Transnational Contacts and Cross-Fertilization among Baltic Historians in Exile, 1968–1991*

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This chapter focuses on the impact of growing transnational contacts among Baltic historians in exile in the Western world in the 1970s and 1980s, especially the role of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS). The AABS quickly developed strong ties to Baltic scholars in Western Europe, and working together, this transnational network played a key role in establishing Baltic studies as a recognized field of academic inquiry in the West. The methodology of area studies encouraged a broader and more comparative approach to Baltic history, which came to be increasingly practiced in these two decades.

Baltic studies and a comparative approach to the investigation of Baltic history in the West came of age in the little more than two decades from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. The period begins with the holding of the First Conference on Baltic Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park at the end of November 1968, which led to the establishment of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS) at the conclusion of the conference. It culminates in 1991 with the acceptance of the AABS into the ranks of the prestigious American Council of Learned Societies as a bona fide scholarly organization as well as the re-establishment of Baltic independence, thus ending the overt political divisions between Baltic scholars east and west. This article will assess the impact of transnational contacts among Baltic historians in exile during these two decades, focusing especially on those who were members of the AABS and based in the United States and Canada, but also including their rapidly developing connections with colleagues in Sweden, West Germany, and elsewhere in Western Europe. The period in question can be conveniently divided into two halves: (1) the 1970s, which constituted a search for self-definition and a struggle for survival for Baltic studies and its emerging practitioners in the West, and (2) the 1980s, which witnessed a stronger institutional base for Baltic studies outside the Baltic as well as an intensification of

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international contacts, especially with scholars in the Baltic states themselves. The mainly triangular configuration (North America—Sweden—West Germany) that had quickly developed in the 1970s now became a considerably broader one with the increasing involvement of scholars from the Soviet Baltic republics in transnational connections.

The development of a considerable exile community of Baltic intellectuals was a direct result of the loss of independence in World War II. Forced annexation and repression during the first year of Soviet rule—especially the brutal deportations in June 1941—and the very real prospect of even more massive repression as the Soviets returned in 1944–45 contributed to a substantial flight to the West from all three Baltic states. Although the barriers to an in-depth study of this process were removed with the collapse of the Soviet regime, we will likely never have very reliable or exact figures on the numbers of refugees because of the chaotic conditions in which the flight from their homelands took place. In particular, the number of Baltic refugees who perished en route, e.g., in small boats on the Baltic Sea or in bombing raids in Germany in the latter part of the war, will remain unquantifiable to a large extent.\(^1\) It is clear, however, that the Latvian emigration was the largest, probably about twice the size of the Estonian and Lithuanian ones. At the end of the war about 120,000 Latvians were counted in what became West Germany while the figure for Estonians in the same location was about 50,000, to which should be added over 21,000 who had fled to Sweden. A standard estimate for Lithuanian refugees in all of Western Europe in 1945 is 63,000.\(^2\)

Among this wave of emigration the urban intelligentsia was disproportionately represented. For example, perhaps as few as 10% of the Latvian refugees had gained their livelihood in agriculture. Roughly half of all Balts with a higher education joined the flight to the West, and nearly half of the teaching faculty at Tartu University in Estonia and at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania was included in their numbers. The creative elite also played a strikingly prominent role in the emigration. For all three Baltic states it is estimated that among the refugees were one-half to two-thirds of the established authors of belletristic literature from the independence era.\(^3\) At first glance it may appear that this division of the already small-numbered Baltic peoples constituted an ominous fragmentation of their meager demographic resources. In fact, however, the Baltic intelligentsia in exile proved strong

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1 Kumer-Haukanõmm, 2009, 17.