

SUMMARY

*Revenge against the historical enemy?  
Citizenship policy towards the Baltic Germans  
in the newly established Republic of Estonia*

This article studies the Estonian citizenship policy towards the Baltic Germans after the proclamation of Estonia's independence in 1918. It focuses particularly on the question of the citizenship of those Baltic Germans who were beyond the state's borders at the end of 1918, when the first law on Estonian citizenship was enforced. The aim of the article is to illustrate how the activities of the Baltic Germans at the time of the German occupation in 1918, and in particular, during the Estonian War of Independence, influenced decisions made by the Estonian state authorities on the citizenship of the Baltic German emigrants in early 1920s.

Until the collapse of the Russian empire, the elite of Estonia and Livonia provinces consisted mostly of Baltic Germans who constituted around 3% of the total population of Estonia. The breakdown of the Czarist empire in 1917 left Estonians and Baltic Germans with very different and often conflicting views on the future of their common homeland. The activities of the Baltic German *Ritterschaften*, seeking the incorporation of the Baltic provinces into the German state in 1918, deepened the negative attitude towards them in Estonian society. Estonians were indignant at the German occupation authorities for their reluctance to recognise the already proclaimed independence of Estonia. The negative emotions towards the Baltic Germans grew especially strong as the result of an armed conflict between the Estonian Army and the *Baltische Landeswehr* in June 1919. This *Landeswehr* War was openly regarded as "a holy war against the historical enemy" in the Estonian press, indicating the old grudge towards the former elite, and in particular, the image of "the 700-years of slavery" under the rule of Baltic German barons deriving from the period of the Estonian national awakening.

After the conclusion of the Peace Treaty of Tartu between Estonia and Soviet Russia in 1920, many of the Baltic German emigrants who had left Estonia prior to the War of Independence, including many of those who had fled with the German occupation forces, wanted to return. However, the absentees were not automatically granted Estonian citizenship by law. The decision on their citizenship was made on a case-by-case basis by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In this decision-making process, inquiries were made to the police authorities and the local municipality from which the applicant claimed to have originated. The Ministry wanted to make sure that the applicants did not have an anti-state attitude, that they were loyal to the Estonian state and that their return was favoured by the local

authorities providing the state institutions with an opportunity to hinder the return of those emigrants whose return was unwanted.

First of all, citizenship was denied to those emigrants who were considered to be disloyal to the Estonian state. Among those were emigrants who were known to Estonian authorities for having fought among or having supported the formation of the *Landeswehr*. Likewise, applications of those emigrants who had collaborated with the German occupation authorities were very carefully considered and often rejected by the Estonian authorities. It was noted in letters sent to the ministry from local municipalities that the return of emigrants, who had fled Estonia at the beginning of the War of Independence instead of protecting their homeland against Soviet Russian aggression or, who had even “attacked the Estonian forces from the back” in the lines of the *Landeswehr*, were not welcomed back. As the emigrants to whom the citizenship was denied were also deprived of the chance to return and live in their former homeland as full-fledged members of the state, the citizenship policy could be considered as an opportunity to take revenge against the “historical enemy”. It should be noted, however, that some of the emigrants whose application for citizenship was rejected in the early 1920s still had a chance to return to Estonia later.