

## **The Fall of Empire and the Emergence of New Elites: Creating a National Academic Elite at the University of Latvia, 1919–1922**

by Per Bolin

The fall of the Russian Empire at the end of World War I and the emergence of a row of new and independent states in Eastern Europe entailed a drastic change in the composition of elite groups. In the Baltic provinces, Baltic Germans and – to some extent – Russians, had constituted the societal elite, predominating in the spheres of politics, culture, administration and economy. When the independent states of Estonia and Latvia were established in 1918, the position of this societal elite was challenged by the aspiring strata of the previously subordinated majority populations of Latvians and Estonians. The introduction of parliamentary democracy meant that the political power of the Baltic Germans, who constituted less than five per cent of the population, was severely curtailed. Their economic power was also reduced by far-reaching land reforms implemented in the early 1920s. In a process of “ethnic reversal”, elite groups from the Latvian majority population took power.

This article will investigate the substitution of elite groups in a special section of the cultural sphere: that of academia.<sup>1</sup> The Baltic Germans had for centuries had a cultural predominance in these provinces, and higher education at the University of Dorpat (Tartu) and the Riga Polytechnical Institute had been conducted in German and Russian. Education in the popular vernaculars, if at all, was only permitted in elementary schooling. With the establishment of independent Latvia and Estonia the matter of creating national universities catering to the majority population, and conducting higher education in the national language, became a political priority.

At the same time, what stands out in the Latvian and Estonian cases, in contrast to other newly emerged states in Eastern Europe, was the remaining presence of the previously hegemonic group, in this case the Baltic Germans. Unlike, for instance, the Hungarian elite in Romanian Transylvania, the Baltic German elite remained to a very large extent in Latvia, defending whatever they could of their elite position.<sup>2</sup>

This clearly clashed with the aspirations of the new Latvian political elite, and their project of a national Latvian university in Riga. According to this agenda, the previously established academic elite – primarily Baltic Germans and Russians – had to be replaced by scholars and scientists stemming from the Latvian majority population. However, there were two major obstacles to these aspirations: first, the educated stratum of ethnic Latvians was

1 A more thorough analysis of universities as national institutions can be found in my monograph *Between National and Academic Agendas. Ethnic Politics and “National Disciplines” at the University of Latvia, 1919–1940*, Huddinge 2012.

2 The Baltic German nobility dominated the provinces of Estonia, Livonia and Courland all through the nineteenth century, viewing themselves in clearly colonial terms. Keeping themselves aloof from the peasants speaking Estonian or Latvian vernaculars, they remained separate in terms of rank, *Stand*, language, culture and ethnicity. See Heide W. Whelan: *Adapting to Modernity. Family, Caste and Capitalism among the Baltic German Nobility*, Köln et.al. 1999, pp. 25-29.

very thin. Very few among this previously subordinated majority population had been able to make distinguished academic careers that would merit them for professorial positions. Second, there were significant restrictions inherent in the academic field. The transnational ethos of professionalized European academia emphasised the primacy of qualification and merit in the selection of academic staff. The organisers of the new university therefore had to manoeuvre between a national agenda promoting the creation of a professoriate stemming from the majority population, and an academic agenda stressing a recruitment process based entirely on merit, irrespective of ethnicity.

Using the material from a collective biography study comprising more than fifty individuals, this article investigates how the organisers and academic leadership at the newly created University of Latvia handled this dilemma: to form a nationally Latvian professoriate while at the same time adhering to the principle of academic merit as the basis for recruitment. While the process of “ethnic reversal” meant that the previous elite groups in the political sphere were swiftly replaced by a new elite stemming from the majority population, this process was much more complicated and complex in the field of academia – in spite of its political importance and great symbolic weight.

There was no Imperial university within the boundaries of the new Latvian state, but in Riga the Baltic German commercial and political elite had founded a local institution of higher education, the *Baltisches Polytechnikum*, in 1862. It catered primarily to the needs of commerce and engineering, but by 1914 it held a very high academic standard primarily in natural science and technical subjects.<sup>3</sup> Until the Russification process in the 1890s, German was the language of instruction and the teaching staff consisted primarily of academics from German states, Austria, and Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> The teaching staff included very few ethnic Latvians, and those who were included had by way of education become fully integrated in the Baltic German elite.

During the War the Riga Polytechnical Institute (RPI) was evacuated to Moscow, but in spring 1919 the main body of the Baltic German professoriate and lecturers, altogether at least sixty in number, returned to Riga. The question is: to what extent could this academic elite gain a foothold at the projected national Latvian university?

### Creating Latvijas Universitāte

The organising committee for the new university was formed in the summer of 1919, and consisted initially of representatives from three groups: prominent academics from the previous Riga Polytechnical Institute (primarily Baltic Germans) delegates from key governmental ministries and finally representatives of some Latvian cultural and professional organisations. At the inaugural meeting in August 1919, six Baltic German academics represented the projected faculties: Wilhelm von Stryk, Edgar Jacobi, Waldemar Fischer,

3 Clara Redlich: Das Rigaer Polytechnikum 1862–1918, in: Gert von Pistohlkors, Toivo U. Raun et.al. (eds.): Die Universitäten Dorpat/Tartu, Rīga und Wilna/Vilnius 1579–1979, Köln et.al. 1987, pp. 241-262.

4 Latvijā 19. gadsimtā. Vēstures apceres [Latvia during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A historical assessment], Rīga 2000, pp. 291 f., 319.

Alvil Buchholz, Paul von Denffer and Alfred von Hedenström. Another Baltic German, Alfred Sommer, participated at the meeting as an expert on medicine. The new university – in contrast to the previous Riga Polytechnical Institute – was to have a Faculty of Medicine. Sommer had in fact attempted to start medical training in Riga already in the spring of 1919.<sup>5</sup>

The ministries represented on the committee were those for Treasury, Trade and Industry, Communication, and Agriculture. The conveners belonged to the Ministry of Education: the minister Kārlis Kasparsons and the former Principal of RPI, the ethnic Latvian Pauls Valdēns. The Latvian professional organisations invited were those connected to the fields of engineering, law, education and agronomy. Sub-committees for each faculty were swiftly put together to plan the further recruitment of academic staff.<sup>6</sup>

Very soon, however, ethnic Latvians replaced Baltic German academics as provisional deans of some of the projected faculties: Jānis Bergs, representative of the Latvian agronomists, replaced the original committee member Buchholz. Bergs had strong ties to the Latvian farmers' cooperatives, and had previously been the director of one of their experimental farms.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Latvian architect Eižens Laube was chosen rather than the Baltic German von Stryk, and Alfred Sommer was replaced by the Latvian Eduards Zariņš as the organiser of the projected medical faculty.<sup>8</sup>

In the Faculty of Law and Economics, the Baltic German lawyer August Loeber was appointed dean instead of the RPI academic Alfred von Hedenström. This seems to have been a matter of proficiency in Latvian, but perhaps also of perceived political loyalty. Loeber had close links with the Latvian provisional government, and was appointed senator already in 1918.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, while seven Baltic Germans represented academia at the inaugural meeting of the organising committee, only four were appointed as provisional deans for the first academic year: August Loeber, Law and Economics, Paul von Denffer, Mechanics, Waldemar Fischer, Chemistry, and Edgar Jacobi, Engineering.<sup>10</sup>

During the autumn of 1919, a fourth group gradually entered the committee: Latvian academics who had managed to return to Riga during the War. They belonged primarily to a younger generation who had not obtained permanent positions at Imperial universities. Two of them played a particularly active role in the committee: the young agronomist Paulis Lejiņš, Social Democrat and national activist, and psychologist Pauls Dāle, soon to be elected chairman.

5 Arnis Vīksna: *Latvijas Universitātes Medicīnas fakultāte 1919–1950* [The Medical Faculty of the University of Latvia, 1919–1950], Rīga 2011, pp. 21–23.

6 *Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs (LVVA), Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1. Organisation Committee Minutes, 1919/08/08; 1919/08/12.*

7 *Latvijas Universitāte 1919–1929* [The University of Latvia, 1919–1929], Rīga 1929, pp. 277–279.

8 Zariņš was actually a pharmacologist, and was replaced as dean a year later by the newly-arrived Roberts Krimbergs. *Latvijas Universitāte divdesmit gados 1919–1939* [The University of Latvia during twenty years, 1919–1939], I, Rīga 1939, p. 589.

9 LVVA, *Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/13/985, Staff records.* According to the official history published in 1929, Loeber lectured in Latvian from the very beginning. *Latvijas Universitāte* (see note 7), p. 558.

10 LVVA, *Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1919/09/02; 1919/08/12; 1919/08/19; 1919/08/28.* Dean Laube actually supported the appointment of von Stryk to a position in architecture, but the latter's inability to lecture in Latvian was held against him. *Ibid*, 1919/09/26; 1919/10/03.

A very important figure during the initial formative moment, Pauls Valdēns was an internationally acclaimed professor of chemistry, Principal of the Riga Polytechnical Institute during Tsarist times, and at the same time a representative of the Latvian Ministry of Education. Valdēns was an almost unique case. Coming from a Latvian family but through education becoming fully integrated in the Baltic German academic elite, he served as a crucial link during the formative moment in the summer of 1919. Indeed, it could be argued that Valdēns manoeuvred skilfully in order to ensure that the established Baltic German professoriate from the RPI should be given prominent positions at the new university, thus remaining a part of the new academic elite. At the same time, Valdēns was also cast in the role of a national Latvian figurehead, the projected Principal of the new national university.

Shortly after his election as committee chairman, however, Valdēns went to Germany for research purposes, and, to the obvious disappointment of his committee colleagues, did not reappear as promised. Naturally eager not to lose one of the prime figureheads of the new national university, the committee sent a number of missives exhorting Valdēns to return and reassume his position in Riga. He several times promised to return, but for various reasons the homeward journey was always postponed. Finally, he informed the committee that he had been persuaded to accept a permanent chair at the University of Rostock, Germany.<sup>11</sup>

Within the organising committee, Valdēns's prevarications gave rise to some dissension. The prominent economist Kārlis Balodis, himself with strong ties to German academia, maintained that every effort should be made to secure Valdēns's return. Balodis had previously been professor at Berlin University, and had quite unexpectedly joined the organising committee in September 1919. He was the only internationally acclaimed Latvian social scientist, and also one of the very few Latvian academics who had made a career in Germany. Other committee members, however, described him as 'uncommitted' and argued that people with more heart and enthusiasm were needed to develop the new Latvian university. Valdēns was formally removed as chairman of the organising committee in November 1919 and replaced by the young psychologist Pauls Dāle.<sup>12</sup>

Valdēns's 'defection' was certainly a major setback for the organising committee, but at the same time it opened a door for a more thorough Latvianization of the academic elite. Without Valdēns as a forceful mediator the position of the leading Baltic German academics at the new university became considerably more vulnerable.

While the main part of the Baltic German professoriate had returned to Riga already in spring 1919, this was not the case with the established Latvian academics holding posts at Russian universities. Of prime importance for the organisation committee in 1919 was therefore to bring 'home' as many as possible of these prominent Latvian academics, the core of a future Latvian academic elite. No efforts were to be spared. All prominent Latvian academics at Russian universities received telegrams telling them that they had been elected professors at the new national university in Riga, exhorting them to return to their 'country of birth' and take part in the building of the national university.<sup>13</sup>

11 Ibid, 1919/09/23; 1919/11/12.

12 Ibid, 1919/11/12; 1919/11/26. Kārlis Balodis was, however, marginalised in university politics after refusing to give up his German citizenship.

13 Ibid, 1919/09/02; Pauls Dāle: Vēsturisks pārskats par Latvijas Augstskolas nodibināšanu un viņas darbību pirmā (1919/20.) mācības gadā, Rīga 1921 [A historical overview of the creation of

Due to the persistent turmoil in Russia, however, this was not an easy matter. Pauls Dāle, in his very important dual role as the new chairman of the organisation committee and at the same time director of the department of higher education at the Ministry of Education, moved to get financial assistance from the government for these selected Latvian professors to travel through Russia.<sup>14</sup> The Foreign Ministry was also instructed to provide papers and material assistance for those Latvian academics who desired to leave Russia.<sup>15</sup>

Most of these acclaimed academics were only able to undertake the journey to Riga after the peace treaty with the Soviet Union in the summer of 1920. Especially those who had worked at universities in southern Russia endured many hardships on the way. Contagious diseases, lack of food and water, and great difficulties in procuring the necessary travel permits made the journey very hazardous. Travelling from Kazan on a train with many passengers infected with typhus, linguist Juris Plāķis and his young family had to wait for several weeks lacking sufficient food and shelter before getting all the necessary permits. Finally, Plāķis and his colleague Jānis Endzelīns were held hostage for a time at the border before being exchanged for some Bolsheviks imprisoned in Latvia.<sup>16</sup>

Pēteris Šmits, a professor of Chinese in Vladivostok, took by far the longest route. He had to travel around the world by sea in order to take up his post in Riga in 1920 – unfortunately losing much of his Asian folklore collection in the process.<sup>17</sup> More tragically, some of the targeted academics did not survive the journey. One very notable loss for the projected humanities faculty was that of philosopher Jēkabs Osis. A professor at Dorpat University, where he had previously provoked the Baltic German academics by delivering some lectures in Russian, Osis had been evacuated to Voronež, where he died in a typhoid epidemic.<sup>18</sup> A forceful character and experienced professor of philosophy, he would certainly have been a great asset to the faculty.

By 1920, several of these prominent Latvian academics had joined the organising com-

Latvia's Augstskola and its work during its first academic year, 1919–1920], p. 22. The situation seems to have been similar in Estonia, where some outstanding Estonian scholars at Russian universities were repatriated in the early 1920s. See Helen Rothmets: The Repatriation of Estonians from Soviet Russia in 1920–1923: A Test of Estonian Citizenship and Immigration Policy, in: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 42 (2011), no. 2, pp. 169-187, here p. 180.

- 14 LVVA, Izglītības ministrijas fonds, 1632/2/608. Saraksti par mācību spēku pieņemšanu augstskolā, par vēstures-filoloģijas fakultātes pārdēvēšanu. Letter from Pauls Dāle, IM section for higher education, to the Minister of Education, 1919/12/13, asking for 100,000 Roubles to enable three Latvian professors to return to Latvia.
- 15 Ibid, 1632/2/633. Saraksti ar Latvijas Augstskolu par mācības spēku pieņemšanu darbu. Letter from the organisation committee to Latvia's chargé d'affaires, Moscow, 1920/12/08.
- 16 Sarma Kļaviņa: LU profesora Jura Plāķa dzīves un ciešanu ceļi (1869–1942) [The life and road to captivity of LU professor Juris Plāķis], in: *Laikmets un personība. Rakstu krājums* 12 (2010), pp. 37-39. In this article, Kļaviņa edits and publishes some autobiographical fragments by Plāķis, probably written in the 1930s.
- 17 Latvijas Universitāte (see note 7), pp. 148-195. During the previous twenty years Šmits had been in Riga only for some summer vacations but he was an active corresponding member of the Riga Latvian Society's academic committee, especially on orthographic matters. Jānis Stradiņš: *Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmija: izcelsme, vēsture, pārvērtības* [Latvia's Academy of Science: creation, history, transformation], Rīga 1998, pp. 71-82.
- 18 Ludvigs Bērziņš: *Mūža rīts un darba diena. Atmiņu grāmata* [Morning and workday of life], Rīga 1935, pp. 104 f.

mittee: Jānis Endzelīns, dean of the humanist faculty, Juris Plāķis, a fellow linguist and nationalist activist, art historian Ernsts Felsbergs, soon to be elected Principal, Pēteris Šmits, now devoting himself the Latvian folklore issues, and Roberts Krimbergs, medicine. While they undoubtedly increased the weight of Latvian academia within the committee, the great majority of them belonged to the humanities – primarily linguistics. This meant that they did not constitute a counter-elite to the already established Baltic German professoriate in the natural sciences and the technical faculties. They also – especially Endzelīns – were generally prone to give weight to academic excellence in matters of recruitment. This became a fiercely contested area within the committee for the next few years.

### **The organisation committee: between national and academic agendas**

In the autumn of 1920, the organising committee consisted of several different groups: the deans of the technical faculties and natural sciences; Baltic German professors; deans from the humanities, social science, medicine, agronomy and theology (all Latvians); representatives from Latvian professional and cultural associations; and representatives from selected ministries. The crucial point was the recruitment of additional teaching staff, making the new university fully operational.

The basic dilemma concerned the criteria for these academic appointments: should academic merit have priority, should special consideration be paid to proficiency in the Latvian language, or should ethnic Latvians be preferred over more meritorious scholars and scientists belonging to the ethnic minorities? Here, the organisation committee became clearly split in different factions, its members adopting one of four positions on the recruitment question. According to one position, academic merit should be the primary selection criterion: a position closely associated with the established norms of European academia. The prominent Baltic German academics often took this position, together with some of the most renowned Latvian scholars – especially linguist Jānis Endzelīns.

A second position emphasised the pragmatic need of qualified lecturers to cover the teaching assignments: again, many of the Baltic German academics argued along these lines, but the main proponents in the committee were Latvian colleagues in medicine, law, and economics, faculties with a rapidly growing number of students but, at the same time, a persistent scarcity of qualified lecturers who could teach in Latvian.

A third position on recruitment emphasised the language criterion: academic appointments should be reserved for those who could lecture in Latvian. The main supporters of this position were the less established Latvian academics in the organisation committee, but perhaps even more so the representatives of the Latvian ministries and professional and cultural societies. For them, the use of Latvian as an academic language seems to have been a paramount issue.

The fourth position, favouring ethnic Latvians over more qualified non-Latvians, was – interestingly enough – seldom advocated openly, even if it seems certain that at least some of the committee's members preferred this basis of selection. However, such a stance would in fact have been discriminatory, and in clear contradiction with the academic agenda. Those favouring an ethnic selection of Latvian candidates most often argued instead for a strict adherence to the language criterion.

The committee soon split in two competing factions: the “national wing” giving preference to Latvian or Latvian-speaking candidates, and an “academic wing”, advocating recruitments based entirely on scientific and scholarly merit. The regulations on appointments were rather harsh: a suggested candidate from the faculties had to be supported by a two-thirds majority in the organising committee. This meant in effect that the “national wing” of the committee, the Latvian non-academic members together with a nationally minded fraction among the Latvian deans, were in a good position to block the appointment of non-Latvian academics.

The main academics within the “national wing” were psychologist Pauls Dāle, the members from the Ministry of Education and the agronomist and first vice-principal Paulis Lejiņš. Pauls Dāle was very young, only 30 years old, when he was given the key position as chairman of the organisation committee. The virtual absence of academically trained Latvians in many disciplines certainly made it easier for a younger generation to reach high positions at a relatively young age. Educated at the University of Moscow, he returned to Latvia during the war and became actively involved in the first initiatives towards organising higher education in the Latvian language. By way of the Ministry of Education, Dāle soon assumed a key role in the organisation of the university.<sup>19</sup>

Like Dāle, Paulis Lejiņš belonged to a younger generation of academics, being appointed *docents* in 1919 at the age of 36.<sup>20</sup> He represented the Faculty of Agronomy, one of the most Latvian faculties in terms of teaching staff, students, and language of instruction.<sup>21</sup> In the same way as the faculty’s dean Jānis Bergs, before the War Lejiņš had been employed by the Latvian farmers’ cooperative movement, in his case as an educator and itinerant lecturer.<sup>22</sup> Only very few established Baltic German agronomists were invited to join the Faculty of Agronomy: as a part of a deliberate policy, younger Latvians were selected instead.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most forceful committee members advocating the ‘Latvianization’ of the new university, Paulis Lejiņš seems to have pursued these principles relentlessly during the first formative years. When academics belonging to one of the ethnic minorities were put forward by the faculties, Lejiņš frequently questioned their selection and insisted that ‘native’ candidates be given preference. Latvians who had not the requisite academic qualifications, he argued, should be sent abroad in order to gain the necessary expertise.<sup>24</sup> Such a long-term

19 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/13/342, Staff records.

20 Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), I, p. 234.

21 Already in the spring of 1920, 80% of the teaching in agronomy was done in Latvian. Together with Philology and Philosophy, this made them the most ‘Latvian’ of the faculties. In 1924/25, 97% of the students in agronomy were ethnic Latvians, compared to 71% in mechanics and 84% at the university as a whole. Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), I, pp. 29, 66-68.

22 Lejiņš was an agronomist specialised in cattle breeding. He was a former student of agronomy at the Rīga Polytechnical Institute. See Paulis Lejiņš dzīvē un darbā [Paulis Lejiņš in life and work], Rīga 1983.

23 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1919/09/16.

24 Lejiņš advocated the sending abroad of Latvian doctors rather than appointing ethnic German academics, see also LVVA, Izglītības ministrijas fonds, 1632/2/632. Saraksti ar Latvijas Augstskolu par mācības spēku ievēlēšanu. Letter from P. Lejiņš to Dāle, 1920/07/01, where he in a similar manner suggested that the young Latvian philologist Arnolds Spekke should be sent abroad to improve his research record rather than the committee appointing the non-Latvian professor Schischmarewa.

strategy, however, certainly did not satisfy deans who urgently needed qualified academic staff to manage the teaching assignments.

After one of the heated discussions on recruitment, Lejiņš wrote to Dāle complaining that one of the deans had called him ‘German-hater’ and ‘chauvinist’. Feeling the need to explain his position, Lejiņš declared that he was in no way hostile to Latvian citizens belonging to other ‘nationalities’ if they had supported the Latvian government during the recent War of Liberation, or at least had remained neutral and were now loyal “in thought and deed”. However, he nevertheless felt it reasonable that all government institutions, including the newly started university, should contain a representative proportion of ethnic Latvians. That meant that at least seventy-five per cent of the academic staff should belong to the majority nation. Moreover, the university must, he argued, be infused with a Latvian spirit.<sup>25</sup>

This shows that Lejiņš’s ‘national’ stance went further than merely promoting the use of Latvian as the mandatory academic language. His agenda was clearly of a more ethnic nature, with its insistence that the great majority of staff be ethnic Latvians. However, it is interesting that in the organisation committee’s discussions, Lejiņš and other members of the ‘national’ wing most often framed their arguments in terms of language proficiency, not ethnicity. Openly advocating an ethnic principle in recruitment was clearly controversial because that would be incompatible with established academic norms and practices. To some extent, therefore, the requirement that recruited academics should be proficient in the Latvian language seems to have served as a cloak for what was really a selection based on ethnicity.

Among the committee members advocating the primacy of academic merit, Jānis Endzelīns stands out as an especially interesting figure. As the most prominent Latvian linguist he was absolutely central in the standardization and expansion of the Latvian language, turning it into a language for administrative and educational purposes. At the same time, he strongly adhered to the transnational academic agenda. While his national allegiance could not be questioned, his insistence on appointments based primarily on scientific and scholarly merit certainly caused considerable friction with the organisation committee’s ‘national’ wing. In the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy, linguist Jānis Endzelīns held the key position of dean during the formative years.<sup>26</sup> This led him to advocate the appointment of several German and Baltic German scholars, a very controversial issue within the committee. Endzelīns was successful in some cases, like archaeology, where no viable Latvian candidates could be found.<sup>27</sup> Even if this faculty, like agronomy, was predominantly Latvian in terms of academic staff and teaching language, it was during the first formative years

25 Ibid, Saraksti ar Latvijas Augstskolu par mācības spēku ievēlēšanu. Letter from P. Lejiņš to the Ministry of Education, 1920/07/01; 1920/12/08; P. Lejiņš: “Personīgā lietā” [A personal matter], n.d.

26 Endzelīns was dean of faculty until 1 July 1923, when he was replaced by Pēteris Šmits. See *Latvijas Universitātes piecgadu darbības pārskats 1919–1924* [A five-year overview of the work of the University of Latvia, 1919–1924], Riga 1925, p. 290.

27 The first lecturer in archaeology was the Baltic German nobleman and librarian Karl von Lōvis of Menar, a self-taught archaeologist who could only lecture in German. LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/2. Organisation Committee Minutes, 1921/09/21. However, he was only given yearly assignments, not full tenure.



much more open to the recruitment of prominent non-Latvian academics in fields where there were no viable 'native' candidates.

Endzelīns was not entirely alone in his defence of academic standards. In fact, the most internationally renowned Latvian academics – admittedly a very small group – also supported the notion that scholarly and scientific merit should be given priority when forming the academic staff at the new university. But for most of the Latvians involved in shaping the University of Latvia, the prospect of a continued Baltic German cultural predominance was a haunting one, and clearly at odds with the national Latvian agenda with its insistence on breaking the societal and cultural hegemony of the Baltic Germans.

### **Reproducing the Baltic German elite – or creating a new national Latvian elite?**

Recruitment policy and appointments became an area of conflict not only within the organising committee, but also between the committee and the faculties. The faculties consisted entirely of academics, and their suggestions for new appointments were primarily directed by academic concerns and needs. These suggestions often clashed with the national priorities of the committee majority. The core of these conflicts seems to have been the question whether the established Baltic German academic elite should be allowed to reproduce itself at the new university, or whether it should be replaced with a new, ethnic Latvian elite.

To some extent, this set of problems is connected to the existing links with the former Riga Polytechnical Institute. As we have seen, the new university was clearly divided – some faculties had very strong links with the former RPI. Especially in the natural science and technology, a substantial Baltic German RPI professoriate had managed to transfer to the new Latvian university. In the organising committee, their main spokesperson was Paul von Denffer, dean of Faculty of Mechanical Engineering. He advocated a more open recruitment policy, allowing Baltic Germans or non-Latvian citizens to be elected primarily on the basis of their scientific merits. He also insisted that the faculties were more qualified to judge in these matters than the organising committee.<sup>28</sup> While the majority in the committee paid lip-service to the importance of academic merit, it is clear that they would not delegate the crucial matter of recruitment to the respective faculties. All appointments had to be confirmed by the committee.

While the position of the RPI professoriate who had been appointed in 1919 remained relatively solid, the conflicts instead evolved around the selection of junior scientists. Against the wishes of the technical faculties, the organising committee remained adamant that only Latvian-*speaking* candidates could be accepted. In effect, this meant that the lower levels of the academic structure in these faculties gradually became more Latvianized.

The situation in the Faculty of Law and Economics to some extent resembled the one in the technical faculties. There were strong personal ties with the previous Riga Polytechnical Institute, since most of its academics had taught there before the War. There was also originally a predominance of Baltic Germans. In the summer of 1920, the ethnic composition of its teaching staff was categorised as follows: nine Germans, four Latvians, one Jew and

28 Ibid, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1919/09/19.

one Englishman.<sup>29</sup> The group of experienced Baltic German academics included, among others, Benedikt Frese, professor in Roman law, with an impressive academic record from Russian universities, Friedrich Hänsell, a statistician and economic historian, and Alfred von Hedenström, who lectured mainly on the geography of commerce and on modern history. They all contributed considerable academic expertise, but especially Frese and Hänsell seem to have had difficulties lecturing in Latvian.<sup>30</sup>

Von Hedenström was one of the original members of the organising committee, but the office of dean was immediately given to Latvian colleagues instead of to him. The dean in charge from spring 1920, Ernests Birkhāns, was an ethnic Latvian who also had strong ties with the Polytechnical Institute. A former student at RPI, he had received a government scholarship to study trade and commerce at the University of Leipzig and other institutions in Western Europe. He lectured at the Polytechnical Institute from 1900, was exiled to Moscow and the Caucasus during the War and joined the newly formed university in Riga in 1920.<sup>31</sup>

Together with economist Kārlis Balodis, Birkhāns belonged to a middle generation of well-qualified academics, trained at both German and Imperial Russian institutions, but he was also an old colleague of several of the Baltic German academics in the faculty. While certainly not averse to the general national agenda of the Latvian university, both Birkhāns and Balodis seem to have given priority to the faculty's pragmatic need to recruit competent academics in law and commerce. Especially in law, Birkhāns and Balodis several times suggested the election of ethnic Russian academics in order to manage the teaching assignments. The number of students enrolled at the faculty rose swiftly, from 174 in the autumn of 1919 to 556 the following year.<sup>32</sup>

The urgent need for teaching staff led to confrontations with the organisation committee. Birkhāns repeatedly argued for the need to recruit foreign specialists, especially in law where there was a great lack of qualified lecturers, and for the necessity to give academic competence a clear priority.<sup>33</sup> The organisation committee, however, was not keen to recruit the suggested Russian specialists. Especially Paulis Lejiņš repeatedly questioned the initiatives to persuade Russian academics to come to Riga. In the end, very few such recruitments actually materialised during the initial years, primarily because the organisation committee, even when grudgingly convinced of the necessity, was only prepared to offer Russian academics two-year contracts. Such very limited tenure appears to have been less alluring for Russian specialists, since their future employability by Soviet Russian universities after the period in question would no doubt be rather uncertain.<sup>34</sup>

The committee majority was also less keen to accept academics from the ethnic minorities. The faculty's election of jurist Pauls Mincs as professor caused some controversy.

29 Ibid, 7427/6/37a. Pārskats par Latvijas augstskolas, vēlāk Universitātes, nodibinašana un viņas darbību. Overview of the ethnic composition of the teaching staff in the faculties, 1920/06/26.

30 Ibid, 7427/13/504; 7427/13/624; 7427/13/633. Staff records.

31 Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), II, p. 523.

32 Ibid, I, pp. 735 f.

33 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1920/06/02; 1920/09/24.

34 Ibid, 1920/06/02.

Mincs had studied Law at Dorpat/Jur'ev and Moscow, and had been teaching at the new university in Riga since 1919.<sup>35</sup> Although a Latvian citizen, Mincs was not a Latvian in ethnic terms: he belonged to the Jewish community, and was also politically active in one of the Jewish political parties.<sup>36</sup> This prompted some discussion within the organisation committee. Lejiņš, and Dāle held that Mincs, although described as a 'very capable person', was far too occupied with politics to simultaneously hold a chair at the university.

However, such qualms were not voiced regarding Latvians. Several prominent academics at the university were active in the provisional parliament. Jānis Čakste, one of the leading politicians in the Latvian struggle for independence and the Republic's first president, had actually been elected professor in the Faculty of Law and Economics. Moreover, Kārlis Puriņš, dean of the same faculty between October 1919 and March 1920, served as Minister of Finance for a short period in 1920.<sup>37</sup> There were many ties and interconnections between the Latvian academics and the government ministries.

Regarding Pauls Mincs, Dean Ernests Birkhāns warmly recommended his election. The decision was postponed, allowing for an investigation of Mincs's political affiliations. Finding the result satisfactory, the committee later decided to appoint Mincs, on the condition that his lectures were to be held in Latvian. Even so, it should be noted that four members voted against the appointment.<sup>38</sup> Pauls Mincs, together with Mečislavs Centneršvērs in Chemistry and Naum Lebedinski in Zoology, was actually one of the very few Jewish professors appointed at the University of Latvia during the entire First Republic.<sup>39</sup>

In the Faculty of Law and Economics, it seems that the attitude towards the appointment of Baltic German academics was comparatively open. In 1921, for instance, Dean Birkhāns strenuously tried to convince the organising committee to accept the faculty's appointment of Friedrich Treu, son of a Baltic German RPI professor, as *docents*. Perhaps not surprisingly, the "national wing" of the organising committee blocked this appointment, proposing instead that an ethnic Latvian candidate be appointed.<sup>40</sup>

Eventually, the persistent lack of ethnic Latvian academics qualified in Law convinced the committee that it was necessary to change policy and appoint some trained specialists

35 Ibid, 7427/13/1162. Staff records.

36 Political parties based on ethnicity emerged in Latvia after independence, primarily targeting Baltic Germans, Jews and Russians. Mincs belonged to the National Democratic Party, which consisted primarily of educated middle-class Jews. Ezra Mendelsohn: *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars*, Bloomington 1987, p. 248.

37 *Latvijas Universitāte* (see note 8), I, p. 749; II, p. 534.

38 LVVA, *Latvijas Universitātes fonds*, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1921/02/16; 1921/02/23. It should perhaps also be noted that the organisation committee had, without discussion, one month previously voted solidly against the appointment of the Jewish jurist Max Lazarson. Ibid, 1921/01/19. Lazarson later became a leader of a leftist Zionist party in the parliament. See Michael Garleff: *Die baltischen Staaten und die Juden 1918–1940*, in: *Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums* 52 (2005), pp. 95–106, here p. 103.

39 Centneršvērs belonged to the former RPI staff that was taken over in 1919. The appointment of Lebedinski appears to have been smooth: 24 'ayes', 2 against and 2 abstaining. LVVA, *Latvijas Universitātes fonds*, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1921/10/12. However, the absence of openly anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish comments in the minutes makes it difficult to prove that Jewish academics were systematically discriminated against.

40 Ibid, 1921/03/16; 1921/03/22.

belonging to other nationalities – but only for limited time periods, not with full tenure. This ensured that during the initial years, the majority of professors in this discipline were non-Latvians.<sup>41</sup> This group included the ethnic Russian Vladimir Bukovski, appointed in September 1921, and the ethnic Pole Vjačeslav Gribovski, first appointed in October 1920. Bukovski was an experienced judge and had served in courts in Jelgava and Riga for almost twenty years before his appointment. He had also been a member in the Latvian commission for the codification of a new civil law. Gribovski, on the other hand, was a very experienced academic, having previously been professor at various Russian universities for eleven years.<sup>42</sup> The Latvians in the Law Department during these initial years belonged to a younger and less influential generation: Kārlis Dišlers and Pēteris Lejiņš were in their early forties when appointed *docenti* in 1920.<sup>43</sup>

Summing up, it seems safe to say that the faculties with strong links and personal ties with the previous RPI had repeated clashes with the organising committee in recruitment matters. While the early appointed professoriate managed to retain their academic positions, their power over recruitment and the forming of a younger generation of scientists was very soon curtailed by the committee.

In the technical and science faculties, academic leadership gradually passed from the Baltic German professors from the previous Polytechnical Institute to their younger Latvian colleagues. In Engineering, the first dean, Edgar Jacoby, was replaced by Edmunds Ziemeļis in 1922, while in Chemistry, Waldemar Fischer gave way to Latvian pharmacologist Eduards Zariņš.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the following year the Mechanics faculty's forceful dean, Paul von Denffer, resigned and was replaced by his younger Latvian colleague, Emīls Āboliņš.<sup>45</sup>

By 1923 all Baltic German deans had been replaced by ethnic Latvians.<sup>46</sup> In the Faculty of Law and Economics, Ernests Birkhāns was replaced by younger Latvian colleagues.<sup>47</sup> The Baltic German professors from the previous RPI were allowed to remain at the university until retirement, but after 1923 they played a very minor role in the academic leadership. This also meant that they were much less able to secure career paths for promising students from the Baltic German community.

41 The only ethnic Latvian professor in Law during the formative years was in fact the state president Jānis Čakste, but his many political duties meant that he only taught courses in international law during the academic year 1920/21. See Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), I, pp. 747-749; II, pp. 524-535; Jānis Stradiņš: Jānis Čakste un demokrātijas ideju iedibināšana Latvijā [Jānis Čakste and the establishing of the democratic idea in Latvia], in: Jānis Čakste (ed.): Taisnība vienmēr uzvarēs. Atziņas, runas, dokumenti, raksti, vēstules, Rīga 1999, pp. 5-11, here p. 9.

42 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/13/570; 7427/13/283. Staff records.

43 Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), II, pp. 526, 531. This group also included the judge Aleksandrs Būmanis, appointed as part-time *docents* in October 1921. LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/13/287. Staff records.

44 Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), I, pp. 339, 389.

45 Ibid, p. 553.

46 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, University Council Minutes, 1923/04/25; 1923/05/02.

47 In 1921, economist Jānis Kārklīņš, was elected dean. Until 1938, he and Kārlis Dišlers in Law took turns as deans. Both of them belonged to a younger generation. Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), I, pp. 736-740.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, control over career possibilities for younger academics is one of the main ways in which prestigious professors exercise power.<sup>48</sup> This power was now wielded by ethnic Latvian academics. A younger generation of Latvian scientists and scholars was fostered in all faculties during the 1920s and 1930s, gradually replacing the Baltic German elite. The preference for young male Latvian-speakers when filling junior academic positions, like assistants and sub-assistants, ensured that in time the university staff would become increasingly nationalised.

### **The medical faculty: an internal Latvian controversy**

The medical faculty was at one point even more clearly at loggerheads with the organising committee, but for somewhat different reasons compared to the previous cases. There were no previous bonds with the Polytechnical Institute, and the initial group of lecturers were Latvians. However, there was initially only one reasonably qualified academic among them, a pharmacologist, and most of the lectures were held by ordinary medical doctors. The main dilemma therefore was that the faculty struggled with a very serious lack of properly qualified academic staff, an unwillingness among the organising committee to appoint Baltic Germans, and at the same time a very substantial enrolment of students.

In the autumn of 1919, more than three hundred students enrolled in the medical faculty, making it the second largest faculty after Law and Economics.<sup>49</sup> Professor Eduards Zariņš, a pharmacologist who was in charge of developing this faculty, repeatedly complained that it was impossible to run it without adequately trained staff.<sup>50</sup> Apparently, at that point Zariņš had only four doctors at his disposal as lecturers.<sup>51</sup> Some Latvian academics at Russian universities had been summoned to Riga but those who favoured this option had great difficulties in leaving the Soviet Union.

As an emergency measure, the organisation committee accepted the election of the Swedish anatomist and physical anthropologist Gaston Backman, in spite of his salary demands and the fact that he could only lecture in German.<sup>52</sup> However, the organisation committee majority was far less ready to appoint Baltic German specialists. In April 1920, Dean Zariņš declared to the committee that there was a strong need for at least one qualified professor of surgery, and nominated the Baltic German Otto Hohlbeck. Committee member

48 Pierre Bourdieu: *Homo academicus*, Stanford 1988, esp. chapter 4.

49 According to Vīksna, 334 students had registered for studies in medicine in early October 1919. However, the resumption of warfare in Latvia during the autumn meant that teaching in the medical faculty was much reduced until February 1920. Vīksna: *Medicīnas fakultāte* (see note 5), p. 31. According to enrolment statistics, eighty-five students were registered in the medical faculty in December 1919. LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/54, *Gadu statistikās ziņas par studentu un mācībās spēku sastāvu*.

50 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, *Organisation Committee Minutes*, 1919/09/12; 1919/09/23; 1919/11/19.

51 *Ibid*, 7427/6/47, *Medicīnas fakultātes darbības pārskats*, 1919. g – 1938. g. All except Zariņš were members of the Society of Latvian Physicians. See Vīksna, *Medicīnas fakultāte* (see note 5), p. 26.

52 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, *Organisation Committee Minutes*, 1919/09/30; 1919/12/19; 1920/01/07. 7427/13/114, *Staff records*.

Paulis Lejiņš was critical, asserting that this was contrary to the previous decision to give priority to Latvian as the language of instruction. Pauls Dāle and bacteriologist Augusts Kirchenšteins from the Faculty of Agronomy argued that it was far more constructive to send Latvian doctors abroad to get the necessary specialist training, Dāle adding that this was also Ministry policy.<sup>53</sup>

When Hohlbeck's appointment was turned down in a formal election a few months later, Dean Zariņš reacted with great disappointment and announced his resignation. The split vote in the committee indicates that there were strong differences of opinion. One of the other deans expressed his surprise about the organisation committee's lack of confidence in the medical faculty's judgement, and their insensitivity to the desperate staffing conditions in that faculty.<sup>54</sup> When shortly afterwards a professorship in surgery was announced for open application, the committee by-passed several well-merited foreign academics and instead appointed the Latvian surgeon Jēkabs Alksnis at the lower academic level of *docents*.<sup>55</sup>

The arrival of the long-awaited professor Roberts Krimbergs from Kharkov in September 1920 was naturally a great relief, but understaffing remained a chronic problem. A new batch of students had enrolled, 241 in the medical faculty alone.<sup>56</sup> Apart from Krimbergs, practically all lecturing during the first two years was delivered by only three professors: the Latvians Paukulis in pathology and Zariņš in pharmacology, and the Swedish anatomist Gaston Backman in most other subjects.<sup>57</sup>

Krimbergs, the new dean, soon complained bitterly about the persistent lack of teaching staff in the medical faculty, which, he maintained, made it impossible to organise tuition at a reasonably scientific level.<sup>58</sup> Efforts by the organising committee to find more staff met with very limited success. One of the eagerly expected Latvian medical professors, Kundziņš, could not be persuaded to leave Tartu since the Estonian government refused to let him bring his voluminous scientific collection of anatomical samples.<sup>59</sup> Of three professors recruited later, one died before arrival, and another decided after a brief and apparently discouraging visit to Riga to remain in his native Poland.<sup>60</sup>

53 Ibid, 1920/04/14.

54 Ibid, 1920/06/30.

55 Vīksna, Medicīnas fakultāte (see note 5), p. 34. Alksnis was an experienced surgeon who had run a private clinic in Liepāja before the war. He had very good connections with Latvian political circles, having served as a medical officer and war clinic surgeon during the War of Liberation. He immediately became a member of the organising committee. Latvijas Universitāte (see note 8), II, pp. 401 f.

56 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/54, Gadu statistikās ziņas par studentu un mācībās spēku sastāvu [Yearly statistics on the composition of students and teaching staff].

57 Ibid, 7427/6/37a. Pārskats par Latvijas augstskolas, vēlāk Universitātes, nodibinašana un viņas darbību. Overview of the teaching staff in the faculties, 1919/20; Latvijas Universitātes piecgadu darbības pārskats (see note 26), p. 178.

58 Ibid, Izglītības ministrijas fonds, 1632/2/633. Saraksti ar Latvijas Augstskolu par mācības spēku pieņemšanu darbu. Letter from Krimbergs to the Ministry of Education, complaining that the medical faculty under the present circumstances could not meet scientific standards.

59 Ibid, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1919/09/23; 1919/11/19; 1920/02/04.

60 Ibid, 1920/09/08. The organising committee accepted that the medical faculty could recruit Polish staff on one-year contracts, but these efforts seem to have been fruitless.

The third recruit, the eminent Baltic German professor Karl Dehio, caused serious friction between the medical faculty, the organising committee, and the government. While the organising committee was initially in favour of Dehio's appointment, the Latvian government refused to condone it, making no secret of the fact that the reasons were entirely political.<sup>61</sup> Dehio had served as Principal at the briefly existing German university at Dorpat in 1918/1919, and was therefore seen as too close to supposedly disloyal Baltic German political circles.<sup>62</sup>

Renewed efforts from the medical faculty to have Dehio appointed failed. While some of the committee members, among them Jānis Endzelīns, were quite prepared to rely on the medical faculty's judgement, it emerged that many of the other members now clearly opposed Dehio's appointment. One of the opponents was the celebrated playwright Jānis Rainis, who for the first time exercised his right to attend the committee in his capacity as an elected Honorary Fellow. Rainis spoke strongly against Dehio, claiming that he was much too involved in Baltic German politics and also a known enemy of 'smaller nations'. For Rainis, appointing someone like Dehio to a university that should, as he put it, embody the spirit of the Latvian nation, was simply unthinkable.<sup>63</sup>

The committee members representing the Latvian organisations sided with Rainis, declaring that Dehio was in fact an enemy of the Latvian people and his election was therefore untenable. When the matter was finally put to the vote, Dehio's opponents were in majority.<sup>64</sup> Evidently, the political resistance to Dehio's appointment had grown considerably within the organising committee.

This conflict appears to have been notably acrimonious and the discussion in the organisation committee continued. Endzelīns, perhaps the most active proponent of recruitment based primarily on academic merit, was obviously not convinced that the vetoing of some of the Baltic German medical specialists was reasonable. He publicly voiced his opinion that the appointment of Dehio, for instance, had been blocked entirely due to the candidate's Baltic German ethnicity. The Principal Ernsts Felsbergs and Pauls Dāle argued strongly against this interpretation. They both maintained that it was Dehio's 'politics' which made him unsuitable, not his ethnicity; this was described as a 'misunderstanding'. Endzelīns remained unimpressed, claiming that there was no evidence that Dehio was in fact hostile to the Latvian nation.<sup>65</sup> The matter was naturally very sensitive. Apart from purely academic considerations, basic democratic principles ruled out open discrimination of citizens belonging to the ethnic minorities.

Frustrated by this setback and the seemingly endless shortage of staff, the medical faculty declared that it could no longer take responsibility for the situation.<sup>66</sup> The conflict between the medical faculty and the organising committee seems to have deepened. Krimbergs now

61 Ibid, 1920/10/13; 1920/10/20.

62 Latvijas Universitātes piecgadu darbības pārskats (see note 26), pp. 179 f.; Heinrich Seesemann: 350 Jahre Universität Dorpat, in: Pistohlkors, Raun et.al. (eds.): Die Universitäten Dorpat/Tartu (see note 3), pp. 347-366, here p. 362.

63 LVVA, Latvijas Universitātes fonds, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1920/10/27.

64 Ibid, The result of the vote was 13 for Dehio, 14 against, and 2 abstaining.

65 Ibid, 1920/12/15.

66 Ibid, 7427/6/390, LU Medicinas fakultātes sēžu protokoli, 1920/12/06; 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1920/11/03.

chose to reopen the case of Otto Hohlbeck, whose appointment had previously been stalled by the committee. Krimbergs again nominated him for formal election, but failed to get the required two-thirds majority. Endzelīns, who had evidently supported Hohlbeck, deplored that the committee's academic members, the deans, had been silent in the discussion. Instead, the meeting had been dominated by the politically appointed non-academic members. Arguments on issues such as scientific competence and under-staffing, Endzelīns claimed, had not been sufficiently voiced.<sup>67</sup>

Reacting to the second rejection of Hohlbeck, Krimbergs and the medical faculty launched an open attack on the organising committee. Krimbergs claimed that the refusal to appoint Hohlbeck had not been based on a consideration of his scientific merits: it therefore had nothing to do with medical science or academic standards. This attack undoubtedly drew an embarrassing attention to the dilemma of reconciling academic and national prerogatives.

The committee meeting developed into a ferocious argument. Krimbergs insisted that the medical faculty alone was competent to assess Hohlbeck's scientific record, and the committee's repeated refusals to appoint candidates selected by the faculty simply could not be tolerated. He received some support from Endzelīns, who again criticised the other deans for not speaking out in support of academic concerns. The committee majority, on the other hand, could not publicly admit that appointments were not based on a serious evaluation of scientific records – that would have eroded the committee's academic credibility as well as the new university's reputation. Paulis Lejiņš reiterated his position that 'foreign' academics should only be recruited if they were truly 'eminent' – which he evidently thought Hohlbeck was not.

After some calls for calm and moderation, the committee voted that Krimbergs's statements should be seen as an expression of "groundless suspicions". The committee voted solidly in favour of this interpretation: 14 for, 2 against, and 7 abstaining. Evidently, it was simply out of the question to admit openly that well-merited medical academics were barred on ethnic grounds.<sup>68</sup>

In conclusion, the conflict over the recruitment of non-Latvian academics apparently came to a head in the faculty of Medicine because this faculty had the most explosive combination of preconditions: a severe shortage of staff, a very large admission of students, and, probably, a set of academics who were above all scientists and pragmatists and not prepared to give priority to nationalist concerns that would lower the quality of teaching. The Latvian professors of medicine, whose ethnicity could not be questioned, clearly gave priority to pragmatic and professional considerations.

Another reason why this conflict came to the fore in the medical faculty may have been precisely because the leading professors, Krimbergs and Zariņš, were ethnic Latvians. In some of the technical and natural science faculties there was also a lack of properly trained scientists, but here the staff was to a far greater extent dominated by Baltic Germans from the previous RPI. Running the risk of being seen as disloyal 'foreigners', these academics probably did not find it prudent to challenge the organising committee's authority in the same direct manner as Krimbergs and Zariņš did.

67 Ibid, 7427/6/1, Organisation Committee Minutes, 1920/11/17; 1920/11/24.

68 Ibid, 1920/12/01.



The “national wing” in the committee was clearly much keener to retrieve ethnic Latvian academics from Soviet Russia, or to send Latvian doctors abroad to receive the required specialist training. Naturally, this policy was supported by Latvian doctors who were eager to benefit from such opportunities.<sup>69</sup> The group organising the medical faculty in 1919 had very strong links to the Latvian Society of Physicians, and several of them remained on the teaching staff even though they had not received any advanced academic training in medicine. In this way, the professional strategies of Latvian medical doctors became intertwined with government policy and the ethnic policy at the new university. Indeed, in the same manner as was the case with the strongly Latvianized Faculty of Agronomy, the Latvian professional organisations forming a counter-elite to the Baltic Germans seem to have wielded some influence on the organising committee in these matters.

### Concluding remarks

Latvia during the interwar period should be seen as a nationalizing state where the leading circles were primarily concerned with the need to break the cultural hegemony of the former elite groups within the country and instead elevate a new, ethnically Latvian elite. While this was swiftly achieved in the political arena, the forming of a new Latvian academic elite was, however, not a completely straight-forward process. Some of the most renowned Latvian professors were adherents of an academic ethos stressing the primacy of scientific and scholarly merit, a transnational conception of academic pursuits that had emerged within the European university system in the late nineteenth century as a part of the professionalization process of academia. Also, the persistent lack of adequately trained Latvians in many academic disciplines made it difficult to swiftly establish an ethnic Latvian professoriate that could immediately replace the previously hegemonic group, the Baltic Germans. The first formative years of the new university were therefore fraught with inconsistencies, conflicts, and compromises.

Due to the organisation committee’s composition and voting procedures, the group of more nationally inclined academics could combine with the members belonging to the ministries and the Latvian professional organisations to dominate the recruitment procedure during the university’s initial formative period. Eventually, the language criterion became paramount: academics not able to lecture in Latvian were appointed only when no reasonably deserving Latvian-speakers could be found. Officially, therefore, the emerging academic elite was a professoriate of Latvian-*speakers* rather than ethnic Latvians.

Unofficially, however, there was clearly an ethnic agenda. Several of the committee members were very reluctant to accept the recruitment of German and Baltic German academics, no doubt because these had formed the academic and cultural elite in the previously existing Baltic provinces of Russia. Appointments of Jewish and Russian academics were also rare. Here the ‘national’ agenda and its imperatives apparently conflicted with academic notions

69 Ibid, Izglītības ministrijas fonds, 1632/2/633. Saraksti ar Latvijas Augstskolu par mācības spēku pieņemšanu darbu. Letter from Dr Alksnis, a physician, to the ministry 1920/09/02, complaining that money was wasted on recruitment attempts directed at Polish academics instead of relying on Latvian professionals.

of quality, and, quite clearly, with a more pragmatic need to organise high quality education for the rapidly growing number of students.

Latvian professional organisations also seem to have played a vital role in this process. Being well represented in the organising committee, they had a large say in the appointment of academics. Especially two professional organisations, agronomists and medical doctors, seem to have influenced government and university policy in the direction of a more thorough Latvianization of those faculties. Here, in a sense, Latvian counter-elites manoeuvred to dominate the faculties tied to their respective professions.

During the first formative years, a sizeable group of Baltic German professors were allowed to remain, primarily in the technological faculties, natural sciences, law and economics: subjects where a competing Latvian counter-elite yet had not emerged. Half of the faculties initially had Baltic German deans. To some extent, therefore, there was a reproduction of the established academic elite. However, by 1923 a younger generation of Latvian academics had replaced the Baltic German professoriate as deans in all faculties. This meant that the power over the promotion system within a few years was passed over to the hands of their younger Latvian colleagues, ensuring that the future academic elite would be – primarily – ethnically Latvian.

Control over promotion and grants is one of the most important modes of power within academic systems. In effect, this meant that while junior academic positions were formally reserved for Latvian-*speakers*, most grants and scholarships seem to have been consistently awarded to promising young Latvian males. Talented students from the ethnic minorities, even if they were Latvian-speakers, were given considerably fewer chances to pursue academic careers. In this manner, during the course of the 1920s and 1930s a new Latvian and primarily male academic elite was gradually established. Initially a combination of Baltic German and Latvian scientists and scholars, with a sprinkling of academics from small and supposedly friendly countries, this academic elite became gradually Latvianized during the interwar period.

Proofread by Louis Marvick, Lüneburg

### *Zusammenfassung*

Das Entstehen eines unabhängigen Staates Lettland im Jahre 1918 brachte gravierende Veränderungen in der Zusammensetzung der Machteliten mit sich. Bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt hatten die Deutschbalten in den Ostseeprovinzen des Russischen Kaiserreiches die dominierende Bevölkerungsgruppe in Politik, Kultur, Verwaltung und Wirtschaft dargestellt. Nun wurde ihre Position durch eine aufstrebende Schicht aus der Mehrheitsbevölkerung der Letten angegriffen. Denn die junge parlamentarische Demokratie brachte es mit sich, dass die politische Macht der Deutschbalten, die weniger als fünf Prozent der Bevölkerung ausmachten, stark eingeschränkt wurde. Auch die adligen Familien erfuhren drastische Eigentumsbeschränkungen ihres Grundbesitzes als Folge der in den frühen 1920er Jahren durch die lettische Regierung eingeführten weitreichenden Landreform.

Die deutschbaltische akademische Elite musste sich den neuen Herausforderungen auch im Bildungssystem stellen. Das Polytechnische Institut in Rīga, eine Initiative der Deutschbalten aus dem Jahr 1862, wurde 1919 in eine nationale lettische Universität umgewandelt.

Die damit einhergehende Bildung einer neuen lettischen Elite war ein komplexer Vorgang: Die nationale Agenda bei der Umgestaltung der Universität widersprach den gängigen Auffassung der akademischen Führungsspitze. Einige der renommiertesten lettischen Professoren hielten an einem akademischen Ethos fest, das wissenschaftliche und akademische Leistung hervorhob. Außerdem ging mit dem anhaltenden Mangel an gebildeten Letten die Schwierigkeit einher, eine Professorenschaft aus ethnischen Letten aufbauen zu können, die in der Lage gewesen wäre, die dominierte Gruppe der Deutschbalten zu ersetzen. Die ersten Reformjahre waren deshalb voller Unstimmigkeiten, Konflikte und Kompromisse zwischen nationalen und akademischen Belangen.

In der Berufungskommission setzten sich schnell national ausgerichtete Akademiker, Mitglieder von Regierungsministerien und lettischen Berufsverbänden durch. Doch trotz der bestehenden ethnischen Agenda entschied das Kriterium der Sprache letztendlich über Personalfragen: Akademiker, die nicht auf Lettisch lehren konnten, wurden nur eingestellt, wenn keine ausreichend qualifizierten lettisch sprechenden Personen gefunden wurden. Die aufstrebende akademische Elite bestand demnach eher aus lettisch sprechenden Professoren als aus ethnischen Letten.

Während der ersten Jahre ihrer Neuausrichtung durfte eine beträchtliche Anzahl deutschbaltischer Professoren an der nationalen Universität bleiben, vor allem in den technologischen, naturwissenschaftlichen, juristischen und wirtschaftswissenschaftlichen Fakultäten. In diesen Fächern existierte zunächst noch keine konkurrierende lettische Elite. Während die Hälfte der Fakultäten anfangs noch über einen deutschen Dekan verfügte, konnten diese schon 1923 durch eine jüngere Generation lettischer Akademiker ersetzt werden, so dass die Neubesetzung von Personalstellen in die Hände von jüngeren lettischen Kollegen überging, die wiederum die Bildung einer akademischen Elite aus ethnischen Letten vorantrieb. In ihrer Aufsicht lag die Kontrolle über Personalfragen, Einstellungen und Beförderungen, so dass die Stellen für den akademischen Nachwuchs formal lettisch sprechenden Bewerbern vorbehalten waren. Zudem wurde ein Großteil der finanziellen Zuschüsse und Stipendien an vielversprechende junge lettische Männer vergeben. So konnte im Laufe der 1920er und 1930er eine lettische akademische Elite aufgebaut werden.