

Eine neue Ostseeregion? Nordosteuropa am Ausgang des Ersten Weltkriegs
Towards a New Baltic Sea Region? North-Eastern Europe at the End of World War I
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Abstract

The emergence of the third star.
Francis Kemps and the fate of Latgale in 1917-1920

The fact that the region of Latgale became a part of the new founded Latvian Nation state in 1918 was not self-evident and only the result of a contingent process in the aftermath of the revolutions in Russia and Germany. Three factors can be seen as crucial for this outcome. Firstly, like for the foundation of Latvia and the other Baltic Nation states the international conditions had to be favourable. The collapse of the German and Russian Empires created such circumstances although as the Latvian case reveals, things were not that easy, which is not the least true with regard to Latgale, which was “liberated” only in early 1920.

Secondly, the international conditions were only a necessary but not sufficient means to achieve the inclusion of Latgale into Latvia. Of course also the political strivings and interests of the inhabitants of the region itself have to be taken into account, which is not the least true with regard to the significant non Latvian population of Latgale. But generally it can be asserted, that there are hardly any sources or research concerning the political opinion of “ordinary” men in Latgale during the years of 1917-1920. Probably it would be a fruitful approach to apply Tara Zahras concept of national indifference with regard to the population of Latgale. Apart from national belongings, certainly the solution of the agrarian questions was pivotal for getting support from the local population, as it was in other regions of the Russian Civil War.

Therefore, regarding the question of national belonging, we have to concentrate thirdly on the political active intellectual elite and their political activities and discussions during these years, for they determined mainly the results of the inner Latgalian discourse and actions. Among others, two persons with the name Francis particularly stand out: While Francis Trasuns is usually the main character in telling the story of the unification of Latgale with the rest of Latvia, Francis Kemps on his part is a somewhat more controversial figure. Both deserve recognition for “inventing” Latgalian traditions, focusing mainly on language and literature. And they created the institutional means like newspapers and societies for Latgalian intellectuals to meet and communicate with each other. By doing so, they assembled a group of cultural activists in St. Petersburg and hence they can be perceived as a typically case of the first stage of Hrochs model of nation building.

Thus, in the long run, Kemps and Trasuns can be seen as allies in fighting for Latgalian culture and political rights, which is confirmed by the fact, that in the early 20th century Kemps was a student of Trasuns and later on, after the turmoil of nation building, they founded together a

political party in independent Latvia – the Latgale Democracy party. But especially during the crucial years of political change, or maybe even more precisely, during the most crucial event of decision making – the First Latgale Congress in April 1917 – they appeared to be on opposing sides, which was due to two slightly but significant differences in their political opinions. For one, Kemps was the first significant Latgalian Intellectual not to become a cleric, but an engineer. Since he also was younger, his political views came much closer to socialist trends, of whom especially the Socialist Revolutionaries movement was important for Kemps. But parallel to the fate of the Socialist Revolutionaries in the Russian Civil War, Kemps got also in an awkward position, when Bolshevik forces gathered strength on Latvian and Latgalian soil. Secondly, by being much tougher in Latgalian national issues vis-à-vis the idea of Latvian Nation building – he preferred rather a Baltic federation of three autonomous parts Latvia, Latgale and Lithuania – he also outmaneuvered himself due to the international impossibility of such an option.

Keeping his socialist political roots and his ambiguous national strivings in mind, it seems to be worthwhile to consider a comparable approach for future research regarding such personalities as Pilsudski or Petljura, who also rooted their political careers in the socialist movements, but ended up as national heroes. Kemps certainly plays only second fiddle within the Latvian context after Trasuns, but for modern Latgalian separatists he serves as a figure of identification. Whether he would have liked such a commemoration seems unlikely, but remains an open question.