

Germany's "Neuland" in the Baltic? Efforts to Colonize and Germanize Courland. 1914–1919

Since the well-known works of Aba Stražas and Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, the German "Ober Ost" military administration in the Baltic during the First World War is often characterized as a kind of "colonial regime". Liulevicius especially tried to picture "Ober Ost" as a link between the First World and in some parts even the overseas colonial activities of the German Empire on one side and the Nazi aims to conquer "space" in Eastern Europe. The main thesis of Liulevicius is that the experience of German soldiers here in the occupied Baltic led to a fundamental change of how the Germans viewed Eastern Europe in general. Furthermore, Liulevicius points out that "Ober Ost" didn't have any elaborated concepts as to how to rule the occupied territory and what its future should be, thus the leaders of the German military administration had to improvise and finally developed their own "military utopia".

In current research Liulevicius' theses have gained support, but a lot of criticism as well. For example, a recently published dissertation shows that a German "colonial view toward the East" had already been established in the 19th century. A different study about space in Germany history regards the occupation policy of "Ober Ost" as a transfer of colonial thinking, which had been originally developed for overseas territories, to Europe.

The dissertation project presented here follows an approach which connects the arguments of both sides. An analysis of documents of German civilian and military planners engaged in Eastern European affairs during the First World War reveals that the Baltic was imagined as the ideal "space" for future German colonization. The core for the creation of this colony was to be Courland. The Baltic was depicted as a "new settlement land", even as a kind of "America" exclusively for German settlers, while at the same time it was emphasized that the Baltic provinces and at least a part of Lithuania in fact were the "Land of the German Order", and "the oldest German colony". The projected new settlement colony would therefore be rather the fulfillment of the old "German mission in the East" interrupted during the Livonian War in the 16th century.

A short overview of the development of the "Neuland" planning shall be attempted here.

In an intriguing way, these plans connected two strands of German colonial discourse. The idea that Germany should acquire colonies, in particular to settle German emigrants as farmers, is deeply rooted in the history of German colonial activities already since the beginning of the 19th century. By 1900 at the latest it had developed into its own kind of ideology. The close connection between these ambitions and the planned settlement of the German occupied areas in the Baltic becomes visible through the term "Neuland". Established in the 1890s, it was originally used in the context of German colonial ambitions in Africa and as a catchphrase to label German expansionist demands in general. Since the occupation of Lithuania and Courland

by German forces in summer 1915, the term “Neuland” was increasingly used to mark exactly the Baltic area. Derived from the term “Neuland”, the term “neues Ostland” or simply “Ostland” for the Baltic appeared as well.

The image of the former medieval Livonia as a “German colony” or even “the oldest German colony” dates back to the Age of Enlightenment. Throughout the 19th century, the narrative of Germany’s “oldest colony” became firmly established in German historical literature, and especially in Baltic German literature. Baltic German writers like Julius von Eckhardt, Victor Hehn and August Bielenstein pictured the Germans in the Baltic area as “colonizers” and “bearers of culture”, but the Latvians and Estonians as “natives”, which have all their culture and influence thanks to 700 years of German dominance. According to these stereotypes, Latvians and Estonians were even described as “German farmers with foreign languages”. The German planners of the First World War adopted the latter image without restriction and made it a guide on how to deal with the Latvian and Estonian inhabitants of the future “Neuland”. Thus both peoples were considered “useful members of the foreign population”, who, in contrast to Slavic peoples should be allowed to stay in the country after its annexation by Germany. As stated in several memoranda, an education system with German as the language of instruction and the settlement of Germans everywhere where possible would guarantee the total Germanization of all Latvians and Estonians within no more than 25 years. In most cases the same was expected concerning the Lithuanians. Meanwhile the so called “Neuland” or “Ostland” was to be ruled as a territory of the German Empire.

The guidelines for this project can be found in several memoranda submitted to the Imperial German government already in August and September 1914. Starting in March 1915, it received much publicity in Germany, as Baltic German emigrants started to push a campaign for the annexation of their home region by the German Empire.

One of the crucial figures for further attempts to realize the “Neuland” planning was Alfred von Goßler, head of the German local military administration of Courland, later responsible for the whole area which is today Latvia and Estonia. Although subordinated to “Ober Ost”, he pursued his own policy, and in the case of the school policy he even acted contrary to the strict orders of his Supreme Commander. From the beginning of his service in Courland he enthusiastically supported demands to annex Courland and other areas in the Baltic as Germany’s “Neuland”. Thus he tried to introduce a policy as it was recommended in the memoranda of summer 1914. In April 1916 General Erich Ludendorff, Chief of Staff of “Ober Ost”, gave an order to examine the possibilities to settle Germans in the “Ober Ost” area. It was due to von Goßler, whose administration already had collected appropriate material, that this work was finished in the summer of 1917. In the winter of 1918 the first German settlers arrived in Courland. It was only the outbreak of the revolution in Germany and the armistice of Compiègne that led to an interruption of the settlement program. A short reactivation, nevertheless, was experienced in the context of the German “Freikorps”, which fought in the Baltic till November 1919.