

In der erfolgreichen Anpassung des Ständesystems an die jeweiligen Anforderungen lag eine unbestreitbare Stärke, ebenso aber auch ein schwerer Defekt. Auf der einen Seite ermöglichten die Reformen den ehemaligen Leibeigenen, allmählich zu Bodenbesitzern zu werden und eine eigene wirtschaftliche Basis aufzubauen. Auf der anderen Seite blieb die Ständegesellschaft durch diese Entwicklung selbst durch die Jahre der „Russifizierung“ hindurch so stabil, dass die Esten und Letten eigene Wege gehen mussten, wollten sie der deutschbaltischen Vormundschaft entkommen. Es ist kein Zufall, dass die estnischen und lettischen Nationalbewegungen zunächst nicht städtische, sondern ländliche Erscheinungen waren,<sup>53</sup> der Zusammenhang mit den Agrarreformen ist hier offenkundig. Doch zwang die soziale Undurchlässigkeit des Ständesystems Esten und Letten, ihren eigenen Weg in die Moderne zu finden. Und dafür bot das baltische System ihnen Möglichkeiten, die den russischen Bauern in ihrer rechtlichen Isolation verwehrt blieben.

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SUMMARY

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*Role Model or Daunting Example?  
The “Baltic Path” in the Agrarian  
Politics of the Russian Empire*

The article puts the agrarian reforms in the Baltic Provinces in the larger context of state-gentry interaction in the Russian Empire. Although the Baltic German landholding gentry enjoyed a special degree of independence within the Russian Empire and had strong corporate institutions, it nevertheless shared a number of problems with its Russian counterparts. Most importantly, in both cases, the gentry sought to rationalize and regulate the relations to their serfs, while fearing similar approaches by the central state that would restrict their own freedom of action. When the Baltic German gentry emancipated its serfs in 1816/17 and 1819, it therefore initially sought to solve this problem by declaring the relations between peasants and landowners to be a basically private economical affair. Drawing on the contemporary liberal theory, it did not grant the freed peasants any land, but left the further developments of the gentry-peasants relations up to the free market. They were to be regulated by “free contracts”. However, famine and peasant uprisings in the 1840s made an intervention

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<sup>53</sup> DAVID FEEST: Die Entstehung der estnischen Nation, in: Estland – Partner im Ostseeraum, hrsg. von JÖRG HACKMANN, Lübeck 1998 (Travemünder Protokolle, 2), S. 19-39, hier S. 20-25.

by the St. Petersburg government into the Baltic affairs ever more likely. At last, Hamilar von Fölkersahm created a plan that preserved the liberal core of the “free contracts” system, while re-introducing elements of peasant protection. According to it, a certain contingent of land was reserved for the peasants and they were given the perspective of becoming land-owners in the long run. In complicated negotiations Fölkersahm not only prevailed against his adversaries in the Baltic provinces, but also convinced the decision makers in St. Petersburg of his plan.

The “Baltic path” in agrarian reform was popular among a number of Russian landholders as well as some St. Petersburg bureaucrats. However, when the emancipation of the Russian serfs was discussed in the late 1850s, it never became a serious option and had no impact on the emancipation statute of 1861. The reason was that the Russian bureaucratic elites had already decided beforehand, that the Russian gentry should have only little influence on the course of reform. Also, the image of the peasant commune as warrant for local stability, an impediment against quick social change and bulwark against the landlord’s influence on peasant life did not allow a liberal approach. Land was handed out to the communes rather than to individuals. In the light of these plans, the Baltic reforms were not seen as a role model, but rather as a daunting example.

The skilful diplomacy of the Baltic German gentry enabled it to adapt to the requirements of the new times while holding on to the principles of the feudal system. On the one hand, this enabled the former serfs to gradually become individual land-owners – something the Russian peasants would not become for a long time still. On the other hand, by stabilizing the existing system the “Baltic path” left no possibility for the peasants to rise beyond a certain level in society. It was not by chance that the Baltic national movements were mainly agrarian ones and soon turned against the Baltic German establishment.