some Estonians attended German or Russian schools, especially under the Czar. Thus, a congress of the Swedish People's Union held in March 1919, where the residents of Estonia's Swedish regions were widely represented, demanded a dismantling of mixed Estonian-Swedish schools and as complete an implementation of ethnic separation as possible.²⁵ Until then, native-language teaching had been arranged for only about half of the Swedish children, so the circumstances still needed improvement.²⁶ From the viewpoint of other nationalities, the situation was basically the same as with the Swedes. The more emphasis placed on the obligation to participate in native-language education, the less children in their own ethnic group would be Estonianised, at least through the school system.

As far as Estonia's Swedish schools were concerned, it can further be said that they in particular found it difficult to begin work during the spring semester of 1919. This was not because of a passive attitude of the Estonian authorities or government (if anything, the situation was exactly the opposite). Rather, there were two problems: a lack of competent Swedish-speaking teachers and Swedish schoolbooks. Behind both problems was the fact that no Swedish elementary school teaching had been arranged in Estonia during the Russian rule. Then, when it suddenly became possible to establish a network of Swedish schools at the end of 1918, a multiplication of teaching staff and schoolbooks in a short time was not possible. The difficulty of finding competent Swedish-speaking teachers is exemplified by the fact that Estonia's fifteen Swedish schools had altogether only sixteen teachers in late spring of 1919 (there were well over 500 pupils), and of these, only six were qualified teachers.²⁷

Taken as a whole, it appears clear that after initial difficulties, Estonia's German, Russian and Swedish school systems adapted to the new school laws

²⁵ Svenska Folkförbundet's [Swedish People's Union] congress protocol, 22 Mar 1919, publ. with the title "Protokoll", in: Kustbon [Coast Dweller], 5/1919 and 6/1919.

²⁶ ERA (cf. footnote 7), Statistics on Swedish-language schools in Estonia, 19 May 1919, F. 1108, 8, 4, 32; Annual report of the Swedish secretary of ethnic affairs, 1919, F. 1108, 8, 14, 90-91.

²⁷ ERA (cf. footnote 7), Ministry of Education's letter to the Swedish Ministry of Ethnic Affairs, 15 May 1919; N. Bles's report to the Ministry of Education, 19 May 1919, F. 1108, 8, 41, 30, 32.

in 1919-1920. At the same time these minorities' rights to native-language education were established. Various minor practical questions occasionally caused disputes during the first half of the 1920s, but the controversies around these disagreements were short-lived and mild in tone. It was possible to handle disputes openly in the minorities' newspapers, and on the basis of what we read in the newspapers, it appears that no serious problems were encountered in ensuring native-language education. Preserved archives of the minorities' own secretaries of ethnic affairs confirm this interpretation. The only minority groups whose native-language education was delayed and whose rights were debated in principle in the early 1920s were the Finns and the Ingrians living in Estonian Ingria, near Estonia's northeast border, who were ethnically close to the Estonians.

The Finnish and the Ingrian exception

In the beginning of the 1920s there were contradictory views among the Estonians and among the Finns and the Ingrians as to whether the Finns and the Ingrians had any realistic possibilities of maintaining their own ethnic identity, since both minorities numbered only about a thousand people in Estonia. The situation was most clearly visible in the arrangement of school conditions in the early 1920s. Estonian and Finnish activists interested in school matters agreed that Russian education had to be abandoned because it exposed the region's non-Russians to Russification.²⁸ Yet that was the only matter that they agreed on. As early as 1919, a few Finnish ethnic activists personally proposed to Estonia's Ministry of Education that the three elementary schools in four central villages inhabited by Estonian-related people in Estonian Ingria should be converted to Finnish schools. However, some of the parents of Finnish schoolchildren felt Estonian education would guarantee their children better opportunities in continuing education and working life. As a result of the contradictory hopes, two of the schools were changed into Estonian schools in the autumn of 1922. In keeping with the wishes of the local Ingrians, the third school remained a Russian school.²⁹

Thus, six different camps with differing stances were discernible in the educational and ethnic questions of Estonian Ingria. First of all, among the Estonians, activists and the authorities had slightly different views. In principle, by allowing Ingria's Finnish-related people to be taught in Russian schools until the autumn of 1922, Estonian authorities had acted against the constitution.³⁰ The number of Finns and Ingrians would have sufficed for the

²⁸ Ingeri pulmas [At an Ingrian Wedding Party], in: Kaja [Echo], 8 Feb 1922; Ingeri kool [The Ingrian School], in: Kaja, 30 Jul 1922.

²⁹ Virumaa provincial government's dept. of education's letter to the Ministry of Education, 9 Jun 1925, in: VKEV (cf. footnote 3), pp. 203-205.

³⁰ Minutes of the Estonian National Assembly, No. 127 (8), 4 May 1920, pp. 332-333; Riigi Teataja [State Bulletin] 113/114 1920, pp. 897-898.

establishment of their own native-language schools, and even if there were not enough in each village, at least it would have been possible to gather a sufficient number of students in open native-language parallel classes. However, the authorities responsible for supervising teaching were indifferent about ensuring native-language teaching for Finns and Ingrians, and they allowed Russian schools to operate as before. Estonian activists were amazed and criticized this.³¹

In the autumn of 1922 the authorities responsible for supervising teaching again deviated from the spirit of the constitution by changing the schools of said three villages into Estonian schools. The reason given for the decision was that some of the Finnish-speaking parents themselves wished for Estonian teaching and that the students already spoke Estonian. True, the school law on compulsory education passed in 1920 allowed placement of pupils in non-native-language schools "for valid reasons decided on by the provincial government" (or the town government).³² Apparently in this case the provincial government of Virumaa province felt the reasons were valid enough, but at the same time the decision was a backlash for the Finns whose initiative started the whole process of change and who hoped Finnish teaching would be arranged for their children. In this matter the Estonian kindred activists agreed with the authorities and did not oppose the change to Estonian teaching.

It seems that the Estonians' primary objective was to prevent the Russification of the Finns and the Ingrians. At the start the authorities were indifferent toward the matter, probably because it was a question of a small number of residents in a few outlying villages. Nevertheless, the authorities awoke to the perceived danger in 1921-1922 and began to push the issue after private parties had first brought up the problem. The Estonian actors did not much value the preservation of Finns and Ingrian identity. Most likely they strove to bring the Finns and Ingrians closer to the Estonians, and they did not mind if in the distant future the fragmented peoples were assimilated into the Estonians. The result would be a strengthening of Estonianism in the border regions and correspondingly, a weakening of Russian irredentism. The Finns and the Ingrians may have been allowed to preserve some features of their ethnic cultures as long as they also assimilated the Estonian language and loyalty to the Estonians.

The Estonian Ingrian Finns were also divided into two camps, which had greater differences than did the Estonians. Apparently many of the Finns took a pragmatic stand in school and language matters, and they felt their children's acculturation into Estonianism was unavoidable and even positive.

³¹ Kirjad Eesti Ingerist [Letters from Estonian Ingria], in: Waba Maa [Free Country], 6 Feb 1922; Ingeri pulmas [At an Ingrian Wedding Party], in: Kaja, 8 Feb 1922.

³² Minutes of the Estonian National Assembly, No. 127 (8), 4 May 1920, pp. 332-333; Virumaa provincial government's dept. of education's letter to the Ministry of Education, 9 Jun 1925, in: VKEV (cf. footnote 3), pp. 203-205.

Perhaps they did not consider preservation of Finnishness in Estonian Ingria realistic; after all, contacts with Russian Ingria were severed and the theoretical ethnic motherland, Finland, was far away. Perhaps ethnic awareness among the Finns was weak enough that the practical aspects of school and working life preceded the preservation of ethnic identity. Active defenders of Finnishness were rare, but beginning in 1923 the region's Finnish activists initiated a newspaper campaign in which they demanded that Finnish teaching be started. The campaign finally achieved results in the academic year of 1925/26, when the Estonian schools were gradually changed to Finnish schools.

The Ingrians and Russians were the fifth and sixth camps in the Ingrian school matter, although their views were apparently quite similar to those of the ethnically passive Finns. From all appearances the Ingrians were so Russianised that they were not ready to fight to preserve an Ingrian identity, not to mention not being enthused about joining the Estonians or the Finns. The Russian language and Russianism were traditionally criteria of social acceptance, and from the viewpoint of the Ingrians at the beginning of the 1920s, the situation had not changed even though the inhabitants of Estonian Ingria were now Estonian citizens. The understanding that Ingrian language and culture were less valuable than Russian language and culture, which had been impressed in the minds of the Ingrians for many generations, could not be changed quickly.

For their part the Russians did not oppose the Estonians' kindred people's desire to become assimilated as Russians. Perhaps the newcomers were not considered fully equal to "authentic" Russians, but additions to their own ranks were welcome. The more Russians, the more the Russian minority's voice had to be taken into consideration in Estonian decision-making. Especially in the case of the municipality of Narooa (where most of the Finns and the Ingrians lived), the fact was that presumably less than half of the residents were "authentic" Russians, although according to the official census about 63 percent belonged to said group. Correspondence of Estonian school authorities noted that, regardless of background, in some villages nearly all Ingrians registered as Russians.³³ Hundreds of persons who were considered ethnically kindred to the Estonians had voluntarily joined the Russians. If these people with wavering identities had registered as non-Russians, the Russians would have lost their majority status in the municipality and at the same time their decision-making power in the municipal government. Thus, the question was significant in local politics.

The behaviour of the Ingrian Finns and other Estonian kindred ethnic groups in the beginning of the 1920s had clearly discernible features that are typical of the identity of minority groups with uncertain identities. To such minorities the majority represents the norm, and at the same time the attitude

³³ Virumaa provincial government's dept. of education's letter to the Ministry of Education, 9 Jun 1925, in: VKEV (cf. footnote 3), p. 205.

toward their own perceived ethnic features is negative. Theoretically, it can be said that underneath it all is often the minority's internalisation of the biases marketed by the majority³⁴, but of course such theories were not analysed in the Estonian public. However, in practice the matter affected the ethnic relations of Estonian Ingria in such a way that, for many Finns and Ingrians, assimilation into the Russians or Estonians was not a psychological problem, but rather a desired goal. That is why it was also possible that a native-language school system was not created for the Ingrians, despite the Estonian constitution and the articles of the school law. Correspondingly, the ethnic awakeners who emerged from among these minority groups had to begin with the rather hopeless job of trying to get their kindred people with an unsure minority identity to change their ethno-political stand. Neither could the Estonian authorities force the Ingrians to attend a native-language school, since the Ingrians themselves registered themselves as Russians, in both language and nationality.

Conclusion

The situation in Estonia in 1918-1926 is a good example of problems that were of topical interest in Europe at that time and in which the questions of language, nationality and school system reform were intertwined. In the late 19th and the early 20th century language had become the most important nationality emblem especially in Eastern Central Europe, at the same time as nationality ideas made a breakthrough among the general public. In addition, the question of the language of teaching had become an extremely tense nationality policy issue.³⁵ The actions taken by the Estonian Government reflected the dichotomy typical of the states of that time. On the one hand, Estonian was made the only official language in the country after the gaining of independence and one cornerstone of the Government's policy was to promote Estonianness in all ways possible. On the other hand, the Estonian Government also wanted to follow the Wilsonian ideals of national equality characteristic of the era, and these ideals were stressed in public in the border decisions taken after the world war, for instance. As a result, the minorities in Estonia were allowed broad school teaching in their native languages. Compared with other Eastern European states, it can be said that Estonia followed a school policy that was on the average more permissive. The Estonian state supported minority schools if there were at least 20 pupils of a certain minority in the locality, regardless of the percentual share of the

³⁴ See, e.g. KENNETH J. GERGEN, MARY M. GERGEN: *Social Psychology*, New York 1986, pp. 71-72.

³⁵ HOBBSBAWM (cf. footnote 4), pp. 106-134; for comparison, a series of case-studies can be found, for instance, in: *Schooling, Educational Policy and Ethnic Identity. Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850-1940*, vol. I, ed. by JANUSZ TOMIAK in collaboration with KNUT ERIKSEN, ANDREAS KAZIMIAS and ROBIN OKEY, Dartmouth 1991.

minority of the whole population. In addition, Estonia designated native language teaching as compulsory to everyone, without forcing minority pupils to enter Estonian schools. However, this did not apply to minorities of less than 20 persons or to Finns and Ingrians, who were ethnically close to the Estonians and whose integration the state considered desirable. In addition, the minorities of Estonia acted in a way typical of the era when defending their rights and demanding the further improvement of their linguistic position. The identities and degrees of organisation of Estonia's German, Russian and Swedish minorities in particular were so prominent that disagreement with the Estonian government was bound to occur. However, conflicts soon calmed down as a result of the mainly permissive policy followed by the Estonian government. After the passing of new school acts in 1919-1920, minority schools could operate on the same terms as Estonian schools.

Zusammenfassung

"Fort mit dem deutschen und dem russischen Einfluss!" Ethnopolitische Erwägungen bei der Neuordnung des estnischen Schulsystems in den frühen 1920er Jahren

Die in Estland im Zusammenhang der Neuordnung des Schulwesens 1918-1926 geführte Diskussion ist exemplarisch für die seinerzeit in Europa zu beobachtende Verbindung von Sprach- und Nationalitätenfragen mit der Reformierung der Schulsysteme. Im gleichen Maße, in dem ‚Nationalität‘ als ein wesentliches Merkmal individueller und kollektiver Identitäten im späten 19. und zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts an Bedeutung gewann, avancierte Sprache, insbesondere in Ostmitteleuropa, zum wichtigsten Kennzeichen und Sinnbild nationaler Zugehörigkeit. Die Frage nach der Unterrichtssprache in den Schulen wurde damit zu einem nationalpolitischen Thema mit hohem Konfliktpotenzial.

Die nach Erlangung der Unabhängigkeit von der Regierung Estlands ergriffenen Maßnahmen spiegeln einen durchaus zeittypischen Gegensatz wider. Einerseits wurde Estnisch zur alleinigen offiziellen Landessprache erhoben und vom Gesetzgeber in jeder erdenklichen Weise gefördert. Andererseits war die Regierung Estlands zugleich bemüht, der offiziell als Leitlinie der Weltpolitik geltenden und mit dem Namen des amerikanischen Präsidenten Woodrow Wilson verbundenen Vorstellung von der Gleichheit der Völker zu entsprechen. Aus diesem Grund wurde den Minderheiten in Estland Unterricht in der eigenen Sprache zugebilligt, und verglichen mit anderen Staaten im östlichen Europa war die Schulpolitik in Estland insgesamt toleranter. Minderheitenschulen wurden vom Staat gefördert, sofern in einem Ort mindestens 20 Schüler einer nicht-estnischen Bevölkerungsgruppe lebten, unabhängig vom prozentualen Anteil der jeweiligen Minderheit an der Gesamtbevölkerung. Das Recht auf Unterricht in der Muttersprache galt grundsätzlich jedoch nicht für die im Land lebenden Finnen und Ingrier (Ischoren), die wie die Esten zu den ostsee-finnischen Völkern gehören und die der Staat zu assimilieren hoffte.

In gewisser Weise typisch für die damalige Zeit war auch die Forderung nach einer Garantie und weiteren Verbesserung ihrer Rechte, insbesondere auf sprachlichem Gebiet, welche die Minderheiten in Estland gleich nach der Unabhängigkeit des Landes erhoben. Das Gruppenbewusstsein und der Organisationsgrad der in Estland lebenden Deutschen, Russen und Schweden waren so ausgeprägt, dass es anfangs fast zwangsläufig zu Meinungsverschiedenheiten mit der estnischen Regierung kommen musste. Die Konflikte wurden jedoch recht bald durch die überwiegend liberale estnische Schulpolitik und die Verabschiedung neuer Schulgesetze in den Jahren 1919 und 1920 entschärft.