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‘National indifference’ in the Baltic territories? A critical assessment

Per Bolin and Christina Douglas

Historical and Contemporary Studies, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Tara Zahra maintains in her article ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’ that many people in the early twentieth century were indifferent to the call of the national movements or oscillated between different national belongings. While finding Zahra’s perspective relevant, this article criticizes the choice of her central analytic concept, ‘national indifference,’ and also questions the absence of an integrated gender perspective. Finally, the article queries the general applicability of her theoretical approach. While useful in the analysis of demotic national movements, it is considerably less so when studying elite minority groups. This becomes evident when Zahra’s theoretical perspective is applied to the Baltic Germans.

KEYWORDS Baltic Germans; national indifference; minority politics; gender; cultural autonomy; national movement; Latvians

The seminal article by Tara Zahra (2010), ‘Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis’ has had a profound influence on researchers studying national movements and national identities. Zahra convincingly shows that a nationalist matrix has very often influenced the historical narratives of the states established in central and eastern Europe after 1918. Commitment and loyalty to the nation was turned into normality, while dithering, wavering, and noncommitment toward the nation were depicted as unnatural breaches of trust and loyalty. On the contrary, Zahra maintains that historical evidence indicates a large part of the populations in central and eastern Europe were in fact indifferent to the call of nationalism, either finding the whole notion of national belonging bereft of meaning or tending to oscillate between different national identities without any apparent qualms.

While Zahra’s article remains a very important scholarly contribution to the research on nationalism, there are some points that can be the subject of criticism. These points concern the actual meaning of her pivotal term ‘national indifference,’ the different phenomena she subsume under this heading, and the question to what extent her analytical concepts can be applied on societies not specifically studied by her. In this article, we will focus on the possible use of ‘national indifference’ when studying the societies of the Baltic territories, the Imperial Russian provinces of

Estonia, Livonia, and Courland, and the emerging Latvian nation-state, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The different meanings of 'national indifference'

Regarding the concept of 'national indifference,' Zahra (2010, 98) concedes that it is not a perfect term, something she attributes to the predominance of nationalist assumptions in the formation of scholarly concepts in the area of nationalism. The question regarding the suitability of the term is however not really given a satisfactory answer. Zahra concedes that the term indifference 'carries a pejorative connotation' but she does not really tackle this problem convincingly (Zahra 2010, 98). From our point of view, the term 'indifference' is problematic because it brings with it connotations of inactivity and therefor risks underestimating people and ethnic groups as historical agents.

Zahra also maintains that 'national indifference' can 'apply to many different kinds of behavior and people' (Zahra 2010, 98). Zahra claims that the possibilities and actual forms of such indifference changed in the same way modes of nationalism varied in central and eastern Europe. Both nationalism and national indifference should be historicized and not seen as stable phenomena.

However, this means that very different attitudes in reference to the nation are lumped together under the common label 'indifference.' The historical examples evoked by Zahra can actually be divided in three different categories: first, a-national borderland populations with strong local identities but little connection to the grand nationalist projects. A classic example of this category is the inhabitants of the Masurian swamp area, who found questions about their national belonging utterly incomprehensible. Second, borderland populations creating hybrid versions of regional identities and national ones. Third, people in ethnically mixed areas oscillating between different national identities.

Zahra certainly makes an important point when stating that nationalist activists and politicians saw all these forms of a-national attitudes or national infidelity as a grave problem. It is not difficult to find historical evidence, in the material left by different national movements, of the vexation and hostility raised by encounters with 'uncommitted' or 'renegade' conationals, people who chose to write and speak in another language, parents who sent their children to the 'wrong' schools, and people who changed their names according to the custom of a competing language.

Theoretically, however, it would make good sense to distinguish between these different forms of a-national attitudes and identities. While the first category, traditional local identities still largely untouched by the budding nationalist projects, is perhaps of less theoretical interest, the other two categories definitely are. Both historians and anthropologists have recently extensively studied hybrid identities and oscillations between different national identities in borderland or mixed ethnic territories.

An important observation in many of these studies is the connection between ethnic boundary-crossing and social status (Wimmer 2008). In our view, ethnicities are socially, culturally, and politically constructed entities. They are never completely demarcated: on the contrary, there is always a certain fluidity and lack of precision in the definition of ethnic boundaries. In nineteenth century's central and east Europe, the societal hierarchy very often coincided with ethnic boundaries. This meant that the

ethnic communities in the upper echelons of society customarily enjoyed an influx of elite groups from the lower echelons, either by way of education or other forms of social advancement. This was often seen as acceptable among the receiving group as long as these boundary-crossers were relatively few. At the same time, this 'defection' of parts of the elite was anathema to the national activists in the lower segment of the societal hierarchy: these elite groups should instead form the basis of a separate and culturally high-standing nation. As Zahra very reasonably points out, nationalist activists were frequently frustrated by two very different forms of noncommitment: first, the unwillingness of large segments of the targeted population to become mobilized in national terms, and second, the defection of elite groups seeking to join an ethnic community with a higher social status. We argue that these phenomena should in theoretical terms be treated separately rather than joined together under the common label 'indifference.' Zahra concedes that the term may actually be too broad to be useful. She also states that it is a 'negative and nationalist category,' existing only in the eyes of the nationalist beholder (Zahra 2010, 104–105). However, this assessment actually shows that her key concept is part of the same nationalist matrix that she criticizes elsewhere.

'National indifference' in the Baltic territories?

The second critical question stemming from Zahra's work regards the extent the analytical term 'national indifference' has explanatory value for the research regarding national identities and movements in the Baltic territories. Zahra's main field of study, and the source of most of her concrete examples, is the Habsburg lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her special field of expertise is the clash between the Czech and German national projects in the ethnic borderlands of Upper Silesia. Here, the Czech nationalists strove to expand the use of the Czech language in education and administration, to mobilize the Czech-speaking population in national terms, and to discourage the Czech-speaking elite from becoming Germanized (Zahra 2010).

To what extent was the situation similar in the Baltic territories? Taking the Latvian national movement as the prime example, it is clear that the budding nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century saw a similar problem: some members of the tiny Latvian elite crossed the ethnic boundary and joined the higher status group of the Baltic Germans. A derogatory term, *karklu vācietis* (Willow German), was used to depict such a defector from the national fold. While the national mobilization of Latvian-speaking farmers and workers remained difficult due to both the rigid structures of Imperial Russian society and the strong resistance from the Baltic German nobility and urban elite, retaining the thin strata of educated Latvians within the nation became a priority. Unlike the Czechs, the Latvian nationalists could not enhance the use and scope of the national language in education and administration: Russian, and to some extent German, remained the official languages. Instead, the national mobilization of the noncommitted had to rely on a cultural repertoire of newspapers, periodicals, and, perhaps above all, folk culture (Plakans 1995). Still, the combination of societal and ethnic cleavages meant that social conflicts – peasants against noble landlords, workers against factory owners, petty bourgeoisie against urban patricians – could easily be filled with a national meaning.

So, in the Latvian case, it is clear that the phenomena of noncommitment to the national cause existed, but in a slightly different form than in the Habsburg lands. However, should Zahra's theoretical concept of 'national indifference' also be used when analyzing the local elite group, the Baltic Germans? This is a very different matter, which requires a closer scrutiny of this very peculiar ethnic group. The Baltic Germans constituted a demarcated elite group in the Baltic territories from the thirteenth century onward, both as landed nobility lording over enserfed Finno-Ugric and proto-Latvian speaking peasants, and as a town elite of burghers and merchants. Baltic Germans also dominated the Lutheran church as clergymen and bishops. By the late nineteenth century, however, this elite group was under pressure from the national movements of both Estonians and Latvians, and also the Russification measures implemented from the imperial center (Haltzel 1981). They were also internally divided, according to *Stand* (estate), with the nobility guarding their privileges regarding offices and landowning, in competition with Baltic German *literati* and urban elites (Whelan 1999, 209–228).

However, under this external pressure, the Baltic Germans tended to coalesce under the joint banner of *Deutschtum* (Germandom), making efforts to bridge their previous internal divisions. The Russification of the previously German-speaking education system, comprising Dorpat University, Riga Polytechnikum, and the gymnasia, was a special node of conflict promoting a growing ethnic cohesion (Bolin 2012, 52–53; Hagen 1987). The upheavals in both urban and rural areas in 1905 and 1906, with manor houses burned down and Baltic German nobles and factory owners murdered, were a collective shock that even further reinforced the common identity of *Deutschtum* (Henriksson 1996, 219).

In the period following the 1905 and 1906 uprisings, we can see a repertoire of cultural projects intended to strengthen the cohesion within the Baltic German group. The October manifesto, issued in October 1905, made it possible to form voluntary associations without prior permission from imperial authorities. The Baltic Germans were quick to take advantage of this new opportunity.

Nation and gender

In this repertoire of voluntary Baltic German associations, the *Deutsche Frauenbünde* (German Women's Leagues) were among the very first to establish themselves. The *Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga* (German Women's League in Riga) was founded in the 4 December 1905, at a meeting in Riga where more than seven hundred Baltic German Women participated (Henriksson 1996, 219). Among the new organizations that were formed were also the *Deutsche Vereine* (German Unions) that started emerging in 1906 (Hackmann 2012). Both the *Deutsche Frauenbünde* and the *Deutsche Vereine* came into being in answer to the growing concern among the Baltic Germans regarding their perceived endangered position in society (Hackmann 2012, 392–393; Henriksson 1996, 221). Both the *Deutsche Frauenbünde* and the *Deutsche Vereine* had clear nationalist aims, as the use of the word *Deutsche* (German) makes evident. This was something new among Baltic German associations and it emerged in the aftermath of the 1905 revolutions (Hackmann 2012; Henriksson 1996).

Previously, the Baltic Germans had been somewhat concerned about 'seepage' at the top – nobles entering imperial service and marrying into the Russian aristocracy – while at the same time allowing a limited influx of Latvian elite individuals at the

bottom end of the group. The main concern after 1905 was rather the opposite: the fear that the lower end of the Baltic German group, urban artisans, and relatively impoverished townspeople should sink into the sea of the majority Latvian-speaking population (Douglas 2015, 231). By that time, the towns and cities in the Baltic provinces were no longer dominated by Baltic Germans in terms of numbers: Latvians and Estonians now constituted a majority. The previous societal hierarchy had been further muddled by the emergence of an urban middle class among the majority populations (Von Hirschhausen 2006, 84–99).

The movement to overcome the social divisions among the Baltic Germans and solidify the boundaries against the other ethnic groups was spearheaded by the network of *Deutsche Frauenbünde* (Women's Leagues) that emerged in towns and cities in late 1905 (Henriksson 1996, 219–221). The Baltic Germans may have been late in embracing nationalism, or any kind of nationalist endeavor, but they cannot be said to have been indifferent. A nationalistic interest had begun to show itself in the late nineteenth century, very much as a response to the Russification process. However, with the 1905–06 revolutions, a more organized form of nationalism arose among the Baltic Germans (Henriksson 1996, 214).

Both Anders Henriksson (1996) and Christina Douglas (2015) have shown that it was Baltic German women who both spearheaded this nationalist activity and became its most ardent advocates and organizers. The *Deutsche Frauenbünde* were pivotal in this endeavor, and especially so the *Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga*, whose main aim was to preserve and strengthen the Baltic Germans and their national character, their *Volkstum*, primarily through social and cultural work (Henriksson 1996; Douglas 2015). This aim remained constant throughout the *Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga's* thirty-four-year long history, from 1905 until 1939. It guided all their work, from running schools and daycare centers to organizing tea evenings and lectures where Baltic German women from different social strata could meet (Douglas 2015). The *Deutsche Vereine*, studied extensively by Jörg Hackmann, had very similar aims and activities; the maintaining of schools, organizing lectures, and the like. The *Deutsche Vereine*, unlike the *Deutsche Frauenbünde*, only existed until the beginning of the First World War when they had to dissolve. They were not reestablished after the war (Hackmann 2012, 391). The role played by women in nationalist projects is still often overlooked, even though Anne McClintock already in 1993 drew attention to the fact that even though 'the invented nature of nationalism has found wide theoretical currency, explorations of the gendering of the national imaginary have been conspicuously paltry' (McClintock 1993, 61). McClintock extended her argument a few years later in her acclaimed book *Imperial Leather* (McClintock 1995). Nira Yuval-Davis has pointed to the importance of 'a gendered understanding of nations and nationalisms' and looking at 'the crucial contribution of gender relations into several major dimensions of nationalist projects' (Yuval-Davis 1997, 3). The problem concerning gender and the nation has attracted interest among gender historians. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall have edited an anthology, *Gendered Nations*, on the subject where an explicit reference to Yuval-Davis is made (Blom and Blom 2000, 20). Zahra mentions gender late in her article, but only in passing, and in very general terms, referring to Joan W. Scott's influential article from 1986 (Scott 1986; Zahra 2010, 111). The absence of a properly developed and integrated gender perspective in Zahra's article is therefore also problematic.

Nationalism and nation-states

The feared 'seepage' of Baltic Germans indicated above made them embrace the notion of common *Deutschtum* with some intensity. However, the Baltic Germans were not able to transform this notion into a national movement following the 'usual' pattern. This was primarily due to two different reasons. First, they had served as important supporters of the imperial regime for centuries, both as military officers, administrators, and delegated rulers of the Baltic provinces (Henriksson 1983). Second, they constituted a very small minority in terms of numbers and could not reasonably claim a right to a specific territory as a *nation*. Their claims were based on landowning, social status, and supposed cultural superiority – not in terms of a people constituting a nation and possessing a specific territory.

In fact, the only brief period of 'nation-state' imagery among the Baltic Germans occurred in 1917 and 1918, when Imperial Russia collapsed and Germany dominated in the Baltic territories. An envisaged Baltic German political entity under special protection of the German *Reich* for this short period seemed to be a possibility. So much of a possibility that seventy Baltic German organizations made a resolution on 23 December 1917 that the three Baltic provinces should be joined to the German Reich (Lenz 1974). The *Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga* did not participate in this resolution, even though other women's organizations did. Instead, later that year, they submitted their own petition to the German Empress, Prince Leopold von Bayern, the High Command and the Imperial Chancellor, pleading that the three Baltic provinces be incorporated into the powerful German Reich (Douglas 2015, 224–225).

Mark R. Hatlie has also shown that the Baltic Germans' political activity during the German occupation of Riga in 1917 'was marked by a strong, and toward the end even desperate, effort to prevent the possibility of being subject to the local Latvian majority' (Hatlie 2014, 195). The Baltic Germans can, in light of these occurrences, hardly be seen as indifferent. They were not indifferent to the Latvian nationalist movement: on the contrary, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, they were deeply disturbed by Latvian intellectuals questioning the hierarchical order between the two national groups. As Ivars Ijabs has shown, the strong Baltic German reaction can be analyzed in postcolonial terms, where the 'mimicry' among the Latvian intellectuals of German culture was seen as very disturbing (Ijabs 2014). For example, using the Latvian language when writing a philosophical treatise questioned the 'natural' hierarchy between the two cultures in the eyes of the Baltic Germans (Ijabs 2014). And, as we have seen, the Baltic Germans were certainly not indifferent when pursuing their own nationalist project, as the resolution and petition of 1917 clearly show.

National imaginary and cultural autonomy in the interwar period

With the ultimate defeat of Germany in the War and the eventual victories of the Estonian and Latvian forces in the internal quest for power in the Baltic territories, the Baltic Germans had to give up their ambition of political supremacy. After 1918, they accepted their position as an ethnic minority in a state dominated by another majority nation.

As John Hiden has shown in his excellent biography of Baltic German politician Paul Schiemann, the "nation-states" emerging in central and eastern Europe after 1918 had to deal with the conditions and rights of their often considerable ethnic minorities

(Hiden 2004). In Latvia, the Baltic Germans' elite position was substantially eroded with the far-reaching agricultural reforms of the early 1920s, drastically reducing the manor lands and redistributing them to Latvian farmers. Politically, the Baltic Germans had to resort to measures defending their minority rights, especially in the fields of education and culture. Here, there was undoubtedly some degree of success. The major ethnic minorities in Latvia, Baltic Germans, Russians, and Jews were granted a certain measure of cultural autonomy, with separate school systems partially funded by the state. However, in spite of strenuous efforts, the cultural autonomy of the minorities was never made part of the Latvian constitution but remained in practice until the authoritarian takeover in 1934 (Hiden 2004). In Estonia, the cultural autonomy of the minorities received a far more firm legal backing (Alenius 2004, 38).

In 1918, the Baltic Germans had their social status reduced to that of an ethnic minority with certain cultural rights. Does this new status mean that they were nationally 'indifferent,' to use Zahra's term, or nationally uncommitted? We would argue to the contrary. The Baltic Germans were extremely conscious of their common *Deutschtum*, and strove strenuously to prevent the 'seepage' of members of their group into the majority Latvian nation. In fact, the very notion of minority rights implied that the minority in question could be defined with a great deal of clarity. Cultural autonomy in terms of a separate school system meant that the Baltic German school authorities had to account for all pupils in order to receive state funds. The Baltic Germans simply had to stand up and be counted for the call for minority rights to work. This meant a process of consistent boundary drawing against the 'others': Latvians, Russians, and Jews.

This cultural autonomy was neither uncontested nor complete. As John Hiden (2004) has shown, the Baltic German political leadership never achieved one of its main aims: the right to impose taxes on the members of their community. The Latvian government refused to compromise on its prerogative to tax Latvian citizens. Since the Baltic German leadership could not impose taxation, they instead, as a second best, promoted a scheme of voluntary contributions, putting considerable pressure on all community members to make donations. This scheme necessitated firm control of who actually belonged to the Baltic German group. In theoretical terms, this process of solidifying group boundaries could be labeled ethnic closure.

In the political field, the leadership under the liberal Paul Schiemann managed to harness the conservative group of Baltic Germans to a common program advocating minority rights, cultural autonomy, and the common rights pertaining to citizenship. When defending this program as the only viable strategy for the Baltic Germans, they had two major problems to contend with: first, the "seepage" of nonelite community members into the Latvian population and the "defection" of Baltic German elite groups, particularly the dispossessed nobility, to Germany proper. These processes diminished the number and proportion of Baltic Germans still further during the 1920s, reducing their political clout. Second, they had to counter nationalist initiatives allying the Baltic Germans to the German state and its national project. Such an alliance would severely damage the Baltic Germans' appeal to their rights as Latvian citizens: instead, they would be seen as a fifth column attached to a foreign and possibly hostile state. In turn, this would drastically reduce their possibility to defend their cultural autonomy.

Consequently, for Schiemann and the Baltic German political leadership, it became necessary to limit their national agenda to minority rights and cultural autonomy and

to emphasize their position as loyal Latvian citizens (Hiden 2004). They were not able to proclaim rights to any specific territory or join in a full-scale nationalist project. Still, the Baltic Germans should hardly be labeled 'indifferent' or 'uncommitted.' Their sense of a common *Deutschtum* was exceedingly strong and was underpinned by a wide repertoire of boundary-drawing structures and processes. The Baltic Germans, even liberals like Schiemann, believed in a hierarchy of national cultures where their own was situated at the very top with a special civilizing mission (Ijabs 2009). What seems evident is that their kind of ethnic identity did not fit with the nation-state imagery that predominated in the demotic nationalist movements.

Conclusion

When developing her theoretical concept 'national indifference,' Tara Zahra bases her argument on three different kinds of historical cases: first, borderland populations with little attachment to any major national projects; second, borderland populations developing hybrid identities; and third, populations in ethnically mixed areas oscillating in their attachment between different national projects (Zahra 2010). The Baltic Germans, we argue, do not fit in any of these categories. They constituted an elite group with a strong sense of national identity, and Baltic 'Germandom,' they drew clear boundaries toward 'Others.' They were not a-national, they did not develop a hybrid identity, and they certainly did not oscillate between different national projects.

Apparently, Tara Zahra's theoretical approach does not really consider cases of this kind: an ethnic group may well have a very strong inner cohesion and elaborate boundary-drawing procedures – but still not develop a nationalist movement (Brubaker 2014, 805). The nation-state paradigm certainly fits best with demotic majority populations, but far less with small and geographically dispersed elite groups – like the Baltic Germans. So, what is needed is a theoretical approach that is not bound to a nation-state paradigm but instead acknowledges the existence of strong identity formations in ethnic terms that for different reasons never turned into a kind of nationalism that strove to establish a nation-state.

What is also needed is a theoretical approach that from the outset takes into account and incorporates an understanding of the gender aspect of identity formations in regard to both ethnic groups and states, regardless if it is nation-states or other types of states. In order to truly understand different kinds of national strivings and 'national indifference' it is of paramount importance to take the gender aspect into account. The Baltic German case is an excellent example of this. In our view, the role played by Baltic German women and their organizations in the group's national endeavors was of key importance.

However, we do not dispute Zahra's most important point: too long have nationalist assumptions and the nation-state model influenced scholarship and theoretical concepts. While we acknowledge the importance of a serious investigation of national noncommitment in various historical contexts, our analytical approach should also be able to capture instances of strong ethnic identities that did not conform to the nation-state paradigm.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Per Bolin is a Professor of History at Södertörn University, Sweden. He received his PhD in History at the University of Lund, Sweden in 1991. Since the late 1990s he has devoted himself to the study of Latvian modern history, particularly on matters connected to national identity and national institutions. He has written extensively on the creation of the national Latvian university in Riga, *Latvijas Universitāte*, in the 1920s and 30s, summarized in his recent monograph *Between National and Academic Agendas: Ethnic Policies and 'National Disciplines' at the University of Latvia, 1919–1940* (2012). His most recent article on this topic is, “The Fall of Empire and the Emergence of New Elites: Creating a National Academic Elite at the University of Latvia, 1919–1922”, in *Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte* 23 (2015), pp. 67–85. Between 2010 and 2013 Bolin was research leader at CBEES, the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies, Södertörn University, and is presently Head of Department and a CBEES Associate.

Christina Douglas is Assistant Professor of History at Södertörn University, Sweden. She was awarded her PhD in History at the University of Lund, Sweden in 2011. Her dissertation *Kärlek per korrespondens. Två förlovade par under andra hälften av 1800-talet*. [Loving through Letters. Two Engaged Couples during the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century] was published in 2011. Her fields of scholarly interests are primarily gender studies and the history of the Baltic territories in the 19th and 20th centuries. She is presently doing research on the Baltic German women's movement in the early 20th century in her project “Paradox at Road's End. The Simultaneous Fall of the Baltic German Elite and the Emancipation of its Women, 1905–1939”. The first results have recently been published: “A Baltic German Women's Movement. The German Women's League in Riga Preserving 'Germandom' in Democratic Latvia, 1919–1934” in *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 64 (2015), pp. 218–238.

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