

Minorities and the State. Non-Territorial Autonomy in the Baltics, 1914-1940

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It is well-known that in the final decades of the Romanov and Habsburg empires, many national movements demanded national-territorial autonomy, a federation of nationalities, or even separate states. What is less known is the non-territorial autonomy model. Numerous theoreticians and political activists proposed this model either as an alternative to the national-territorial organisation of the state or as a complementary tool to defend diasporic communities in other parts of the empire. The central idea of non-territorial autonomy is turning nationalities into corporations of public law so that none of them would have exclusive control over the territory. Each of these autonomous corporations would have the right to independently organise the cultural and educational affairs of the respective nation, thus avoiding the disintegration of the state. Neither of the empires introduced full-fledged non-territorial autonomy, but several states that emerged from these empires introduced non-territorial autonomy legislation. Estonia, which is the central case of this project, also introduced non-territorial autonomy legislation in 1925.

The aim of this research project is to shed light on this model which played an important role in the political discussions and practice in the first half of the twentieth century, but which is far less known. By focusing on the case of Estonia, it analyses how intellectuals and political activists discussed and incorporated ideas on non-territorial autonomy into their political agendas. The Estonian case deserves a closer look in the context of the history of non-territorial autonomy because, after introducing of the Law on Cultural Self-Government in 1925, minority rights activists across Europe widely regarded it as an exemplary solution to defend ethnic minorities within states. It is also widely regarded as one of the best examples of non-territorial autonomy legislation.

The core questions this study asks are how and for which purpose various protagonists advocated non-territorial autonomy. The study also looks into the bookshelves and desks of these activists to try to understand which sources, and texts did they rely on in devising their own projects. Relying

on theories of studying the history of political thought and the circulation of knowledge, the study scrutinises several cases such as the Estonian national activists, diasporic Estonian communities in Russia, German and Jewish minorities advocating autonomy, legal discussions in legislative assemblies, and the authoritarian-corporatist state in the 1930s. In so doing, it will offer a fresh interpretation of the passage of the 1925 Law on Cultural Self-Government. The study also asks how the autonomy arrangement worked in practice, based on the example of Jewish Cultural Self-Government, surveying its work from its establishment in 1926 until its dissolution in 1940. The study will also look into several unstudied cases of international organisations discussing non-territorial autonomy and in particular the Estonian example.

The project aims to demonstrate that there was a rich interlinked autonomy discourse in Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Discussions in Estonia took place at the intersection of various sources, including autonomy discourse in the Habsburg empire, party programmes of Russia, international minority rights discourse, and various adaptations and translations of some of the most influential theoretical works by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer. Ultimately, after the passage of the law in 1925, Estonian law became an important element in this discourse.