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The Challenges of Modernity to the Orthodox Church in Estonia and Latvia (1917-1940)

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Introduction

This work analyses the struggle of a specific section of the Estonian and Latvian nations, Orthodox Christians, to come to grips with modernity in the early twentieth century. After the end of the Russian Empire in 1917, the newly independent nation states were exposed to a very different kind of nationalisation than before. Instead of the imperial attempts to bind all citizens to the Russian State and its autocratic ruler, each of the new governments had to devise a way of channelling national sentiment to a new entity. Moreover, while the Russian Empire had kept strict regulations on confessional affiliation, independent Estonia and Latvia held a secular outlook and left faith to the churches and religious groups. The former Orthodox Church of the Russian Empire could not neatly fit into the new nation-state ideologies. The new national elite wanted to retain as few links as possible to the former 'oppressors,' as the Russians were henceforth officially called, and Orthodox Christianity was often considered a sign of Russianness.

Thus, the Orthodox faithful were doubly challenged. They could no longer count on the support of a powerful state church but had to construct an identity as a minority group. At the same time, they had to defend this new identity in a hostile political and social environment. This was not easy, since the canonical head of the Orthodox Church in Latvia and Estonia remained the Patriarch of Moscow, and most of the Russian minority in both countries was part of the local Orthodox community. The national movements, which had begun in the middle of the nineteenth century, could only take full effect in an independent state, with an institutionalised national history, language, and political culture. For most Latvians and Estonians, Orthodox Christianity was not, and could not be, an integral part of these efforts. In short, this work analyses the discourse on Orthodox Christianity as it related to the Estonian and Latvian nation building processes in the 1920s and 1930s. The analysis is based on published opinions or works on Latvian and Estonian Orthodoxy of the period from 1917 to 1940 and thus provides a variegated array of voices, which all contribute to a picture of the situation of Orthodox Estonians and Latvians between the World Wars.

The study forms part of the relatively recent research field of 'Orthodox Studies.' Similar to the various 'Area Studies' that have arisen as interdisciplinary research fields enjoying increasing popularity in academic institutions, also 'Orthodox Studies' pursue an interdisciplinary approach, endeavouring to analyse Orthodox Christian societies and issues from multiple angles. For the purpose of this particular study, insights from religious studies, political science, sociology, history, communications studies, and theology are combined to paint a comprehensive picture of the situation of Orthodox Estonians and Latvians in the interwar period. The entire study is informed by the assumption that the

published word conveys an accurate depiction of the social and political context in which it appeared. Therefore, its main sources are the various Orthodox journals published in Estonia and Latvia, together with a number of other published references to the Orthodox Church in the Estonian and Latvian press. On the basis of this source material, the empirical parts analyse the way Orthodox Christianity was perceived in Estonian and Latvian society and how Orthodox Estonians and Latvians reconciled conflicting identities. Various theoretical approaches from different disciplines each form the backbone of a particular section in the empirical study and are, therefore, more thoroughly introduced as they become relevant.

A study on the Orthodox Church in interwar Estonia and Latvia is necessary, for there are, in my opinion, no unbiased and historically sound treatments of the developments in either Estonia or Latvia available.[1] All existing studies lack important developments and/or include clear errors. Interestingly, the interwar years of the other Orthodox Churches in the Baltic region have received extensive academic treatment. In the case of the Orthodox Church in Lithuania, two academically ambitious publications have recently appeared, covering the inner and outer life of this church.[2] Also the case of Poland has been extensively researched and covered in academic literature.[3] Numerous academic treatments concerning the Orthodox Church in the northern neighbour, Finland, have been published over the years.[4] Only the Latvian and Estonian cases have not been well researched. What research exists on these two cases, moreover, is not very objective.

The first comprehensive treatments of the Orthodox Church in the Baltic States appeared during the interwar period. In Latvia, the historian Antonijs Pommers, the brother of the first Latvian Bishop Jānis (Pommers), published a '*History of Latvian Orthodoxy*' in 1931.[5] This historical sketch of 88 pages starts with the first (not very well documented) beginnings of the Church in the Middle Ages and only the last ten pages are devoted to the interwar period. Moreover, these last pages are heavily tainted by the author's personal involvement in the Latvian Orthodox Church. No similar monograph appeared in Estonia, although at least two Estonian historians devoted much attention to

1 Toomas Schvak is currently working on a PhD on the Estonian Interwar Orthodox Church, which might bridge this gap in the Estonian case.
2 Laukaitytė, 2003; Marcinkevicius and Kaubrys, 2005.
3 Papierzyńska-Turek, 1989; Mironowicz, 2005; Mironowicz et al., 2005.
4 Heyer, 1958; Setälä, U.V.J., 1966; Pispala, 1978; Hotz, 1979; Koukkunen, 1982; Purmonen, 1984; John, 1988; Frilander, 1995; Frilander, 1997; Raivo, 1997; Riikonen, 2007; Nokelainen, 2010.
5 Pommers, 1931a. See also chapter 4.1.3.

the conversion movements of the nineteenth century.[6] The Estonians, however, invited European scholars to the Petseri Monastery in 1937 to become acquainted with the Estonian Orthodox Church. One of these scholars was Helmut Risch, who later published a comprehensive 30-page overview in a German journal of church history.[7] This article provides surprisingly unbiased and detailed insights into the inner workings of the Estonian Orthodox Church from a perspective informed by political science. A similar article on the Latvian Orthodox Church from 1940 was much shorter and not the result of field research.[8] It mainly repeats the developments mentioned by Pommers in the afore-mentioned historical overview and brings no new information.

After the Second World War, there was no significant publication concerning the Baltic Orthodox Churches until the 1950s, when the Latvian and Estonian emigrant communities began publishing. Here, the Estonians were clearly more active, publishing three books and one article on the Estonian Orthodox Church before 1966.[9] These works consist mainly of memories from a peaceful past and injustices suffered during the Soviet occupation. On the Latvian side, only one article concerning the Latvian Orthodox Church appeared in 1954,[10] until the administrator of the Latvian Orthodox Church in Exile, Alexander Cherney, published an overview book in London in 1985.[11] This work is written with the injustices suffered by the Orthodox Church in the Baltic Region clearly in mind and brings historical details only in order to justify its argument. The other treatments from the émigré community were apologetic in nature. Their authors glorified the independence period and condemned the Soviet takeover.

The Baltic German community in exile also started to publish in the 1950s. Its output included an edited volume on Baltic church history.[12] There are passing references to the Orthodox Churches in the volume, and it relishes memories of a glorious past, when the Baltic Germans and the Lutheran Church were the unchallenged masters of the Baltic Provinces. Only three contributions were devoted to the interwar period and they cover mostly developments within the German minority.

Next to such self-interested treatises, several academics in the West showed an interest in the Orthodox Church of the Baltic Region. The German Wilhelm

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6 Kruus, 1930; Rebane, 1932; Rebane, 1933. See also chapters 2.1.2. and 4.1.4.

7 Risch, 1937; "Igaunijas Pečoru klosterī Eiropas zinatnieki izdara pētīšanas darbus" [European researchers carried out research work in the Estonian Petseri Monastery] in *TuD*, 13/16, 1937, p. 256. See also chapter 4.2.1.

8 Schubart, 1940.

9 *Apostlik õigeusk*, 1951; Fridolin, 1953; Juhkam, 1961; Laatsi, 1966.

10 Starcs, 1954.

11 Cherney, 1985. In the 1990s, this book was translated and published in Latvian.

12 Wittram, Reinhard, 1956.

Kahle, after having spent a year in Estonia in 1938, wrote a monumental work on the relationship between Orthodoxy and Lutheranism in the Baltic Area, which was published in 1959.[13] However, his focus on *Russian* Orthodoxy and *Baltic German* Lutheranism disregarded the developments of national churches. After noting that the interaction suddenly dwindled following the First World War, he concludes that "the direct relationship between Russian Orthodoxy and Baltic Protestantism ended with the *Umsiedlung* of 1939."[14] A second Western scholar, the Finnish political scientist U.V.J. Setälä wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Finnish State's relations with the Orthodox Church 1917-1923. It contains numerous references to developments in Estonia, which are further elaborated in separate articles by the same scholar.[15] In the USA, Wassilij Alexeev wrote his doctoral thesis and several articles on the Baltic Orthodox Church under German occupation during the Second World War.[16] In Germany, there appeared an article on the so-called 'mission of Pskov' during the occupation.[17] However, since the developments before and after 1940 differ so immensely, these works on the German occupation hardly provide any new insights into the interwar period. The treatment of '*Religion in the Soviet Union*' by Walter Kolarz deserves mention, because it includes short historical sketches of almost all religious communities in the entire Soviet Union, including the Orthodox Churches in the Baltic region.[18]

Within the Soviet Union, there were no significant academic works concerning the Estonian Orthodox Church.[19] In Latvia, on the other hand, the Marxist historian Zigmunds Balevics devoted much attention to church issues in the interwar period. However, his Soviet schooling and communist theory makes his works difficult to use as unbiased sources. His 1962 book on '*The Orthodox Clergy in Bourgeois Latvia*' was written in order to "help the believers judge the falseness and two-sidedness of religious morality for themselves."[20] His 1964 assessment of the relationship between church and state in bourgeois Latvia is interspersed with references to communist theory and refers to the churches as

13 Kahle, 1959.
14 Kahle, 1959, p. 279. For the *Umsiedlung*, see also von Hehn, 1984; chapter 2.3.4.
15 Setälä, U.V.J., 1962; Setälä, U.V.J., 1966; Setälä, U.V.J., 1972.
16 Alexeev, 1957; Alexeev, 1974; Alexeev and Stavrou, 1976..
17 Treulieb, 1965. This mission, organised by Moscow-subordinate Metropolitan Sergej Voskresenskij of Vilnius, consisted in sending missionaries from the Baltic area to the Soviet regions occupied by German forces to re-Christianise the Russians. It was very successful. See Oboznyj, 2008.
18 Kolarz, 1962, p. 118-123.
19 Excepting the doctoral dissertation of the Metropolitan of Tallinn, later Patriarch of Moscow Aleksij II (Ridiger), which he completed in 1984. It was, however, published only in 1999, after serious revision. Aleksij, 1999, p. 6-7.
20 Balevics and Kadiķis, 1962, p. 3.

nothing but puppets in the hands of the fascists in government.[21] His small 1987 overview book on the history of the Latvian Orthodox Church is less ideologically tainted, but remains less than credible at times. Its designated task was "to gather existing research and provide the reader with an overview of the history of the Orthodox Church in Latvia."[22] However, this work does not represent a change of style, as significant parts are taken directly from the 1964 book. Nonetheless, Balevics had access to the original sources and his treatments are historically valuable.

Meanwhile, in a little volume from 1984, dedicated to Latvian Agrarian History, two other Soviet Latvian historians showed interest in the Orthodox Church. Heinrihs Strods and Aleksandr Gavrilin both contributed articles on the Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century.[23] In the years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Aleksandr Gavrilin published several articles on Latvian Orthodox Church in the nineteenth century, and he has continued his publishing activity in the post-Soviet period.[24] The work of Gavrilin cannot be overrated, especially when it comes to extrapolating the original sources of the nineteenth century history of Baltic Orthodoxy. However, he remains somewhat caught within the traditional discourse of Orthodox Church history, which is mostly concerned with the number of faithful, of churches and monasteries, and who heads what Eparchy when. This becomes obvious in a contribution to a recent French volume on the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century.[25] The section on the interwar period is lacking in analytical detail. It seems more important to mention numbers and names than to put them in historical context. Gavrilin's most recent monograph, dedicated to the life and work of the Latvian Bishop Jānis Garklāvs moves slightly away from this tendency, turning more to the discourses of and long-term developments within Latvian Orthodoxy.[26] The nine volumes of '*Orthodoxy in Latvia*' edited by Gavrilin between 1993 and 2010 contain a number of interesting contributions. The largely statistical treatment of the 1920s by K. Ozoliņš and the analysis of the autocephaly discussions of the 1930s by Andris Kūla merit special mention.[27] The latter has also published an extensive article on the situation of the Latvian Orthodox Church during the Second World War.[28]

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21 Balevics, 1964.
22 Balevics, 1987, p. 3-4.
23 Strods, 1984; Gavrilin, 1984.
24 See all his works in the bibliography.
25 Gavrilin and Pazāne, 2009.
26 Garklāvs was consecrated Bishop of Riga under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate during the German occupation in 1943. Gavrilin, 2009, p. 176.
27 Kulis, 1993; Ozoliņš, 1997.
28 Kūla, 2007.

Other post-Soviet Latvian academic treatments include the works of Archpriest Jānis Kalniņš, who has published a source compendium on Archbishop Jānis (Pommers),[29] a biography of the Archbishop,[30] and a historical commentary on the Orthodox Church of Latvia.[31] While the source compendium is very useful and the biography of Bishop Jānis contains much important information, the historical commentary does not stand up to scrutiny. It is clearly written as a polemic against some particular interpretation of history, although it is not entirely clear which interpretation.[32] As an appendix to the second edition of Kalniņš' autobiography from 2005, several archival documents and parish histories also exist in published form.[33]

Another biography of Bishop Jānis from 2004 does not contain any new information and the way it exalts Jānis' achievements beyond measure reminds the reader of medieval hagiographies.[34] Heinrihs Strods has published an important biographical volume on Metropolitan Augustīns (Pētersons), who headed the Latvian Orthodox Church from 1936 to his death in 1955.[35] This work is detailed and analytical; however, critics claim that since it was paid for by the family of Metropolitan Augustīns, it lacks some critical distance and independence.[36] Jurij Sidjakov has published numerous letters and documents from Archbishop Jānis' archive, which have proved very useful for this study.[37] The official view of history – as presented in a recent volume on Post-Soviet developments in the Latvian Orthodox Church – is less useful, with sweeping generalisations and a pro-Russian bias.[38] Finally, the 2008 dissertation of Inese Runce on the Latvian church-state relationship 1906-1940 must be mentioned.[39] This work has given me a thorough understanding of the legal and political framework in which religions operated in interwar Latvia.

The Estonian Orthodox Church has received much attention in the academic world, especially since the clash between the Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople over the jurisdiction of Estonian territory.[40] However, most of this attention has been very biased and one-sided. As the most comprehensive vol-

29 Kalniņš I, 1993; Kalniņš II, 1993.
30 Kalniņš, Jānis, 2001.
31 Kalniņš, Jānis, 2007.
32 See the review by Strods, 2008.
33 Kalniņš, Jānis, 2005a.
34 Požidaev, 2004. See also *Žitie*, 2008.
35 Strods, 2005.
36 See the review by Kalniņš, Jānis, 2005b.
37 Sidjakov I, 2008; Sidjakov II, 2009; Sidjakov III, 2011. Much of Sidjakov's work is also published on the internet.
38 *Latvijas Pareizticīgā Baznīca*, 2009.
39 Runce, 2008.
40 See Rimestad, *forthcoming*, 2013a; Rimestad, *forthcoming*, 2013b.

ume of this genre, the monumental monograph on '*The Orthodox in Estonia*' by late Moscow Patriarch Aleksij II, himself born and raised in interwar Estonia, should be mentioned.[41] However, it remains more concerned with names and numbers than with context and analysis. On the other side, there are the works written under the auspices of Archimandrite Grigorios Papathomas, an Orthodox canon law specialist, who has taken an interest in the fate of Estonian Orthodoxy.[42] These works are clearly apologetic; they do everything possible in order to exclude certain interpretations of the history of the Estonian Orthodox Church. Corresponding works from the side of the Moscow Patriarchate display similar flaws.[43]

At the same time, a number of more neutral young academics have written on the Estonian Orthodox Church, including Andrei Sõtšov, who wrote his BA thesis on the Church during the Second World War, continued with its history under Stalin (1945-1953) in his MA thesis, and dedicated his PhD dissertation to the Khrushchev era (1954-1964).[44] Anu Raudsepp wrote a useful MA thesis on the influence of the Riga Orthodox Seminary on Estonian society, and Urmas Klaas wrote on the structure of the Orthodox Church in South Estonia until 1917, both in 1998.[45] Toomas Schvak is currently writing his PhD dissertation on the Estonian Orthodox Church history of the interwar period. The Lutheran church historian Riho Saard has devoted some effort to the Orthodox Church. In 2008, for example, he published an historical sketch of the first years of the Estonian Orthodox Church after the First World War.[46]

With only a few exceptions, most of the above-mentioned works were written in Estonian, Latvian, or Russian. Moreover, they are either concerned only with historical data or are trying to justify a certain view of history. In addition, many are written in a traditional church history style, detailing which bishop collected how much money for the construction of which church. Very few concern the inner life of the Estonian and Latvian Orthodox Churches beyond the legal, canonical, and statistical frameworks. Notable exceptions are the numerous treatments of the Second World War as well as the works of individual authors.[47] The most important exception is Jeffers Engelhardt, an American who

41 Aleksij, 1999. A shortened version of the thesis, extended until the present, was published in 2010 together with over 200 reproduced documents. However, this book is not for sale on the free market. *Pravoslavie*, 2010.

42 Papathomas and Palli, 2002; *Istina,* 2004; Kala, 2007.

43 Prekup, 1998.

44 See all his works in the bibliography.

45 Raudsepp, 1998a; Klaas, 1998. Raudsepp also published a short version of her thesis in German as Raudsepp, 1998b.

46 Saard, 2008.

47 Especially Riho Saard and Mikko Ketola. See their works in the bibliography.

became interested in Estonian Orthodoxy and wrote a dissertation at the University of Chicago in 2005 on the musical practices of the Estonian Orthodox Church.[48]

I conceptualise my book as a contribution at three different levels to these largely divergent strains of research on the Orthodox Church in Estonia and Latvia. On the descriptive level, I attempt to provide a comprehensive treatment of the development of this little known part of the Orthodox Church in a Western language. Second, I evaluate the various existing, seemingly incompatible, narratives of this development. Third, I attempt a genuine analysis of the discourse surrounding Orthodox Christianity in interwar Estonia and Latvia, something that is completely missing from the existing treatments.

This is accomplished in four main parts. The first part considers general questions concerning the notoriously elusive concept of modernity and, more specifically, Orthodox Christianity coming to terms with modern changes. The three remaining parts each look into a specific challenge of modernity, as defined in the beginning of the first part. The second, and most substantial, part analyses the way the Orthodox Churches of Estonia and Latvia severed the link to the Russian Empire that made them inferior in the eyes of many national activists and the opposition they faced in doing so. It consists of a concise historical outline of the development of the Orthodox Church in Estonia and Latvia from 1917 to 1940 in conjunction with an analysis of the discussions within each of the communities concerning the inner and outer structure of the Church, following a largely chronological order. It asks how the modernising political setting of the new nation states of Estonia and Latvia challenged the organisation of the Orthodox Church. Which power struggles concerning church structures and organisation occurred within the Orthodox Church or between the Church and the secular authorities? How did Orthodox elites try to mobilise their constituencies to adjust to the new context?

This last question connects parts two and three. However, part three does not address organisational adjustment but rather concerns all kinds of non-structural issues. Once the structures of the Church had been reformed to emancipate the local Orthodox Church from Russian leadership, Orthodox Estonians and Latvians began to adapt the activities and service of the Church. They widely discussed issues such as congregational singing and the Church calendar and argued that the language and liturgy of the Church should become more 'indigenous.' At the same time as Orthodox Latvians and Estonians worked to create a more modern Orthodox Church, they were often perceived by the predominantly Lutheran society as remainders of the Russian Empire, as less developed, as less devoted Estonians and Latvians. Of importance here is how the Orthodox press

48 Engelhardt, 2005.

reacted to such accusations and attempted to change the conception of normality.

Part four analyses the accusation that the dominant national historiography did not adequately distance itself from the biased historical accounts of previous periods when it came to the Orthodox Church. Baltic German platitudes concerning the arrival of Orthodox Christianity to the Baltic shores were perpetuated in history schoolbooks and professional historiography. The part answers the question of which arguments Orthodox spokesmen used to justify their views and how they attempted to transform the historical conception of the overall population.

A final section sums up the findings and arrives at a general conclusion. There are four appendixes (chapter 6.), including maps of Estonia and Latvia, both before and after 1917 (chapter 6.1.) and a timeline listing the most important developments in the two churches (chapter 6.2.). A paradigmatic speech, held by Archbishop Jānis (Pommers) of Riga in 1923 is reproduced as chapter 6.3., and chapter 6.4. lists the most important actors with brief biographies.