

DENISS HANOVS**GARLIEB HELWIG MERKEL:
THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT IN LATVIA
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY – NATIONAL HEROES
AND RITUALS****Introduction.
German Enlightenment
discovers the Latvian folk**

The process of nation-building among the indigenous peoples of the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century is one variation on the theme of nationalism. This phenomenon spread throughout Europe, and its nineteenth-century forms are a continuation of the eighteenth-century political philosophy of Late Enlightenment, which discovered folk culture and religious beliefs and stressed the importance of a new historical subject – the people.

Latvian nationalism is one of the cultural processes that shows the interconnectedness of European cultures. Enlightenment came to the Baltic provinces through the reception and interpretation of French and German Enlightenment. At the same time the reception of Enlightenment thought was not passive: most of the intellectuals who lived and acted in the Baltic region took an interest in the local situation. Attempts in the Baltic region to realise in practice the concept of the educated individual as an autonomous and physically and spiritually free person go back to the beginning of the eighteenth century. The desirability of free peasants instead of serfs in the Baltic region was proposed by Theodor Ludwig Lau (1670–1740), one of the representatives of Early German Enlightenment, whose socio-economic essays based the idea of abolition on his experience as a ducal official in Courland.¹

¹ A short biography of T. L. Lau and extracts from his essays are given in: *Ideju vēsture Latvijā*; see also: Donnert, E. *Theodor Ludwig Lau*.

One of the most prominent figures in this field in the second half of the eighteenth century was another German intellectual, Pastor Gotthard Friedrich Stender (1714–1796). Stender's role in the development of Latvian grammar is not to be separated from his views on Latvian serfs, who had to obey their landlords, despite the fact that the everyday life of Latvian peasantry was beyond the pale of human existence.

Stender was one of the earliest Baltic Germans to attract the attention of members of the nineteenth-century Latvian national movement. His interest in Latvian folk culture and language was taken as a sign of the real value of Latvian popular culture, as well as an indicator of the need to enrich Latvian written culture through of mass communication media (newspapers). The first editor-in-chief of the Latvian national newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis* (The Baltic Herald, published 1868–1906), Bernhards Dīriķis, in his work *Latviešu rakstniecība* (Latvian Literature, 1860), praised Stender above all other writers in the Baltic provinces, because he had tried to realise the ideas of the Enlightenment as a mass process, and because Stender's aim had been to give Latvians an opportunity to acquire education at a time when they themselves were unable to develop their language and literature.²

B. Dīriķis was also one of the representatives of the Latvian elite and used his newspaper as a workshop for creating a gallery of national protagonists. Not only Stender but also other representatives of German Enlightenment, as we will see from the analysis of the articles published in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, were turned into protagonists of the emancipation of the Latvian population. To such representatives of the liberation ideology in the Baltics belong J. G. Herder and G. H. Merkel.

At the end of the eighteenth century Johann Gottfried Herder was without doubt one of the most significant representatives of German Enlightenment whose ideas became an essential part of the Latvian national movement. His work *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–1791), written during the Classical Weimar period, gave crucial impulses to the thought of the Latvian nationalists, not only because Herder viewed language as an expression of the character of an ethnic group, but above all because he viewed culture as created and articulated by the people, which (he said) was capable of creating aesthetic categories.³

² Dīriķis, B. *Latviešu rakstniecība*.

³ On the aesthetics of the Latvian national movement in the 19th century see: Hanovs, D. *The Aesthetics of the Latvian Nationalism*.

Herder had made some comments on the obscure origins of the Latvians and had stressed the inner aesthetic value of their language. But it was his close friend and ideological disciple, the Baltic German journalist and writer Garlieb Helwig Merkel (1769–1850) who articulated most clearly the case for liberating the serfs, described the situation and state of Latvian culture, and was consequently integrated into the historical scheme of the Latvian national movement as one of the heroes and protagonists of nationalism in the Baltic region.

He was born a hundred years ago, he, who spent all his life fighting for humanity and freedom. He did not fight with weapons, but with words and articles in the newspapers. His aim was not glory. He wished to give light and freedom to the suppressed slaves who had been thrown into spiritual darkness.⁴

This emotional quotation from the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* was dedicated to Merkel's role as a journalist. Like many others, among them Friedrich Schiller, who rejected French citizenship offered to him by the revolutionary government of the French Republic, Merkel was shocked by the French Revolution in 1789. The development of the Revolution into Jacobin terror as well as the situation in the Baltic provinces at the end of the eighteenth century (peasant revolts in inner Russian provinces and in the Baltic provinces) must be taken into account when considering the background to Merkel's views on the future of Latvians. Evolution and revolutionary changes of the status quo were for Merkel two poles of the developing history of the Baltics. His own biography and curriculum vitae can be viewed through his works and ideas that prolonged his life in the reception and interpretation of his ideas by the Latvian national movement.

Life and views: why Merkel?

Merkel was born in the village of Lēdurga, the son of a parish pastor. His father, a typical Enlightened Lutheran clergyman, educated his son at home and then sent Garlieb to Riga to continue his education at the Riga Cathedral school. Financial difficulties of the family forced Merkel to drop out of school; he stayed in Riga and tried his hand as a minor official in the law courts, played minor roles in Riga's German theatre, and worked as a private tutor. In 1796 he went to Germany to publish his book *The Latvians, Especially in Livonia, at the End of the Philosophical Century. A Contribution to the Study of Peoples and Mankind* (Die

⁴ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, July 6, 1869.

Letten, vorzüglich in Liefland, am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zur Völke- und Menschenkunde), which appeared in the same year in Leipzig. He took courses in medicine at Leipzig University, later switched to law, then studied aesthetics and continued his education in Berlin and Jena.⁵

In his book "The Latvians" Merkel described in detail the situation of the Latvian peasantry, although later some of the sources of information for his essay were questioned, mainly because Merkel did not speak Latvian. Despite some critical aspects Merkel's work was quite different from other previous texts which had advocated reform or freedom for the peasantry.⁶

It made a great impact on discussions about the improvement of the living conditions of Latvians. Discussions of peasant reform were not new among Baltic Germans and Merkel was far from being original nor did he initiate the discussion. It had existed long before "The Latvians" appeared in Leipzig.

Attempts by such figures as the liberal Baltic German landowner C. F. Schoultz von Ascheraden (1720–1782) and the Lutheran pastor Johann George Eisen (1717–1779) to improve the situation had no chance of success, principally because of a strong opposition from the German landowners in the region and their connections in the empire capital. As the result the aristocratic opposition could use its economic and political influence to block the initiatives of single individuals.⁷ A generation later, Merkel too felt the reaction of the Baltic German opposition to his book, which among other things described particular cases of extreme cruelty, especially during punishments. This clash of two opposing views on the status of the Latvian peasantry was recently caught and described in the play *The Court* (*Das Gericht*), written by the well-known Latvian writer Māra Zālīte and based on the ideas articulated by Merkel in "The Latvians".⁸

Although the nationalist tradition depicted Merkel as a passionate hero, almost a messiah, his proposals to improve the situation of peasants should not be seen in isolation from his own ethnic and social identities.⁹

Merkel had accepted a pension from the tsar for his book *The Free Latvians and Estonians. A Commemorative Essay Dedicated to the Freedom*

⁵ Merķelis, G. H. *Izlase*, 40.–74. lpp.

⁶ See also: Hanovs, D. Merķeļa "Latvieši" Vācijā.

⁷ Plakans, A. *The Latvians*, p. 76. On Eisen and Schoultz see: Bartlett, R., Donnert, E. *Johann Georg Eisen*.

⁸ Zālīte, M. Tiesa.

⁹ Švābe, A. *Latvijas vēsture, 1800–1914*.

Festival Celebrated in Riga on the 6th of January 1820 (Die Freien Letten und Esthen. Eine Erinnerungs-Schrift zu dem am 6ten Januar 1820 in Riga gefeierten Freiheitfeste. Riga, 1820) and spent the rest of his life as a literate without enjoying much attention and admiration, at least not of the Baltic nobility.

But after Merckels's death in 1850 Merkel's life changed and it was actively used by the national movement. Within a decade Merkel became for the Latvian national movement the embodiment of the dissenting Enlightenment tradition with respect to Latvian culture. Why were his influence and its reception more important than that of the classical authors and representatives of Enlightenment such as Herder? Under what historical conditions did Merkel become a representative of the Latvian ethnic cultural myth, which revived (constructed) the ethnic past? Why did Latvians use Merkel for their *kontrapräsentische Erinnerung* (memory as reaction against the present) – a term created by Jan Assmann? How did Merkel lose his ethnic background and become a representative of Latvians?

Answers to these questions should be sought in the idea of cultural equality with other ethnic cultures, including German, which was expressed by Merkel at the very beginning of "The Latvians". Merkel described as unnatural the situation in which one group of Baltic citizens (the German landowners) exploited another group of equal citizens (the Latvian peasantry: Merkel uses the term *Mitbürger*).¹⁰

The idea expressed by the term *Mitbürger* that proposed social and cultural equality can to some extent explain the enormous popularity of the book among the Latvian nationalists, especially taking into consideration the fact that the book was not actually written for Latvian peasants, but for the educated society of Germany and the Russian Baltic provinces, and also for the Russian government, addressed directly in the person of the book's dedicatee, the Governor-General of Liefland, Estland and Lithuania, General-en-Chef Prince Nikolai Vasil'evich Repnin.

Merkel's reconstruction of the Latvian past can be seen as another important explanation of the popularity of the book. The bibliography of the Latvian press starting from the late 1860s shows how important the reception of the book was. At the same time it would be certainly wrong to say that the national movement created a kind of ideological dialogue with the ideas and views expressed in "The Latvians", which was the central work for the national movement and which was discussed in the national press, but it was not a dialogue, it was a

¹⁰ Merkel, G. H. *Die Letten, vorzüglich in Liefland.*

monologue created for the aims of the national movement and its opposition to the local German cultural hegemony. Which are the main aspects and elements of the book chosen by the Latvian national movement as one of its main written documents?

The Latvians – constructed cultural memory and nation

Merkel himself stressed in the subtitle of his book the themes that were later taken up by nationalists as their main topics, such as language and history.

The information about folk culture, which Merkel promised in his subtitle is the reason why the book took pride of place among the works crucial to the national movement. Another crucial work was *National Aspirations* (Nationale Bestrebungen, 1872) by Atis Kronvalds, one of the principal figures of the movement. He elaborated Merkel's ideas about the need to develop written Latvian culture and support education. These ideas underlie the publication of the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* article cited above. The article opened a long period of development of national ideology created by the Latvian national press, in which the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* was the leading Latvian newspaper from 1869 until the first competition was set up in the 1880s by democratic middle-class groups and represented by the newspaper *Dienas Lapa* (Daily Paper).¹¹

The Latvian national press reflected the evolving image of the national past, its history and social mythology. Merkel's place in the thought of the national movement was based principally, as already indicated, on the reception of his book "The Latvians" by young Latvian intellectuals who now constructed and defined the attributes of Latvian national identity, and who called their own activities "national awakening". The Latvian national movement accepted certain principles of national ideology as construction, such as the role of language and common history in the process of creating national identity. As an example of cultural transfer, the attitude of the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* to the brothers Grimm can be viewed as characteristic: the brothers were called "the authors of the [German] national past".¹²

¹¹ Latvian National Library, Rare Literature Department. RX, 74, 2, 22, letter by editor-in-chief Bernhards Dirīķis to Mrs. F. Tidemane, October 20, 1886. Dirīķis characterised the new daily paper *Dienas Lapa* as "competition".

¹² *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, June 6, 1873.

Many aspects of the national movement in the Baltic provinces suggest that it had contacts with and was influenced by manifestations of German nation-building in the "proto-national" period preceding the 1848 revolution. Such forms of expression as national symbols, mass festivals, the creation of a pantheon of leaders and heroes, can be mentioned as typical of both the national movements.

The treatment of the role of the (Baltic) German Merkel in the national movement of Latvia – a territory dominated intellectually and economically by the descendants of German knightly orders and administered since the early eighteenth century by Russian bureaucrats – is an example of a serious gap which exists nowadays in Latvian historiography. It should be filled by new research in the emotional dimensions of the Latvian national movement, its dialogue or monologue with other ethnic groups in the region, described by A. D. Smith as an area of "irrational" East European nationalism.¹³

A. D. Smith's concept of nationalism, along with B. Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined community" and E. Gellner's view of nationalism as a result of the modernisation of society through technical progress (for example, the press), belong to the classics of Western theory on nationalism, but in Latvia these ideas are still relatively unusual and almost unknown.¹⁴

Merkel created the basis essential to every national movement – a past which can be activated for current political aims.¹⁵

The glorious past which represented Latvians as brave fighters for freedom was associated with intellectual capabilities, which were for Merkel a kind of guarantee of development and of progress of the ethnic group. He called the latter a nation, probably without intending any difference in political meaning between a people and a nation, using both terms as synonyms. The Latvians are depicted in the book as a nation with its own history and a people, which has its own rights. Although the Latvian nationalists avoided calling the Latvians a nation, but used the word people instead, they participated in the creation of the essential parts of the nation. The conception of the past which they discovered in Merkel's book was useful because it showed that the current situation of the Latvians in the Baltic region could be changed; it legitimised Latvian progress

¹³ Smits, E. D. *Nacionālā identitāte*.

¹⁴ The only book on Latvian nationalism that follows the idea of deconstructing the nation is: Bula, D. *Dziedātājtauta*, 104.–110. lpp.

¹⁵ Nipperdey, T. *Auf der Suche nach der Identität*.

up the social scale, which was exemplified in the biographies of the first generation of Latvian nationalists themselves.¹⁶

The representatives of the first generation of the national movement were mainly individuals who personally experienced the increasing movement of Latvians from the countryside into cities, among which Riga can be mentioned as a principal industrial centre of the region in the nineteenth century. This first generation of Latvian nationalists also exemplified the cultural transfer of the German nationalist theory and the reception of its main works. A. Kronvalds, for example, was influenced by Fichte's *Reden an die deutsche Nation*.¹⁷

Krišjānis Valdemārs was another key figure of the first generation, who studied at Tartu University, where he created, and participated in, the so-called student evenings, gatherings that were in fact the first forms of the organisation of the Latvian national elite.¹⁸

To understand what the group called the New Latvians, or national activists (a synonym used by the American Latvian historian A. Plakans¹⁹), had in common, it is necessary to mention elements, which forged the social and cultural identity of the group, whose members had grown up both in the realm of German landowner culture and in that of the German urban middle classes. Some of them, such as the editor of *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, B. Dīriķis, and the head of the Riga Latvian Society, Kr. Kalniņš, were married to German wives and spent their private life in the German cultural tradition.²⁰

Most of them were active in the nationalist press and were concerned to develop the Latvian cultural environment. This explains why the national movement was interested in linguistic rights, and wished the language to be

¹⁶ Most of the leading personalities, if compared according to the categories of social background, education and activities, were sons of well-to-do Latvian peasants. They were the first generation which laid the foundations of Latvian middle class culture by creating the extremely important Riga Latvian Association (1868), and establishing schools and scholarship programs for Latvian students. Concise biographies of the main leaders of the national movement can be found in: Puriņš, K. *Baltijas Vēstneša divdesmitpiecu gadu jubilejai*.

¹⁷ This impact is described in: Lasmane, S. J. G. Fihtes "Runas vācu tautai".

¹⁸ Libermanis, G. *Jaunlatvieši*.

¹⁹ Plakans, A. *The Latvians*.

²⁰ For more information on Krišjānis Kalniņš see: Blanks, E. *Latvju tautiskā kustība*. For additional information on Bernhards Dīriķis see: Kaudzīte, M. *Atmiņas no tautiskā laikmeta*.

spoken in various fields of Baltic cultural life – in schools, law courts and during the song festivals. For example, the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* made the language question the main focus of its critique of German domination and the main goal of the nationalist cause – equal rights: “As we all know, one of the main aims of Latvian national awakening is to give the same rights to Latvians as can be enjoyed by Germans.”²¹

Could the first generation find an answer to its question in Merkel’s interpretation of the past?

The idea of progress, the importance of language and songs for the preservation of ethnic and cultural differences, which demonstrated the loyalty of Merkel to the ideas of Late Enlightenment, were reflected in the ideology of Latvian nationalists. The development of pride in the Latvian past took place in the very period when national elite rediscovered Merkel for its aims. The reception of Merkel’s views on Latvian past belonged to the essential elements of nation-building processes at the beginning of the national movement, which can be viewed as a result of various economic and social as well as cultural development, reforms and new processes in the social structure of the Baltic provinces. After the liberation of serfs in the Baltic provinces in the period from 1816 until 1819 and the land reform in 1849, peasantry in the Baltic provinces was able to rent land and later buy it. This provided a basis for the emergence of relatively well-to-do peasantry who traditionally did not have large families. The children of these peasants were able to continue their studies to the tertiary level. They went to university, either in Tartu or St. Petersburg. The first generation of educated Latvians that appeared in the 1860s intended to create a national culture, which could serve as an alternative to the foreign, German cultural influence.²²

Among the tools at the disposal of this nationally orientated group of Latvians was folklore, and the actualisation of national mythology. This, in fact, because of the lack of written artefacts from the ethnic past, was a creation of the group which led the national discourse and created the main forms of the national past: each period in the past is better than that which came after it, and that is why the desire to return to the past was developed as a way to find the lost national culture. To advance meant to go back, to rediscover, but in fact to build the past. On the basis of these specific features of national ideology we can give a positive answer to the question once asked by the Latvian philosopher

²¹ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, August 12, 1882.

²² Plakans, A. *The Latvians*.

I. Šuvajevs about the origins of the Latvian national movement: whether "the awakening is merely a renewed, reestablished mythology?"²³

Similar ideas about creating the past for current political or social purposes can be found in the works of the national activists who established the first national Latvian newspaper *Pēterburgas Avīzes*, which for three years (1862–1865) promoted the ideas of national awakening in the imperial capital. To the enduring elements of national awakening belonged interest in the cultural background and in the origins of the language. The problem of the existence of the national language reflected a combination of the linguistic nationalism of Enlightenment and nationalistic romanticism. National constructs appeared in the press. In 1869 *Baltijas Vēstnesis* published an article by V. Siliņš entitled "Brief Remarks on Latvians and the Latvian Language".²⁴ This article was the first to make interpretative use of Merkel's "The Latvians". The comparison between Latvians and German tribes, in favour of Latvians, shows the first reception of the content of the "The Latvians". Valdemārs Siliņš' article shows the reception as a direct transfer of text. V. Siliņš created his Latvian history on the basis of the concept of *Wiederkehr* (historical return) which is one of Merkel's essential theses.²⁵

V. Siliņš' conception of history needed no proof, no critical approach. Considering that Latvians had always lived in the region, he excluded every basis for discussion and created a fixed structure of social mythology. Eternity as something, which allows no other version or interpretation was followed by the idea that Latvians were close relatives of the barbarian tribes of Odoakr who destroyed the Western Roman Empire. At the same time the Latvian past was associated not only with their role in the destructive processes of world history, but also with the purity of the language. V. Siliņš presented it as an unique and integral element of the past, comparable with Latin and Greek as one of the "few languages in the world which had preserved their natural beauty" and a feature which integrated the Latvians in the cultural past of Europe.²⁶

Merkel's view of the spiritual potency of Latvians was transformed by the newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis* into the idea of a true and a false history, the latter

²³ Šuvajevs, I. *Prelūdiņas*.

²⁴ In the original: Siliņš, V. Druskas par latviešu tautu un valodu. *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, June 18, 1869.

²⁵ Merkel, G. H. *Die Letten, vorzüglich in Liefland*, S. 101.

²⁶ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, June 18, 1869.

written by the local Germans to control the indigenous people. V. Siliņš' article, if viewed not simply as literary fantasy can demonstrate the utilitarian approach adopted by the national movement towards the past and the interpretation of its fixed literary forms. The article shows the beginning of the construction of enemies, which demonstrates the existence in Latvia of a form of ethnic nationalism, which spread all over Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The strength of ethnic nationalism can be illustrated by other important examples, such as the anti-Jewish tendency of the newspaper the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* in the late 1880s.²⁷

These suggest that, starting from the first year of the institutional existence of the Latvian national movement, 1869, reality was combined with the gradual creation of a multifunctional history, of "another reality", which could be used for the specific tasks of the national movement. The articles of the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* illustrate one of these tasks – to free the collective memory from its inferiority complex and fill it with a collective past able to awaken the sleepers, to overcome their dreams.

Merkel saw unique ethnic features in Latvian folk culture, features alive in its folk festivals and traditions.²⁸ The same vision was conveyed by the newspaper. But Merkel's work was used to stress one of the characteristic claims of the movement – that the so-called "dignity" of the people could be found in the language, which keeps memory alive, and in a special religiously-oriented perception of the world. The language, still seen as one of the most important phenomena, which constitute the cultural environment, was used by V. Siliņš to stress the authentic nature of Latvians. Religious feelings too were redefined in terms of qualitative difference from other ethnic groups. According to V. Siliņš there had seldom been such a religious people as Latvians. The role of pagan religious beliefs is another example of the complicated attitude towards the ethnic past – on the one hand, the newspaper published a great amount of Auseklis' (1850–1879) poetry, a Latvian poet who created the pagan pantheon and used the name Laima (the pagan goddess of happiness) which was mentioned by Merkel in his work.

The past, on the other hand, was stylised as an encounter with the nation's history in which the Christian god and the pagan gods were united in a relatively

²⁷ Dribins, L. *Nacionālais jautājums Latvijā, 1850–1940*.

²⁸ Merkel, G. H. *Die Letten, vorzüglich in Liefland*.

unproblematic combination: a combination probably to be explained in terms of abstract divine attributes, which were, above all, useful for the system of the so-called Latvian virtues, a term which belongs to the glossary of the national movement.²⁹

God or gods were not of great importance in themselves. Divine nature and feelings were first of all Latvian, and theological peculiarities did not disturb the harmonious picture of the ancestors, who in this portrayal were spiritually highly developed.

Another example of national identity as a construct viewed as something to be awoken or activated is the term national spirit, which was accepted in the Latvian national ideology and corresponds to the German term *Volksgeist*, developed by German Romantics.³⁰

The concept of *Geist* as eternal vital energy was described by Merkel as well, and this allowed the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* to employ the term in the creation of the nation's tragic past. Merkel's conception of the mighty folk spirit was transferred to the national press. The newspaper developed Merkel's idea of the boundless energy of the folk spirit and integrated it in the system of middle-class optimism and belief in endless progress. This construct served as one of the basic forms of national community represented by the Latvian middle class.³¹

The *Baltijas Vēstnesis* formulated the spirit as a collective noun, which made it possible to stress qualitative differences between the national cultures that were fated to interact in such a multinational area as the Baltic provinces, and especially in Riga, with its four different mentalities and cultural traditions, German, Latvian, Russian and Jewish. The task of the spirit was to build an identity based on primary sources of cultural difference in everyday life – the language and the forms of its existence, such as folk songs, the press, the theatre, books and schools. A comparison of the two texts or sets of texts, Merkel's "The Latvians" and the above mentioned article by V. Siliņš in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* shows a direct transition of Merkel's text into a new period and a new medium of national ideology, the newspaper. Let us compare some examples.

²⁹ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, February 20, 1874. As an example for the special interest in pagan cultural heritage see: *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, November 1, 1872.

³⁰ Grimm, J., Grimm, W. Vorrede zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen.

³¹ On progress as a sign of the flourishing industrial society which is a basis for the development of nationalism see: Gellner, E. *Nationalismus und Moderne*, S. 39. For the Baltic situation see: Hirschhausen, U. von. *Die Wahrnehmung des Wandels*.

In "The Latvians" Merkel stresses the necessity to believe in the capacity of the spirit to recover after so many centuries. The newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis* turns Merkel into the first protagonist of national awakening (the term belongs to the lexical specifics of the language spoken by the representatives of the national movement, and that is why it should be used, although with caution): "The situation in which Latvians had disappeared from history lasted for a long time, until Merkel drew the attention of the rest of the world to the existence of Latvians."³²

The articles in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* are so close to the content of Merkel's book that the reader almost begins to feel that he or she is reading a direct quotation, with no need for references: "The folk spirit, which was strong and gigantic, was kept imprisoned for six hundred years. Despite all that, the spirit cannot be completely destroyed. Nowadays, as humanism is established, the spirit wakes up and rules all over the Latvian territory and people."³³

Merkel, who used the unpredictability and concomitant ferocity of the folk spirit as a warning, stressed the spirit's power, its vitality: a force that should have been controlled and formed by evolution. The spirit is a cruel and unpredictable element, which can change history. Merkel's vision in "The Latvians" no doubt differs from the vision of the Latvian nationalists, but the common element of vitality demonstrates the use made of his text, and the influence of the context created by ideological needs and aims. This method of interpreting literary works became typical of the national movement, and consequently subordinated literature, art and thought to the national project. The "monstrous creations" in the press (I. Šuvajevs), such as ideological construction in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, can be interpreted and their historical and cultural value analysed in terms of the role of literature in politics.

Elucidation of the presence of the past in current political issues was one of the tasks of national ideology. Where can the spirit be identified? The editor of *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, B. Dirīkis, who belonged to the elite of the national movement through his membership and leading position in the Riga Latvian Society, was one of the main ideologists of the first mass festivals in Riga. The aim of the festival was clearly explained in the newspaper. It was important to produce a visual symbol of the masses of peasants gathered in the city and dominated by other cultures, so that the geographic location could help to create an imaginary

³² *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, June 23, 1901.

³³ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, July 11, 1873.

community, a nation, to which those gathered at the festival should express their highest loyalty. The categories included in the national identity, which had to be formed and visualised during the festivals were mainly those of the middle class which was the progenitor of the national movement. The essential question for a conceptualisation of the Latvian national movement is: what elements of middle-class culture were transferred and integrated into the vision of the Latvian nation? A systematic process of creating objectives and element of the nation can be seen in the comments of *Baltijas Vēstnesis* on the festival dedicated to the Hall of the Riga Latvian Society in 1871. The nationalist rhetoric found expression in the idea of one integrated Latvian family. The standard middle-class virtues were combined with the task of creating a feeling of belonging to a community.³⁴

This became a vital tradition which lasted until the early 1890s: in 1893 *Baltijas Vēstnesis* stressed that 25 years before no one had believed that the development of Latvians could be possible. The development of the nation had become a reality, but the success of the national movement also meant the personal success of representatives of the middle class and literati: "Latvians too can be good lawyers, clergymen, doctors and even professors."³⁵

Another important area was the folk song. Through folk songs the middle class discovered an additional opportunity to stress its authority in the national movement. In this respect the Latvian middle class no doubt played the same role as its counterparts in other Western countries, combining the traditions of Enlightenment and Romanticism.³⁶

Folk songs were turned into a natural habitat of the national spirit, reflecting the ideas proclaimed by Herder and accepted by Merkel. In 1891 Matīss Ārons pointed out that the process of collecting folk songs and fairy tales created the content of national awakening. He described the popular cultural heritage as the only possible form of existence of the national spirit.³⁷

The temporal division – the past, the present, and the future of Latvians – is another point, which gives us useful information about the patterns of the national movement.

³⁴ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, March 4, 1871.

³⁵ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, February 16, 1893.

³⁶ Hroch, M. *Das Bürgertum in den nationalen Bewegungen*.

³⁷ *Dienas Lapa*, October 3, 1891.

The past, which was needed to prove the capacity of the national spirit, served as a mediator between the present and the future, which was based on the idea of a long and slow evolutionary development, reflected in Merkel's "The Latvians" and accepted as the only possible way of development for Latvians.

At the same time the need to stress a new identity depends on the regular "updating" of the identity symbols. Benedict Anderson's idea that identification with a group requires some kind of a sacred object or a sacred way of thinking, as an integrating element of the constructed and fictitious community, can find empirical demonstration in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis*. The sacred object of the Latvian national movement manifested itself not only in the elements of "The Latvians" but took form in the person of its author as well. Not only the book became a sacred document of national ideology. Merkel too became an example of a collective and at the same time intimate connection between the national hero, whose German nationality was never stressed³⁸ (one can say that Merkel here was not a human being with specific national predicates, but an abstract protagonist of the Enlightenment), and the nation which was first mentioned as such in his work: so the national ideology could stress that national awakening derived its legitimacy from its authors. Richard Tomsons, who organised the commemoration of Merkel in 1869, remembered that the nation could attain self awareness through impulses that came from the protagonists, from another culture: "I received Merkel's picture and I placed it in the hall of the Riga Latvian Society. People started asking each other who the man in the picture was. Someone mentioned Merkel's name and everyone wished to have his picture."³⁹

In spite of the emotional style of the article, this quotation, like others, which mention Merkel's role, shows the collective intimate connection and the idea of the national content of the past to be a stable characteristic of Latvian middle-class newspapers. The gallery of the symbols of the national movement can be supplemented with the image of Latvians as a natural and naive people. This image again shows how intensive the reception of "The Latvians" was.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, August 6, 1869.

³⁹ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, September 17, 1869.

⁴⁰ The image of the naive folk was preserved unchanged until the early 1890s. Compare: *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, August 9, 1869 and April 2, 1893.

Merkel in the “Baltijas Vēstnesis” – another construction?

What do we know about Merkel's image in the *Baltijas Vēstnesis*? What characteristics predominate? Can we talk about a transition of the image? The sources, which mainly consist of biographical articles about Merkel published in the newspaper in the 1860s and 1870s, project the picture of a handsome man, kind but shy, but only until someone mentioned the theme of serfdom. This topic instantly provoked a change of the image. Merkel, all of a sudden turned into a romantic hero: “Merkel was a man who respected Enlightenment and personal freedom. That is why he had no mercy towards anyone who neglected this treasure.”⁴¹

The ceremony at Merkel's grave in 1869, dedicated to the hundredth anniversary of his birth, shows another significant feature of national ideology, which might be called double thinking. There existed two different types of thinking, the official one and the internal, the latter intended for the small group of the national elite. The ceremony was held as a manifestation of national gratitude to the nation's hero,⁴² but later it was depicted as a purely functional action, in order to stress its role in the national movement's project to give the masses the feeling of being united. In an article of 1877 M. Kaudzīte, one of the leading Latvian national journalists and writers, recalled that the Riga Latvian Society was the basis and an object of national pride,⁴³ but that Merkel's monument was even more important. He stressed that the leaders of the Society, such as R. Tomsons, knew how to “warm up people for national activities”.⁴⁴ It would be possible to say that Merkel's grave became a visually perceived element of the national cultural memory, which uses monuments, ceremonies, including death and burial rituals, as important elements. The function of such a memory is to actuate the feeling of belonging to one and the same history through similar experience. This explains the meaning of the monument in national constructions of the past. The *Baltijas Vēstnesis* described monuments as cultural phenomena that had to serve as symbols of identification with the higher level of culture. This means that the established forms of cultural memory can help to fulfil the process of identity – building that takes place with-

⁴¹ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, August 9, 1869.

⁴² Kaudzīte, M. *Atmiņas no tautiskā laikmeta*.

⁴³ For the role of the middle class culture in the ideology of the Riga Latvian Society see: Hanovs, D. *Rīgas Latviešu biedrība – pretrunīga realitāte?*

⁴⁴ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, April 27, 1877.

in a certain symbol – a filled space. Merkel's death and the monument on his grave are two examples of the process. In 1890 the *Baltijas Vēstnesis* expressed its concept of a cultural unity of the nation based on consensus as common artefacts of cultural identity: "If the people sets up monuments which are dedicated to its greatest dead men, it shows that the people has reached a true level of culture [“the level of a Kulturvolk”] because it also honours itself and its awareness of being a people.”⁴⁵

Conclusion. A Baltic German – the father of the nation?

To sum up the activities of the Latvian national movement, staged in Riga during the 2nd half of the 19th century – the beginning of the 20th century by its Latvian middle-class representatives, it is necessary to stress the following points: the national movement was one of many European national movements, which used different instruments to create the abstract construct known as a nation. Intellectual and written (published and distributed) support for the ideology was found above all in G. H. Merkel's work. Over a relatively short period (1869–1890), the Latvian national press created a system of a national past, which was revived in the activities of the middle class such as festivals and societies. Merkel was taken as the intellectual spokesman of the Latvian past and his posthumous life depended on the functionality of his ideas as they were accepted by the newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis*. At the same time, middle-class culture supplied the form for the content of the national culture, another possible way to provide unity: "Whatever happens, we should concentrate our ideas and thoughts on one or two main centres. Riga is one of these centres and in Riga the Riga Latvian Society is the most important centre."⁴⁶

It would be wrong to say that Merkel belongs to the past, as well as to the history of the national movement. Is his role topical nowadays? Is Merkel useful for the modern multinational cultural environment which now exists in Latvia, and which has always been the stage for a common existence of different nations? Was his book the only precondition for his integration into Latvian culture? To answer these questions we should probably reread Merkel, or start reading him. The way he looked at and accepted the culture of the indigenous people

⁴⁵ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, February 7, 1890.

⁴⁶ *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, February 7, 1890.

provides an answer to the question. It is the basis for future intercultural dialogues with the past, and remains one of the issues of the present day.

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Garlībs Helvigs Merķelis:

**Latviešu nacionālā kustība 19. gadsimtā –
nācijas varoņi un rituāli**

Kopsavilkums

Nāciju veidošanas process Eiropā liecina par dažādu valstu kultūru savstarpējiem sakariem. Baltijas reģions iesaistījās nacionālā ideoloģijā 19. gs. otrā pusē. Šo procesu stimulēja izglītības līmeņa celšanās, ko atbalstīja baltvācu apgaismības perioda pārstāvji, arī G. H. Merķelis. Viņa darbība 18. gadsimtā bija 17. gadsimta vācbaltiešu uzskatu un sacerējumu turpinājums. Latviešu un igauņu zemnieku stāvoklis un reformu nepieciešamība – šie ir 18. gs. apgaismotāju pārstāvju centrālie temati.

19. gs. otrā pusē izglītības un sociālās emancipācijas procesu attīstīja jau latviešu inteliģences un vidusšķiras pārstāvji, kas definēja nacionālās kustības mērķus. Latviešu nācijas veidošanās noritēja, attīstot nacionālo ideoloģiju, simboliku un veidojot nacionālos varoņus, kultūras atmiņu.

G. H. Merķeļa darbība, viņa sacerējumi un viņa saistība ar Krievijas impērijas reformu tradīciju integrēja šo vācbaltiešu literātu latviešu nacionālā kustībā. G. H. Merķeļa interese par latviešu vēsturi un tradīcijām, valodu un folkloru, bet galvenais – par latviešu izcelsmi un viņu cīņa pret vācu bruņiniekiem – šie aspekti veidoja G. H. Merķeli kā ideālo tēlu latviešu nacionālās kustības ideoloģijai. G. H. Merķeļa loma nācijas veidošanā bija nacionālās atmiņas glābējs, kas aizstāvēja latviešu kultūras nozīmi un veidoja idealizētu latviešu tēlu.

Nacionālās kustības laikraksts "Baltijas Vēstnesis" (1868–1906) aktīvi integrēja G. H. Merķeli savā darbībā, savienojot nacionālās ideoloģijas mērķus ar to leģitimāciju no pagātnes, no 18. gadsimta. Baltijas intelektuālās elites puses. G. H. Merķeļa tēls laikrakstā ir latviešu pārstāvis Eiropas kultūrā, viņu aizstāvis un nācijas attīstības pareģis.