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## NATIONAL MINORITIES IN THE BALTIC STATES 1919 - 1940

The emergence after World War I of a number of national states in Central-Eastern Europe, brought about, as an important result, a considerable reduction on our continent of the number of people deprived of their own statehood. According to certain authors, that number was reduced by one half in the years 1914 - 1919, from 60 million to 30 million.<sup>1</sup> Even a rough estimate, however, permits to state that the actual decrease was still greater: from about 70 million to 25 million — not counting, of course, as national minorities the main nationalities of the Soviet republics or autonomous regions, the Slovaks in Czechoslovakia or the representatives of the federated nations of Yugoslavia.

Considering the great mixture of ethnic elements, the real mosaic of nationalities that appears especially in certain regions of Central Europe, and the fact that mass-scale resettlements were not carried out, it may be stated that the bringing closer together of the political map of Europe and of the ethnic divisions was a major achievement and marked an important step towards the implementation of the nations' right to self-determination.

This, however, does not mean that the problem of national minorities lost its importance in Europe after World War I, as compared to the prewar period. On the contrary, it became even more acute. While it may be said that, prior to 1914, nobody took very much to heart the lot of oppressed nationalities which had no effective means of defending their rights on an international scale, and that the big powers showed interest in the situation of minorities only occasionally, when they saw in it a means of attaining their own political goals — the situation changed radically after 1919.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Renouvin, *Histoire des relations internationales*, vol. VII, Paris 1957, p. 178.

The national minorities obtained in most countries legal guarantees of equal rights and, in many cases, also of cultural autonomy and of their own self-government. They also acquired the possibility of vindicating their rights at the League of Nations. The minority groups availed themselves frequently and readily of these possibilities, and their complaints against oppression and persecution received ever wider publicity.

The various governments, especially those in the newly-established countries, with their international standing and internal situation not yet stabilized, had to reckon with their minority groups, even those relatively small — particularly so when the latter displayed great vitality and good organization. This created in the life of these countries a number of complex problems, not easily solved.

The minority problem, however, cannot be considered in a static manner. As years went by, one could notice in the newly-established countries a clear tendency to abridge the influence and importance of national minorities, to force them out from political and economic life. This process — a phenomenon of secondary but by no means marginal nature — went together with tendencies to disregard altogether the principles of parliamentary democracy and to pass to dictatorial rule.

In the case of three newly-established small countries which are the subject of this study — Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, the state nations were decidedly predominating; in each of these countries, however, there existed minorities accounting for from 12 to about 30% of the total population. They appeared both in dispersion and in compactly concentrated groups. There were some minority groups characterized by backwardness and passivity but there were also others distinguished by high standards of education or by political and economic dynamism. One should also point to the specific conditions prevailing in the Baltic countries: on their road to independence, these nations had to overcome the resistance of minorities which often received foreign assistance; later on, after achieving independence, they had to build their own statehood from the very outset in constant struggle against a part of their own citizens of alien nationality. Besides, the nations of those states, although they had already acquired political rule, were not yet by any means predominating in cultural and economic life; this fanned the bias and complexes that had developed in the course of centuries towards the nationally alien element. This created a whole interlacement of complex problems connected with the question of minorities and deserving investigation and analysis.

Let us begin by presenting the actual situation of the nationality relations in the various countries, and try to establish certain common features.

In Lithuania, the official census of 1923 showed — within a total population of a little over 2 million people: 84% Lithuanians, 7.6% Jews, 3.2% Poles, 2.7% Russians and Byelorussians, 1.2% Germans.<sup>1</sup> The above figures, however, were called in question by the representatives of minorities.<sup>2</sup> E.g., the Polish Central Electoral Committee, basing itself on the records of Parliamentary elections, cited the number of 200 thousand Poles which would account for about 10% of the total population. According to these calculations which, for the rest, also call for critical approach, the Lithuanian population should account for 77% of the total.<sup>3</sup> The census of 1923 did not take into account the population of Memel (Klaipeda) which at that time was not yet formally incorporated into Lithuania and which had more than 140 thousand inhabitants. According to later Lithuanian statistics, Lithuanians should account for 51% of Memel's population. Yet, in the elections to the local regional council, the Lithuanian lists of candidates obtained no more than 6-19% of the vote.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the Memel area there existed a compact and organized German group which reduced even more the general percentage of the Lithuanian population in the country.

In Latvia, according to 1925 statistics, out of a total population of about 1,850 thousand, Latvians accounted for 73.4%, Russians for 10.5%, Jews for 5%, Germans for 4%, Poles for 2.8%, Byelorussians for 2%.<sup>5</sup> A part of the most numerous Russian minority lived in a compact mass in the north-eastern confines of the country, in the region of Jaunlatgale (Pytalovo). The nationality problem in Latvia was additionally complicated by the presence of some 300 thousand Latgalian, i.e. the part of the Latvian population inhabiting the former Polish Livonia. As a result of different historical destinies, a difference of religion and

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<sup>1</sup> *Lietuvos gyventojai. Pirmojo 1923 m. rugsėjo 17 d. visuotino gyventojų surašymo duomenys*, Kaunas, Table on p. XXXVI.

<sup>2</sup> Representatives of four minority fractions in the Lithuanian parliament — Jewish, German, Polish and Russian — lodged a protest in connection with the results of the 1923 census. Cf.: W. Budzyński, *Ze wspomnień dwudziestolecia w Republice Litewskiej* [Recollections of Two Decades in the Lithuanian Republic], typescript, Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences, p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> *Statystyka narodowościowa [Litwy] na podstawie głosowania do sejmów* [The Nationality Statistics of Lithuania on the Basis of Parliamentary Elections], Central Polish Electoral Committee, Kowno 1926.

<sup>4</sup> W. Wielhorski, *Litwa współczesna* [Modern Lithuania], Warszawa 1938, Table on p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> *Latvija skaitļos 1936*, Riga 1937, p. 39.

dialect, that group had a considerably developed sense of cultural separateness, especially in the first years of Latvian statehood.<sup>7</sup>

Estonia was relatively the most homogeneous nationally. Out of a total population of about 1,100 thousand, Estonians accounted for 88%. The most numerous national minority — 8.2% — were the Russians living for the most part in compact groups in the eastern confines of the country, especially in the region of Petseri (Pyetchora). There were also about 1.5% Germans. Other minorities — Swedes and Jews — represented negligible percentages.<sup>8</sup>

With such a general nationality composition in the Baltic countries, we observe there a characteristic phenomenon which, for the rest, appears also in certain other parts of Central-Eastern Europe, namely a difference in the ethnic composition in urban and rural areas. In the territories under investigation, the towns had, as a rule, a much higher percentage of national minorities than the rural areas. E.g. in Lithuania, according to the Russian census of 1897, in towns with a population exceeding 10 thousand, Jews accounted for 43% of the total, Russians for 20%, Poles for 20%, and Lithuanians for only 11.5%.<sup>9</sup> It is true that these proportions changed in the subsequent years; all the same, in the city of Kaunas in 1923, Jewish voters still accounted for 32% of the total electorate in Parliamentary elections, Poles for 31.5%, Lithuanians for 30%, Germans for 4.5%.<sup>10</sup> In Riga, the biggest and most important city in the Baltic countries, the Latvian population constituted in 1919, 51.5% of the total (Germans — 17%, Jews — 13.5%, Russians — 7%, Poles — 5%).<sup>11</sup> In the rural districts of Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Zemgale, on the other hand, Latvians were the overwhelming majority — from 78 to 94% of the total population.<sup>12</sup>

The above data lead to the conclusion that the ruling nations and the ethnic minorities had different social and occupational structures. In the dawn of their statehood, Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Debates of the Latvian Constituent Parliament (*Latvijas Satversmes Saspulces Stenogramas* — abbr. L.S.S.S.), 5th Session, 10th Sitting of 7 Feb. 1922, pp. 328 - 329, and 11th Sitting of 8 Feb. 1922, p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Data from the Census of 1 March 1934 (*Eesti Statistika VII - VIII 1935*).

<sup>9</sup> Cf.: "Osteuropa," vol. XIII, 1937/1938, p. 390.

<sup>10</sup> W. Wielhorski, *Litwa etnograficzna [Ethnographic Lithuania]*, Wilno 1928, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> *Rīga ka Latvijas galvas pilseta*, Riga 1932, Table on p. 178. The highest percentage of Poles in Riga — 9.2% — is shown in the data of 1913; in absolute figures, it amounted to 47,595 persons.

<sup>12</sup> *Latvija skatļos...*, p. 40. The percentage of Latvian population in Latgalia was much lower (53%) but this region, with its very specific conditions, cannot be used as basis for comparisons.

were still peasant nations, with a thin stratum of intelligentsia, a small working class and an even smaller bourgeoisie. The underdevelopment of the latter social group is clearly illustrated by the fact that in 1923, only 13% of retail trade in Lithuania was in Lithuanian hands.<sup>13</sup>

Seen in more general proportions, the relationship of nationality and occupational structure — e.g. in Latvia in the year 1930 — looked as follows: employed in agriculture were about 65% of the Latvians but only 14% of the Germans and 1% of the Jews. Only the Russian and Byelorussian groups were characterized by an even more marked predominance of the peasant element (the percentage of population engaged in farming in those groups was 72 and 75%, respectively). Employed in industry and handicrafts were: 14% of all Latvians, 28% of the Jews, 27% of the Germans, 26% of the Poles. Engaged in trade were only 3.6% of the Latvians, but 49% of the Jews and 19% of the Germans. Employed in administration were 3.6% of the Latvians, 4% of the Germans, 3% of the Poles, 0.8% of the Jews. Finally, engaged in the learned professions were 1.7% of the Latvians, 12% of the Germans, 6% of the Jews, 2% of the Russians.

In view of the numerical prevalence of the Latvians, they constituted of course the majority of the active population in absolute figures: 80% of all those employed in agriculture, 67% in industry, 82% in administration, 55% in the learned professions. Only in trade, they did not represent the absolute majority, accounting for 41% of all those engaged in trade.<sup>14</sup>

The national minorities were retaining particularly strong positions in trade and — second to it — in industry, especially in big industry. The Germans, for example, in spite of the implementation of land reform, still represented a considerable economic power which resulted among other things, from their economic connections with the Reich. In Estonia, as late as 1936, the value of industrial installations in German hands amounted to 67 million crowns while Estonians had in their hands industries — consisting mostly of small workshops — with a total value of 76 million crowns.<sup>15</sup>

The minorities were also able to exert a considerable influence upon the economy of those countries through capital in their possession. Here are some characteristic data concerning Latvia: Out of the total sum of 138 million lats which joint-stock and credit companies had at their disposal in 1928 — the capital in Latvian hands amounted to only 19 mil-

<sup>13</sup> "Osteuropa," vol. XIII, 1937/1938, p. 388.

<sup>14</sup> *Latvija skaitļos...*, Table on pp. 50 - 52.

<sup>15</sup> U. Kaur, *Wirtschaftsstruktur und Wirtschaftspolitik des Freistaates Estland 1918 - 1940*, "Commentationes Balticae," vol. VIII/IX, 1960/61, p. 103.

lion, the German and Jewish capital to 38 million each, mixed and diverse capital to 42 million.<sup>16</sup>

The national minorities also played a considerable role in other spheres of life in those countries. While the administration was mostly staffed by representatives of the ruling nationalities, there were also — especially in the first years — officials from the minority groups; what is more, some of them did not even know the official language of the State. There were spheres where the predominance of minorities was particularly strong and durable. In Latvia and Estonia such was the case with the administration of justice. Among the judges, public prosecutors, members of the prison administration, the Germans constituted for many years a very high percentage and occupied posts of authority.<sup>17</sup>

The above-presented interlacement of the nationality problems with economic and social questions forejudged to some extent the character and directions of the main tensions and conflicts. None the less, the situation of minorities in each of the countries under consideration assumed very different and even contrasting forms. Differences also appeared within the various countries and were manifested by the considerably different situation and possibilities of action of the various national minorities.

In spite of the fact that all the Baltic countries adopted the principles of democracy and the parliamentary system as the basis of their statehood, differences appeared already in declarations on the rights of minorities. While, e.g., the Estonian Constitution announced full rights and autonomy for the minorities, similar guarantees were missing in the Constitution of Latvia where a separate law mentioned only an autonomy of the school system.

A characteristic and almost universal phenomenon should be noted at this point, namely that much more was being promised at first and that one backed out of those promises later on. Thus, e.g., the programme of the Lithuanian Christian-Democratic Party of December 1919 pledged in Paragraph 4: "All other nationalities inhabiting Lithuania shall obtain cultural autonomy [...]"<sup>18</sup> In the year 1922, however, the deputies of the same party which constituted the strongest fraction in Parliament, came out in the course of the constitutional debate as advocates of abridging the legal guarantees of the rights of minorities, and proposed

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<sup>16</sup> *Latvija desmit gadus*, Riga 1928, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Cf.: A. Drizul, *Latvija pod igom fašizma*, Riga 1960, p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> The Central State Archive of the Lithuanian S.S.R., Set 402, vol. 41.

to reduce those guarantees to noncommittal generalities — which they in fact managed to carry out to a great extent.<sup>19</sup>

If we now proceed to consider the situation in the various countries and begin with Lithuania, we ought to point out at the outset that the restrictions imposed under the state of emergency which were particularly severe and sustained in Lithuania, weighed directly and heavily upon the situation of the minorities. This was especially true with regard to public life, freedom of the press, etc. The school system of the national minorities did develop but the progress was uneven. In this respect, the German and Jewish minorities were in a relatively better situation. The parliamentary forum, however, offered to the representatives of minorities only slender possibilities for defending their rights. The period of the short-lived government of the Left in 1926 was an exception. During that period, the school system of the minorities enjoyed the support and assistance of the Ministry of Education, and the raising of emergency restrictions was conducive to the development of social and public life.<sup>20</sup>

The situation of the Polish minority in Lithuania deserves a separate mention. That situation was affected, above all, by the Polish-Lithuanian conflict. The frequently recurring waves of persecution had the character of retaliation for the reprisals inflicted upon the Lithuanian population in Poland. Of great importance was also the general attitude of the ruling circles and of the bourgeois parties which saw in the local Poles — Polonized Lithuanians. It was assumed that the nationality of a given person was not determined by such criteria as the language or the individual consciousness but by the origin and blood ties of that person, often interpreted freely and arbitrarily. Nationality, approached in this manner, became an objective category.<sup>21</sup> Neither did one make a secret of the fact that representatives of the Polish minority were being looked upon as traitors and renegades of sorts and the attitude towards them had to be hostile. Here is, by way of example, what was written on this subject by Professor S. Šalkauskis, one of the prominent

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<sup>19</sup> "Steigiamojo Seimo Darbai" [Records of the Lithuanian Constituent Parliament], 1st Session, 218th Sitting, 18 July 1922, pp. 105 and 108.

<sup>20</sup> Central Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian S.S.R. Department of Manuscripts, Set F-117, vol. 1061. Memorial on *The Situation of the Polish National Minority in Lithuania* (in Lithuanian), Kaunas 1930, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Commenting on theories of this kind, Professor W. Wielhorski wrote: "Applied in practice, this theory becomes the original sin: it inculcates in the Lithuanian public, views that no one could defend, either ethically or politically, before the public opinion of Europe of today. The above theory could be qualified as a moral justification for the forcible reincarnation of the national spirit in human beings who have already gotten rid of that spirit completely." W. Wielhorski, *Litwa etnograficzna...* [Ethnographic Lithuania...], p. 184.

Christian-democratic leaders: "It is particularly hard to maintain the proper behaviour towards such a national minority: it is not so difficult to respect Polish nationality in a Pole [i.e., one issuing from Poland — P. Ł.] but it is much more difficult to respect Polish nationality in a Polonized Lithuanian for, in his case, this nationality has been developed by the ignoble way of denationalization."<sup>22</sup>

The situation of national minorities in Latvia, alongside of unquestionable differences, also revealed certain similarities to Lithuania. On the one hand, as early as December 1919, the minorities obtained school autonomy; under this law, they were to receive — in proportional share — financial help from the State and from local government for the needs of the schools.<sup>23</sup> This law, however, was passed under special and short-lived circumstances. The endeavours subsequently undertaken by the representatives of minorities and aimed at obtaining general autonomy and national and cultural self-government proved abortive. The debate over this problem continued for a long time in the Latvian Parliament and relevant constitutional provisions were even adopted in first and second reading.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, however, they were voted down together with the entire second part of the draft Constitution dealing with civil rights.

In Latvia, too, voices were being raised negating the language criteria for the determination of nationality and recognizing certain minorities as Slavized Latvians. Thus, e.g., the political leader M. Skujenieks came out with the assertion that the Russians inhabiting densely the region of Pytalovo, were Russified Latvians.<sup>25</sup> In the Parliament, too, attempts were made to voice similar opinions: e.g. F. Kemps, member of Parliament from the Latgalian Peasant Party moved for striking off credits for Byelorussian schools. He motivated his proposal by arguing that the Byelorussian nationality in Latgalia was artificially contrived and that the matter actually concerned Byelorussianized Latgilians. "It will be enough to take just a little more care of these 'Byelorussians', — Kemps concluded — to exert influence upon them through literature, the Catholic Church, schools and social organizations, and I am con-

<sup>22</sup> S. Šalkauskis, *Tautybė, patriotizmas ir lietuvių tautos pašaukimas*, "Židinys," vol. VII, 1928, p. 371.

<sup>23</sup> A. Krodors, *Par minoritatu autonomiju*, Riga 1924, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> It was to be Article 116 of the Constitution, with the following wording: "The national minorities have their own autonomic organization under public law, with regard to national and cultural problems. The concept of national minority, its organs and the competence of these organs as well as the electoral procedure shall be determined by a special law." L.S.S.S., 5th Session, 11th Sitting, 8 Feb. 1922, pp. 336 - 337.

<sup>25</sup> M. Skujenieks, *Latvija, zeme un iedzīvotāji*, Riga 1922.



vinced that within one year their number will dwindle to a few hundred.”<sup>26</sup>

Unlike in Lithuania, however, opinions and trends of this kind remained isolated and met with immediate and effective counteraction of the Left. Such was the case with Kemps's motion, too. He was re-joined by the writer Janis Rainis, social-democratic member of Parliament. When the proposal for striking off the subventions for Byelorussian schools was put to the vote, it obtained only six votes in favour and was rejected by an overwhelming majority.<sup>27</sup>

Generally speaking, the Latvian Parliament was for a number of years an effective platform for the defence of the rights of minorities, mainly as a result of the attitude of the strong social-democratic fraction as well as the Communist workers' and peasants' fraction existing in the 3rd and 4th Parliament (in the years 1928 - 1933). In the years of parliamentarism in Latvia, the political and social life of minorities was developing vigorously, parties and unions deployed lively activities, numerous daily papers and periodicals were being published.<sup>28</sup>

The situation of minorities took a different shape in Estonia where they obtained the broadest range of liberties and rights. Already the Estonian Constitution of 1920 explicitly guaranteed the right of every citizen to determine freely his own nationality; it also granted complete equality of rights and guaranteed the possibility of acquiring education in one's own language at the expense of the State. The Constitution also granted broad rights to the languages of minorities. Finally, it announced that broad cultural autonomy would be introduced.<sup>29</sup>

One had to wait several years, however, for the implementation of the latter promise. It is hard to say when this law would had entered into force, had it not been for the great shock brought about on 1 December 1924 by the uprising of Tallin's workers under the leadership of Communists. The Parliament and Government, frantically seeking any measures that might lead to an internal consolidation of the country — reverted to the idea of autonomy, trying to secure in this way the support of the German minority which could gain most through autonomy.<sup>30</sup>

The law adopted in February 1925, proclaimed that every minority group counting at least three thousand people, had the right to establish

<sup>26</sup> L.S.S.S., 5th Session, 57th Sitting, 19 June 1922, pp. 2011 - 2014.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 61st Sitting, 27 June 1922, pp. 2092 - 2093 and 2141.

<sup>28</sup> A. Salts, *Die politischen Parteien Lettlands*, Riga 1926.

<sup>29</sup> Cf.: H. de Montfort, *Les nouveaux états de la Baltique*, Paris 1933, pp. 109 - 110.

<sup>30</sup> Cf.: H. Weiss, *Das Volksgruppenrecht in Estland vor den Zweiten Weltkriege*, "Zeitschrift für Ostforschung," vol. I, 1952, p. 253.

an autonomic Cultural Council of its own. The Council was to keep the national cadastre, decide on matters of nationality option and issue relevant certificates for government authorities, supervise the work of self-government organs directly engaged in the running of schools and cultural institutions of the given national minority group.<sup>11</sup> The funds for the maintenance of these institutions were to come from government and local-government subsidies, from public levies imposed by the Council, from collections, foundations, etc.<sup>12</sup>

Benefitting by the law on autonomy, which gave preference to the personal principle, were those national minorities that lived in dispersion, namely the Germans numbering some 15 thousand people and the Jews whose number did not exceed 5 thousand. The benefits of the law were most fully turned to profit by the Germans who established a cultural self-government functioning very efficiently. It united the German minority within one organization under public law. This organization was granted a scope of competence equal to that of the organs of local government.<sup>13</sup>

In the world literature dealing with problems of minorities, the Estonian law of 1925 is cited as an example and model of the most far-reaching and liberal solution of the nationality problem. While by no means negating the character and importance of that law, we submit that it ought to be seen in proper proportions. As has been said, benefitting by the law on autonomy were the small minorities whose numbers, what is more, were continuously decreasing. Thus, e.g., the Germans in Estonia were a shrinking, dying-out group. Things came to such a point that at the annual sessions of the German Kulturrat one of the main concerns of that organization was to decide which of the schools were to be closed down because of the ever smaller number of German children.

On the other hand, Estonia's most numerous national minority, the Russians, were at first unable to form their own Council and availed themselves only of such general rights in the sphere of language, school system and local government as were granted to them under the Constitution.<sup>14</sup> In the late '30s, the Russians undertook attempts to avail

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<sup>11</sup> The text of the Estonian law of 5 Feb. 1925 in: H. Kraus, *Das Recht der Minderheiten. Materialien*, Berlin 1927, pp. 192 - 199; also cf.: W. Cywiński, *Sprawozdanie z II Kongresu Mniejszości Narodowych w Genewie* [Report from the 2nd Congress of National Minorities in Geneva], "Droga," Nov. 1926, No. 11.

<sup>12</sup> J. Hempden Jackson, *Estonia*, London 1948, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> W. Čečeta, *Estija. Praeitis ir dabartis*, Kaunas 1937, pp. 94 - 95.

<sup>14</sup> The poor organization of the Russian minority is tellingly demonstrated by the fact that it was represented in the consecutive Estonian parliaments by only 2 - 4 members, i.e. a number equal to the representation of the Germans who were six times less numerous.

themselves of the benefits of the law on autonomy but these endeavours were belated and met with resistance on the part of the Estonian government.<sup>15</sup>

When considering the situation of minorities in Latvia and Estonia<sup>16</sup> in the parliamentary period, one notices clearly that in the early '30s attempts were made to rouse a wave of nationalistic feelings against them. Under the conditions of economic depression which strongly affected the Baltic countries, too, the parties of the Right and Centre were trying to switch the discontent of the masses against the minorities. It was being argued that the abridgment and then elimination of alien elements from economic life would improve the economic situation.

This programme was advanced in the 1931 election by the Latvian parties of the Democratic Centre and of the Progressive Union which gained several seats.<sup>17</sup> The government formed with their participation after the election, launched a campaign against minorities. It mainly consisted in attempts, not always successful for the rest, of closing down schools, imposing language restrictions, etc. This was accompanied by a vociferous propaganda campaign which did not subside at all in spite of the change of government in 1933.

The propaganda campaign was accompanied by a great number of public meetings and demonstrations. Here is a characteristic excerpt from a leaflet distributed in the streets of Riga on 13 February 1934 by the Democratic Centre and announcing a public meeting: "The economic crisis has clearly demonstrated that the alien elements took advantage of the confidence shown to them, only to the detriment of the Latvian people. The Jews, Germans and other minorities have been skimming off for themselves the cream of Latvia's economic life and want to go on doing so." The leaflet concluded with an appeal to Latvians to force out aliens solidarily.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, the deputies of the Democratic Centre came out in Parliament with a formal motion calling for the Latvianization of private business enterprises. Among other things, the motion included the demand that the owners of such enterprises be compelled to make

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<sup>15</sup> H. Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> Lithuania, where the dictatorial rule was established already in 1926, does not come into consideration in this case.

<sup>17</sup> J. Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur. Zur Geschichte des lettländischen Staatsreichs vom 15. Mai 1934*, "Jahrbücher für Geschichte Ost-europas," Beiheft 3, München 1957, pp. 16 - 17.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted after "Rigasche Rundschau," No. 36, of 14 Feb. 1934.

changes and replacements of personnel so that Latvians would account for 80% of the employees.<sup>39</sup>

This vociferous campaign did create an atmosphere of nervousness and unrest but it met with effective resistance. As long as the Parliament functioned as the supreme organ in the State, there could be no question of any drastic and unilateral abridgment of the rights of minorities. The above-mentioned motion of the Democratic Centre calling for the Latvianization of private enterprises also obtained only 11 votes in the Parliament and was rejected.

The situation underwent a radical change only when the parliamentary system was overthrown in the Baltic countries through a series of *coups d'état* and supplanted by dictatorial régimes.

This happened first in Lithuania, as early as December 1926. The coup of Smetona and Voldemaras resulted in the liquidation not only of those liberties the minorities had gained under the short-lived governments of the Left but also of the scanty rights they had had earlier, i.e. under the parliamentary rule of the Christian Democrats. The dissolution of the Parliament spelled the elimination of that frail platform for the defence of the rights of minorities, too. The introduction of new principles into the electoral law of the local government barred the way to the organs of local government for representatives of minorities. The pressure of the school system of the minorities continued. Thus, e.g., in 1926 there were 78 Polish schools in Lithuania but already in the next year their number was reduced to 20. 90% of the Polish children were deprived of the possibility of learning in a school of their own.<sup>40</sup> The Polish population defended themselves against these restrictions by organizing secret instruction at home but those engaged in it were liable to be severely punished. The harsh restrictions of the permanently maintained state of war excluded any manifestations of public life. Somewhat better was the situation of the Jewish and German minorities whose separateness was even then respected by the authorities. Also different was the situation of the Germans in Memel but this is a separate problem.

In Latvia, too, there was a marked difference between the years of parliamentary rule and the period of K. Ulmanis's dictatorship which was imposed as a result of the coup of 15 May 1934. This date marks an important turning point in the history of Latvia's national minorities.

One of the main watchwords of that coup: "Latvia for the Latvians!" was repeated and conjugated in countless variations. It was the content

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<sup>39</sup> "Rigasche Rundschau," No. 30 of 7 Feb. 1934.

<sup>40</sup> W. Wielhorski, *Litwa etnograficzna...*, [*Ethnographic Lithuania*] pp. 185 - 186.

of official statements and press articles. It is true that one spoke to the representatives of minorities about tolerance in return for complete loyalty towards the State,<sup>41</sup> but at the same time resolute and practical measures were being taken aimed at ousting alien elements and alien influence from all spheres of life in the country.

One began with language rights. As early as 14 June, the Cabinet issued a new decree in this matter. It secured for the Latvian the dominating role of official State language, also introduced on all levels of local government. The decree also included the prohibition of using foreign languages in public meetings.<sup>42</sup>

The practical implementing orders went even farther. Foreign language inscriptions began to disappear from signs and posters. The administrative organs went so far as to prohibit the placing of foreign-language visiting cards on the doors of private apartments. The press of the minorities was forced to print proper nouns and, above all, geographical names in Latvian version. This was not all. The representatives of minorities were even forbidden in certain circumstances to use their own language in direct contacts among themselves. Thus, members of national minorities doing military service were not allowed to talk among themselves in their native tongue.<sup>43</sup>

On 18 July 1934, a new school law came into force. According to the comment by the then Minister of Education, Professor L. Adamovics, the new law was to lay the main emphasis on the education of youth "in the national spirit, in loyalty of the State, in love of the country and in devotion to work."<sup>44</sup> In actual practice, however, the new law brought the liquidation of the educational self-governments of the national minorities and the subordination of minority schools directly to the organs of the Ministry of Education and, as a further result, a drastic reduction of the number of those schools.<sup>45</sup> Within one year from the issue of the law, a total of 93 minority schools were closed down.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Speech by K. Ulmanis made in Dyneburg on 17 Aug. 1934 ("Rigasche Rundschau," No. 186 of 18 Aug. 1934).

<sup>42</sup> Text of the language law of 14 June 1934 in: "Rigasche Rundschau," No. 133 of 15 June 1934.

<sup>43</sup> A. Rudevics, *Fašistiskā diktatūra Latvijā (1934 - 1940)*, Riga 1961, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Statement by L. Adamovics, Minister of Education, made on 24 June 1934 ("Rigasche Rundschau," No. 139 of 25 June 1934).

<sup>45</sup> This is how the newspaper "Pedeja Bridi" (No. 227 of 27 July 1934) commented on the new school law: "The new national school puts an end to the so-called cultural autonomy of the minorities; it marks at the same time the end of special privileges the foreign-language schools have been enjoying until now."

<sup>46</sup> Cf.: I. Ring, *Latviya*, Leningrad 1936, p. 59.

Particularly painful were the blows inflicted upon Polish schools in Latgalia: out of 30, only a few of them survived.<sup>47</sup> The minorities retained relatively most of the schools in the city of Riga where, among others, 6 Polish schools continued to function.<sup>48</sup>

The liquidation of all political parties in Latvia affected the national minorities as well, and the restrictions of the imposed state of emergency paralyzed their public life.<sup>49</sup>

How far the régime was reaching in its endeavours to Latvianize all spheres of public life, is shown by its attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of churches. As far as the Protestant Church was concerned, the government endeavoured to eliminate from it the German influence and, to introduce Latvian liturgy; it supported the group of docile clergy.<sup>50</sup> On the part of the Roman Catholic Church which remained largely under Polish influence, the Ulmanis government encountered determined resistance. Being additionally restricted by the provisions of the concordat, the government concentrated its efforts on the Orthodox Church in which Latvians accounted for about one-third of the congregation. Clergymen of Latvian nationality were placed in leading positions, seminarists were recruited almost exclusively from among Latvians, and for all the priests courses of the Latvian language were introduced with the intention of making it subsequently the liturgical language of the Orthodox Church.<sup>51</sup>

We have previously mentioned the particularly great influence of the Germans in the Latvian judicature. This matter did not escape the government's notice, either. Persons of alien nationality were being dismissed from posts of judges and public prosecutors. The legal profession was also placed under very close supervision, its autonomy was limited;

<sup>47</sup> "Pedeja Bridi," No. 295 of 29 Sept. 1934.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, No. 165 of 25 July 1935.

<sup>49</sup> Michał Świerzbiński, Polish consul in Dünaburg, described in the following way the situation of the Polish minority at that time: "After the coup of 15 May 1934, a planned, ruthless and definitive liquidation of the Polish element in Latvia began. The Polish National Union in Latvia and all its branches were dissolved, the newspaper "Nasz Głos" was closed down. Only organizations independent of the Union survived: the Polish Farming Society, the "Harfa" choral association, the Union of Polish Roman-Catholic Youth, and the pathfinders' troops subordinated to the Latvian Scouting organization [...]" (M. Świerzbiński, *Martyrologia Infantium Polkich [The Martyrology of the Polish Livonia]*, typescript, Archive of the Polish Academy of Sciences, p. 113).

<sup>50</sup> "Jaunakās Zinas," No. 284 of 13 Dec. 1935.

<sup>51</sup> Z. Balevics, *Baznīca un valsts buržuāziskajā Latvijā 1920 - 1940*, Riga 1964, pp. 244 - 250.

above all, access to the legal profession was almost totally barred to representatives of national minorities.<sup>51</sup>

In Estonia, the developments took a milder course in spite of the fact that there, too, the authoritative régime of Päts—Laidoner was established in March 1934 which necessarily affected the situation of national minorities. The policy of Estonization did not assume so drastic forms, however, and while restrictions for minorities were imposed, one mainly demanded of them civic loyalty.

A new law concerning the language was issued in Estonia in November 1934. The implementing orders based on that law and issued by the Minister of the Interior on 3 January 1935, required that all public announcements, signs, advertising pamphlets, etc. be written in Estonian. The same order spoke of using Estonian geographical names in the press and in books with the only exemption made for historical works.<sup>52</sup> It should be noted at this point that previously the advertisements and letter-heads of private business firms printed only in foreign languages, mostly in German, had been in use almost exclusively. The fact that the given firm was actually working in Estonia found reflection only in the German name of the country — Estland.<sup>53</sup>

Alongside of the language law, another one was issued — on determining the nationality. Under the new law, the nationality of citizens was to be determined by government authorities and not any longer by the Cultural Councils of the minorities. To Estonians, the way was barred for claiming other nationality but representatives of minorities could accede to Estonian nationality. In the case of mixed marriages, the Estonian nationality enjoyed distinct privileges.<sup>54</sup>

In Estonia, a programme of compulsory liquidation of minority schools was not launched on a large scale. Attempts were made, however, to enforce the instruction of certain subjects in Estonian.

The policy of the régime with regard to nationalities found expression in the new Constitution which came into force on 17 August 1937. The previous cultural autonomy of the minorities was replaced by cultural

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with H. Apsitis, Minister of Justice, on 14 Sep. 1934 ("Rigasche Rundschau," No. 210 of 15 Sept. 1934).

<sup>52</sup> "Postimees," No. 3 of 4 Jan. 1935, article: *The Estonian Language Must Get Its Rightful Place*.

<sup>53</sup> Here is a sample of printed advertisement circulated both in Estonia and abroad: "Professor San Martino de Kastrozza, der Einzigexistierende berühmte russische Hofkünstler, Theater, Illusion, Magie. Ständige Adresse: Werro, Estland, Neue Strasse 5, Eigenes Haus." (Central Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian S.S.R. Department of Manuscripts, F-62, vol. XXXVIII, p. 88).

<sup>54</sup> The text of the Estonian law *On the Determination of Nationality* of 9 Nov. 1934, in: "Osteuropa," Jahrg. X, Heft. 3, Dec. 1934, p. 175.

self-government with a more restricted scope of competence. The Constitution reaffirmed the previously issued law on determining the nationality. It stipulated that instruction in minority schools would be conducted in the language of the given minority and in the official language of the State. Finally, it introduced an electoral law so conceived that the minorities living in dispersion, such as the Germans and Jews, lost the chance of sending their representatives to the Parliament.<sup>51</sup>

The above measures began to provoke unfavourable repercussions abroad, inspired by the Germans. Critical voices were raised at the London Congress of Minorities and were reflected in the Western press. It said that "Estonia ceases to be a model for positive solutions of the minority problem."<sup>52</sup>

In those years, the Estonian press wrote much about the problems of minorities. Few voices were dictated by hatred and nationalism alone; prevailing were warnings appealing to minority groups and, above all, to the Germans, for loyalty to the State. Attention was called to the increasing Nazi tendencies, especially among the German youth, and to activities that followed directives received from abroad. It was stressed in this connection that "All citizens of the Estonian State, irrespective of their nationality, should place Estonia first. This is a categorical demand from which the Estonian people will not depart one step [...]"<sup>53</sup>

With regard to the Russian minority, the hope was expressed that one might perhaps succeed in Estonizing them. This, however, was but wishful thinking. In practice, one let them keep their self-government and schools. Conciliatory gestures were even made in the form of meetings of high-rank Estonian officials with the population; on these occasions the dignitaries addressed audiences in Russian.<sup>54</sup>

The measures taken by authoritative régimes against minorities in the economic sphere seem to have been even more important than developments in the cultural sphere. While such measures took place in all three countries under consideration, the case of Latvia was perhaps the most eloquent.

<sup>51</sup> W. Meder, *Zwanzig Jahre Freistaat Estland. Von der liberalen zur autoritären Demokratie*, "Osteuropa," Jahrg. XIII, Heft 5, February 1938, p. 332. One of the German comments on the Estonian Constitution of 1937, states among others: "*Statt des Rechtes, seine Volkszugehörigkeit frei zu bestimmen, wurde dem Staatsbürger jetzt nur noch die Möglichkeit gewährt, seine Zugehörigkeit zu einer Nationalität zu bewahren*" (H. Weiss, op. cit., p. 254).

<sup>52</sup> Report of the Estonian newspaper "Päevaleht," No. 353 of 30 Dec. 1937.

<sup>53</sup> "Päevaleht," No. 168 of 8 July 1935.

<sup>54</sup> Thus, for example, the chief of the State Propaganda Office, H. Kukke addressed graduates of the Russian school in the village of Permisi on 30 May 1937 ("Vaba Maa," No. 122 of 1 June 1937).



The keynote of the economic policy of the Ulmanis government was the Latvianization of the country's economy. One attempted to achieve this not only through increased control over major branches of production but also through direct and indirect government interference. The already existing State monopolies and trade organizations engaged in the purchase and exportation of farm products were now being strengthened. Business firms remaining in Latvian hands were supported by the government, chiefly through credits. At the same time, firms owned by representatives of minorities were frequently being forced to close down under the pretext of indebtedment.<sup>60</sup> Among other things, the government did not demur at liquidating the German guilds in Riga, Libau (Liepaja) and other cities; the property of those corporations whose origins dated back to the 12th century, was turned over to the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, established by the government.<sup>61</sup>

The Latvian press was able to report with satisfaction that in the year 1934/35, Latvian property in the cities began again to increase for the first time since the depression. In Riga alone, Latvians acquired 108 new properties with a total value of 1.5 million lats.<sup>62</sup>

However, according to Ulmanis's own assessment of August 1937, while Latvians had already gained a predominating position in rural areas, much remained to be done in the towns.<sup>63</sup> None the less, a distinct shift in the proportions of economic forces had already taken place in urban areas as well.

By conducting action against national minorities, the authoritative régimes tried to secure political gains for themselves. By preaching the ideology of nationalism, by pointing to a concrete enemy and to a concrete object of struggle, the governments calculated to win over to their side the bourgeoisie and well-to-do peasants, to penetrate into the working class, and thereby to reduce and eliminate the influence of the opposition. National solidarity was to become the main basis for the internal consolidation of the country. It was in this direction that an extensive apparatus of propaganda was working. One tried to waken and instil the national consciousness through the press, films, theatre, through numerous public meetings and assemblies; a special role was played by mass singing events, traditional in the Baltic countries. In these activities, one departed from the assumption that positive models alone would not yield

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<sup>60</sup> Cf.: W. T a m m e, *Der Einfluss des Staates auf die Wirtschaft Lettlands*, "Ost-europa," Jahrg. XIII, 1937/38, pp. 100 - 109.

<sup>61</sup> "Päevaleht," No. 26 of 27 Jan. 1936.

<sup>62</sup> "Rīts," No. 117 of 30 April 1935.

<sup>63</sup> K. U l m a n i s, *Uzvaras ceļš. Rakstu un runu izlase un izvilcumi*, Riga 1939, p. 154.

quick results, and therefore one attempted to stir the feelings and to arouse anew all the time hatred towards strangers in order to achieve in this way the political unification of the nation.

It was symptomatic that one often fabricated artificially problems where they actually did not exist, and trivial matters were being amplified to the proportions of big problems. Thus, for example, dragging out a wretched existence in a few villages in the north-western tip of Kurland, was the tribe of Livs, related to Estonians. The problem of those Livs and of the restrictions imposed upon them by the Latvian administration, was being taken up in Estonia for many years. The press wrote about it, lectures and conferences were made on the subject, financial aid for the Livs was organized, endeavours were made to tighten their ties with Estonia. Much prejudice and many mutual accusations accumulated around this problem, even affecting the official relations between Estonia and Latvia.

The Latvian press, in turn, was writing much about the fraternal tribe of the Kurs, inhabiting the Spit of Kuronia, and condemned to denationalization by Germans and Lithuanians. In this case, too, expeditions were organized to help the Kurs, to give them financial assistance, etc.

One should finally mention the action, much more important for the rest, organized by the Lithuanians in the period between World War I and II in connection with the problem of Vilna — and about its great social and political resonance. In the intentions of the organizers, the raising of the problem of liberation of Vilna to the rank of a national mission, and surrounding it with a wave of unprecedented excitement and fascination, was to serve the cause of national unification and of enhancing the national consciousness of the people.

We thus encounter the unquestionable phenomenon of marked hypertrophy of national feelings, often leading to the devious paths of nationalism. One should, however, consider the causes of such development. They cannot be reduced to inspiration from above alone. Such inspiration would not have yielded major results had it not fallen upon receptive ground.

It is necessary to view this whole problem in a broader perspective and to recall the situation of the Baltic nations prior to World War I. Lithuania, in spite of the progress in the sphere of national consciousness, was then still threatened by Polonization; Latvia and Estonia remained within the range of very strong German influence against which the national movements of these countries were waging a hard struggle. In addition to that, there was prepotent pressure from above, the policy of Russification conducted by the Tsarist government. In the face of

these dangers, the awareness of which was becoming more and more general, the defensive reflex was the excitement of national feelings. It is worth quoting here the opinion of Paul Milyukov, student of nationality problems, who pointed out: "Acute, feverish national feelings are usually born in the face of imminent denationalization which is particularly dangerous to small nations."<sup>44</sup>

When the Baltic nations obtained their own statehood, some leaders postulated that the favourable conditions existing at that moment be taken advantage of to the maximum, for the consolidation of the nation which is a category more durable than the state. Here is a statement, characteristic in this respect, by one of the leaders of the Lithuanian Christian Democracy, Professor K. Pakštas, who wrote in 1928: "It is possible that in some unforeseeable European storm, our independent political organization may fall again. But even in the greatest misfortune and disaster, we have more chance to survive as a nation than as a state. A nation that survives will always be a serious and firm candidate for independent statehood. This is why it is so important to utilize properly and planfully the period of independence for the consolidation of the nation and for hardening its resistance."<sup>45</sup>

With the Latvians and Estonians, the unfavourable demographic situation was an additional element of that complex of imminent threat. These two nations showed a minimal birth-rate. In view of the small size of these countries and their sparse population, this problem assumed very serious proportions. In these countries, one always pointed to the greater progenitiveness of the Slav national minorities as a real threat to their own national assets.

Finally, one should mention critically the attitude of certain minorities towards the State of their residence. There were minorities distinguished by their positive attitude and loyalty but there were also others which have in a great part become an alien and even hostile element in the state. Such was, above all, the German minority present in all the three countries under consideration, strong by its deep-rooted influence, by its high organizational and educational standards, by its economic position. In the '30s, the majority of Baltic Germans turned Nazi, looked up to the 3rd Reich and sought support from it. This could not but provoke a sharp reaction in the Baltic nations and arouse in them the feeling of imminent threat.

All those apprehensions, resentments and complexes produced a

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<sup>44</sup> P. Miliukov, *Rossija na perelome*, vol. I, Paris 1927, p. 208.

<sup>45</sup> K. Pakštas, *Iš praejusio dešimtmečio i ateinantį*, "Zidinys," vol. VII, 1928, pp. 243 - 244.

favourable psychological ground upon which inflamed feelings towards national minorities in general could grow. They became nourishment for rightist parties in the parliamentary period and, later on, they were widely exploited and fanned by nationalistic dictatorial régimes.

We would like at this point to emphasize once again the very close relationship between the strength and vitality of democratic principles in a country and the scope of liberties of its national minorities. The Baltic countries provide an almost classical illustration in this respect. This, too, is where we ought to look for the explanation of differences in the situation of national minorities in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — even with the correction that Estonia, where the minority problem weighed the least heavily, was more inclined to liberalism in these matters.

The struggle of the Left in defence of parliamentarism and civil rights in general, was at the same time a defence of the minorities' right to the unhampered development of their own language and culture. On the other hand, the attacks of the Right against parliamentarism were most closely connected with the offensive against minorities. It is worthwhile to quote in this connection the following statement of the newspaper "Latvis," the organ of Latvian nationalists: "It is not by chance that in countries which are conglomerations of nationalities, the modern parliamentarism is facing bankruptcy. For such countries, parliamentarism is a millstone round their neck — and is bringing them to ruin. The abolition of the unlimited power of Parliament in Latvia will be tantamount to the liquidation of the political and economic influence of minorities in our country."<sup>66</sup>

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The experience of the life of minorities in the Baltic countries in the two decades between World War I and II provides both positive and negative examples. This experience includes on the one hand efforts to establish cooperation between the State and the minorities, and even attempts of very liberal solutions; on the other hand, it includes facts that bear witness to relentless struggle, persecutions and tendencies to oust the minorities from social and economic life. Any univocal assessment, detached from the specific conditions, seems therefore impossible.

Yet in the Western literature devoted to the history of Central-Eastern Europe in the interwar period, we encounter many over-simplified and one-sided statements on the situation of national minorities in this area. Seton-Watson, for example, draws the following, truly infernal, picture

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<sup>66</sup> From E. Blanks's article *The Decline of Parliamentarism*, "Latvis," 14 Jan. 1934.

of the situation of minorities in Central and Eastern Europe throughout the two decades between World War I and II. He wrote that it was simply inconceivable that national minorities could be treated well in states organized on the basis of economic exploitation, social oppression, corruption, tortures and terror. Not only the minorities but quite a number of representatives of the dominant nation suffered from these things and to speak of human rights and of the protection of minorities under such conditions is but an unseemly mockery.<sup>67</sup>

A closer study of the actual situation shows, however, that the reality was not as simple as that. It was not a picture in black and white alone, it comprised intermediate colours as well.

The Baltic states under consideration, with a total population of less than 6 million and a total area of 166 thousand sq. km. (64 thousand sq. miles), constituted only a small but integral part of Central-Eastern Europe in the interwar period. The general social and political processes that took place in our part of the continent, covered these countries, too. This is also true to the full extent of the minority problem. It seems therefore that a number of phenomena observed there can lead to more general conclusions; on the other hand, however, the Baltic countries had their specific conditions, and one could observe there definite and unique phenomena.

One regularity does find ample corroboration in all of Central-Eastern Europe, namely the close interdependence between the social and political system of the country and the situation of its national minorities. Almost everywhere, too, do we observe the developing changes in their situation. The minority problem appears everywhere as an intertwining of complex social, cultural, political and economic questions. Responsible for it were not only current conditions and developments; the past also had a very strong bearing on this problem.

*(Translated by Jan Aleksandrowicz)*

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<sup>67</sup> H. Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe between the Wars 1918 - 1941*, Cambridge 1948, p. 272.