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Defending the Empire in the Baltic Provinces: Russian Nationalist Visions in the Aftermath of the First Russian Revolution

Karsten Brüggemann

The report was alarming. The revolutionaries had burned down “almost all manors,” dissolved government institutions, and took portraits of the tsar off the walls in the offices of Hasenpoth (Latvian: Aizpute) district in the province of Kurland. In the north of the district, usurpers proclaimed a “Latvian Republic” and took weapons from a Finnish (!) ship. The anonymous author concluded more than two years later that nobody could be certain in these days, that “our borderland” was still in Russian hands. Even in peacetime, he asserted, there were only “inorodtsy i inoverty” (different by their origin and/or faith) in state offices. Moreover, the Baltic barons were organizing the resettlement of German colonists to Kurland. It seemed as if the whole non-Russian borderland along the Baltic Sea was uniting to eliminate Russian authority in the region, which was so close to the capital geographically. The author ended his small piece, published in the chauvinist paper Okrany Rossi (Russia’s borderlands) in early 1908, with the desperate assurance that every Russian who was not yet “Germanized, Latvianized, or Lutheranized” feels that they are “on enemy territory.” The empire in the Baltic littoral apparently was in great danger.

In the historiography on the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire, which has traditionally been dominated by local scholars, many studies

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2 Karsten Brüggemann and Bradley D. Woodworth, “Entangled Past—Russia and the Baltic Region,” in Russ-
have focused on the excesses of the local revolution in 1905. The littoral was indeed shaken by a wave of violence, especially in the countryside of the Livland and Estland provinces, where it was directed mostly against German landowners and clergy. During these months of extreme violence, the tiny group of Germans, whose elite had played a dominant role in the provinces for centuries, finally sensed how dependent they were on imperial support. Only massive counter-violence exercised by the imperial army and German self-defense units allowed the old authorities to regain control. In the aftermath of the upheaval and using new freedoms granted by tsar Nicholas II, German associations in the provinces were established to address the needs of the community, offering some comfort and an ethnic consciousness which was hitherto quite foreign to the Germans of the littoral. A far more important consequence of the nationalization process taking place in reaction to ethnic violence, was that any kind of political cooperation between Baltic Germans on the one hand, and Estonian and Latvian representatives on the other, eventually became extremely difficult to negotiate. It seems that, in the very sensitive Baltic borderland, the clash of ethnicities loomed large. How did the imperial government react?


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Historiography so far has neglected the repercussions of the Baltic revolution in 1905–06 on the imperial scene.⁶ Though we understand local reactions quite well by now, far less is known about Russian perceptions of the clashes on the Baltic countryside. Of course, in general, the reactions of various Russian groups were quite diverse. While Lenin praised the revolutionary activity of the Latvian proletariat,⁷ for the St. Petersburg government, keeping the region quiet and loyal was the primary goal now more than ever. It comes as no surprise then that a confused and shaken center, in the face of the first signs of potential separatism from Estonians and Latvians, returned to a century-old strategy of aristocratic alliance with the German nobilities of the littoral. At the same time, however, the center also had to look for ways to come to terms with demographic realities in terms of, for example, pragmatically cooperating with the Estonian-led city administration of Revel’ (in Estonian, Tallinn; in German, Reval).⁸

For Russian “popular nationalists,” who—according to Theodore R. Weeks—never came so close to the realm of “official nationalism” executed by the government as in the aftermath of 1905, everything had gone wrong in the strategically vital Baltic borderlands.⁹ In their eyes, Russia now had to pay the price for the complete failure of any kind of “Russification” in the

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⁷ Vladimir I. Lenin [Rabochii], “Sovremennoe polozhenie Rossii i taktika rabochei partii,” in idem, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, t. 12, 175–82, here: 181. (Originally published in Partiinye izvestiia, no. 1, February 7, 1906); Vladimir I. Lenin [Rabochii], “Iubileinomu nomeru ‘Zihna’”, in idem, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, t. 19, 305–09, here 305–306 (originally appeared in Zihna, no. 100 [July 1910]).


litoral where inorodtsy and inovertsy continued to dominate the local administration even after 1905. Since the 1860s, demands to support “Russian principles” (russkie nachala) in the Baltic provinces had become popular in the press; but not even under Aleksandr III, during the period of so-called “Russification” that was much criticized by Baltic Germans and Estonians/Latvians alike, did the situation change to such an extent that would have pleased Russian nationalist activists. As a matter of fact, concerning their visions for a Russian imperial future of the Baltic provinces, they remained disappointed with the government until the very end of the empire.

In this chapter, I will first briefly outline the perception of the Baltic past and present in imperial nationalist discourse since mid-nineteenth century, keeping in mind the precarious relationship between the categories of “empire” and “nation” concerning the allegedly “German” provinces, which were commonly believed to be a kind of “European” periphery of the tsarist state. How was the project of the “imperial nation,” to use Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller’s term, conceived so as to influence (and ultimately, possibly alter) the situation in the Baltic provinces? Second, I ask how the immediate influence of events during 1905–06 in the region affected the perceptions and visions of Russian popular nationalists.

In contrast to the government, which by and large for the sake of the empire continued to view the Baltic German nobilities as natural allies in the littoral, nationalists must have felt the complete isolation of their radical position. They virtually ran out of potential allies in the provinces. Heavily influenced by Nikolai Danilevskii’s teachings about the inevitable clash between the Germanic and Slavic worlds, rallying behind the traditional estate-based alliance of aristocracies supported by the dynasty did not enter their minds. Moreover, after the revolutionary excesses committed by Estonians and Latvians, it was virtually impossible for them to con-
receive of anti-German cooperation with the demographic majorities in the provinces. Thus, they applied the very imprecise category of “Russianness” (russkost’) to conditions in the very un-Russian littoral in the vain hope of finding support in the imperial center, which should be, at least in their view, committed first and foremost to the representatives of the imperial nation in the borderlands. Yet the imperial government continued to view the provinces as “Russian” according to an imperial rather than a strictly nationalist definition.

This study argues that, in Russian eyes, it was the emergence of Estonians and Latvians as collectives with an independent agenda that ultimately forced imperial authorities and Russian nationalists alike to change their attitude toward the provinces. Previously, both ethnicities were generally believed to be “ethnographic material” that sooner or later would assimilate to the larger neighboring cultures, be it German or Russian. After 1905–06, however, they were largely seen as socialists and potential separatists, and thus no longer as future objects of any kind of “Russification.” In the early twentieth century, the imperial (and) nationalist dream that Estonians and Latvians would sooner or later become loyal citizens acculturated—presumably by orthodoxy—to the world of the Rus’ obviously remained just that, a dream.

Finally, this contribution demonstrates that eventually solving the “Baltic question” the way it was posed during the imperial period came close to squaring the circle. Robert Schweitzer has convincingly argued that St. Petersburg failed to create a “government party” in the provinces that would have provided local support for the central government’s aims, leaving this task primarily to the imperial government’s official representatives, the governors. Of course, not being able to solve the national question did not

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mean that the whole empire would immediately collapse; but neither pragmatism (managing Baltic diversity as had been done over the past centuries) nor radical nationalism (the bet on russkost’ as general solution for the non-Russian region) offered durable solutions that could keep the region quiet, loyal, and secure. In the final section, I will additionally argue that during World War I, Russian imperial policy toward the littoral reached a dead end because the center had also run out of potential local allies.

**Perception of a Non-Russian and Non-Orthodox Region during the Nineteenth Century**

In the early 1870s, a governmental paper postulated that the “Baltic question” had become one of the most urgent problems of imperial domestic policy. To put it another way, using the situation in the Baltic provinces in order to criticize the government had become quite popular. In press debates concerning this question in the 1860s, criticizing local developments in the Baltic provinces was widely used as a tool to demand the government break German domination of and support everything Russian in the littoral.

This nationalizing approach to the empire was accompanied, moreover, by an illustrative change in topography. While traditionally, the Baltic provinces were referred to as Ostzeiskii krai (Ostsee is German for “Baltic”), since the 1860s a telling neologism was used: Pribaltiiskii krai (“Baltic region”). Obviously invented, much like the similar Privilenskii krai, to reflect the

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13 Isakov, *Ostzeiskii vopros*, 179.
15 On the process of “territorial Russification” related to the invention of the term Privilenskii krai for Poland, see: Raymond Pearson, “Privileges, Rights, and Russification,” in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, ed. Olga
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perspective of the empire towards the border region, this new term semantically “Russified” Baltic topography. It also created new expectations: as ostzeiskii, the region was something far away, intrinsically foreign, something that might even be permitted to remain separate. As pribaltiiskii, in contrast, the region was meant to be a genuine part of the empire.16 In 1907, the previously mentioned ultra-nationalist newspaper Okrainsy Rossii claimed that only Germans still used the old-fashioned term Ostzeiskii krai, while Russians were kindly asked to pay attention to geography and call it correctly Pribaltiiskii krai.17 After all, it was geography (among other factors) that made the region undoubtedly “Russian,” at least according to widespread discourse in late imperial Russia.

How “Russian” were the Baltic provinces?18 Until the mid-nineteenth century, they had been largely conceptualized as a German part of the empire. During the reign of Nicholas I, it was not unusual for the region to be perceived as making Russia truly European, and thus a European empire in its own right.19 German dominance there, however, was perceived in terms of a “cosmopolitan monarchism” typical of the Nikolaevan era.20 Thus, it

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18 The following paragraphs are based on Brüggemann, “The Baltic Provinces.”

19 In 1848, the eminent geographer Konstantin I. Arsen’ev wrote that though the empire’s provinces on the Baltic Sea coast were almost entirely foreign in terms of language, law, and, culture, they comprised the “most treasured possession of the Empire” not least because they made it “European.” Konstantin I. Arsen’ev, Statisticheskie ocherki Rossii (St. Petersburg: Tip. Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1848), 4.

was a typical imperial territory in which loyalty was guaranteed by transnational estate-based identities and solidarities—the alliance of aristocracies. Yet there was an uneasiness with the ethno-cultural conditions of the Baltic provinces, expressed, for example, in the accounts of Russian visitors to the littoral.\(^{21}\) Even if the Baltic Germans were still highly praised for their cultural habits, they came to be chided for refusing to learn the language of the emperor, whom they claimed to honor so dearly, and they were criticized for their “provincial patriotism.”\(^{22}\) Yet this earlier criticism was not grounded in ethnic preconceptions. However, this began to change. While Russians visiting the provinces in the 1820s and 1830s sought their “Europe” in the romantic landscape of medieval towns and castles, they later came to search for Russian symbols of the empire in this foreign environment. Revel’ was, thus, turned into an imperial \textit{lieux de mémoire} with a special regard for Peter I.\(^{23}\)

Apart from that, there was a growing sensibility for all of the missing elements of Russian imperial culture that would make even the ostensibly “Western” capital a Russian city. Still there were very few Russians on these shores. Russian was seldom heard spoken, and Orthodoxy was weak. There was political loyalty expressed by the Baltic Germans, but no cultural affinity. There were virtually no cultural anchors for Russians in the region, and this only slightly changed when in the 1840s approximately 100,000 Estonians and Latvians converted to Orthodoxy (which was, on the whole, a development in the countryside, where few Russians lived). In the long run, not even Russian religion turned these Baltic peasants into Russians, although many Russian (and, with a growing sense of fear, German) observers expected this to happen. If conversion was initially a form of social protest against economic conditions in the countryside—peasants adopted the faith of the Emperor in the vain hope of being granted good land—


\(^{22}\) See, e.g., Faddei V. Bulgarin, \textit{Letniaia progulka po Finliandii i Shvetsii v 1838 g.} (St. Petersburg: Tip. Ekspeditii Gouzdarstvennykh Bumag, 1839), 13 (quote), 18. 40–41, 68.

being Orthodox eventually provided a means for Estonians and Latvians to escape German cultural and economic domination.  

In the long run, the conversion movement fundamentally altered the Russian perception of the Baltic provinces. Inspired by Western romantic nationalism, Russian intellectuals sensed that Russian imperial domination over non-Russian territories had to be justified anew. Instead of explaining Russian power simply by referencing autocratic rights, historical and cultural arguments for continued imperial dominance were elaborated. In this respect, the conversion to Orthodoxy was welcomed as a field upon which the issue of German domination in the Baltic provinces could be reassessed. Of lasting influence were Iurii F. Samarin’s “Letters from Riga,” written in 1848. Here, the prominent Slavophile who had worked in Riga on behalf of the Interior Ministry in the mid-1840s clearly set out a program for the mental appropriation of the Baltic region by Russia as a precondition for its genuine “merger” (sliianie) with Russia proper. In demanding affirmative action for the representatives of the imperial nation, this program challenged tsarist policy at the time. Samarin was arrested for a few days, and the “Letters” were never published during his lifetime.

Samarin maintained that the Great Russian Plain extended all the way to the Baltic Sea; it was only at the coast that the empire (and thus the im-

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imperial nation) met its “natural” border. Translated into geopolitical terms, this argument turned into a strategic one that was well known since the times of Peter I, when Russian power in the Baltic provinces was seen as vital for defending the entrance to the Gulf of Finland, and thus protecting the capital. In Samarin’s “Letters,” this geographic “naturalness” was underpinned with an argument taken from history, which asserted the “naturalness” of imperial Russian rule. Samarin reminded his readers of an ongoing process of submission on the part of the indigenous populations to peaceful Russian authority, which began as early as the time of Kievan Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise in the eleventh century.

In this narrative, the Germans played the part of brutal intruders who interrupted a peaceful process of the integration and assimilation of lands and peoples into the Orthodox world of the Rus’. According to this thesis, Samarin claimed Russia’s right and “destiny” to “lead the Baltic region to civil and ecclesiastical enlightenment,” a mission civilisatrice typical for an empire in the nineteenth century. Most of all, however, his argument that “the Germans took the Baltic region from the Russians, and Catholicism tore it from the bosom of Orthodoxy” resonated with his Russian readers. Therefore, German dominance in the region was interpreted as unjust and even “unnatural.” Based on this idea, Estonians and Latvians had originally adopted Christianity as a result of a peaceful mission from the east. Equipped with this narrative, nationalists thereafter could depict the Baltic region as initially Orthodox and, thus, culturally and historically Russian territory.

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29 Evfimii M. Kryzhanovskii, Ostzeiskii vopros i pravoslavie (St. Petersburg: s.n., 1884), 10–14; Boris V. Dobryshin, K istorii pravoslavieia v Pribaltiiskom krae. Ocherk s prilozeniem nekotorykh ofitsial’nykh dokumentov (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia tip., 1911).
What was important from the point of view of the empire was that the “natives” (*tuzemtsy*), as this colonial discourse tended to call Estonians and Latvians, were seen as victims of German aggression given that their forefathers had previously been on the “right” path towards Orthodoxy and the Russian world. The conversion movement of the 1840s, thus, properly expressed their “natural” needs. In the 1860s, the Baltic “natives”, allegedly under attack by a Germanizing Lutheran Church, were even depicted as martyrs to the “Russian cause.”

This discursive environment was famously expressed in the well-known controversy between Samarin and the Professor of History at Dorpat (Russian: Derpt/Iur’ev; Estonian: Tartu) University, Carl Schirren in 1869, in which the latter ferociously attacked the idea of a Russian *mission civilisatrice*. However, the framework established by Samarin was later used by Alexander III to carry out so-called “Russifying” reforms in the Baltic provinces.

The tone was set, however, for a more enduring kind of “Russification” than any kind of administrative or political reforms could offer: the “Russification” of the region in the minds of the Russian public. Of course, in contrast to predominantly Slavic-inhabited territories in the Western provinces claimed by Russian nationalism as part of the national body, the Baltic provinces were usually seen as Russian only in terms of history and culture. However, attempts to demonstrate that Latvians (and Lithuanians) were ethnically “half-brothers of the Slavs,” and the urgent demand made...
by historian Mikhail P. Pogodin already in 1869 to “Russify” (rusit’) the natives of the Baltic provinces as soon as possible in order to make them into “truly Orthodox Russians,”\(^{34}\) prove that there was fertile ground for the idea to make the provinces part of the national body, at least at some point in the future. Even if the Baltic provinces were not perceived as being ethnically “Russian” right now, or in Miller’s words, they were “not included into the image of the Russian national territory,”\(^{35}\) they were broadly regarded as a historically (and potentially) Orthodox region with a (peasant) population culturally bound to the world of Russia, and thus predisposed to Russia’s cultural and political dominance.

Russian Nationalists and Baltic History

History mattered in the Russian perception of the Baltic provinces, because for those inspired by the vision of a national empire,\(^{36}\) Samarin’s thesis of a Russian pre-Catholic past in the littoral served as an essential legitimation of their claims. In the years after the revolution of 1905–1906, this thesis already had its own history. It was popularized in brochures introducing the Pribaltiiskii krai to an increasingly literate public starting in the 1870s. One of the first examples of this type of literature published in 1870 repeated the claim, taken from Samarin’s teacher Pogodin, that “before the Germans, Poles, Swedes, and Danes, the Baltic littoral \([\text{Baltiiskoe pomor’e}]\) belonged to Russia” because it used to be part of the principalities of the Rus’.\(^{37}\) Thus, from times immemorial, the region never lost its primordial Russian character. This construction of

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\(^{34}\) Pogodin, Ostzeiskii vopros, 109, 111.


\(^{36}\) See the categorizations in Bassin, “Geographies of Imperial Identity,” and esp. 55–61 on “national empire.”

\(^{37}\) M. Nevzorov and V. Zabotin, Pribaltiiskii krai: Istoricheskii ocherk i opisanie gubernii Estliandskoi, Livliandskoi i Kurliandskoi (St. Petersburg: Izdanie redaktsii narodnogo zhurnala “Mirskoj vestnik”, 1870), 6. This formulation comes from Pogodin, Ostzeiskii vopros, 11–12.
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a specifically Russian history of the region was needed if one wanted to alter its conditions. In this context, it was not only “conquest” or “reconquest” in the name of the dynasty that counted: imperial possessions were justified through a tradition of the continuous peaceful impact of Russian culture on the territories and peoples of a borderland. Theodore Weeks has claimed that it is impossible to understand “Russian attitudes and ‘state interests’ as perceived by contemporaries . . . without an appreciation of the historical lessons lurking behind Russians’ perceptions of their role in these lands” (meaning broadly the “western territories”). In the case of the Baltic provinces, in this process of re-writing of history, the Russian mission civilisatrice of the late nineteenth century received a mythical predecessor during the tenth and eleventh centuries in order to prove the long lasting (peaceful) dominance of “Russia” in the region. Convinced that the Germans were only illegitimate intruders who came with “fire and sword,” this discourse eventually integrated the conflict with the Baltic provinces into the story of the historical antagonism between the Germanic and Slavic worlds.

It has to be stressed that in early twentieth century Russian-language literature related to the Baltic provinces, Samarin’s historical argument was firmly established. Russian publications issued on the occasion of the bicentennial of the de facto incorporation of Estland and Livland into the Russian Empire in 1710 left no doubt about who the legitimate ruler in the littoral was. Next to the traditional argument of imperial conquest in 1710, most of them also promoted the thesis that the strong, pre-Catholic Russian (-orthodox) influence on the littoral was interrupted by the Germans only in early thirteenth century. Consequently, the Russian state had a historical right to rule in the littoral, which, due to its geographic situation, had to become part of this state sooner or later. The Estonian-born magis-

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39 In more detail, see Brüggemann, Licht und Luft des Imperiums, 271–88.
40 See, as an example: Pavel G. Pshenichnikov, Russkie v Pribliitiskom krae (Istoricheskii ocherk) (Riga: Russkii natsional’nyi klub “Russkaiia beseda”, 1910). Cf. Ivan I. Vysotskii, Ocherki po istorii ob”edineniia Pribaltiki s Rossiei (1710-1910 g.g.), vyp. 1–4 (Riga: A. Nitavskii, 1910); Ivan I. Rogozinnikov, K dvukhsot-letiiu prisoedineniia Estlandii k derzhave Rossiiskoi: Eestimaa Weneriigi Walitsuse alla saamise kahesaja...
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ter of the Ecclesiastical Academy in St. Petersburg, Ivan Iur’ens (Joann Jürgens), supported the nationalist Russian view on the local past, emphatically claiming that prior to the Catholic crusade, the littoral had reached an exceptionally high level of cultural development solely due to the early Russian mission civilisatrice.41

The following discussion of right-wing activists’ reactions to the revolutionary events in 1905–1906, which were essentially a presentation of various models for a “Russian” future of the littoral, demonstrates that regardless of the level of personal experience in the Baltic provinces, the protagonists of this debate created a utopian vision of the region in which everything was turned upside down. In many ways, the process of mental appropriation of the provinces as historically and culturally part of Russia had gone so far that many authors were ready to project the idealized situation in Russia proper onto the completely different realities that existed in the littoral. In contrast, it must be stressed that there was actually no danger in 1905–06 that the empire would lose its outlet to the Baltic Sea or that the German Reich would have been ready to take over the territory. It might even be argued that the region never was so integrated into the empire-wide structures as in the decade following the chaotic days of the revolution.42

Visions of the End of Empire at the Baltic Sea

In his speech at the St. Petersburg branch of the Slavianskoe Blagotvoritel’noe Obshchestvo on December 30, 1905, the former rector of the Universities of Warsaw and Iur’ev, Anton S. Budilovich, set the tone for the alarm-
ist discourse of Russian nationalists that dominated the debate during and immediately following the revolutionary events. The well-known Slavist made it clear to his audience that if nothing happens, the “Northern Capital” might find itself very soon only 20 verst “from the enemy” (meaning the Finns in this paragraph). In the Baltic provinces, the situation was no less serious because the main centers were cut from the rest of the empire during the course of the revolution. The new governor of Livland province, Vasilii U. Sollogub, had to force his way from Dvinsk to Riga with weapon in hand. The region had been temporarily cut off from imperial control. In his speech, Budilovich also stressed the brutality with which Estonians and Latvians allegedly massacred German nobles and pastors. This reminded him of the way they had fought the Catholic crusaders in the early thirteenth century.43

Budilovich blamed the recent escalations on “foreign propagandists” (British, Japanese, Jews, the soiuz inodordtev Rossii, professors, doctors, and engineers, as well as the soiuz soiuzov), but there was one party he criticized the most for the ostzeishchina (a pejorative term denouncing German rule in the Baltic Provinces), as he called it: the rulers of the empire. Since Peter I, they had always only thought about how to preserve local customs and traditions instead of “fostering the Russian (...) element” there.44 The Germans, he continued, now would say that everything happened because of the Russification policies of “Murav’ev, Manassein, and Bobrikov,” but in fact, the Germans just wanted to divert attention away from the real problem. In Budilovich’s eyes, the real problem was quite the opposite: there hadn’t been a Murav’ev, Manassein, or Bobrikov consistently present in the borderlands.45 What Budilovich expressed here was the well-known argu-

43 Anton S. Budilovich, O poslednikh dvizheniakh v srede chudskikh i letskikh plemen Baltiiskogo poberezh’ia. Rech’ v torghevennom sobranii Spb. Slavianskogo blagotvoritel’nego obschestva, 30 Dekabria 1905 g. (St. Petersburg: Tipografia V.D. Smirnova, 1906), 7–8, 13. Interestingly enough, this braveness, which was usually seen as a positive aspect of the character of the tuzemtsy (as long as it was directed against the Germans), now turned against the Russians. On ethnographic stereotypes virulent in Russian perception of the Estonians and Latvians, see Brüggemann, Licht und Luft, 149–80.
44 Budilovich, O poslednykh dvizheniakh, 18.
45 Ibid., 19. Budilovich here refers to three Russian governors resp. officials active in non-Russian regions: N. M. Murav’ev (Governor-General of Vilna 1863–65), N. A. Manassein (the later Minister of Justice who
ment used by advocates of full sliianie ever since the era of Peter I, when the Russian government continuously acted against “real” Russian interests in the Baltic borderland. He asserted that St. Petersburg governed the region politically, but failed to do so in the ethical and spiritual sense. As a result, Budilovich concluded, Russia’s power on the Baltic Sea coast was destined to end soon. In the final passages of his speech, he used the specter of the Germanization of the whole coastline from Lübeck to Torino to communicate the vulnerability of St. Petersburg itself.46

For Budilovich, the empire needed the littoral “like light and air” (kak svet i vozdukh) because it provided the only access to the Atlantic Ocean. Therefore, he rhetorically asked his audience, “do we really want to allow this access to the world to be cut off (...) by a system of alien autonomies”?47 It is interesting that right-wing authors with a more liberal orientation like Oktobrist and expert in financial law Eduard N. Berendts came to a very similar conclusion about the situation; but the two men offered completely different solutions. In early 1906, Berendts argued that without the Baltic borderlands, the empire could not make any use of its vast territory. He called it the “tragedy of Russia’s historical situation” that every time the government aims to foster “Russian statehood” in the okrainy, its adversaries criticize its “national chauvinism.” For this reason, he called for more attention to be paid to the cultivation of local languages and more local autonomy; that is, “autonomy in the strict sense,” which would leave local self-administration to local powers without jeopardizing “state unity.”48

For Budilovich, in contrast, leaving local questions to local populations would spell political suicide. He advocated for a system modeled after the all-Russian zemstvo, where demographic majorities would be shielded

carried out a revision of Livland Province during 1882–83), and N. I. Bobrikov (Governor-General of Finland 1898–1904), who in the eyes of popular nationalists, had become the (good) exceptions to the rule of too many liberal officials sent out by the center due to their “Russifying” policies in the borderlands.
46 Ibid., 24.
47 Ibid.
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against the “grasps” (zakhvaty) of the “minority of newcomers” (prisbloe men’shinstvo)—meaning Baltic Germans who had already been settled in the littoral for nearly seven centuries. In order to make this system work in the interest of the imperial nation, he proposed the large-scale migration of Russian peasants into the provinces.49 But, as we shall see, this was easier said than done. Yet, Budilovich in general agreed with Berendts on the issue of local languages. If the reforms of the early 1890s introduced Russian as language of instruction in all schools—a measure abandoned, by the way, in 190550—Budilovich proposed an educational system for the Baltic provinces “patterned after the Russian-alien schools of Il’minskii [po tipu russko-innorodcheskikh sbkol Il’minskogo],” which (Budilovich most definitely intended) would provide a foundation for the integration of Estonians and Latvians into the Russian world.51

In this context, it is interesting to note what exactly the Russian public knew about Estonians and Latvians; that is, the potential secessionists whose own elites did not see independent states as a possibility in the near future of their communities. The uneasiness exhibited by many Russian observers toward these “natives” also has to do with the traditional image of peasant populations distributed in the aforementioned ethnographical writings that introduced the Baltic provinces to Russian readers. In this literature, the reader would rarely learn that, for example, Estonians and Latvians were almost completely literate. Ethnographic information tended to come from Enlightenment writings and was, on the whole, hopelessly outdated. Why should anybody in the empire be concerned about the national

49 According to the census of 1897, 5.4 percent of the population was composed of Russians in the three Baltic provinces (including Belorussians and Ukrainians); Riga counted almost 17 percent of its population and Reval 10 percent as Russians. Brüggemann, Licht und Luft, 311–13.
aspirations of peasants whose favorite entertainment was swinging (in the case of Estonians) and solving riddles (in the case of Latvians)?

However, something was going on in these provinces which were traditionally regarded as “German.” In his book *Pribaltiiskaia Smuta* (Baltic “Times of Troubles”), an allegory of the empire completely losing control already apparent in the title, author “Vega” (the pseudonym for V. V. Geiman, a journalist for the right-wing populist *Novoe Vremia* [New Times]) described a situation in which Estonians and Latvians could now be found in much higher levels of hierarchy than previously thanks to the traditional sympathies of Russian bureaucrats toward oppressed nations. Eventually, the victories in local elections (presumably a hint to the Estonian victory in Revel’ in 1904) “made the heads [of these young nationalities] spin.” But even more alarming must have been his claim that both collectives now also have national anthems that they would sing with unceasing emotion on every occasion. The real danger for Russia was not to be seen in peasant populations singing national melodies; in Vega’s eyes, it was that these peoples would voluntarily join Germany and become proud parts of the *Vaterland* sometime in the near future. The only way to prevent this development, according to Vega, was to bring the Russian administration in order, so it would no longer be paralyzed if it had to move beyond punishing poor peasants. If nothing changed, Vega claimed boldly, Latvians, sooner rather than later, would call for the assistance of the German *Reich* themselves. From their point of view, Vega added emphatically, this would even be the right choice because Russia was paralyzed, when it came to realizing reforms: “seas of paper and ink” would never be enough to keep the provinces loyal.

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56 Ibid., 130.
The German danger was a well-established rhetorical figure in Russian nationalist discourse at least since Danilevskii’s *Rossiia i Evropa*. The question of how to improve the situation in the Baltic borderland led to another characteristic element of these writings: the belief that the *russkost’* of officials and even colonists was the key to a solution of the Baltic question that would be in the empire’s interests. This attitude was especially true for those Russian nationalists who actually lived in the Baltic provinces. It was in their writings first and foremost that we find quite imaginative solutions for the “Baltic question,” thereby revealing a mind-blowing tendency to completely ignore actual local conditions. This tiny segment of the Russian population in the region, however, quite effectively used the weekly *Okrainy Rossi*, established in 1906 (and mentioned in the introduction of this chapter), to communicate its ideas to the capital. It was in their publications that the call for a thorough “Russification” (a term offering a wide array of interpretations) prevailed to such an extent that more neutral observers might have noticed the absence of any consideration as to how the realization of the proposed measures might affect the position of the empire in the littoral.

Mikhail Dolbilov has written about the “discursive trap” set by the rhetoric of the state that Russian officials often faced when they visited the Western borderlands. This was also true for officials visiting the Baltic provinces. Born and raised in Russia proper, their ideas of the state they lived in were shaped by the “all-imperial context.” Realizing that quite a lot of the usual elements of the Russian environment—the cultural anchors Russian tourists had already looked for in the littoral during the era of Nicholas I—were not displayed in the same way and were less meaningful in the “borderland context” was a shock. In the Baltic provinces, the

58 At least on one occasion (see the introduction to this chapter) we know that this chauvinist paper was read by His Majesty as well. Diakin, *Natsional’nyi vopros*, 242; Andreeva, *Pribaltiiskie nemtsy*, 104. See also Toomas Karjahärm, *Ida ja Lääne vahel: Eesti–Vene suhted 1850–1917* (Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeedia-kirjastus, 1998), 165–68. Yet it is hard to measure the actual influence of papers like “Okrainy Rossi.” See Weeks, “Official and Popular Nationalism,” 429.
situation was even worse because of the Lutheran and utterly non-Slavic environment. Obviously, especially after the events of 1905, when Latvian and Estonian revolutionaries challenged state authority locally, the only feasible solution seemed to be to finally make the foreign region as Russian as possible. One of the standard demands in this regard was the proposal of administratively merging the three Baltic provinces with the St. Petersburg or Pskov provinces, a demand that actually dates back to Pavel Pestel’s “Russkaiia Pravda.” Such a reform, however, eventually would have only deepened the “discursive trap” in raising the expectations concerning the *russkost’* of the Baltic region. To some extent, this was exactly what happened after the Alexander Nevskii Cathedral was opened on Revel’s Toompea hill, the traditional bastion of the Baltic German elite, in 1900. Just a few years before the turmoil of the first revolution, the *Pravitel’stvennyi Vestnik* proudly declared that this church would finally confirm “the victory of Orthodoxy and the Russian State.”

Apparently, the most prolific exponent of this extreme right-wing Russian diaspora in the Baltic provinces was Ivan Vysotskii, the editor of the Riga-based Russian newspaper *Rizhskii vestnik* (1903–13). If Weeks described official politics in the Baltic provinces “as a combination of administrative centralization and the protection of minorities from an alien and hegemonic foreign culture,” then for people like Vysotskii, protecting minorities meant first and foremost protecting the small number of Russians in the Baltic provinces. He never went so far as Budilovich in terms of his thinking regarding the defense of Estonians and Latvians against the Germans. In a memorandum sent to Provisional Governor-General Aleksandr Meller-Zakomel’skii in 1907, Vysotskii argued that Russians as the first and


Defending the Empire in the Baltic Provinces

The oldest kulturregery in the region were entitled to political representation despite their small share of the population of 5.4 percent in 1897. Moreover, of all inhabitants, only the Russians possessed a kind of supra-national quality as born go-betweens, whereas the other nationalities were not able to free themselves of their national prejudices. Resting on the authority of such figures as Fedor Dostoevskii and Vladimir Solov’ev, Vysotskii claimed that due to the “softness of the Slavonic nature,” Russian nationalism could never be aggressive or anti-human and would always only become active in terms of defending “the interests of the Russian nationality, the Russian religion, and Russian culture” against the aggressions of inovertsy and inorotdtsy. This was written in 1910, when Vysotskii had already left the Oktobrists in order to join the Union of the Russian People.

How Vysotskii imagined this natural Russian conciliator to act in the Baltic provinces if, at the same time, it was the obligation of every Russian to preserve the possessions of the Emperor and take arms against the “annihilators of the spiritual and material values of the Russian people” (meaning virtually all inhabitants of the littoral) remains a secret. In order to bring local administration into conformity with Russia, he proposed the introduction of zemstva in the Baltic provinces with the caveat that at least one third of all representatives in each province should be Russians. Only such a composition could serve the interests of the empire, meaning, of course, the interests of the ruling nationality, in order to lead to the complete slijanie (merger) of the littoral with Russia.

Much like in the case of Budilovich, it was an almost mythical belief in the qualities of the Russians that motivated people like Vysotskii. Pavel Pshenichnikov, the author of a book on the Russians in the Baltic provinces, firmly supported the view that only Russian officials were capable

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62 Trudy Osobogo Soveshchaniia pri Vr. Pribaltiiskom General-Gubernatore, uchrezhdennogo Vysochaishim Ukazom 28 noiabria 1905 g. (Revel': A. Mikvits, 1907); “Zapiska predsedatel’ia Russko-Pribaltiiskogo Soveshchaniia pri vremennom pribaltiiskom general-gubernatore, 1907 g.,” in Imperskaia politika, 144–50, here 145, 147.
64 “Zapiska, predsedatelia,” 149–50.
of merging the region with Russia proper. However, Vysotskii knew how difficult it was to define this category: to be fluent in Russian and a Russian subject was not enough in his eyes to be “really” Russian. And indeed, what was the category of *russkost’* worth if, during the campaigns for election to the State Duma in 1907, some Russians from Iur’ev openly supported German candidates, claiming that the share of Russian deputies in the Duma was sufficient for the preservation of Russian interests? A sharp protest from the Iur’ev Oktobrists, which was fully supported by the correspondent of *Okrainy Rossii* (possibly Vysotskii himself), came to the conclusion that co-nationals who opted for the Germans apparently were not “real Russians.”

Apparently, not even birth was enough for Vysotskii who, besides all obstacles, remained true to his principles when in 1908 he demanded that only “real Russians” (*korennye russkie*) be promoted to service in the administration of the Baltic provinces. “Real Russians,” in his view, were only those who supported the ideals of Alexander III. In order to guarantee peace in the provinces, he suggested fixing this regulation with a tsarist *ukaz.* How the ideals of Alexander III, which were abhorred by old and new local elites alike, would guarantee peace in the littoral was a question he obviously never asked. In 1910, he concluded, after all, that “hard work” was still to be done in the provinces.

Actually, this demand appears in the most radical vision of Russification in the Baltic provinces known to the author thus far. Written by Vysotskii and the Riga chief of police Nikolai Balabin, this document was titled “Measures for the Affirmation and Maintenance of Russian Influence in the *Pribaltiiskii krai*.” Most strikingly, the authors predicted that

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71 “Mery k utverzhdeniiu.”
the “artificially bred (not without support from the government)” Estonian and Latvian cultures are “doomed to die slowly”; these cultures had to be replaced with Russian culture, a process that might be accelerated with state interference. The number of Russian-born officials was to be increased and non-Russian cultural associations were to be strongly controlled by the government. In order to marginalize the non-Russian character of the region, the authors suggested creating two administrative units along ethnographic borders Revel’skaia and Rizhskaia provinces. Thus, according to this plan, the traditional topography based on the traditions of German Ritterschaften (corporations of nobility) should be erased; terms like Eston’skaia or Latyshskaia were, of course, out of the question since the “separatists” were not to be encouraged topographically.

Most important, the authors suggested demographic “Russification,” or in their words, Russian “colonization,” thus recalling Russia’s mission civilisatrice in the East, which was realized by peasant migration to Siberia. This had been suggested already in late 1905 by Budilovich, who dreamt of a broad colonization movement “like in the times of our veche-communities and old principalities,” evoking Russia’s assumed domination of the Baltic region prior to the arrival of Catholic missionaries and colonization.72 Of course, this Russian colonization was to be supported by the state also in terms of large subsidies for cultural efforts aimed at raising the national consciousness of both old and new Russians in the provinces. As I have discussed elsewhere, Russian westward colonization to the Baltic Sea was debated officially in correspondence between Prime Minister Stolypin and the Baltic Provisional Governor-General Aleksandr N. Meller-Zakomel’skii in 1908. It seems to me that the quoted memorandum by Vysotskii and Balabin (found in Stolypin’s papers) might have eventually convinced the Prime Minister that the risks and the costs of such a large-scale program would outweigh the benefits.73

In this document, the authors made their goals clear first and foremost in terms of security: they suggested the settlement of Russian fisher-

72 Budilovich, O poslednykh dvizheniakh, 23.
73 Brüggemann, “Representing Empire.”
men along the Baltic coastline in order to defend the state border. In their view, inorodtsy collectively were to be singled out as potential traitors, and the blurred category of russkost’ again was used as a single marker of loyalty.74 In the context of these radical ideas, it is striking that after 1905, not even people like Vysotskii promoted the idea of making the Estonians and Latvians into Russians anymore. In this regard, the conversion movement of the 1840s and the decade of reforms under Alexander III were nostalgically recalled as wasted opportunities. The authors did not bother with the question of what to do with Estonian and Latvian fishermen; but, at the same time, the governor-general did, at least to some extent, because he had to guarantee peace and order in the provinces entrusted to him. Meller-Zakomel’skii was a nationally minded officer who was, by no means, a defender of the traditional conditions in the Baltic provinces, and he, of course, had no sympathy for the German nobility there. But when Prime Minister Petr A. Stolypin asked him to suggest effective measures to foster Russian statehood (gosudarstvennost’) and culture in the Baltic provinces in 1908, Meller-Zakomel’skii provocatively suggested that if the state really wants to support “Russian principles” in the littoral, the government had to organize Russian colonization on a mass scale; but it could not forget to compensate all those Estonians and Latvians who would be replaced by the newcomers with lands in Siberia and organize their resettlement.75 Quite naturally, a massive project like this was out of the question.

In their project, Vysotskii and Balabin went so far as to demand that Russian peasants from the central provinces be settled along railway lines in order to protect those vital lines of imperial communication from “Latvian or Estonian bands.”76 In this way, they advocated an ethnic preponderance to preserve state integrity that actually did not fit the multicultural landscape of the borderland at all. The authors’ radical vision to rule lands and peoples in opposition to both the demographic majority and the old elites

74 “Mery k urverzhdeniiu,” 339.
75 Meller-Zakomel’skii to Stolypin, October 30, 1908, in Imperskaiia politika, 313–14; see also Diakin, National’nyi vopros, 253.
alike almost logically led the authors to create a warlike scenario in which the government would survive only with the help of extraordinary measures and, if necessary, the military.

A memorandum about the situation of the Russians in the Baltic provinces produced in Meller-Zakomel’sch’s chancellery in Riga offered a devastating picture. Compared with Estonians and Latvians, the littoral’s Russians’ rates of illiteracy (although on par with those in St. Petersburg and Moscow) were high, and their education standards low. The memorandum suggested that any serious attempt to improve the economic situation of local Russians only (not to mention tens of thousands of future colonists) would have to involve at least 50,000 people in need of land. State land was partly rented out and, therefore, not immediately available. The text only implicitly suggested that it would be extremely difficult to communicate this redistribution of land to the masses of landless *inarodtsy*. Concerning the colonization project, however, the author was even more skeptical, since Latvians and Estonians displayed more endurance in their work and were better educated in the rural economy compared to average Russian peasants (not to mention the differences between Baltic sea fishing and Russian inland fishing). Thus, he doubted the competitiveness of Russian peasants from the internal provinces in the local environment without significant funds provided by the government and local authorities.

Finally, the author of the memorandum made clear that strengthening “Russian principles” in the Baltic provinces meant squaring the circle. Whereas he convincingly described the Estonians’ and Latvians’ strong ambitions toward the “self-determination of their tribes,” he argued in the same paragraph that the only way to improve “Russian principles” was to “attract” Estonians and Latvians “to Russian culture and Russian statehood.” But he offered no ideas about how this might ultimately be realized. In Vysotskii’s and Balabin’s mind, the state should establish and support local Russian theaters because “nothing conquers the sympa-

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78 Ibid., 332.
thies of the *inorodtsy* for Russian culture so easily and imperceptibly as the admiration (*obaianie*) for Russian art.”79 At the time, however, Estonians and Latvians had already quite successfully created their own national cultures with the establishment of their own theaters and operas. The *obaianie* for Russian culture was secured via translations into Latvian, just like one Riga-born Russian sarcastically had predicted already in 1901. According to him, Latvians of all social strata loved their translated Dostoevskii and Tolstoi at a time when Russian peasants as a rule had still no clue as to who these writers were.80

**Securing the Loyalty of the Baltic Provinces after the Revolution of 1905**

A former governor of Livland province, Mikhail A. Zinov’ev, who resided in Riga from 1885 to 1895, stated in his first report to Alexander III that Riga was surely one of the “most valuable pearls in His Majesty’s crown.” According to him, however, it was rather “absurd” to turn this pearl into Smolensk or Tula because the empire could only learn from local institutions.81 Two decades later, Meller-Zakomel’skii had learned during his time in Riga from 1906 to 1909 that transforming the Baltic provinces “into Smolensk and Tula” was not only “absurd”: it would potentially lead even to a revival of the civil war that had ravaged parts of the provinces in 1905 and 1906. Eventually, the provisional governor-general demonstrated that *russkost’* as an indicator of loyalty could be quite misleading. Like Zinov’ev, he pragmatically sensed the particular conditions in the Baltic provinces without trying to artificially impose onto the Baltic region criteria that were valid in the all-imperial context.

Promoting *russkost’* in the Baltic provinces as a means to defend the empire eventually did not convince even a staunch monarchist and military

79 “Mery k utverzhdeniu,” 337.
80 Ch. Vetrinskii [Vasilii E. Cheshikhin], *Sredi Latyshei. Ocherki* (Moscow: Izdanie S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1901), 28.
man like Meller-Zakomel’skii. In his position he had to pacify a region disoriented and shattered by months of socially and ethnically motivated violence. Most interestingly, he actually supported Vysotskii’s idea of ethnic curiae for the Russians because they had more historical rights to be represented in the capital than did the Latvians. The general-governor also shared Vysotskii’s view of the Russians as born negotiators, and he suggested to St. Petersburg that the Baltic provinces might be well represented in the State Duma solely by Russian deputies. Possibly to the dismay of Vysotskii, however, he favored the Riga Old Believers as potential representatives in Petersburg, thus choosing a segment of the population that, in many aspects, was better integrated into local society. In the long-term perspective, the advice Minister of the Interior Ivan N. Durnovo gave to the governor of Estland province, Prince Sergei V. Shakhovskoi, in early 1894 to “manage affairs in a routine manner” was the recipe of state officials in the Baltic provinces for years to come.

After the excitement of the revolutionary period, the Russian nationalists in the littoral also reduced their alarmist rhetoric to a minimum. In the literature published on the occasion of the bicentennial of the incorporation of the provinces into the empire, an author like the teacher Pavel Pshenichnikov, whose text on the tragic fate of Russians as “foreigners” in the Baltic provinces was published by the Riga-based “Russian National Club ‘Beseda,’” did not reproduce the apocalyptic vision of the Okrainy Rossi article cited at the beginning of this chapter. In contrast, he was sure that the littoral would become permanently and tightly connected “with great Russia,” even if he made the important reservation that this was possible only with the help of governmental reforms to be executed soon.
Even Vysotskii was sure that the “unification process” was becoming ever more visible in the everyday life of the provinces, and that the “fundamental frame” for the “unification with Russia and the Russian people of the Baltic provinces and their multiethnic inhabitants (raznoplemennoe nasedenie)” already existed.85 By this “frame,” he obviously referred to the third State Duma, which, in his view, had the potential to revitalize the old Russian representative body of zemskii sobor.86

In any case, concerning the antagonism between the interests of empire and nation, Vysotskii was quite aware of in 1910, he was convinced that Russia was still far from “major conflicts” between these “contradictory interests.” Neither the Finnish nor the Polish, the “German-Latvian” or the most serious of all, the Jewish question, in his view posed that kind of danger because Russia would solve all these problems in a “human-progressive, good-hearted direction” without any repressions against “national self-esteem” (natsional’noe samoliubie).87

Vysotskii, therefore, provides a good example of the crystallizing effect the 1905 revolution had on the right-wing milieu of Russian nationalists, especially those who lived in the non-Russian borderlands. After the “Pribaltiitskaia smuta,” any visions about a peaceful “Russification” of the Latvians and Estonians had become irrelevant. These were only consequential for nationalists who advocated a national empire to envision a large-scale Russian colonization of the littoral as the last resort of their expectations (not the least because the Germans, the other tiny demographic minority in the provinces, allegedly did the same). Voting as a form of legitimate representation was accepted also by Vysotskii and others, but in a nationalizing environment, small ethnic groups facing these new conditions had no chance. The demographic majorities in the littoral, the Estonians and Latvians, however, would not voluntarily leave their homeland (and one might wonder if resettlement or rather deportation to Siberia of tens of thousands of local peasants would still fall under the category of respecting “national self-esteem”).

86 Vysotskii, Sushchnost’, 15.
87 Ibid., 16–17.
Finally, in hoping that the state would help realize their dreams of a truly Russian Baltic borderland, nationalists in the empire, like Budilovich, or in the provinces, like Vysotskii, bet on the wrong horse. The continuation of the “coalition of aristocracies” with the Baltic nobilities, which was already much criticized at the time, not only provided no answer to the question of how to deal with the fact that, actually, the center increasingly needed to maintain its ties with the political representatives of the Estonians and Latvians (for example, as city leaders or Duma deputies). This traditional estate-based cooperation all of a sudden had no future because it came to an end, by and large, in August 1914 with the beginning of the Great War against Germany. When in late 1916 a project was presented to the Duma that aimed at the introduction of zemstva in the three provinces (Kurland and southern Livland were occupied by the German army at the time), the government was obviously helpless, even if this project would have meant full administrative “Russification,” without, however, the necessary numbers of Russians living in the littoral. Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei D. Sazonov put it bluntly in his comment: this project would create a “system of national self-administration” in the provinces that was not tolerable because “little tribal groups” in the borderland should not be empowered by imperial law. Of course, the Germans could not maintain their previously dominant position, but without a “carefully thought out system of curiae-elections,” no balance of “all elements of the inhabitants” could be established.88

Thus, to keep the balance between the interests of the empire—to keep the provinces loyal and quiet—and those of the Russian nation—to establish firm Russian control in the provinces—was indeed to square the circle. In this political stalemate, any solution one might think of would meet with the protests of at least one of the parties involved. After August 1914, the demographic majorities whose delegates in the Duma constantly demanded more rights for their loyal war effort felt entitled to raise the price for their consent to reforms. Only when the Provisional Government in

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1917 eventually revoked the alliance of aristocracies and agreed to give local power to the demographic majorities was this stalemate broken. But by this point, the radical ethnic utopia of Vysotskii and Budilovich finally lost its relevance and, as one may argue, gave way to the nationalizing agendas of the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians.