

Afterword: Self-Determination and Recognition in the Baltic States, 1917–1922

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Abstract. This afterword outlines the current state of research of self-determination and recognition in the Baltic region during the First World War and its aftermath. Examining the subtle transformations in the meaning of the concept of self-determination in this period reveals that a fundamental consensus emerged among the Allied and Associated Powers concerning the illegitimacy of territorial acquisition and annexations. However, there were also differences regarding theories of the state and understandings of federalism that informed their views on self-determination. Moreover, national independence was not seen by Baltic national leaders as a primary goal before the start of the First World War, until it came to be advocated by two warring Great Powers: Imperial Germany and Soviet Russia.

Keywords: Baltic states; First World War; self-determination; recognition; Woodrow Wilson; the Brest-Litovsk Moment; Imperial German conception of self-determination; the Bolshevik conception of self-determination

The idea of the self-determination of peoples gained extraordinary resonance during the First World War. This is also reflected in the foundational documents of the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania which invoke this idea. The term appears not only in

their declarations of independence, but also in the treaties that each of these states concluded with Soviet Russia. Furthermore, the Tartu Peace Treaty of 2nd February 1920 is the first international treaty to mention it in human history.¹ How did this idea gain such prominence in the Baltic context? How did the representatives of these new states and their domestic rivals interpret it? What was its meaning and significance for the Great Powers that granted recognition to these states? What role did it play in these states' "road to recognition"? The *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* special issue "Recognition: de facto and de jure" invites us to revisit these fundamental questions.

The goal of this afterword – essentially a historiographical essay and historical overview at once – is to provide some general reflections on the findings of this special issue, and the current state of the art in the study of these topics and this period.² This afterword will venture to weave together the different national perspectives in the Baltic region into a single narrative, whilst also seeking to suggest some ways in which the more nationally or regionally focussed scholarship on Baltic history could be brought into dialogue with broader transnational studies on self-determination and recognition.³ This afterword will also demonstrate that there is a value in reintegrating the study of the intellectual and political history of self-determination with that of recognition and diplomatic history. Indeed, it is precisely on the example of the Baltic states that we can begin to appreciate the relevance of the intellectual history of self-determination for understanding (at least some of) the practices of recognition. Insofar as the different interpretations of self-determination crystallised in the years around 1918, the main focus will be on this period.

- 1 L. Mälksoo. The Soviet Approach to the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination: Russia's Farewell to Jus Publicum Europaeum. – *Journal of the History of International Law*, 2017, 19, 200–218, specifically, 207–208.
- 2 This discussion is exclusively based on English-, German-, and Estonian-language historiography. It should thus be regarded as an invitation to discussion rather than any kind of conclusive statement.
- 3 Remarkably, two recent interpretations of the intellectual history of self-determination do not even mention the Baltic case in their discussion of the period of the Great War, see: E. Weitz. *Self-Determination: How a German Enlightenment Idea Became the Slogan of National Liberation and a Human Right*. – *The American Historical Review*, 2015, 120, 2, 462–496; A. Liebich. *Cultural Nationhood and Political Statehood: The Birth of Self-Determination*. Routledge, London, New York, 2022. On recognition, including that of the Baltic states, see: M. Fabry. *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States since 1776*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010, 132–134. On the collapse of the continental empires, see: A. Roshwald. *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923*. Routledge, London, New York, 2001.

SELF-DETERMINATION BEFORE THE BOLSHEVIK AND BREST-LITOVSK MOMENTS

In recent years, Boris Chernev has made a powerful case for the “Bolshevik” and “Brest-Litovsk moments” preceding the more famous “Wilsonian moment”.⁴ We will see below that this is indeed roughly a correct view when we are looking for ways in which self-determination emerged as an international principle during the First World War. However, the idea had a long prehistory as a domestic aspiration in the Baltic region.⁵ As various sociologically oriented studies on the history of Baltic national movements have shown, there was a gradual rise of national self-consciousness among different national groups inhabiting Russia’s western peripheries.⁶ Indeed, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, a number of thinkers and national leaders were demanding forms of autonomy, self-government, or even self-determination in the Russian Empire.

Let us thus begin by briefly comparing the historical circumstances in which the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian claims to self-determination emerged. In the case of the Lithuanian national movement, there were different historical political entities (the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth existing until 1795; the medieval Lithuanian polity) which national leaders could invoke in their self-understanding and political discourse. Latvian and Estonian national leaders, by contrast, could only imaginatively construct the idea of lost independence. In any case, it was common to refer to the medieval conquest and colonisation by German crusaders and merchants as explanations for the current

- 4 B. Chernev. *The Brest-Litovsk Moment: Self-Determination Discourse in Eastern Europe before Wilsonianism*. – *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 2011, 22, 3, 369–387; B. Chernev. *The Twilight of Empire: The Brest-Litovsk Conference and the Remaking of East-Central Europe, 1917–1918*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2017; on the “Wilsonian moment”, see: E. Manela. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007. For a broader prehistory of the term, see: E. Weitz. *Self-Determination, and the introduction of this special issue*.
- 5 Cf. Chernev’s uninformed reference to “largely illiterate Latvian and Estonian peasants” when discussing what kinds of collective “selves” could be found in the Baltic littoral, *The Brest-Litovsk Moment*, 376. The level of literacy among Latvian and Estonian peasants was 96 per cent according to the 1896 census in the Russian Empire, A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*. Palgrave MacMillan, Houndmills, 2010, 85. The level of literacy in the Lithuanian area was considerably lower (just below 50 per cent), yet much higher than the average in the Russian Empire (just below 30 per cent), see: T. Balkelis. *The Making of Modern Lithuania*. Routledge, New York, 2009, 8.
- 6 See: E. Jansen. *Eestlane muutuv asjas. Seisusühiskonnast kodanikuühiskonda*. Ajalooarhiiv, Tartu, 2007; C. Wetherell, A. Plakans. *Borders, Ethnicity, and Demographic Patterns in the Russian Baltic Provinces in the Late Nineteenth Century*. – *Continuity and Change*, 1999, 14, 1, 33–56.

national composition and power relations in Russia's Baltic provinces. However, in both cases there existed a triangular power dynamic, rather than a simple dual constellation (or claims to it). Alongside the imperial government, two very different national groups emerged with different claims to political power: the respective national movements arising mainly on the basis of ethnic majority (in the Lithuanian area, the population as a whole was considerably more mixed than in the Latvian and particularly Estonian territories), and a numerically small, yet politically and socio-economically more powerful national group with a strong sense of historical identity – in case of Lithuanians, Poles (or the Polish-speaking population which identified with Poland), and in case of Latvians and Estonians, the Baltic Germans.

The relationships of these dominant national groups to the imperial government, of course, were different (varying further along particular estates or social groups). In the Lithuanian area, the Polish-speaking elites traditionally opposed the Russian imperial authority and there was anti-Russian sentiment more broadly, insofar as these elites had suffered from severe repressions after the uprisings of 1830 and 1863. As Tomas Balkelis has argued, a separate peasant-based Lithuanian elite emerged thanks to the modernised imperial educational system towards the end of the nineteenth century, whilst the experience of cultural Russification nevertheless alienated this new elite from the imperial government. It simultaneously also began to distance itself from the Polish-speaking elites.⁷ In the Baltic provinces (Livonia, Estonia, Courland), the Baltic German estates had seen their privileges confirmed by successive rulers until 1881. Even after the reforms of the 1880s – which ushered in profound changes in municipal governments – the provincial administration remained with the Baltic German *Ritterschaften* whose individual members were generally loyal to the imperial government. In cities, too, there evolved parallel and mutually exclusive national societies. Among Latvians and Estonians, anti-German sentiment was strong, insofar as there was a widespread sense that the medieval conquest and colonisation of their lands by Germans was the root cause of the rise of serfdom, poverty, and the absence of political representation for local populations. The relationship of the Estonian and Latvian populations to the Russian imperial government, by contrast, was relatively positive (particularly until 1905), as it was seen as the only power capable of crushing that of the Baltic German nobility.⁸

7 T. Balkelis. *The Making of Modern Lithuania*, 34–35.

8 For a comparative discussion of the developments in Lithuanian lands and Baltic provinces, see: A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 68–94.

There was thus not only culturally, but also socio-economically, and politically fertile ground for the rise of ideas of linguistic-cultural peoplehood in Russia's western peripheries, whereas the ideas of territorial (provincial) peoplehood had only a weak resonance among the native populations. The national movements and public spheres of all these different national groups developed separately. Thanks to the rise of national printed press and grass-root societal activity involving the creation of numerous voluntary organisations, the Lithuanian-, Estonian-, and Latvian-speaking populations developed their own public spheres and civil societies.⁹

However, as several recent studies have shown, ideas of linguistic-cultural peoplehood should not automatically be linked to those of national self-determination in a strong sense, understood as a longing for, or pursuit of, an independent nation-state.¹⁰ The leaders of these national groups or movements did not see national independence as a desirable, let alone realistic goal. Although the term "self-determination" was occasionally used, claims to self-determination were most commonly described as a "nationalities question" (when viewed as a "problem"), or as those arising from the "rights of nationalities" (when the ideal was invoked by the representatives of subject nationalities, or some other vocal defenders of their rights, such as social democratic parties). Visions of the federalisation of the empire emerged in the more liberal circles of Baltic Germans already in the 1860s, leading to (largely unjustified) accusations of "separatism" from the Russian liberal press.¹¹ As the socio-economic situation of the Estonians and Latvians began to improve, the leaders of their national movements also tentatively proposed the idea that the administrative borders of the Baltic provinces should be adjusted to reflect the ethnographic borderline between them.¹² For Lithuanians, the idea of a Polish-Lithuanian federalism had largely lost its appeal for

9 See: E. Jansen. *Eestlane muutuv asjas*. See also: T. Balkelis. *The Making of Modern Lithuania*.

10 K. Piirimäe. *Federalism in the Baltic: Interpretations of Self-Determination and Sovereignty in Estonia in the First Half of the 20th Century*. – *East Central Europe*, 2012, 39, 237–265; D. J. Smith. *Across the Lines: National Self-determination in the Baltic between the Russian, German and Allied Conceptions*. – *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis*, 2015, 31, 155–168; cf. T. Balkelis, *War, Revolution and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018.

11 E. Piirimäe. *Humanität versus Nationalism as the Foundation of the Russian Empire*. *Jegór von Sivers' Herderian Cosmopolitanism*. – *Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 2012, 1/2 (139/140), 79–113, specifically 95–102.

12 M. Lehti. *A Baltic League as a Construct of the New Europe: Envisioning a Baltic Region and Small State Sovereignty in the Aftermath of the First World War*. Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 1999, 61–66; H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*. – *Iseseisvusmanifest: artikleid, dokumente ja mälestusi*. Toim. A. Pajur, T. Tannberg. *Rahvusarhiiv*, Tartu, 2014, 163–234, specifically 168–169.

fear of Polish dominance by the early twentieth century, albeit there were some exceptions, such as the *Krajowcy* movement.¹³ Among different political parties, the Social Democrats were the leading political party to buttress the ideal of national self-determination *and* the federalisation of the Russian Empire.¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, various kinds of visions emerged in all national movements, different authors calling for federalising the Russian Empire along national lines.¹⁵ Particularly during the first and second Duma, to which numerous Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian representatives were also elected, international collaboration within the empire strengthened.¹⁶

BALTIC NATIONAL LEADERS BETWEEN IMPERIAL GERMAN AND BOLSHEVIK OFFERS OF SELF-DETERMINATION

The First World War brought changes for all these national groups and movements. Lithuanian developments diverged significantly from the Latvian and Estonian ones at the beginning of the First World War. Lithuanian lands were invaded and occupied by Germany in 1915, and it was the Lithuanian exiles who first began to seriously develop, and campaign for, a union of Lithuania and Latvia (and subsequently also an independent Lithuanian state).¹⁷ Meanwhile, Latvians came to see early on that the military frontline was running right through the middle of their territories, which did not, however, prevent their leading intellectuals from voicing demands for autonomy within Russia.¹⁸ In Estonian lands, this was a period of intensified discussions on the federalisation of the Russian Empire. Already the promise of autonomy for Poland by the Tsar at the beginning of the war created a stir also among Estonian leaders. Of course, even more decisive was the crucial

13 D. Smith. *Across the Lines*, 157.

14 On Socialist thinking on self-determination in the Baltic, see: K. Piirimäe. *Federalism*, 243–249.

15 H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus ja pragmaatika: Tartu versus Pariis. – Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 2020, 3/4 (173/174), 243–301, specifically 247–249; K. Piirimäe. *Federalism*, 248–252.

16 A. Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 92–93. On the Baltic question in the imperial Duma, see: T. Karjahärm. *Vene impeeriumi parlament ja Baltikum, 1906–1917*. Argo, Tallinn, 2021.

17 See: T. Balkelis. *War, Revolution*. See also the introduction of this special issue.

18 M. Lehti. *A Baltic League*, 75–78.

moment of the February Revolution in 1917.¹⁹ New reform visions were put forward, in which it was proposed that a democratic constitution of Russia would combine territorial and democratic autonomy for the *Bundesländer* (drawn on the basis of ‘natural’, i.e. national and economic lines) with cultural autonomy for minorities within the latter.²⁰ There were hopes that the Provisional Government would really be willing to take steps in the direction of transforming Russia into a federal state, adopting elements from the constitution of the US or Switzerland.²¹ This did not happen, as the Provisional Government supported a rather more centralised vision of Russia. Nevertheless, a major achievement from the viewpoint of the Estonian national movement was the merger of the province of Estland with the Estonian-speaking area of northern Livonia in April 1917. Indirect democratic elections were held in both Estonia and the unoccupied parts of Livonia (north-Latvian territory); the Estonian Provincial Assembly convened in July 1917 and the Latvian one in September 1917.²²

The momentum of reforms slowed down in summer 1917 and there was widespread disappointment among different national movements, which supported their bottom-up collaboration. The pivotal moment in this respect was the Kiev Congress of September 1917 at which new ideals of federalism were voiced. Instead of top-down reforms, it was now expected that minority nations themselves would take the initiative into their hands.²³ Furthermore, the Latvian and Estonian governments were most actively looking for allies in the Baltic Sea region. Initially, there were hopes in Estonia of establishing a Baltic-Scandinavian federation, or at least a union with Finland, which nominally was still part of Russia at that point. This hope came to nothing, however, as soon as it turned out that Finnish leaders were seriously considering closer ties with imperial Germany.²⁴ By autumn 1917, Germany had also decisively

19 K. Piirimäe, *Federalism*, 248–252; H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*, 173–174; H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus*, 249–251.

20 K. Piirimäe. *Federalism*, 250–251. On Estonian reform visions, see also: J. Undusk. *Iseseisvusmanifesti intertekstuaalsus*. – *Iseseisvusmanifest: artikleid, dokumente ja mälestusi*, 30–34.

21 A most interesting reform proposal from this period stems from the historian Hans Kruus, an Estonian Social Democrat: H. Kruus. *Rahvusautonoomia (1917)*. – H. Kruus. *Eesti küsimus*. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 2005, 218–316 (on Switzerland and the US as models, see specifically 309–315).

22 For a more detailed overview, see: A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 95–96. For the views of the Provisional Government on the Baltic nationalities’ question, see: K. Brüggemann. *Die Revolutionen von 1917 in den russischen Ostseeprovinzen*. – *Zeitenwende: deutsche und russische Erfahrungen 1917–1919*. Hrsg. von J. Tauber, A. Tschubarjan. Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, Berlin, 2022, 119–130, specifically 123–124.

23 M. Lehti. *A Baltic League*, 80–81; H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*, 188–189.

24 M. Lehti. *A Baltic League*, 82–83. It is to be noted, however, that some Estonian leaders, notably among them Konstantin Päts, proposed a plan of Estonian-Finnish union also in

moved eastward, occupying not only Lithuania, but also most of Latvia (Riga fell in August). Furthermore, by that time, German leadership was actively seeking to collaborate with Baltic German Ritterschaften, which one after another proclaimed themselves independent from Russia in autumn 1917, with the view of creating a united Baltic State (Duchy), which would then be united with Germany.²⁵

In spring 2017, German Supreme Army Command came upon the idea of creating further legitimacy for their eastward expansion by taking recourse to the rhetoric of national self-determination, presenting Germany as a liberator of Poland and Lithuania, Courland (occupied since 1915) (and subsequently, Ukraine, and the Baltic provinces (the Baltic Duchy)).²⁶ Germany also allowed the creation of the Vilnius Conference in September 1917, hoping that it would secede from Russia so as to establish a closer relationship with Germany. The Conference elected a special twenty-members Council (*Taryba*) to deal with issues of independence. A representative body was also established in Courland in September 1917 which declared its wish to join Germany. Similar declarations were also procured from Riga, and the Estonian islands of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa, which had been occupied since September 1917.²⁷ In Lithuania, the *Taryba* sought to carve out as much space as possible for true independence.²⁸

The Bolshevik takeover in October 1917 radically changed the course of the war. The Bolsheviks not only wished to pull out of war, but in a series of steps proclaimed their support for self-determination, explicitly opposing annexations as well as accepting the legitimacy of secession. Although such an interpretation had been given to the term earlier, it was a major new development to include a reference to it in a domestic decree of 2nd November.²⁹ It was also mentioned in the constitution of Soviet

April 1918 (when the Estonian territory was occupied by Germans). This was considered a problematic idea from the viewpoint of the Allies (Finland was strongly German-friendly). E. Medijainen. Enesemääramise udus: Eesti ja Ameerika Ühendriigid. – *Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 2016, 1 (155), 41–70, specifically 62.

25 M. Ilmjärv. Balti-küsimus Pariisi Rahukonverentsi eel ja ajal 1918–1920. – *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 2019, 25, 106–151, here 107. See also Heidi Rifk's contribution in this special issue.

26 H. Kalmo. Enesemääramise saatuslik tund, 176–179. M. Kuldkepp. Rahvusliku enesemääramise kaudu Saksamaa külge: eestlased anneksionistliku Saksa poliitika sihtmärgina 1918. aasta okupatsiooni eel. – *Esimene maailmasõda ja Eesti II. Toim.* T. Tannberg. *Eesti Ajalooarhiiv*, Tartu, 2016, 369–433. Chernev, in his 'The Brest Litovsk Moment', does not discuss these early developments in Imperial Germany, attributing seminal significance to the Bolshevik advocacy of the principle since autumn 1917.

27 M. Kuldkepp. *Rahvusliku enesemääramise kaudu Saksamaa külge*, 431.

28 For a concise overview of its tactics, see: A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 98.

29 See: J. Stalin, V. Lenin. Declaration of the Rights of the People of Russia. <<https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/1917/11/02.htm>>, accessed 7th November 2022.

Russia in 1918.³⁰ Whilst there were internal disagreements about the precise relationship of workers' self-determination and that of nations (and about the revolutionary tactics among Bolshevik leaders), Soviet Russia initially left the impression that it was truly going to follow this idea, allowing the *Rada* of Kiev and the Finnish *Eduskunta* to assume the highest authority in Ukrainian and Finnish territories, as well as granting Finland de jure recognition as early as December 1917.³¹ The Soviet leaders of course openly declared, at the same time, that national independence was for them only a necessary transitory step towards a future union between Socialist republics.³²

It has remained debatable to what degree Germany or even the Allied and Associated Powers were responding directly to Soviet Russia's vocal support for the principle of self-determination when they, too, began to refer to this principle at the end of 1917 and in early 1918. In any case, as Chernev has shown, the two sides in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations were engaged in a "discursive power struggle over the various theoretical underpinnings, practical considerations, and procedural aspects of self-determination", vying to become the leading authority on the application of this increasingly important concept, particularly in this part of eastern Europe.³³ As noted also by the editors of this volume in the introduction, Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, at the same time, did not invoke this principle at all, explicitly referring only to "autonomy" for the peoples of Austria-Hungary and promising the restoration of an independent "Poland".³⁴ Rather, it was the address of Wilson of 11th February, in which he uttered the famous remarks about the principle of self-determination as an imperative principle.³⁵ Only over the course of 1918 did the Allied and Associated Powers also join the aforementioned power-struggle.

Further study is needed to trace the precise response of different Baltic intellectuals to Bolshevik ideas on self-determination. What has

- 30 On Lenin's original ideas, expressed in response to Austro-Marxists, in 1915 and 1916, see: B. Chernev. *The Brest-Litovsk Moment*, 370–371. Examining the decree from a constitutional history point of view might merit further study, even the persistent gap between proclaimed values and actual principles of action characteristic of the Bolsheviks.
- 31 See: H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*, 205–206; E. Medijainen. *Enesemääramise udus*, 48.
- 32 R. A. Mark. *National Self-Determination, as Understood by Lenin and the Bolsheviks*. – *Lithuanian Historical Studies*, 2008, 13, 21–39. See also: L. Mälksoo. *The Soviet Approach*, 204–207.
- 33 B. Chernev. *The Brest-Litovsk Moment*, 375.
- 34 See: T. Throntveit. *The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination*. – *Diplomatic History*, 2011, 35, 445–481.
- 35 W. Wilson. *Address of the President of the United States Delivered at a Joint Session of the Two Houses of Congress, February 11, 1918*. <<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d59>>, accessed 8th November 2022.

been researched thoroughly, however, is national leaders' way of handling the new situation. Estonian and Latvian national leaders continued to be faced with their old rivals, Baltic Germans, but now also the Bolsheviks were contending for power in their territories. In Latvia, the support for the Bolsheviks was the greatest of the three Baltic states.³⁶ However, the Bolshevik declarations also opened up new opportunities. Although the precise significance of the Bolshevik decree of 2nd November was debated in Estonia, it provided a legitimating ground for the Provincial Assembly to proclaim itself the highest authority in Estonia, announcing its decision to hold general elections for a Constituent Assembly on 15th November.³⁷ The Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations also encouraged Lithuanian leaders to proclaim the independence of Lithuania, despite the continuing German occupation and without approving of the "eternal ties" with Germany that the German leadership had sought to incorporate in their "Act of independence". Estonian national leaders initially consolidated their efforts to escape the German occupation, and when it proved impossible, proclaimed Estonia's independence on just that one day between the departure of Bolshevik troops from Tallinn and the arrival of German armed forces – the 24th February. As Hent Kalmo has suggested, the rationale for doing so was to secure as solid a juridical status for Estonia as possible. Ironically, as part of this endeavour Estonian national leaders procured the British and French de facto recognition to the Constituent Assembly (which did not even as yet exist).³⁸ Latvia proclaimed independence later the same year, on 18th November, a few days after the German Revolution, and the conclusion of the Armistice.

The complexity of the situation is exemplified in near-simultaneous declarations of independence by Estonia and Lithuania in very different circumstances, and the recognition granted by Germany to independent Lithuania and the "United Baltic Duchy" supported by Baltic Germans in the Baltic provinces.³⁹ In signing the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the Bolsheviks recognised these two states and accepted the separation of the whole Baltic area from Russia.⁴⁰ The crucial task for all these governments, as James

36 A. Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 95–97.

37 H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus*, 252–255; cf. H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*, 212.

38 H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise saatuslik tund*, 230–232.

39 On the different recognitions of Lithuania and their discussion in Lithuanian historiography, see Sandra Grigaravičiūtė's contribution to this special issue; on the Baltic Duchy, see: M. Kuldkepp. *Rahvusliku enesemääramise kaudu*, and Heidi Rifk's contribution to this special issue.

40 J. Hiden. *Estonia – Winning Recognition, 1918–1921*. – *The Estonian Foreign Ministry's Yearbook*, 2008/2009, 71–76, here 71.

Montgomery Baxenfield and Kevin Rändi underline in the introduction, was to find support and recognition from outside. Combining political history, history of propaganda, public and para-diplomacy, and the study of exile networks, a number of recent studies have traced the ways in which different kinds of political actors sought to achieve as much.⁴¹ Of course, quite clearly the Allied Powers recognised early on the value of Estonian and Latvian governments as military allies against Germany, instigating resistance to it. This may have also been the reason why in May 1918, the British and French governments granted recognition to the Estonian Provincial Assembly as a *de facto* government (a similar kind of recognition was granted by Britain to the Latvian Provisional Council in October 1918).⁴² The international status of these states, however, remained undecided. We will return to this issue in the next section.

After the German Revolution in November 1918, the Bolsheviks abolished the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, setting out to reincorporate the Baltic lands (effectively using the tactic of puppet states tried out by Germany during an earlier phase of the war). The Bolshevik principle of national self-determination was now an efficient tool in the politics of territorial acquisition.⁴³ This was the beginning of independence wars in the Baltic region. National Bolsheviks received considerable help from Russia in setting up nominally independent Soviet formations in the territories of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which were all swiftly recognised by Soviet Russia at the end of 1918. In this very act, however, the Soviets immediately announced that the working class, having seized power in these states, would create a “voluntary and inviolable federation of the workers of all nations living in the territory of Russia”.⁴⁴ When the Red Army invaded the Baltic states, it furthermore proclaimed the nationalisation of land. This sharply contrasted with the approach of national governments, which promised land to all those who enlisted in the national forces. National governments also immediately turned to the Allied Powers and Finland for help, and indeed, received it to a considerable degree.⁴⁵ This still did not lead to their *de jure* recognition, however.

41 See: M. Kuldkepp. *Intriigid, provokatsioonid ja iseseisvuse süünd: Eesti välisdelegatsioon ja Aleksander Keskküla*. – *Ajalooline ajakiri*, 2013, 145, 321–374; E. Medijainen. *Enesemääramise udus*, 54–56; Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus*.

42 H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus*, 256; A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 99.

43 M. R. Beissinger. *Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences*. – *Ethnopolitics: Formerly Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 2015, 14, 479–487.

44 L. Mälksoo. *The Soviet Approach*, 206.

45 A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 101–102.

The leaders of all three Baltic national governments were present at the Paris Peace Conference starting in January 1919, yet only unofficially so. Although there were continuing significant differences between the three Baltic states at that point, they were viewed as one group.⁴⁶ For example, only the Latvian and Estonian governments enjoyed de facto recognition. Insofar as Lithuania's relationship to Poland was still unresolved, it could not gain even this kind of recognition from the Allies.⁴⁷ At the same time, it seemed to have no significance that Estonia had a democratically elected parliament, i.e., the Constituent Assembly (*Asutav Kogu*) since April 1919.⁴⁸ The Allied Powers were still waiting to see how the Russian Civil War would evolve. Various kinds of future visions about Russia also continued to circulate.⁴⁹ As it emerges from Heidi Rifk's and Eero Medijainen's contributions, there was also a continuing alignment between the most conservative wing of the Baltic German nobility and the Russian Whites at this point, insofar as they both continued to advocate the idea of a Russian federation with three autonomous Baltic provinces.⁵⁰ As Rifk shows, the conservatives also put considerable pressure on the Allied Powers in order to prevent the passage of land reform legislation, and when it failed, conducted an active propaganda campaign to receive compensation for the expropriated estates. A separate chapter in this long story is also the involvement of the remaining German troops and the formation of the Baltic German militias (*Landeswehr*) in the Baltic; let it, however, only be briefly mentioned here.⁵¹

46 H. Kalmo. Enesemääramise paleus, 263; see also: M. Ilmjärv. Balti-küsimus.

47 T. Balkelis, War, Revolution, 46–49.

48 H. Kalmo. Enesemääramise paleus, 263–264.

49 C. Alston. The Suggested Basis for a Russian Federal Republic': Britain, Anti-Bolshevik Russia and the Border States at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919. – History, 91, 2006, 24–40.

50 E. Medijainen. Enesemääramise udus, 65–67. For the views of Russian nationalists and White Russians on Baltic national movements and eventually, independence, see: K. Brüggemann. Enesemääramine lastetoas? Vene nägemus Eestist revolutsiooni ja kodusõja ajal. – Vene aeg Eestis: uurimusi 16. sajandi keskpaigast kuni 20. sajandi alguseni. Toim. T. Tannberg. Eesti Ajalooarhiivi Kirjastus, Tartu, 2006, 361–385.

51 A. Kasekamp. A History of the Baltic States, 102–103.

THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE
OF SELF-DETERMINATION
FOR THE ALLIED POWERS
AND THE UNITED STATES

In an authoritative study of the evolution of the practices of recognition in European international relations, Mikulas Fabry has argued that in the aftermath of the First World War, the Allies and the US essentially built on, rather than broke from, the previous practice of recognition. Although Wilson, in particular, proclaimed the idea of a “positive” right to self-determination (i.e. promised help with the realisation of this ideal), he and other political leaders resorted to an earlier practice of letting the claimants of self-determination demonstrate their capacity to fight for it. Indeed, just as in the case of the states emerging from the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, different representative organs in the newly emerged Baltic states were first recognised by the Allied Powers as belligerents, letting the force of arms decide their fates.⁵²

However, is it true that the leaders of the Allied Powers (or Wilson, specifically) proclaimed self-determination as this kind of positive right? More research is needed in order to chart the various kinds of uses and transformations of this term during this period. Andre Liebich, for example, suggests that it may have been because of the “Germanic connotations” or the German usurpation of the term early on that the Allied Powers originally defined their cause as that of the “principle of nationality”.⁵³ It also transpires from Liebich’s discussion that one of the prevalent arguments in the British context was the defence of “small nations”, which referred not to the rights of sub-state nations, but to those of “small states”, i.e. states which were attacked and occupied by Great Powers (such as Belgium or Serbia). A subtle change may have, however, happened during the course of war. It seems likely that British public opinion (and at some point also political leadership) was influenced by the authors writing in the periodical *New Europe* that was launched by several intellectuals sympathetic to the cause of peoples in central and eastern Europe in winter 1916–1917. These authors – including Czechoslovakia’s future president Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk – actively came to support the idea that the Habsburg Empire should collapse rather than be reorganised.⁵⁴ One of Masaryk’s arguments in

52 M. Fabry. *Recognizing States*, 118–134.

53 A. Liebich. *Cultural Nationhood*, 70. However, the only proof he provides to support this claim is a citation from Henri Hauser’s critical discussion of this principle.

54 On this periodical, see: H. Hanak. *The New Europe, 1916–20. – The Slavonic and East*

support of this view was that the Habsburgs actively contributed to the project of pan-Germanism, which was inherently inimical to the cause of small nations. Instead, he argued, a league of small nations should be established in central Europe.⁵⁵

Several historians have pointed out that Wilson did not originally support national self-determination, but democratic self-government. According to Trygve Thrøntveit, Wilson identified self-determination with self-government and integration, rather than a right of a linguistic-cultural people to self-determination. He envisioned political, not territorial changes, and by no means advocated the right of secession for all nations. Self-determination was freedom from domination in the international sphere, and territorial autonomy and federalism in the domestic one. Federalisation of empires along territorial-provincial lines was his favoured solution when he proclaimed his support for the principle of self-determination. Among Baltic historians, Medijainen has endorsed this reading, whilst also suggesting that it may have been the Bolsheviks who forced Wilson to increasingly interpret self-determination in ethnic terms.⁵⁶

This interpretation can be further refined in the light of intellectual history. As Duncan Kelly has argued in a recent article, Wilson had studied with a student of the influential Swiss-German state theorist and international lawyer Johann Kaspar Bluntschli – Herbert Baxter Adams. This left a lasting mark on his political thinking. Wilson’s understanding of the “principle of nationality” was embedded in his state theory first outlined in one of his early books, *The State* (1895, republished in 1918). In this book, Wilson strongly opposed direct popular sovereignty, ruled out secession as unconstitutional, and viewed political life as “an evolving, organic body of experience and institutional form with a federal structure”.⁵⁷ This understanding of the principle of nationality emphasised the moral (national) grounding of states. Essentially, this meant that nationhood was constituted through a

European Review, 1961, 39, 369–399. On Czechoslovakia, see also: B. Bari. New Worlds Tackling on Side-tracks: The National Concepts of T. G. Masaryk and Oszkár Jászi during the First World War (1914–1919). – *The First World War and the Nationality Question in Europe: Global Impact and Local Dynamics*. Ed. by X. M. Núñez Seixas. Brill, Leiden, 2020, 115–141.

55 T. G. Masaryk. Pangermanism and the Zone of Small Nations. – *The New Europe: A Weekly Review of Foreign Politics*, 1916, 1, 271–277, particularly 277.

56 T. Thrøntveit. The Fable of the Fourteen Points; E. Medijainen. Enesemääramise udus, 47–48. See also: A. Lynch. Woodrow Wilson and the Principle of ‘National Self-Determination’: A Reconsideration. – *Review of International Studies*, 2002, 28, 419–436.

57 D. Kelly. Woodrow Wilson and the Challenge of Federalism in World War One. – *Federalism*. Ed. by A. Lev. Hart Press, London, 2017, 167–188, particularly 170 and 174–175.

state's constitutional order and history, rather than vice versa.⁵⁸ Although further study is needed to specify Wilson's views on revolutions, it is likely that he believed that this kind of 'nationhood' still continued to exist at a revolutionary moment, and did not imagine a nation to be dissolving into its original constitutive units, and certainly not into a myriad of linguistic-culturally defined peoples. During the First World War, Wilson also associated this kind of state theory with a confederal idea of a union between civilised (democratic) nations all over the world, one that in turn was pitted against autocracies "which simply cannot have friends" and thus relied only on visions of balance of power, even while ostensibly embracing pan-nationalist "federalism". This was obviously a reference to the militaristic vision of pan-Germany.⁵⁹

Of course, when the US intervened in the First World War, Wilson found himself dealing not only with a militaristic pan-Germany, but also large continental empires – like the Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman empires. He granted that at the intersection of the Habsburg and Russian empires there were territories that had a recognised previous political existence and thus deserved independence. This is in itself a theoretically interesting argument that merits further study. Poland(-Lithuania) was clearly such a special case, albeit the difficulty then concerned the question of the borders of a possible restored entity. Wilson's logic was that all kinds of annexations needed to be undone, whilst the restored entities were to meet the criteria of (culturally *and* politically defined) nationality *and* economic *and* military viability. For example, in his Fourteen Points, Wilson declared that Poland should be restored in "territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations", whilst also stipulating that it "should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant".⁶⁰ Wilson also acknowledged Finland's independent statehood.

58 On Bluntschli's complex account of nationality, one that reflected both his Swiss origin and fascination with the Chancellor of the Second Reich, Otto von Bismarck, see: D. Kelly. *Popular Sovereignty as State Theory in the Nineteenth Century. – Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*. Ed. by R. Bourke, Q. Skinner. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 270–296. Interestingly, Estonian authors cited Bluntschli in support of the idea that each nation has a right to a state, see, e.g. H. Kruus. *Rahvusautonoomia* (1917), 291. Kruus did not notice that Bluntschli himself did not appear to support this idea in its absolute form, making a strong case for an understanding of nationality that was compatible with an idea of the federal state, see J. K. Bluntschli. *The Theory of the State*. Authorised English translation from the Sixth Edition. Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2000, specifically 88–97.

59 D. Kelly. Woodrow Wilson, 180. Quotation: W. Wilson, War Messages, 65th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Doc No 5, Serial No 7264, Washington, DC, 1917, 3–8, cited from D. Kelly. Woodrow Wilson, 175.

60 President Wilson's Message to Congress, January 8, 1918. <<https://www.archives.gov/>

These two historical and prospective states were exceptions, however. Wilson's goal clearly was not to replace existing empires with leagues of small nations as was Masaryk's; rather, he supported the idea that these empires would transform themselves into large federal states, which then would in turn form a confederal union with the US and other similar political entities. This is also consistent with his approach in practical politics: despite his alleged closeness with Masaryk, Wilson originally had no intention to support the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, and thus also the creation of an independent Czechoslovakia (despite the latter's federal structure). His goal until June 1917 was simply to separate (indeed liberate) Austria-Hungary from Germany.⁶¹ Yet even then, when Masaryk pressed him on granting recognition to Czechoslovakia, it was only the National Council of Czechoslovakia as a *de facto* belligerent government that was recognised. The actual recognition was supposed to follow after border and minorities' protection issues were to be sorted out at the Paris Peace Conference, or by the League of Nations.⁶²

There were a myriad of different politicians and advisors whose views and political assessments helped shape Wilson's thinking and decisions. As Olavi Arens has shown in a recent article, the supporters of Russia's territorial integrity included both anti-Bolshevik Social Democrats, like John Spargo (the author of the famous Colby note), and the ambassador of the Provisional Government in the US, Boris Bakhmeteff (also spelled as Bakhmetev). The latter consistently defended the idea that only Poland and Finland should be granted recognition as independent states, whereas Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania should achieve autonomy.⁶³ As it emerges from Medijainen's and Sandra Grigaravičiūtė's articles, Bakhmeteff long continued to contest the idea of granting recognition to the Baltic states. Mart Kuldkepp, on his part, has traced the activities of Ivan Narodny (Jaan Sibul), one of the self-appointed representatives of Estonia in the US, who also held on to this understanding of the principle of self-determination in their "public diplomacy".⁶⁴ According to Arens, many of Wilson's advisors at the same time had very different ideas, particularly since they had

milestone-documents/president-woodrow-wilsons-14-points>, accessed 7th November 2022.

61 A. Lynch. Woodrow Wilson, 428.

62 Ibid., 426; M. Fabry. Recognizing States, 123–125; 130–132.

63 O. Arens. Wilsonianism ilma Wilsonita: Ameerika Ühendriigid ja Eesti, 1918–1922. – Ameerika sajand. Toim. K. Piirimäe, M. Kuldkepp. Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, Tartu, 2022, 19–44, particularly 26, 34–40.

64 M. Kuldkepp. Eesti diplomaatilise esinduse küsimus ja Ameerika väliseestlased. – Ameerika sajand, 45–72, specifically 54–68.

close contacts with national leaders and knew the situation in the Baltic region in more detail. Those advisors – which prominently included Colonel Edward House, the Harvard scholar Samuel Eliot Morrison, the coordinator of American humanitarian aid to Europe, including the Baltic states, Herbert Hoover, and many others – insisted that it was a moral responsibility for the US to recognise these states insofar as they were culturally distinct from Russia. Wilson did not acquiesce, however.⁶⁵ Wilson's reticence in granting recognition to the Baltic states should not thus be criticised for its inconsistency – if anything, it was precisely an example of what might be characterised as stubborn consistency. What he might, however, be accused of with more justice is his failure to understand the actual political goals and principles of the Russian Whites or, indeed, their chances of success.

In his thorough overview of the treatment of the Baltic question at the Paris Peace Conference, Magnus Ilmjärv shows how much uncertainty there was still among the Allied representatives regarding the future of the Baltic states. Not only were there different visions of federalism still seriously considered (autonomy for the Baltic territories within Russia, or the French ideas of a zone of buffer states, and a federation of small states acting as a *cordon sanitaire* between the Great Powers of Germany and Russia), but serious problems were also created through Polish politicians' pretensions to recreate a federal union with Lithuania, which Lithuanians rejected.⁶⁶ Recognition was granted to the Baltic states only after it was clear that the Bolsheviks would stay in power. The US still hesitated. Furthermore, as Kalmo has argued, the Estonian leaders essentially decided to take the gamble of concluding separate Baltic treaties with the Bolsheviks, risking losing support and military aid from the Allies, on the one hand, yet having also lost hope for gaining *de jure* recognition, on the other. The Bolshevik offer to grant peace by invoking the principle of self-determination was thus rather appealing, particularly since it was seen as a possible basis for showing the Allied and Associated Powers that Russia had agreed to the secession of its western borderlands.⁶⁷

The adoption of this strategy by the national leaders also led to some important divergences. Originally, the idea was that the four Baltic states (including Finland) would jointly conclude a set of treaties with Russia. This idea – and ultimately also the creation of a Baltic

65 O. Arens. Wilsonianism ilma Wilsonita.

66 M. Ilmjärv. Balti küsimus.

67 H. Kalmo. Enesemääramise paleus, 287.

League – failed.⁶⁸ There were important differences in these states' historical self-understanding and actual problems, which in turn had an impact on their respective interpretations of self-determination. Let us just mention some of them. When thinking about the application of the idea of self-determination, Lithuania highlighted its previous statehood as a Grand Duchy, and ruled out a plebiscite as a possible way of determining its territorial extension (with a view to the dispute with Poland about Vilnius).⁶⁹ The Polish-Lithuanian border remained a highly contested issue. Estonians, by contrast, viewed language as the constitutive trait of nationhood.⁷⁰ Estonians thus set out to start peace negotiations separately, whilst each of the Baltic states indeed ultimately concluded their own treaties with the Bolsheviks. Nevertheless, all three peace treaties mention the principle of the self-determination of peoples.

It is an intriguing question why both sides were accepting of its inclusion. Lauri Mälksoo has suggested that the Bolsheviks thereby sought to convince the domestic audience of their commitment to this principle.⁷¹ Kalmo further highlights the possibility that the Bolsheviks were also trying to impress the Western public by offering a contrast to the Treaty of Versailles which failed to respect this idea. As stated above, the Estonians, on their part, hoped to use it as a means to gain recognition from the Allied and Associated Powers.⁷² This strategy clearly worked. Soviet Russia's recognition of the independence of these countries must have considerably weakened the still powerful "Wilsonian" argument that Russia's territorial integrity needed to be respected as a high-ranking principle. The Allied Powers recognised the Baltic states *de jure* in January 1921, whilst the latter were accepted to the League of Nations in September 1921.

As several contributions to this special issue argue, various kinds of economic and strategic considerations may have proven decisive here. In any case, a different kind of (and to us more familiar) form of "Wilsonianism" ultimately prevailed in the US, too, at least in theory. Very different arguments were invoked in the statement publicising the decision of the US to recognise the Baltic states. Russia's territorial integrity was still presented as a ruling principle, whilst there were also three qualifying arguments added to it: first, "the actual existence of these governments [those of the Baltic states] during a considerable period

68 On the Baltic League, see: M. Lehti. *The Baltic League*.

69 For a concise description of this dispute, see: A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*, 104.

70 *Ibid.*, 289. M. Lehti. *A Baltic League*.

71 L. Mälksoo. *The Soviet Approach*, 209–210.

72 H. Kalmo. *Enesemääramise paleus*, 298–301.

of time”; “the successful maintenance within their borders of political and economic stability”; and finally, that the governments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had “been set up and maintained by an indigenous population”.⁷³ It was on the basis of this kind of “Wilsonianism without Wilson” that the US finally recognised the Baltic states in July 1922.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

Political theorists often lament the elusiveness and malleability of the idea of the self-determination of peoples, underlining the way in which it downplays ‘the critical role of external actors in polity formation’.⁷⁵ Indeed, there is no doubt that the idea of the self-determination of peoples has frequently served as an instrument of great power politics. The developments during the First World War provide an excellent illustration to this claim. Furthermore, it was during this war that self-determination powerfully re-emerged as an international principle.⁷⁶ All the Great Powers involved in the First World War invoked this idea, whilst diverging from each other in their actual interpretations.

Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to dismiss this principle as merely a tool for great power politics. As we have seen in the example of the Baltic nations proclaiming themselves independent in 1918, it was a demand that had arisen in the domestic context. In the Baltic context – also described as Russia’s western peripheries or borderlands – the linguistic-cultural idea of nationhood became prevalent. There were powerful historical reasons for it. Although Lithuania had a previous political existence as part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Lithuanians sought to distinguish themselves from the politically and

73 Digest of International Law. Ed by. G. H. Hackworth. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1940, vol. 1, 201, cited from M. Fabry. *Recognizing States*, 134.

74 Wilson’s term as US President had ended by that time; for the more precise developments leading towards the US recognition of the Baltic states, see Eero Medijainen’s contribution to this special issue and O. Arens. *Wilsonianism ilma Wilsonita*.

75 See, e.g., Z. Okłopcic. *A Farewell to Rhetorical Arms? Unravelling the Self-Determination of Peoples. – Recognition versus Self-Determination: Dilemmas of Emancipatory Politics*. Ed. by A. Eisenberg, J. Webber, G. Coulthard, A. Boisselle. UBC Press, Vancouver, 2014, 101–124, specifically 110.

76 The term was used internationally already in the nineteenth century. For example, J. K. Bluntschli used it to buttress the idea that international law accepts the “right of nations to national development and self-determination”. Bluntschli contrasted this idea with the pretensions of the dynastic states of the Holy Alliance to support each other in suppressing domestic revolutions, see: J. K. Bluntschli. *Das moderne Völkerrecht der civilisirten Staaten als Rechtsbuch dargestellt*. Beck, Nördlingen, 1868, 46–49. More research is needed for tracing the legacy of this usage and the idea of the “principle of nationality” in the early twentieth century. For the current state of the art, see: J. Fisch. *The Right of Self-Determination of Peoples: The Domestication of an Illusion*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

culturally dominant Polish elites, just like there was a clear separation between the Estonian and Latvian public spheres on the one hand, and that of Baltic Germans on the other. In Russia's western borderlands, it was the idea of linguistic-cultural nations that came to be imagined as the "self" in self-determination of peoples.

This did not, however, mean that the leaders of national groups or movements were seeking national independence as their true or even main goal before the start of the First World War. National independence was not seen as a realistic goal. Rather, this idea came to be advocated by two warring Great Powers: Imperial Germany and Soviet Russia. The leaders of national movements were forced to decide how to position themselves towards this kind of rhetoric and related policies, which ultimately turned out to be only disguised forms of imperialism. Furthermore, the representatives of the Allied Powers and the US, too, began to invoke this idea in their speeches and public proclamations, and there were good reasons to put more trust in the latter. However, all these different kinds of international promises of self-determination also opened up opportunities for the national movements in the Baltic region. Indeed, national leaders developed an extraordinary degree of creativity and energy in seeking to carve out an independent path for their newly created political communities. The Russian Empire no longer constituted the only possible frame of identity and action for them, particularly since neither the Bolsheviks nor the Russian Whites (or even the Provisional Government) seemed to take demands for self-government by leaders of these linguistic-cultural nations seriously. Instead, national independence emerged as the only 'realistic' idea, finding also a great degree of popular support, as proven by the Baltic wars of independence. At the same time, it is also important to realise that national independence was still often seen as a stepping stone towards a future union, for example, a Baltic League.

Despite this newly found confidence and sense of purpose, there was also a growing mood of disappointment among the leaders of the newly independent Baltic states, when the Allied Powers and the US delayed granting recognition to them. It is common to argue that this was an example of sheer inconsistency or cynical pragmatism on the part of these powers to do so. It can also be seen as yet another proof about the actual vacuity and hypocrisy of the idea of self-determination. However, we might do well taking a closer look at the actual theoretical arguments in which their different interpretations of self-determination emerged. As suggested in this afterword, careful reconstructions of the ideas of

the leaders of the Allied Powers and the US about self-determination and federalism may help shed light on their political engagement with (and relationship to) the Baltic states. In particular, it may go some way towards explaining the seemingly inconsistent approach that the Allied Powers and particularly the US (Wilson) adopted towards the self-determination of the Baltic countries and their *de jure* recognition.

First of all, it is likely that there were also major divergences within the range of Western authors. All agreed that territorial acquisitions and annexations were illegitimate. This was also what had been understood at the beginning of the war by the idea of the “principle of nationality”. However, Western authors and politicians espoused varying understandings of federalism, which also informed their views on self-determination. For Wilson, a federal state was an entity in which secession was ruled out, insofar as the constituent units in a federal state had renounced that right. He also seems to have applied this view to Russia, which he imagined as a potentially democratic federal state. Poland (and Finland) could be separated from Russia, insofar as they were recent territorial acquisitions. Other parts needed to be viewed differently. A different group of authors called for the dissolution of empires, and the self-determination of their constituent units (territories), or even linguistic-cultural nations. Within this camp, further differences emerged as to which of these two units to prefer. Baltic authors and politicians belonged to this camp, whilst among them, diverging ideas about how precisely to define and demarcate the unit of self-determination also emerged. In the case of Lithuania, the historical and territorial argument maintained its appeal and practical relevance, whereas Estonia and Latvia could only appeal to linguistic-cultural self-determination (combining it with a firm commitment to the democratic form of government).

Ultimately, the Allied Powers and the US granted recognition to the Baltic states when it was clear that the Bolsheviks would not only stay in power, but had explicitly recognised the self-determination of the Baltic states in treaties concluded with them. Yet even here, one would do well to appreciate the agency of those collective selves that were claiming self-determination. After having demonstrated their capacity to maintain effective government in the territories that they held their “own”, including the capacity to defend these territories by armed force, these selves had resorted to various kinds of measures of traditional, public, and para-diplomacy to achieve full international recognition. The idea of self-determination still proved central here. In this multifaceted struggle, the aspiring selves proved successful, attaining

the desired international status in just a few years. The idea of the self-determination of the peoples served not only as an instrument of power politics, but also as a powerful tool for the ‘self-determination’ of the Baltic nations.

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JÄRELSÕNA: ENESEMÄÄRAMINE JA TUNNUSTUS BALTI RIIKIDES 1917–1922

Eva Piirimäe

Teemanumbri järelsõna annab ülevaate tänapäevasest uurimisseisust, mis puudutab enesemääramise mõiste erinevaid tõlgendusi ja selle rolli Balti riikide iseseisvumisel ja tunnustamisel Esimese maailmasõja ajal ja vahetult pärast seda. Täpsemalt käsitletakse pinget, mis valitseb enesemääramise kui riigita rahvaste esindajate püüdluste sihi ning suurriikide võimupoliitika instrumendi vahel. Vene impeeriumi äärealade rahvaste jaoks oli enesemääramine oluline siseriiklik püüdlus, samas kui iseseisev rahvusriiklus muutus nende eesmärgiks alles tänu keiserliku Saksamaa, Nõukogude Venemaa ning hiljem ka liitlaste katsetele muuta ja rakendada enesemääramise põhimõtet oma eesmärkide teenistusse. Ka liitlased ning USA jõudsid selle põhimõtte, olles sõja alguses toetanud väikeriikide suveräänsuse ideed, millest tulenes vallutuste ning anneksioonide lubamatus. Erinevate suurvõimude vahelises võimu- ja ideevõitluses kerkis esile rahvaste enesemääramise põhimõte, mida tõlgendati väga erinevalt. Nii keiserlik Saksamaa kui ka Nõukogude Venemaa tegid panuse keelelis-kultuurilisele rahvusele, samas kui lääne autorite arvamused lahkesid. Enesemääramise subjektiks võis olla nii keelelis-kultuuriline rahvus, demokraatlik kogukond kui ka territoriaalne kooslus, nagu riik. Woodrow Wilsoni jaoks oli see seotud riiklusega, täpsemalt ja ideaalis föderaalriiklusega. Viimane välistas aga setsessiooni, v.a ajaloos varasemalt iseseisvust omanud riikide puhul. Kuigi Wilson etnilisi argumente väga

järjekindlalt tagasi ei lükanud (nt taasiseseisvunud Poola territooriumi määratlemisel oli etniline kriteerium tema jaoks üheks aluseks piiride määramisel), oli tema peamine rõhuasetus riigil ehk demokraatlikul kogukonnal kui enesemääramise subjektile. On võimalik, et Wilsoni käsituses oli veebruarirevolutsioonijärgne Venemaa potentsiaalne föderaalriik. Baltikumis käsitleti viimast aega endiselt impeeriumina ning olles Saksa keisririigi ja Nõukogude Venemaa laienemispretensioonide vahel, muutus ainumõeldavaks rahvusriiklus (mis samas ei välistanud rahvusvahelisi liite). Esimese maailmasõja ajal sai keelelis-kultuuriliste rahvaste enesemääramise ideest Baltikumis ka iseseisva riikluse püüdlamise alus, samas kui Leedus püüti seda siduda ka ajaloolise riiklusega. Liitlased ja USA ei tunnustanud aega Balti riike mitte keelelis-kultuurilise rahvuse õiguste pinnal, vaid eeskätt majanduslikel ja julgeolekupoliitilistel kaalutlustel (stabiilsuse säilitamiseks) ning sedagi alles pärast Nõukogude Venemaa tunnustust. Selle olid aega need riigid ise endale nii sõjalisel kui diplomaatilisel (sh paradiploomaatilisel) teel kätte võidelnud.