

# **Archival Evidence of the Baltic Émigrés' Political Activities:**

## **Ph.D. Research in Progress**

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On June 27-30th 1952, nine Baltic diplomats, each serving a country which was not in existence at that time but under occupation by the Soviet Union, gathered at the Estonian Legation in London to discuss the current situation in international relations and its consequences for Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians living under Soviet rule and in the diaspora. In a press communiqué published after the meeting, they praised both the cooperation of the Baltic émigré communities and the support they received from most of the Western governments. They also expressed their “firm conviction that the rights of the Baltic Nations will ultimately prevail and that the freedom and independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania as well as of the other Soviet dominated countries will be restored.”

Among themselves, however, the diplomats were not as optimistic. “Since many years may pass before we can hope for the liberation of our countries“, it is noted in the minutes of the meeting, “our main efforts should be directed at present towards gathering all necessary and useful materials and towards keeping up the morale of our peoples.“ And in a confidential paper, they added: “Useless sacrifices of human lives must be avoided [...]. [U]ntil the time comes when the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians can engage in the decisive fight for the liberation of their countries, actions which might serve as a pretext for the Soviets to intensify the terror and persecution should be avoided.“<sup>1</sup>

In hindsight, the analysis of the nine diplomats has turned out to be quite accurate, as it took nearly forty more years until independence was finally achieved. During this time the Baltic émigrés' quest for independence of their home countries remained a non-violent struggle. It was a matter of the written word, a battle fought with pamphlets and petitions rather than with arms.

What could be called the political heritage of the Baltic émigrés appears to have received significantly less scholarly attention thus far than the cultural, literary or even scientific heritage. It is my objective to narrow this gap with my Ph.D. thesis dealing with the lobbying activities of the Baltic émigrés during the Cold War. Naturally, the documents preserved in the archives in and outside the Baltic states are of prime importance for this task, and visits to

many of these archives are necessary for my research. This presentation is therefore a highly subjective account of a researcher and user of Baltic archives. My intentions are twofold: to inform the Baltic archival community about my research and how the idea for this research came about, and to provide some first-hand experience as a researcher, including some remarks on obstacles and ideas for improvement.

So where did the idea for my Ph.D. thesis come from? In the summer of 2005 I was visiting a friend in Riga, Latvia. It was my first stay in any of the Baltic countries, and as a student of history at the University of Kiel with a special interest in the history of the Baltic Sea area, I considered it a must to visit the Occupation Museum. At the time, I was looking for a suitable topic for my *Magister Artium* thesis. Strolling through the museum, an information board about Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians in exile and their relentless attempts to influence the political and public opinion in the West in favour of their home countries' sovereignty caught my eye. This seemed like an interesting topic for my thesis.

However, after some consideration and consultation, I had to concede that this was too big of a bite for a M.A. thesis, which had to be finished within six months. Instead, I decided to write about the city partnership of Tallinn and my hometown, Kiel, during the Cold War, and that was probably a good decision. But the Baltic émigrés never left my mind. Having received my degree, I tried to find out whether anything had been written on this topic. I read some of the scarce literature I found and decided to give the topic another try - this time as a Ph.D. student, enrolled at the University of Hamburg, with Prof. Ralph Tuchtenhagen as supervisor.

What will the exact topic of my Ph.D. thesis be, and what are the research questions I will attempt to answer? I will not go into detail here about how the Baltic émigrés left their home countries in the wake of World War II and how they found new homes, temporary homes they hoped, in Sweden and the United States, in Canada and Australia, in Great Britain and in Germany. This is a story which has been told many times and which all Baltic archivists are familiar with. But the political activities of the émigrés are less talked about. Having realized that they would not be able to return to a sovereign Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, the émigrés began to organise and in various creative ways protest against the occupation of their homelands. They wrote petitions, letters and newspaper articles, organized rallies and festivals and lobbied Western governments and international organisations. Through all this they attempted:

- to make aware and keep informed the world public about the circumstances of the 1940 occupation of the Baltic countries by the Soviet Union, and the illegitimacy of the on-going occupation and colonisation and
- to convince Western governments and international organisations to make use of their influence to protect the Baltic peoples' right of national self-determination and to eventually restore Estonia's, Latvia's and Lithuania's independence.

My first task will be to give an overview of the émigrés' political activities and of the methods they used to reach their objectives. I intend to describe these activities along the following four fields of analysis:

1. Diplomacy
2. Lobbying of interest groups
3. Media
4. Publicity through events

Of course, other aspects have played a role in the lobbying efforts as well. Preserving their respective traditions and cultural heritage was important to keep morale high among émigrés and to inform the Western public that the Baltic histories and languages were in fact different from the other Soviet republics. Similarly, the émigrés' scientific activity was an effective way of countering Soviet propaganda and highlighting Estonian, Latvian or Lithuanian singularity to back their claim for sovereignty. However, these were rather indirect side effects, whereas in the fields named above – diplomacy, lobbying, media, events – restoration of independence was a direct, explicit and central aim.

In this first, descriptive part of my thesis, I can not go into as much detail as would be desirable. There are several reasons for this: First, it would be unmanageable to cover in detail the history of all of the major organisations of the Baltic diaspora, let alone the countless local chapters and initiatives that were spread over the whole globe. Second, it would require a much better command of the Baltic languages than I possess to fulfil this task. It will need an Estonian researcher to write the history of the Estonian World Council, a Latvian to write about the World Federation of Free Latvians, and a Lithuanian to write about the Lithuanian World Community.

The question, which I will concentrate on is the extent to which Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in exile cooperated. What was the quantity and quality of this collaboration, and

how does it compare to earlier forms of cooperation among them? This is a question of regional versus national identity. My hypothesis is that the cooperation was much closer and the sense of a regional identity much more developed in the diaspora than during any time preceding World War I, and probably even than during the years of independence leading up to World War II. At this early stage, however, I cannot present much evidence to back up this hypothesis.

There are some other highly interesting questions, which I will touch upon in passing, but which all merit more detailed research:

- How did the Baltic émigrés relate to (radical) Anti-Communism in the West?
- What was the attitude of the Soviet leadership towards the émigrés and their activities and how did they react? (This topic has already been mentioned by Daina Kļaviņa in her contribution to the “International Conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad”, and it has also been addressed by Anne Valmas at this conference)
- What impact did the émigrés' activities have with regard to the singing revolution and the restoration of independence?
- And finally: How have the relations between émigrés and those who had stayed in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania developed after 1991? What role did the returnees play in the Democratic rebuilding process?

Right from the beginning, it was clear that I could not rely very much on using existing literature, as there was, and still is, very little available. There have been a few singular works on specific aspects<sup>2</sup>, but to my knowledge nobody has written a broad overview of the lobbying activities of the Baltic émigrés. Therefore, I had to discover the relevant sources on my own. After all, the countless letters, memoranda, newspaper articles and petitions written by Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in pursuit of the cause of Baltic independence had to be somewhere. Of course I realised that not all of them had been recorded and kept, and that the ones, which have been preserved would be widely dispersed throughout different countries. How to find these documents?

At the occasion of the first conference on the Baltic Archives Abroad in 2006, there has been talk of archives in the time of „googlization“. And indeed, being a modern researcher, I browsed and scanned the Internet, and after a while I happened to stumble upon the website of this very conference. After a brief moment of disappointment that the conference was already over, I soon realised that all the papers had been published on the conference website.

I read them with great interest and was amazed: here it was, all the information I needed to get my research going. Moreover, all the authors seemed to confirm my suspicion that there was research needed in the field I had chosen. „The history of the “Baltic lobby” is one that largely remains unwritten,“ David Jacobs of the Hoover Institution Archives stated in his presentation. When I read that, I had little doubt that I was on the right track.

So here is the first conclusion, which I would like to make, though it is not a particularly surprising one: Websites matter. At least to those researchers who are at the very beginning of their project and who do not yet have the personal contacts and knowledge about where to get the relevant information. The [www.balther.net](http://www.balther.net) has set out to make archives more accessible; and as you see, researchers are already reaping the benefits.

Incidentally, it was the Hoover Institution Archives, which I chose as my first destination. I was lucky to be granted a short-term research scholarship from the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Organisation), which enabled me to spend four weeks at Stanford in the fall of 2008 and to have a closer look at the Hoover Institution's collections. In his 2006 conference paper, David Jacobs has provided an excellent overview over the contents of these collections, which he described as „small, but important holdings on Baltic history“. Not much needs to be added to his analysis. While at Hoover, I have studied the personal collections of several diplomats and émigré personalities, some of them more (Alfrēds Bīlmanis, Kaarel Pusta, Petras Dauzvardis) and some lesser known (Jānis Lejiņš and Peters Oliņš, in whose collection I found the citations given above). What I discovered was an interesting mixture of official legation records, speeches held at different occasions, newspaper clippings about all sorts of topics which in one way or the other concerned the Baltic émigrés, and of correspondence with other émigrés throughout the World. Although no major Baltic organisation's records can be found at the Hoover Institution Archives, there is quite some evidence of their activities scattered among the different personal collections. Not all collections have been sorted and classified, and it was quite a challenge for me to create my own system of structuring and memorising which piece of information I had found where. Due to the limited time, I was very ambitious in taking as much information back to Germany as possible, and consequently I found myself standing in line at the copying machine much more often than I had planned.

I am very thankful to David Jacobs for his support and advice during my stay at Hoover. He recommended that I should also look at the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty records, which tell the story of the longsome struggle of Baltic émigrés to push through broadcasts by

these stations to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. They had to wait until 1975 for such broadcasts to finally commence, and the reasons for this delay are closely connected to the ambiguity of U.S. foreign policy regarding the Baltic States. Radio Liberty had been set up to broadcast to the Soviet Republics, Radio Free Europe addressed the Eastern European satellite states – so which of the two stations should broadcast to the Baltic states? After all, according to official U.S. foreign policy, they were neither. The records show that this was a tricky question, which occupied the Baltic representatives, the State Department and the Radio's staff for quite some time. The RFE/RL records contain valuable information about the Baltic émigrés' political activities not only in the United States, but also in Europe, as well as about their relations to other Eastern European exile communities.

Overall, the Hoover Institution Archives were certainly worth the lengthy travel, with the only drawback being that most of the material concerns only the first half of the nearly fifty years long struggle of the émigrés – from 1940 to the 1960s. In order to cover the whole Cold War era, I would have to visit a few more archives. In April 2009, I therefore went to the Swedish National Archives to take a look at the Baltic Archives. A written permit from the chairwoman of the board is needed to access these archives, and all collections to be used have to be named beforehand. This procedure might not be a problem for someone who lives close by and can easily have a quick look at the finding aids on the spot. However, for me, it was quite difficult to assess from far away which of the collections would be most interesting for my research. I am sure that there is a good reason for this restriction to be in place, but in my opinion it is not particularly user-friendly.

Unfortunately, the few days I spent in Stockholm were not nearly enough to get a complete grasp of the Baltic Archives' collections. My impression has been that for my purposes, the archives are not as important as the Hoover Institution. They do, however, contain the collections of some very important personalities – August Rei, Heinrich Laretei and Birger Nerman, to name a few. Moreover, it made things much easier for me that I was allowed to photograph the documents, which was not possible at the Hoover Institution. Without being able to take pictures, the single greatest challenge for a travelling researcher is logistics: How to make most out of the limited amount of time? How to take home as many documents as possible in order to study them in detail later? For a Ph.D. thesis, you never know which documents you will need when. You become greedy and take all you can get.

So much for my experience in Stockholm and in Stanford. What, then, are my recommendations to the institutions, which host the archives of the Baltic diaspora?

1. As has been emphasized by several speakers at the 2006 conference, improved digital accessibility of the archives' holdings would be very helpful. The first step should be to translate archival database interfaces into English and to provide short descriptions in English about each collection, including its size and the languages it contains. This will help researchers like me to assess even from far away whether certain archives are worth a visit (which consumes time and money, scarce resources for Ph.D. students), and how long the residence should be. It will also ease the preparation of research visits and make them much more efficient.
2. Publication of selected entire documents on the Internet would of course be extremely helpful, but judging from my experience, this implies also threats. Researchers would be tempted to rely too much on those documents, which have been published digitally and dismiss those, which haven't. In addition, research visits are also great opportunities to meet and discuss with archivists and scholars and to receive valuable hints as to where further sources can be found.
3. Therefore, grants and scholarships to cover the costs for visiting archives abroad are of great importance to researchers like me and should be promoted.
4. An idea to improve communication among researchers and archivists would be to publish a list of researchers who are working on topics concerning the Baltic diaspora and using the relevant archives on the BaltHerNet website.

I hope that with this account I have been able to give archivists some feedback to consider and some reassurance that the work they are doing to improve accessibility will benefit researchers who study the history of the Baltic diaspora. In case my remarks have not been sufficient to confirm this, I should add one more thing: As a next step, I am planning a trip to the Immigration History Research Centre in Minnesota next spring, which holds the records of organisations such as Baltic Appeal to the United Nations, the Joint Baltic American National Committee or the Assembly of Captive European Nations. For this trip, I have been awarded a grant-in-aid from the IHRC to cover my travel costs. The announcement of the Grant-in-Aid programme I have found at the BaltHerNet website.

Yes, indeed, websites do matter.

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<sup>1</sup> All three quoted documents are located at the *Hoover Institution Archives*, Peters Z. Olins Papers, Box 2, Folder 10.

<sup>2</sup> Most notably James T. McHugh's and James S. Pacy's *Diplomats Without a Country* (2001) and a recent

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publication entitled *The Baltic Question During the Cold War* (2008), edited by John Hiden et al.