

Estonians, Germans and their Heritage

A Review of: Kristina Jõeekalda, *German Monuments in the Baltic Heimat? A Historiography of Heritage in the ‘Long Nineteenth Century’* (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Art, 2020). Paperback / PDF 365 pp. ISBN 978-9949-594-99-3 (print); ISBN 978-9916-619-00-1 (pdf)

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When, in 1902, as newly appointed General Conservator of the Austrian Central Commission for Research and the Preservation of Artistic and Historical Monuments, Alois Riegl entered the political minefield of cultural heritage, he found that one of his principal ideological adversaries was not one of the many advocates of nationalism in the Habsburg Empire but, rather, the Strasbourg-based art historian Georg Dehio. In his numerous writings on heritage conservation, Riegl argued that individual works of art and architecture might be meaningful to a variety of different communities; no single group had the right to monopolise the meanings of specific artefacts and structures.¹ For Dehio, in contrast, they should be understood as expressions of national identity. The object that became the focus of this position, Heidelberg castle, is less important, perhaps, than their general positions, with Dehio as representative of the newly confident German Reich and Riegl as the scholarly face of the multi-ethnic Danube monarchy.²

Dehio gave his name to the authoritative survey of topographical studies of Germany that, even now, form a standard point of reference. But the surprising fact about Dehio is that this powerful spokesman of turn of the century German nationalism was originally not an imperial German, but rather a Russian subject, for he had grown up in the Baltic port of Reval, now Tallinn, and he studied first at the University of Dorpat (now Tartu). Tallinn and Tartu are now in Estonia, and amidst the celebration of its regained independence in 1991 (Estonia came into existence in 1918 following the collapse of Russia and was then annexed by Stalin in 1940) it is often forgotten that Estonian culture was marked not only by the relation between Estonians and Russians, but also by that between Estonians and Germans. For, as in many other territories in central and eastern Europe, many of the towns of Estonia had been founded by German immigrants, and Germans formed the backbone of the urban mercantile and, later, professional classes, as well as the gentry on rural estates.

Germans had been present in Livonia (the territory covering present-day Estonia and Latvia) since the thirteenth century, first as conquerors in the Northern Crusade, and then as settlers and traders; both Tallinn and Tartu were members of the Hanseatic league. The history of the Germans on the Baltic littoral has been extensively studied, and many figures deemed to be

1) See Alois Riegl, *Kunstwerk oder Denkmal? Alois Riegls Schriften zur Denkmalpflege*, Vienna: Böhlau, 1995.

2) Georg Dehio, *Was wird aus dem Heidelberger Schloß werden?* Strassburg: Trübner, 1901.

central to German culture and society having come from the Baltic regions.³ They include, for example, the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann (1882–1950), the theologian Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930), the biologist Jacob von Uexküll (1864–1944), the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932) and the mathematician Georg Cantor (1845–1918).

Germans left their imprint across the cultures of Livonia, not least, linguistically. Finnish and Estonian are closely related languages, but Estonian is distinguished by the proportion of its lexicon that is of German origin, including the terms for art and painter: ‘kunst’ and ‘maaler.’ For a long time, German was the language of scientific and intellectual exchange. In 2000, for example, the first volume was published in Tallinn of a three-volume anthology of art historical texts in Estonia, covering the period from the late eighteenth century to 1918; the majority of the excerpts were originally written in German.⁴

It is the place of Germans in Estonia that is the subject of this book or, rather, the story of how the German-speaking inhabitants of modern-day Estonia developed a sense of local identity and artistic heritage during the nineteenth century, and how the art and architecture of the region developed into a field of study. In keeping with recent scholarship on the German diaspora across central and eastern Europe, a central claim of this book is that they identified themselves as ‘Baltic Germans’ rather than as members of the larger German nation. Hence their local identity as ‘Baltic’ Germans was the focus of communal identity-construction.⁵

Except for a long methodological introduction specially written for this English edition, the volume consists of articles that were previously published elsewhere, some of them originally in Estonian and translated into English for the first time here. They address topics such as: the rise of a sense of local identity through picturesque topographical illustrations; the emergence of a local art historical literature; evolving notions of Baltic and Baltic-German identity; ideas of local cultural heritage and the development of learned societies concerned with the promotion of local heritage; debates over the relation between Baltic German and Estonian heritage.

The essays offer an invaluable source of material on the role of the visual arts in the construction of an identity by a marginal group, and one can think of numerous parallels elsewhere. Jõekalda notes that the formation of a discourse on art and architectural history in Estonia (and the Baltic region more generally) can be fitted into a larger Europe-wide narrative with parallels elsewhere. The question of the relation between Estonian and German Baltic visual and material culture parallels the debate in late nineteenth-century Bohemia that focused on Czech and Bohemian German culture, or Transylvania, where it was the relation between Hungarian, German and Romanian culture that was the centre of interest. Like those examples, a hierarchy was posited in Estonia; high art was the domain of the Baltic Germans, whereas Estonians were restricted to vernacular and folk art. This created challenges for those seeking to write histories of Estonian art after independence in 1918, for it seemed

3) See, for example, Gert von Pistohlkors, *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas: Baltische Länder*, Munich: Siedler Verlag, 1994.

4) Juta Keevallik, Rein Loodus and Lehti Viiroja, eds, *Kunstikirjutus Eestis 1777 – 1863 / Kunstschreibung in Estland von 1777 bis 1863*, Tallinn: Academy of Sciences, 2000. The other two volumes cover the period 1864–1900 (published in 2004) and 1900–1918 (published in 2006).

5) See Krista O’Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin, eds, *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

that the artistic and architectural heritage of their new state was mostly not ‘theirs.’ Yet in contrast to Bohemia and Transylvania, where heritage was pulled into toxic debates over national affiliation, the first generation of Estonian art historians writing around the turn of the century came to accept this complex situation and avoided engaging in pointless battles over whether specific works were ‘German’ or ‘Estonian.’ Indeed, Jõekalda notes, Estonian-speaking scholars neatly sidestepped the issue by distinguishing between ‘Baltic’ art of the period before 1918 and ‘Estonian’ art for the period after although, given that there were still many Germans living in the new state between the wars, this was not without its own flaws.

For researchers interested in the cultures of German communities and societies dispersed across Europe, this is a helpful guide to a subject that is often little known. It is a substantial text, but due to its origins in a set of separately published essays, there is considerable repetition of some basic ideas and historiographic points. This is unfortunate, because the book would undoubtedly have benefitted from more concrete detail. For example, the reader is left with little sense of which *specific* works of art and architecture served the construction of regional and national identities. A parallel example might illustrate the point. In Bohemia, St. Vitus cathedral in Prague and other monuments of its medieval past were the subject of furious debates over whether or not Bohemia was merely a German cultural territory or whether its distinctive culture was also the product of Czech creative endeavour. Architects such as Peter Parler, the Dientzenhofer dynasty or Jan Blažej Santini Aichel were likewise subject to competing claims over nationality. In contrast, Jõekalda discusses only one case in any detail, the twelfth-century church of St. Olaf in Tallinn. Hence, we have only a surface and rather general overview of how German writers described their artistic and architectural heritage. We learn that Baltic Germans identified Gothic architecture as a specific symbolic bearer of communal identity, but what were the monuments with which they identified or which they viewed as particularly significant? This absence of discussion is all the more regrettable since the book contains numerous illustrations of individual historic buildings that, we might presume, acquired significance as emblems of local history and identity.

Considerable space is devoted to Wilhelm Neumann (1849–1919), one of the most prolific and prominent authors of art historical studies of the Baltic region, but other authors seem somewhat anonymous marginal figures. The period in which Neumann and his contemporaries reached maturity was one of extraordinary intellectual ferment, in which established ideas of scientific art history were discarded and new ones advanced by the likes of Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and August Schmarsow, and it would be informative to learn how Neumann related to these new ideas. One contemporary author has suggested that Neumann, for all his status as the putative ‘father of Baltic art history,’ actually had a rather narrow approach.⁶ Whether or not one agrees with this verdict, an interpretation of the significance of his work beyond that of consciousness-raising would have been welcome.

The essays allude to the wider social background – including useful discussion of the creation of societies that formed a crucial part of the infrastructure of enquiry – but they raised further questions one might have wished to be asked. For example, where did would-be scholars train? Given that art history was not taught at Dorpat / Tartu (although Dehio studied

6) Stella Pelše, *Creating the Discipline: Facts, Stories and Sources of Latvian Art History*, *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi*, 19: 3–4, 2010, 26–41.

there), where did they go? This is not a matter of mere provision of extra information, since this may tell us how Baltic Germans identified themselves. Neumann studied at the University of Leipzig, but what about other historians? For much of the nineteenth century art history was taught as part of history degrees, and one presumes that this was how Dehio learned the subject. The University of Tartu was the main higher educational institution for Baltic Germans, drawing students from Riga as well as Tallinn and towns closer to hand. It would therefore be instructive to know what kind of an intellectual centre formed at the university in the nineteenth century. How did discourses of art and architecture relate to other disciplines, such as history and literary study? The essays in this book discuss the relation between art history and ethnography, which started out as an exoticising field of study reflecting the semi-colonial attitudes of Germans and then, in the early twentieth century, was appropriated by Estonians championing national vernacular culture. Otherwise, however, art history is presented here in an intellectual vacuum. Given that it was important for the crystallisation of Baltic German identity, what political discourses did it draw on and inform?

The example of Dehio also suggests that at least some Baltic Germans did indeed see themselves as part of the larger unitary 'Volk' and not merely members of a regional group. So how did Baltic German intellectuals position themselves in relation to that wider German-speaking world? It is striking that Dehio is hardly mentioned in this volume, presumably because he wrote little about the art and architecture of the Baltic regions. Yet this seems unduly narrow as an approach, for his increasingly nationalistic publications invite some form of commentary. Might we interpret them as a compensatory gesture to overcome a sense of being on the margins, of not being sufficiently German? Given that one of the most famous Baltic Germans was Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi architect and ideologist, does this cast doubt on the claim that Baltic Germans were too conscious of their distinctiveness to feel part of the greater German nation?

The answer to this question lies outside the scope of these essays, and it would be unfair to criticise them for not addressing them, but there is nevertheless one curious omission: Russia. The Tsarist administration is hardly mentioned, which seems an odd oversight given the attempt by the author to set Baltic German intellectual life in some kind of social and historical context. Dorpat/Tartu university was originally founded in the 1620s as the *Academia Gustaviana* in what was then a Swedish province. It was closed down in 1710 when Sweden ceded Livonia to Russia as a result of the Great Northern War. It was founded again in 1802 by the German social elite under a new charter granted by Tsar Alexander I. For much of the nineteenth century it enjoyed a 'golden age' as one of the leading universities in the German-speaking world (and certainly in Russia) until, in the 1880s, a policy of russification led to the marginalization of German teaching and scholarship. How did this impact on art historical writing? To what extent did a literature focused on cultivating a distinctive identity encounter official opposition from the Tsarist regime? Or did it serve the purposes of that regime when scholars developed a distinctive regional identity that set them apart from German-speakers elsewhere? Austria-Hungary provides a useful parallel here, where the idea of a Ruthenian identity was encouraged as a way of disavowing similarities between Ukrainian speakers in Habsburg Galicia and those across the border in the Russian Empire. Did Baltic German historiography unwittingly play a comparable role? By not explicitly addressing this question,

this volume seems to have lost an opportunity for a discussion of wider scope, since it points towards the bigger issue of how Baltic Germans defined themselves not only in relation to Estonian but also to their political overlords.

Despite such caveats, this collection of essays should provide an important starting point for anyone interested not only in the historiography of art but also in the cultural and intellectual life of the Baltic region and of the Russian Empire. It will hopefully spur further enquiry into this fruitful topic.



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