



BALTIC GERMAN CHURCH LIFE IN TALLINN DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Abstract

Baltic German church life in Tallinn during the Second World War

Baltic Germans played a prominent role in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church until the beginning of the Second World War. At that time, Hitler invited all Baltic Germans from each Baltic country to resettle in the Third Reich. Still, not all could or wanted to move from Estonia. There remained a small Baltic German community of a few hundred persons, most of them in Tallinn. They struggled through the Soviet occupation of 1940–1941. Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the German army arrived in Tallinn in August 1941. It was once again possible to ring the church bells and go to church. Among the troops that entered Tallinn, there were a few military chaplains who were former pastors of Estonian parishes. They began to hold regular services for the Baltic German community and organised other pastoral activities as well. Bishop Theodor Heckel of the Foreign Office of the German Evangelical Church was kept up to date concerning the situation in Tallinn. The Baltic Germans organised under the name Trinitatis-Gemeinde with the Consistory of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Keywords

Estonia · Tallinn · Baltic Germans · church life · Second World War

Baltic German church life in Estonia had entered a period of clear decline after Estonia became independent in 1918. Baltic Germans had led the Evangelical Lutheran Church since the Reformation, but in 1919 they were ousted from all positions of leadership. This did not mean an end to their strong influence in the church. Around half of the clergy were still Baltic Germans until the mid-1920s. They were dissatisfied with many new developments in the church under Estonian leadership. There were clashes about the ownership of church buildings in Tallinn, the interpretation of Lutheran doctrine, and the reorientation and reorganization of theological education at the University of Tartu. With the mass emigration of Baltic Germans from Estonia in the fall of 1939, the Lutheran church lost a fourth of its clergy. It was the end of organised Baltic German church life in Estonia (Ketola 2000: 326–329; Ketola 2015: 194–208).

This article looks at the last vestiges of the Baltic German ecclesiastical presence in Estonia during the Second World War before Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in late 1944. The archival sources come mostly from the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv in Berlin, Bestand 5 (Kirchliches Aussenamt). The files contain correspondence between the persons involved in this matter in Tallinn and Berlin. There are not many documents in these files, and other sources are even more meager, but what there is, gives us enough material to reconstruct a tentative narrative of how things turned out for the small Baltic-German community trying to retain an approximation of peace-time church life in war-time Tallinn.

Lutheran church life and parish activities in Estonia during the Second World War remain a relatively little-researched subject. General treatises of Estonian church history such as Altnurme 2009, Altnurme 2018 and, Saard 2018 touch it only lightly. Two scholarly articles have delved a little deeper into the subject (Ketola 2003a, Ketola 2003b). The Baltic German role in the Estonian Lutheran Church has been analysed by Ketola 2000 and Ketola 2015. Bishop Theodore Heckel's activities at the head of the Foreign Office of the German Evangelical Church during the Nazi period have been examined by Boyens 2007, Murtorinne 1975, Murtorinne 1990 and Murtorinne 2010.

Of the archival documents at hand, the most comprehensive and detailed is a report by one Wera von Broschniowski who was one of

the leading personalities of the remaining Baltic-German Lutheran community in Tallinn. This community consisted of people from the three former Baltic German parishes, namely Domkirche, St Nikolai, and St Olai, which had been liquidated after the *Umsiedlung*, or mass resettlement, of the Estonian Baltic Germans to Nazi Germany or Warthegau in the fall of 1939. The latter was a Nazi German administrative subdivision formed from parts of the Polish territory annexed in the first months of the Second World War.

There is very little personal information available on Ms Brosch-niowski. She has been described as a „very energetic lady“ (EZA 5/855, Vermerk Heckel, 13.11.1941). Her report is proof of an intelligent and observant mind and a personality capable of organizing matters. I have made extensive use of her report which is the best first-hand source we have on the post-1939 troubles of the Baltic German Lutherans who remained in Tallinn. I have been able to find only one mention of her in the Estonian war-time newspapers. On 7 September 1944, she placed a missing person advertisement in the newspaper *Postimees*. She requested information about the whereabouts of a certain Ms Alma Pelju (Pr Alma Pelju 1944).

Other notable authors of documents in the files are Bishop Theodor Heckel, pastor Robert Walter, and pastor Johannes Walter, Robert's brother. Theodor Heckel had been since 1934 the director of the Foreign Office of the German Evangelical Church (Deutsche Evangelische Kirche) in Berlin (Bautz 1990). In addition to a number of letters received by Heckel or copies of letters sent by him, there are two memoranda (Vermerk) written by him.

Robert Walter was the former pastor of the German St Nikolai parish in Tallinn. His brother, Johannes, was the former pastor of the Kodavere parish on the shores of Lake Peipus (Neander 1967: 143; Ketola 2000: 332). They reported on different aspects of parish activities in Tallinn.

Bishop Heckel is known for his interest in strengthening the bonds between the German Evangelical Church and the Nordic Lutheran churches. In order to achieve this, he visited Finland several times during the Second World War (Murtorinne 2010: 171–172). The wider context of this activity was the church political strategy for the New Europe; „the realignment of the European church organizations in their relationship

to Germany“ devised by the Kirchliches Aussenamt in 1940. It entailed appealing to the German origins of Luther and the Reformation and seeking ways to bring the European Lutheran churches more closely into the German sphere of influence and to combat the increased Anglican influence. Lutheran churches were not the only target of this policy. There were also detailed plans concerning Orthodox Churches in the Balkans and western Protestant churches (Murtorinne 1975; Murtorinne 1990: 30–31; Boyens 2007: 55). Both the Finnish and Estonian Lutheran churches had entered ecumenical negotiations with the Church of England in 1933 and 1936 respectively. Baltic Germans in Estonia were saddened by the cutting off of ties to the church in Germany and German theology. (Ketola 2000: 286; Pajunen 2008: 28; Ketola 2012: 8)

The Baltic Countries were not explicitly mentioned in the Kirchliche Aussenamt’s 1940 plan although the Scandinavian churches were. Heckel is not known to have visited Estonia during the war, but I aim to show in this article that Heckel extended the proposed „realignment“ and his interest for Nordic Lutheranism to the Estonian Lutheran Church as well. In this regard, Baltic German Lutheran pastors had an important role in his vision for the future of the Estonian church in the New Europe.

At the beginning of November 1941, Bishop Theodor Heckel received a letter from Ms Wera von Broschniowski from Tallinn. Broschniowski expressed her joy at the liberation of Estonia by the German Wehrmacht and trusted this would lead to re-establishing contacts with „evangelischen Glaubensgenossen“ outside the borders of Estonia. Broschniowski wanted to explain the current situation of the small German-speaking evangelical community in Tallinn to Heckel (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Broschniowski referred to the forced liquidation of the German parishes of Tallinn Cathedral, St Nikolai and St Olai, following the mass emigration of the Baltic German community to Germany or areas occupied by Germany in late 1939. Not all Baltic Germans had emigrated. There were still enough of them to constitute a proper parish, but they

could not fulfill the formal conditions for holding elections to the parish board because they were no longer members of any particular parish (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

At the beginning of 1940, the remaining group of Baltic Germans from the three Tallinn parishes consisted of around 2 000 people. They were served by the former pastor of the German Cathedral parish [Carl-Herbert Hausen] who had remained in Tallinn. He finally moved to Germany in May 1940. After he left, the Baltic Germans resorted to the services of two retired Baltic German pastors who lived in the countryside. Occasional ecclesiastical help was provided by the pastor of the Swedish St Mikael's parish (EZA 5/855, Wera v. Broschniowski to Bishop Heckel, 1.11.1941). Broschniowski did not name the two retired pastors but obviously, they were Ernst Lüdig of Karuse and Hanila, and Hellmut Thomson of Hageri (Ketola 2000: 333). The Swedish pastor – whom Broschniowski also did not name – must have been Ivar-Hans Poëll (Veem 1988: 436).

The Soviet occupation of Estonia which commenced in the summer of 1940 resulted at the beginning of 1941 in a late resettlement wave (or *Nachumsiedlung*) of a majority of the remaining Baltic Germans and also those Estonians who, because of their close contacts to the Germans, had reason to fear reprisals from the Soviet authorities (Garleff 2002: 541). Among these late resettlers were pastors Lüdig and Thomson. During the German occupation of the Baltic countries, Baltic Germans who had resettled in Warthegau appealed to the Nazi authorities that they be granted the permission of *Rücksiedlung*, or return to the countries they had left. Hitler decided in September 1941 that this was out of the question as they had already been assigned new homes in the formerly Polish areas (Myllyniemi 1973: 160–161).

Baltic German church life continued despite the dramatic drop in the number of parishioners. According to Broschniowski, there were still around 500 people who for one or another reason had been unable – or perhaps unwilling – to join the leavers. After the last ship to Germany had left in March 1941, those who remained were faced with a difficult task: How to preserve a semblance of the old Baltic German parish life. The Word of God was for many people the only thing giving them solace in times of political anxiety and tension. Prison or deportation were all

too possible destinies for anyone living under Soviet occupation (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

The ecclesiastical desperation of the Baltic Germans was relieved to an extent by pastor Kurt Saarse (until 1936 Steinberg) who was the pastor of the Estonian cathedral parish in Tallinn. He started to organise services in both Estonian and German. Broschniowski wrote to Heckel saying that in the eyes of the authorities, this qualified Saarse as an enemy of the state and he was deported (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941). Saarse was banished to Solikamsk in Northern Russia in 1941 and died there at a forced labor camp in 1942 (Veem 1988: 446).

Since Good Thursday 1941, which fell on 10 April, the Baltic German congregation had held services in the Swedish St Mikael's church in Tallinn. Previously they had worshipped irregularly in St Nikolai's church. They tried to negotiate with the Estonian parish there to make German-speaking services regular, but as that did not work out, they sought refuge at the Swedish church. The German services in the Swedish church continued regularly until Operation Barbarossa commenced and the German–Russian war broke out on 22 June 1941. At that time Soviet authorities implemented a temporary closing of all churches, lasting from June to August (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

The entry of German troops into Tallinn in August 1941 was cause for joy not only for the Baltic Germans. Once again it was possible to ring church bells which the Soviet occupiers had forbidden. The people were so eager to participate in thanksgiving services in the churches that not everyone could fit inside. It seems that for most Estonians – but not all – the invading Germans were heroes worthy of a warm welcome (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Expressions of joy were dampened by the memories of those killed or deported. During the mass deportations of 14–16 June and July 1941, the Soviets deported more than 10 000 Estonians to Siberia. Similar operations took place in Latvia and Lithuania (Maripuu, Kaasik 2006: 363–379). The Estonian Lutheran Church lost 24 pastors who were either killed, deported to Russia, or forcibly mobilised into the Red Army. The other Estonian churches suffered heavy personnel losses as well. (Ketola 2003a: 122). The same happened to many members of the parish councils (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Broschniowsky reported that after the mass deportations of June 1941, the Baltic German congregation comprised around 350 registered persons. She believed that, in reality, the number might rise to 500–600 or even higher as the German civilian administration brought in more people. Services in the Swedish church were well-attended and the church was often full (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

The Baltic German congregation held a thanksgiving service in the Swedish church on 31 August. The service was officiated by a guest preacher who was evidently Pastor Robert Walter. He was now a military chaplain in the Wehrmacht and had arrived with the German troops. His brother Johannes Walter was a Wehrmacht chaplain as well and had accompanied his brother to Tallinn. The Baltic German congregation was overjoyed and immediately contacted the appropriate military offices to apply for permission for the two Walters to start holding regular services in German. This permission was granted (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Nevertheless, this arrangement was not likely to be a permanent solution. Broschniowski explained that the congregation was worried that the Wehrmacht might – without warning – move the Walters out of Tallinn as the war situation demanded. Under the circumstances, it seemed very difficult to find a new permanent pastor for the congregation. On the one hand, there were not many Estonian pastors who could speak German fluently enough, and on the other, the Estonian clergy in general had been severely depleted during the past summer's ordeals. Broschniowski hoped that Bishop Heckel could arrange for a permanent pastor for the congregation (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Broschniowski asked Bishop Heckel whether the salary of the new pastor could be paid at least partly by the church offices in Germany because the poor Baltic German congregation could hardly afford to do so. They could arrange for the new pastor's accommodation, including heating and lighting but not much else. Broschniowski pointed out that Pastor Saarse had received his salary mostly from the Estonian cathedral parish and for that reason had not burdened the Baltic German congregation financially. Broschniowski thought that there was a possibility the congregation might at some point get back some of the

nationalised property of the liquidated German parishes in which case it would be better off financially and able to take care of the new pastor's salary. She admitted this was rather uncertain as the currently existing congregation was not the legal successor of any of the liquidated parishes (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Broschniowski pleaded with Heckel to help the Baltic German congregation preserve their church life „at the dawn of a bright future“. She said that for the new pastor there would also be tasks other than just holding services. He could reopen the German seamen's mission in Tallinn. After the normalization of the Baltic Sea ship routes, the mission would once again be needed. Other work field for the pastor would be organizing care for the elderly and sick. In contrast to Germany, in Estonia, this was still largely a task of the parishes and church organizations. A third task would be visiting the small pockets of Baltic Germans in smaller towns like Tartu and Pärnu or even smaller places (EZA 5/855, Broschniowski to Heckel, 1.11.1941).

Around the same time as he received Wera von Broschniowski's letter, Heckel also got a letter from a pastor Frizewski who wrote from a hospital in Tallinn.¹ Evidently, Frizewski related to Heckel some of the same facts as Broschniowski had. In his reply to Frizewski, Heckel outlined his vision for the future Estonian Lutheran Church. In his view, helping the Baltic German community in Tallinn was not the only important thing. The whole Estonian Lutheran Church needed support from the German Evangelical Church. This was needed to help Estonian Lutherans find their place in the churches' New Europe. In Heckel's opinion, it was in the Estonian Lutheran Church's interests to let at least a few of the emigrated Baltic German pastors return to active ecclesiastical service in Estonia (EZA 5/855, Heckel to Frizewski, 18.11.1941).

After receiving Wera von Broschniowski's letter, Bishop Heckel had the chance to talk with Robert Walter in Berlin in mid-November when Walter was on a leave from his unit. Walter told him that on Sundays he and his brother held ordinary services, children's services, and Bible

¹ No information can be found on Frizewski; who he was, where he had been pastor or even what his first name was. He remains a mystery. He may have been a Wehrmacht chaplain.

lessons. There were almost no men in the congregation. Of the five-member committee formerly leading the congregation, three had been deported by the Soviets. Broschniowski was one of the remaining committee members (EZA 5/855, Vermerk Heckel, 13.11.1941).

Heckel outlined for Walter several things he considered necessary. First, the committee had to be supplemented by people who were politically unblemished. Second, the congregation should strive to get the Walter brothers an exemption from military service. The congregation should plead with the head of the civil administration that a German pastor be appointed to them through the mediation of the German Evangelical Church. Third, it would be good if the congregation could acquire legal title to a church building. Walter told Heckel that the head of the Estonian Lutheran Church, Bishop Johan Kõpp had indeed offered the St Olai church for the congregation's use. However, the church was so big that the current Estonian congregation – not to mention the even smaller German group – could not afford the maintenance costs. Still, Heckel advised the congregation to accept the legal title. They could then agree to leave the church to the Estonian congregation's use for the time being. In the future, a church of their own would prove necessary. Heckel also asked Walter to convince Bishop Kõpp that it would be sensible to re-employ a number of Baltic German pastors who had left the country in 1939. This move could be motivated by the historical connections of Estonian Lutheranism to German theology and study in German universities (EZA 5/855, Vermerk Heckel, 13.11.1941). Heckel seemed to be largely unaware of the animosity towards the Baltic German pastors that had caused so many problems in the church before the Second World War.

Sometime after having met with Robert Walter, Heckel sent him a letter that contained another letter addressed to Broschniowski. In it, Heckel promised to do everything he could to help the congregation in Tallinn. He advised Broschniowski that the most burning matter was to try and arrange for Robert Walter to become their regular pastor. If the congregation succeeded in convincing the military and civil authorities of the importance of this matter, the German Evangelical Church would take care of Walter's salary (EZA 5/855, Heckel to Robert Walter, 25.11.1941).

The reorganizing of Baltic German church life was thus in an active phase in November 1941. There were two channels of information from Tallinn to the German church officials in Berlin. Ten days after Wera von Broschniowski wrote to Bishop Heckel, Pastor Johannes Walter sent a letter to Oberkonsistorialrat Hans Wahl in Berlin (EZA 5/855, Johannes Walter to Oberkonsistorialrat Dr. H. Wahl, 11.11.1941). Walter had emigrated in the fall of 1939 but had now returned to Tallinn, if only temporarily. Hans Wahl worked in the Kirchenbundesamt of the German Evangelical Church in Berlin (Weisse 1991: 639).

Johannes Walter outlined the situation in Tallinn in much the same terms as his brother had done for Heckel. One thing that did not come up in Robert Walter's discussion with Heckel was the matter of field services arranged for the soldiers. Johannes Walter said these could not replace ordinary services in the church and thus were not of much help to the congregation because they were so irregular and rare (EZA 5/855, J. Walter to Wahl, 11.11.1941).

The Baltic German congregation became formally part of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church when the Lutheran Church Consistory accepted the request to establish a new German parish in Tallinn under the name Trinitatis-Gemeinde. It became subordinate to the Tallinn deanery and thus a part of the Estonian Lutheran Church. The request had been signed by Wera von Broschniowski together with another member of the parish.² Wahl received news of the consistory's decision via Johannes Walter (EZA 5/855, J. Walter to Wahl, 25.11.1941).

From the post-1941 period, there are not many documents in the Evangelisches Zentralarchiv concerning the Trinitatis-Gemeinde. Most of these concern practical matters like sending religious literature from Germany to Tallinn. In October 1942, Bishop Heckel wrote a memorandum based on news he had received from Tallinn. The parish still enjoyed the hospitality of the Swedish church. A solution to the question of a pastor remained open. Robert Walter had left Tallinn for other tasks, but his brother still continued serving the congregation. In addition to him, a number of German pastors „in army grey“ had visited the parish. The relations with the Estonian church were good and the

² See EELKKA, Konsistooriumi koosolekute protokollid 1941. Protokoll nr 15, 17.–18.11.1941, 12. I thank Priit Rohtmets for providing me with the document.

parish had complete freedom of action (EZA 5/855, Vermerk Heckel, 19.10.1942).

The last advertisement for a service in the Trinitatis-Gemeinde can be found on 2 June 1944 in the Revaler Zeitung. In September 1944, the situation became desperate as the Red Army closed in on Tallinn. People struggled to escape abroad. Bishop Kõpp and the consistory gave the clergy a free hand in deciding whether to remain or escape. Half of the clergy escaped either to Sweden or Germany (Ketola 2003b: 534). Johannes Walter went missing in 1945. Robert Walter died in West Germany in 1974 (Veem 1988: 462). Bishop Heckel survived the war and died in West Germany in 1967 (Bautz 1990).

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Eestikeelne kokkuvõte

Baltisaksa kirikuelu Tallinnas Teise maailmasõja ajal

Kuni Teise maailmasõja puhkemiseni mängisid baltisakslased Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirikus silmapaistvat rolli. Sõja alguses kutsus Hitler sakslasi Balti riikidest ümber asuma Kolmandasse Reichi, ent mitte kõik ei soovinud või ei saanud seniselt kodumaalt lahkuda. Eestisse, peamiselt Tallinna, jäi väike, paarisajast inimesest koosnev baltisaksa kogukond, kellel tuli 1940–1941 läbi elada Nõukogude okupatsiooni katsumused. Juunis 1941 ründas natsionaalsotsialistlik Saksamaa Nõukogude Liitu ja sama aasta augustis jõudsid Saksa väed Tallinnasse. Taas oli võimalik helistada kirikukelli ja minna jumalateenistusele. Koos väeüksustega saabusid Tallinnasse ka mõned sõjaväekaplanid, kes olid varem töötanud Eestis koguduste vaimulikena. Nüüd hakkasid nad pidama baltisakslastele jumalateenistusi ja korraldama muud pastoraalset tegevust. Koostöös Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kiriku Konsistoriumiga asutati saksakeelne Tallinna Kolmainu kogudus ehk Trinitatis-Gemeinde ning piiskop Theodor Heckelile Saksa Evangeelse Kiriku välisasjade osakonnast edastati Tallinnas toimuvast järjepidevalt teavet.

Märksõnad

Eesti · Tallinn · baltisakslased · kirikuelu · Teine maailmasõda