

“GRUNDBESITZER AUS ESTLAND”: ACTIVIST REGIONALISM IN THE BALTIC SEA AREA IN 1916

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This article presents a case study of First World War-era activist regionalism in the Baltic Sea area. On a more general level, it is an illustration of what political resources were used by an opportunistic private diplomat in the spring of 1916, when attempting to pull the grand maneuver of liberating his nation from Russian and Baltic German repression and re-subjecting it to the Swedish crown. More particularly, it will constitute a further exposition of the ever-fascinating activities of Aleksander Kesküla during the First World War, this time acting in consort with another Estonian, the book publisher and patriot Jakob Ploompuu.

I will make an attempt to piece together the available information on Kesküla's and Ploompuu's meeting in Stockholm in the spring of 1916 and to conduct a contextual analysis of the series of documents signed “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” that were born out of their collaboration. On the basis of it, I will try to establish their probable authorship and target audience, and subsequently draw some conclusions about how Ploompuu's visit and the texts might have fitted into Kesküla's aims. Finally, I will conclude with a brief contextualization of Kesküla's activities with reference to the activist movement as a transnational phenomenon and their place in Estonian history.

Activist regionalism

For the time being, I will leave aside any theoretical analysis of the (notoriously diffuse) concept of regionalism. Instead, I will resort to a somewhat *ad hoc* definition of regionalism in an attempt to unite presently politically heterogeneous but geographically contiguous territories into a culturally, politically, and/or economically unified whole (“a region”), with close cooperation expected between its different constituent parts, and a particular identity on its own. This common identity may be an outgrowth of one or more nationalist projects, but is in itself a transnational phenomenon.

Regionalism can, but does not have to, entail imperialism/colonialism. The project of constructing a new region can be voluntarily accepted even by those who would most likely be fulfilling a subservient role in the region imagined – as long as it is preferable to the *status quo*.

The term „activism“, however, needs some further elucidation, as I am going to use it in a particular historical sense. In Finnish and Swedish historiography, the term is used to describe radical early twentieth century political movements. In the Finnish context, it means the circles that attempted to organize active resistance to Russification and secure Finland’s liberation from Russia with the help of Sweden and Germany.¹ In Sweden, the aim of the activists was to re-activate Swedish foreign policy, making it abandon the shameful neutrality² and turn back to the heroic Sweden of the seventeenth century, when it had been a regional great power and a worthy enemy to Russia.³ As will be seen, these two activisms were inextricably linked.

In Sweden, similar ideas were to some extent present in most right-wing circles,⁴ but activists proper distinguished themselves after the outbreak of the conflict by advocating Sweden’s immediate entry into the war as an ally of Germany. Indeed, some of them claimed that Sweden was in some sense the “natural” ally of Germany, given the geopolitics of the region.⁵ Aided by victorious Germany, Sweden would re-conquer Finland, humiliate Russia, and eventually re-claim its “naturally given leading position in *Norden*”.⁶ As a side issue, even the question of the so-called Baltic provinces’ possible reunification with the former motherland popped up in activist literature,⁷ but generally paled in importance compared with the interest in Finland and Åland.

¹ See: Lauri Hyvämäki, “Kommunismi ja jälkiaktivismi”, *Suomalainen Suomi*, 5 (1958), 277–278.

² Adrian Molin, “Stark eller svag neutralitet”, *Det Nya Sverige*, 1 (1915), 1–7.

³ L. Torbjörn Norman, “Right-wing Scandinavism and the Russian menace”, *Contact or isolation? Soviet-Western relations in the interwar period*, ed. by John Hiden and Aleksander Loit, *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia*, 8 (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1991), 338.

⁴ See: Sverker Oredsson, “Stormaktsdrömmar och stridsiver: ett tema i svensk opinionsbildning och politik 1910–1942”, *Scandia*, 59:2 (1993), 257–296.

⁵ Especially Rudolf Kjellén. See: Otto Järte, Rudolf Kjellén, Yngve Larsson, Adrian Molin, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning* (Stockholm: Nordiska Bokhandeln, 1915), 13–14.

⁶ Järte *et al.*, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, 21–23.

⁷ See: “Sverige och Östern”, *Svensk Lösen* (April 12, 1918), 78–79; “Estland”, *Svensk Lösen* (September 13, 1918), 170–172.

The Swedish activists, building on the common anti-Russian and pro-Finnish sentiments, naturally cooperated with the Finnish activists, represented in Stockholm by a substantial exile community, even though there were major differences in their outlook on the nature of the eventual Finnish independence.⁸ Activists also shared common interests with Germany, which at least during 1915 actively encouraged Sweden to join the Triple Alliance, and many representatives of Germany in Sweden (though not the ambassador von Lucius) collaborated with the Swedish warmongers.⁹

There was also at least one Estonian – Aleksander Kesküla – who could be regarded as belonging to the same movement, although he brought with himself a uniquely Estonian perspective. He, too, tried to make Sweden join the German cause, carry out its historical mission of liberating Finland and Estonia, and ultimately bring about some sort of a union between Sweden, Finland, and Estonia. Kesküla also belonged to the activist network in a practical sense, having personal ties to like-minded Finns, Swedes, and Germans residing in Stockholm. What made him unlike his Swedish and Finnish counterparts, though, was that Kesküla was wary of Germany and especially Baltic Germans, the oppressive nobility in his native land. At the same time, he was perfectly willing to accept German support when he found that his interests happened to coincide with Germany's.¹⁰

What makes activism interesting as a kind of regionalism was that it was not a simply Swedish imperialist project. The dream of the demise of Russia and the new rise of heroic Sweden brought together Swedes, Finns, Estonians, and in a sense also Germans. The First World War, furthermore, seemed like a great opportunity for a united action to make it happen. The temporarily upset political and military balance between the great powers promised potentially enormous political gains for the repressed and humiliated nations of Europe. To make it happen, nearly all means were permitted, not least cooperation with the spies of Germany or the ambassadors of the Entente, with Russian bolsheviks or American peace activists, if that was what the circumstances prescribed.

⁸ Mats Kihlberg, "Aktivismens huvudorgan Svensk Lösen", Mats Kihlberg, Donald Söderlind, *Två studier i svensk konservatism, 1916–1922* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1961), 21–22; Norman, *Right-wing Scandinavianism and the Russian menace*, 339–340.

⁹ About the Swedish activists' ties to Germany, see: Inger Schubert, *Schweden und das Deutsche Reich im Ersten Weltkrieg. Die Aktivistenbewegung 1914–1918* (Bonn: Röhrscheid, 1981).

¹⁰ In the autumn of 1914, Kesküla became a German agent on his own initiative. See: Kaido Jaanson, "Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja Berliin: avang", *Tuna*, 1 (2004), 13–15.

Aleksander Kesküla and Sweden

Some aspects of Aleksander Kesküla's activities during the war are relatively well known, in particular the role he played as a mediator of German money to Russian bolsheviks.¹¹ Less is known about his contacts with Finns and Swedes, even though Michael Futrell pointed out long ago that Kesküla's Swedish contacts might be "a rewarding piece of research".¹² It is nevertheless certain that Sweden played a role in Kesküla's plans from the beginning. In September 1914, he contacted the German ambassador in Bern, Gisbert von Romberg, and offered his help in drawing Sweden into the war on the German side, on the condition that Germany would not occupy Estonia. Kesküla wrote that his personal goal was the reunification of Estonia with Sweden,¹³ and he expected it to become possible with a joint German-Swedish victory and the disintegration of Russia.¹⁴

Shortly after the German Foreign Office had accepted his proposal, Kesküla traveled to Sweden. He stayed in Stockholm for three longer periods of time: from October 1914 until the beginning of 1915, from May 1915 until June 1916 and from the end of 1916 until the autumn of 1918. There, his main task as an agent became the infiltration of the exile Russian bolshevik circles, helping them in various ways with the aim of weakening Russia, and keeping his German handlers updated with information.¹⁵

On his own volition, Kesküla began work on a second major task: making contacts with potentially useful circles in Sweden in order to spread his rather tendentious picture of the history and present situation of Estonia and to promote his activist solution to it.¹⁶ It is likely that Kesküla thought

¹¹ For an in-depth bibliography on Kesküla's contacts with the bolsheviks, see: Jonathan D. Smele, *The Russian Revolution and Civil War 1917–1921: an annotated bibliography* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 380–384.

¹² Michael Futrell, *Northern underground: episodes of Russian revolutionary transport and communications through Scandinavia and Finland, 1863–1917* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1963), 147.

¹³ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Wk, 11c, secr. Bd. 1, l. 113. See also Olavi Arens, "Aleksander Kesküla", *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised: ühiskonnateadused*, 40:1 (1991), 30; Jaanson, *Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja Berliin*, 14; Seppo Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918: ein Beitrag zu Deutschlands antirussischem Propagandakrieg unter den Fremdvölkern Russlands im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Helsinki: Finnische Historische Gesellschaft, 1978), 54. A more systematic overview of Kesküla's world view and political aims is found in Kaido Jaanson, "Aleksander Kesküla maailmanägemus", *Acta Historica Tallinensia*, 6 (2002).

¹⁴ Arens, *Aleksander Kesküla*, 21.

¹⁵ Kaido Jaanson, "Aleksander Kesküla and Sweden 1914–1918", *Scandia*, 69:2 (2003), 158–161.

¹⁶ The thinking characteristic of Kesküla is best captured in the memorandum he presented to the III Conference of the *Union des Nationalités* in 1916: [Aleksander

these activities to be more important than his work with the bolsheviks.¹⁷ In this, however, his main competitors were the Baltic German organizations. Several of those were cooperating with Imperial Germany and, like Germans, tried to make use of the activist currents in Sweden. But unlike Kesküla, they were proceeding from a perspective that left no room for the national ambitions of Estonians.¹⁸

Jakob Ploompuu's travels and the contact with Aleksander Kesküla

In the spring of 1916, Kesküla received the unexpected news that another Estonian was visiting Stockholm with aims very similar to his own. Today, Jakob Ploompuu is remembered as one of the most successful publishers and booksellers of early twentieth-century Estonia.¹⁹ About his activities as an undercover diplomat, however, little is known. The main extant source on this is his undated letter to his sister Leena Vesterinen, subsequently published.²⁰ Judging by some of the claims made therein, it is clear that this short piece of memoir should be approached with caution.²¹ However, as far as it can be trusted, it is a valuable record of the history of Estonian proto-diplomacy.

Supposedly, Ploompuu began his attempts at clandestinely furthering the Estonian cause abroad in 1913. As a motivation to embark on this dangerous path, he claims to have during the Russo-Japanese war reached the conclusion that in a possible conflict with Germany, Russia would emerge as the loser. But as German rule would have become as “nationally destructive” for Estonians as the Russian one, a third way had to be found. Thus he sought contact with powers that might have an interest in keeping the German presence in the Baltic Sea area under control.

Kesküla], *La Question Esthoniennne et la Question Septentrionale: Mémoire présenté au nom des Esthoniens de la III conférence des Nationalités*, par M. Kesküla (Lausanne: Librairie centrale des Nationalités, 1918).

¹⁷ This judgment is shared by Kaido Jaanson: Jaanson, *Aleksander Kesküla maailmanägemus*, 113.

¹⁸ About Baltic German activism, see: Aleksander Loit, “Baltisaksa rüütelkondade seisukohad ja tegevus Eesti iseseisvumisel 1918–1920”, *Tuna*, 4 (2006), 50–74.

¹⁹ Signe Jantson, “Booksellers, publishers and press workers in the second half of the 19th and early in the 20th century in Estonia”, *Knygotyra*, 52 (2009), 239.

²⁰ Jakob Ploompuu, “Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest”, *Tulimuld*, 1 (1951), 42–45.

²¹ For example, Ploompuu claims to have been present at the printing of the Estonian independence manifesto (Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 45). This claim is not corroborated by recent research. See: Ago Pajur, “Iseseisvusmanifesti süünd”, *Tuna*, 1 (2003), 39–41.

In 1913, Ploompuu visited the British Foreign Office in London to warn them of the danger that Germany might take advantage of the discontent of the repressed nations of the Russian Empire. Next year, he followed up with a memorandum sent to the British St. Petersburg embassy, focusing on the same issue.²² Although it is doubtful whether either of these actions led to any results, they nevertheless give evidence of the rather unexpected determination with which he tried to influence international politics.

In early 1915, spurred by the hope that Sweden might be about to enter the war, Ploompuu traveled to Stockholm with the help of the passport of his Finnish brother-in-law, Emil Vesterinen. There, he passed to the Swedish General Staff a memorandum, warning that “in case the Swedish military power should take part in the world war, it would not at all be advantageous to leave in Estonia the impression that Sweden acted in order to help Germany”.²³

The same visit is also described by Aleksander Kesküla in his *Beilage* to the 1916 text, “An die Patrioten Schwedens”.²⁴ Without referring to Ploompuu by name, Kesküla writes that his 1915 journey had been a failure because he had lacked all necessary contacts in Sweden. As he knew no Swedish and but a little German, even his memorandum had been written with the help of a translation bureau(!). As far as the contents of the text, Kesküla adds that it had stressed the Estonian peasants’ strong conviction that a Swedish declaration of war against Russia would be inevitable and merely a question of time. Once the Estonian territory had been occupied, however, the Swedish government would do good to publish a manifesto declaring that Sweden had not started the war with the intention of helping Germany, but was forced into it for the sake of its own security and national future – a goal in which Swedish aims and interests were entirely compatible with those of the small nations living around the Baltic Sea.²⁵

A year later, Ploompuu was again on the way to Stockholm. As the political situation had changed, he this time had to resort to the secret passages of the Finnish *Jäger* volunteers who were being smuggled out of Finland in order to receive military training in Germany.²⁶ In other respects,

²² Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 43–44.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ Kungliga Biblioteket [henceforth KB], Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5: An die Patrioten Schwedens.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ For information about the *Jäger* movement, see the references in Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918*, 39. As Ploompuu’s stay in Stockholm was illegal, it is understandable that his name could not be found in the materials of the

however, the situation had improved. Ploompuu's Finnish acquaintances had provided him with the address of Herman Gummerus, a well-connected Finnish activist residing in Stockholm. Once he arrived, Ploompuu went to Gummerus at once.²⁷

There, he was informed by Gummerus that the interests of Estonians were mainly represented in Stockholm by Mr. Kesküla (in Ploompuu's account "Kesküla").²⁸ As Gummerus relates in his memoirs, the Estonian –an envoy of a "patriotic organization in Tallinn"– had been surprised to hear Kesküla's name, since the latter was suspected in Estonia of having been the agent of Okhrana. Once Gummerus brought the two Estonians together, however, they were soon reconciled.²⁹

What Kesküla himself thought of the unexpected visitor, at least prior to meeting him, is disclosed in his letter to Hans Steinwachs, dated 3 March 1916.³⁰ In the letter, Kesküla reports that he was expected at Gummerus' by an unknown Finnish-speaking Estonian claiming to represent some circles in Estonia. What is interesting about Kesküla's account is that he repeatedly expresses his satisfaction with the fact that the aforementioned Estonian had reached Stockholm without having used his (Kesküla's) help or connections. This pleases him as evidence of the rightness of his own Scandinavian-oriented endeavors, also giving him an important trump-card in the eyes of Swedes, to whom he thus far had only been able to bring Finnish activists as witnesses that the Estonian "svecophilia" was not merely his personal conviction or fantasy. Kesküla adds that for that reason, it would be a pleasant surprise if the *Herr Kompatriot* in question turned out to be a personal or political enemy of his. In light of the Okhrana accusation, this hope was to a degree perhaps also fulfilled.

Swedish police bureau for the monitoring of foreigners (*Polisbyrån för övervakandet av utlänningar*) (Kaido Jaanson, "Eestlased Rootsi salapolitsei valvsa silma all Eesimese maailmasõja ajal", *Tuna*, 1 (2003), 23).

²⁷ Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 44. Ploompuu's contacts with Finnish activists are also mentioned by Kesküla: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 218718.

²⁸ Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 44.

²⁹ Herman Gummerus, *Jägare och aktivister. Hågkomster från krigsåren i Stockholm och Berlin* (Helsingfors: Söderström & Co Förlags Aktiebolag), 193. Gummerus' and Ploompuu's accounts of this meeting have been compared by Kaido Jaanson: Kaido Jaanson, "See kummaline eestlane", *Looming*, 7 (1990), 965–966.

³⁰ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 218719. Steinwachs was Kesküla's handler and an agent of the political department of the German General Staff in Stockholm.

It seems that for Kesküla, later accused by Steinwachs of “overestimating his tiny homeland, compatriots and himself”,³¹ Ploompuu’s arrival represented a long-awaited chance of escaping the legitimation crisis inherent to him being the sole representative of Estonian activism in Stockholm. How Kesküla attempted to make use of this lucky chance is best witnessed by the four texts that were probably written in connection to this episode.

The writings of “Grundbesitzer aus Estland”

Copies of the texts that will be subsequently analyzed can be found in the Royal Library of Stockholm among the papers of Swedish activists Otto Järte and Adrian Molin. Additional copies of one of the texts are also located in the political archive of *Auswärtiges Amt* in Berlin. Even though the texts are anonymous, there is in light of the information presented above almost no doubt in their connection to Ploompuu and Kesküla.

The first of these documents bears the title “An die ‘neutrale Friedenskonferenz’ in Stockholm” (“To the ‘Neutral Peace Conference’ in Stockholm”) and is slightly more than eight typewritten pages in length, concluding with a handwritten note signed “A. K.”³² The same text has also been preserved in two additional copies in Berlin,³³ one of them in French translation.³⁴ The Berlin archive also contains some typed comments of mainly the same content as the handwritten note added to Otto Järte’s copy in Sweden.³⁵

The second text is titled “An die Patrioten Schwedens” (“To the Swedish Patriots”) and covers about five and a half typewritten pages.³⁶ It also includes a page-length *Beilage* signed “Der Uebersetzer” (the translator). The third text is three pages in length and bears the title “Entwurf eines politischen Programmes für den Fall eines Einmarsches der deutschen Armeen in das Land der Esthen” (“The Proposal of a Political Program in the Case

³¹ Arens, *Aleksander Kesküla*, 36.

³² KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5: An die “neutrale Friedenskonferenz”.

³³ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 249007–16. As these texts were found by Kaido Jaanson, copies of them have been preserved in his archive in Estonian Historical Archives [Ajalooarhiiv, henceforth EAA], f. 5377, n. 1, s. 73, l. 157–166.

³⁴ “Au congrès neutre de la paix à Stockholm”: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 249017–25.

³⁵ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 248822–24.

³⁶ KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5 An die Patrioten Schwedens; KB, Adrian Molins Efterlämnade Papper, L0046:25A. In Järte’s archive, the text is preserved in two different copies, one of which includes a section about the 1915 memorandum containing the same information as Kesküla’s *Beilage*.

of the Invasion of the German Army into the Land of Estonians”).³⁷ There is also a fourth text, the three-and-a-half pages long “Ueber die Unterdrückung der Russen durch die Esthen” (“On the Repression of Russians by Estonians”).³⁸

All texts are dated March 1916 and signed “Grundbesitzer aus Ehistland” (or “... in Ehistland”), *i.e.* “Estonian Landowner”, with the exception of the copy of the first text in Järte’s archive, signed by Kesküla’s hand as “Unterzeichnet ein estnischer Grundbesitzer und Mittelständler” (“Signed by an Estonian Landowner and Middle Class Representative”). All texts appear to have been written roughly at the same time and on the same typewriter, resembling Kesküla’s other typewritten papers of the period (*e.g.* in the use of capital “J” instead of “I”).

The texts claim to have been translated from Estonian. “The Proposal of a Political Program...” and one of Järte’s copies of “To the Swedish Patriots” conclude with the comment “Uebersetzung aus dem Esthnischen” (“Translation from Estonian”). The *Beilage* added to one of the copies of the latter text is likewise signed by someone calling himself “Der Uebersetzer” (“The translator”). It seems very likely that this “translator” was Aleksander Kesküla, who, judged by the characteristic handwriting and the signature “A. K.,” was also the author of the undated³⁹ but probably

³⁷ KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5 Entwürfe eines politischen Programmes...; KB, Adrian Molins Efterlämnade Papper, L0046:25C.

³⁸ KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5 Ueber die Unterdrückung..., KB, Adrian Molins Efterlämnade Papper, L0046:25D. This text, which will not be treated here at length, is a partial translation of an article published in the Estonian newspaper *Tallinna Teataja* (nr 88, May 3 1916) titled “Lonkav loogika” (“Faulty Logic”). This article, in turn, is a response to an editorial that had appeared in the Russian-language newspaper *Revelskiya Ivestiya*. In the editorial, Estonians were accused of having excessive nationalist pride, expressed in their unwillingness to speak Russian and the tendency to treat speakers of Russian unfairly. In their response, *Tallinna Teataja* writes that “one would really need to be out of his wits to openly accuse Estonians of haughtiness” and that in any case, the war was being led for the protection of smaller nations, apparent from Britain taking up the Belgian cause and Russia Serbia’s. The “Grundbesitzer” text is a compilation of translated examples of alleged cases of excessive Estonian pride with some “translator’s” comments (mainly “sic!” appended to *Revelskiya Ivestiya*’s most chauvinist allegations). The copy preserved in Järte’s archive includes a large note written in Kesküla’s hand concluding the text: “The Scandinavian (=Great-Swedish) interests of Estonians are not a consequence of weakness, but a result of national vigor!”

³⁹ In June 1916, Kesküla left Stockholm and did not return until the next year: Kaido Jaanson, “Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja rahvuste uniooni III konverents Lausanne’is 1916. aastal”, *Akadeemia*, 9 (2000), 1850.

roughly contemporary handwritten note to the peace conference text preserved in the archive of Otto Järte, as well as of the typewritten *Beilage* to the same text in Berlin.⁴⁰

Circumstantial evidence also suggests that the texts were composed in Stockholm. In the letter to his sister, Ploompuu claims to have brought no papers with himself, having to learn all names and directions by heart.⁴¹ If one is to trust Ploompuu on this point, then, keeping in mind that Kesküla saw in his arrival a chance of bolstering his claims of the Swedish orientation of Estonians, it seems *a priori* likely that the “translator” Kesküla, not Ploompuu, was in fact the main author of the texts. Furthermore, as Ploompuu himself does not mention any written texts in connection with the 1916 visit, it is not impossible he was even unaware of their existence.

The question of whether and to what degree “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” was simply Kesküla’s mystification should be reconsidered after a contextual analysis of the texts has been conducted. But at the same time, this does not change the fact that Ploompuu’s visit left a mark on its own, playing at the very least the role of the gate that enabled Kesküla to take on the *Grundbesitzer* identity.

Ploompuu’s presentation at the Neutral Peace Conference

The culmination of Ploompuu’s visit was his appearance before the delegates of The Neutral Conference for Continuous Mediation. This unofficial peace conference, supported by the finances of American millionaire Henry Ford, was held in Stockholm’s Grand Hotel in March 1916. Approximately 40 delegates, many of them internationally well-known peace activists, were busy with writing an appeal from neutral countries to belligerent powers, proposing the terms on which a lasting world peace could be built. At the same time, the conference received appeals and petitions from representatives of various oppressed nations.⁴²

Of the latter cases, the conference’s general secretary Louis P. Lochner had in his book on Henry Ford’s peace ambitions singled out one in particular as “the most dramatic of all”. This was the unexpected appearance before the conference of “an Esthonian peasant”, who, according to Lochner, had crossed the Finnish border at the risk of his life and traveled on skis

⁴⁰ “Anmerkung des Uebersetzers”: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 248822–24.

⁴¹ Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 44.

⁴² See: Barbara S. Kraft, *The Peace Ship: Henry Ford’s pacifist adventure in the First World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 207–229.

over many miles of the rough Norrland landscape. The man did not dare to tell his name and asked that his visit remain secret for ten days until he had had time to safely return. Lochner writes that the Estonian's plea in the name of his people tragically suffering under the Tsarist regime, delivered with the help of an interpreter, deeply stirred the emotions of the conference delegates with its sincere simplicity.⁴³ The same sort of pathos is also present in a shorter account of this event by another delegate, Jane Addams.⁴⁴

Ploompuu's own description of this event is rather brief. "Facilitated by Mr. Keskküla," he writes, an "Estonian evening" was organized at the American Embassy,⁴⁵ where Ploompuu gave a speech that was also translated (or perhaps interpreted) into English. In his speech, he demanded that more attention be paid to the vital problems of smaller nationalities, such as the fact that Estonians were suffering heavy economical losses due to being forced to learn Russian in school. During the discussion, Ploompuu was posed the question of whether Estonians were Russian- or German-friendly, to which he gave the answer that the resources of the small Estonian nation were only sufficient for being Estonian-friendly. Shortly after that, Ploompuu left Stockholm "with satisfied feelings that even the Estonian question is getting somewhere" and his Finnish friends helped him back home.⁴⁶

Keskküla gives some additional details about the presentation in his handwritten note added to the peace conference text.⁴⁷ Claiming that the document in question had been personally handed to him in March at the American peace conference in Stockholm, he adds that the author had held a speech on the same topic, posing complaints on the repressive Russian politics in the "former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces". When questioned about the Estonian opinion on the annexation of Belgium, the author had replied that "for the sake of Estonian public school, we would be prepared

⁴³ Louis Paul Lochner, *America's Don Quixote: Henry Ford's attempt to save Europe*, with a preface by Maxim Gorki (London: International Publishers, 1925), 146.

⁴⁴ Jane Addams, *Peace and bread in times of war* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 43. Addams' and Lochner's accounts are remarkably similar, making it possible that Lochner was partly relying on Addams' earlier book, or that they both were using a common third source. At the same time, Lochner's text includes details not present in Addams'.

⁴⁵ This claim seems highly unlikely, as the unofficial peace conference had not enjoyed the recognition nor the support of the embassy. This is emphasized in the memoirs of the United States ambassador to Sweden at that time, Ira N. Morris: *Ira Nelson Morris, Minnen från min ministertid i Stockholm 1914–1923* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söners Förlag, 1923), 52.

⁴⁶ Ploompuu, *Kiri vabariigi eelaegadest*, 45.

⁴⁷ KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5: An die "neutrale Friedenskonferenz".

to share the fate of Belgium”. When asked, however, which belligerent side was being supported by the inhabitants of the former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces, the author had, according to Kesküla, answered that their support belonged to “neither Russia nor Germany; the only foreign power that has our sympathy is Sweden, which has done so much to improve our national, cultural and social situation.” According to Kesküla, the peace conference delegates had also promised to inform other neutral countries of the Estonian situation. For this purpose, the text of the speech was translated into English and sent to the United States.

Concerning the author of the speech, Kesküla wrote that he is the father of six children and an owner of real estate, as well as that he had secretly crossed the Russian-Swedish border but already returned the same way home, which is why his writings could be made public. In the *Beilage* to the text found in Berlin, Kesküla adds that the author is somewhat less than 50 years old and very highly regarded in his native country, having held several national and political posts. Kesküla claims that the views presented in the text are representative of the majority of the Estonian middle class; by whom the author had been entrusted with the mission of presenting them to the peace conference. About the occasion, Kesküla adds that it was at an *ad hoc* extraordinary meeting of the conference where his speech had been received with much sympathy.⁴⁸

The exact relationship between the written Neutral Peace Conference text and Ploompuu’s speech is difficult to establish. Calculations about the economic cost of the forced learning of Russian are certainly present in the written version, but the very existence of a written memorandum is unmentioned in Ploompuu’s account. This can be interpreted as a sign of the latter’s unreliability, but it could also plausibly mean that the text – perhaps a thoroughly modified version of it – was spread without Ploompuu’s knowledge.

The discrepancy between Kesküla’s and Ploompuu’s accounts of the answer to the question about Estonian war sympathies is similarly problematic. Did he reply that Estonians were “only Estonian-friendly”, or that their sympathy only belonged to Sweden? Whereas the first answer seems to express the Estonian demands for autonomy, the second one suggests a wish of being re-subjected to the Swedish king. Ploompuu might have changed his answer later, wanting to disassociate himself from his previous, ultimately fruitless hopes for Swedish intervention. The second answer, on

⁴⁸ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 248822–23.

the other hand, is so closely aligned with the thought of Kesküla and the Swedish activists, that it could easily be Kesküla's invention.

The memorandum to the Neutral Peace Conference

Even though little is known with certainty about the contents of Ploompuu's speech, it is likely that it at least partly overlapped with the written memorandum titled "To the 'Neutral Peace Conference' in Stockholm". The contents of this text can be summarized as follows:

It is likely that neither belligerent side will achieve conclusive victory over the other, and there is little hope that war losses would be compensated due to the enormity of the expenses incurred. There exists a precedent from the Crimean War that the conquered territories do not become the property of the winning state but are instead handed over to the local peoples. The same policy should be adopted by Entente and Germany during the peace talks on the condition that the other side does the same. In that way, the autonomy of all the oppressed peoples could be achieved ("*Home rule für alle unterdrückten Völkerschaften*").

Every state that has national minorities living on its territory should guarantee them full language and cultural rights in proportion with the state's size and population. The exercise of these rights should be overseen by an international court or neutral states. It is not true that small nationalities are not ready for autonomy; they merely need a chance to prove themselves in free cultural competition. Until now, the subjugated small nationalities have only suffered cultural repression, above all in Russia. Therefore, it is understandable that they have begun entertaining their own hopes of liberation in connection with the end result of the world war.⁴⁹

For them, it would be most natural to punish Russia, the greatest of all oppressors, as well as the state most damaged in the war, and itself the most culturally backwards of all great powers. If Germany would help the repressed nations to achieve liberation from Russia, it would earn their gratitude and openness to German industry and trade. At the same time, a wide belt of neutral territories would appear between the Central Powers and the aggressive Great Russian imperialism and militarism – the latter of which might become a danger to international security in the near future.

⁴⁹ Such expectations, as well as the hope for German help, were indeed rather widespread among the national minorities of Russia during the First World War. See: Ants Piip, *Tormine aasta: ülevaade Eesti välispoliitika esiajast 1917–1918. aastal dokumentides ja mälestusis* (Stockholm: Kirjastus Vaba Eesti, 1966 [1934]), 4; Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918*, 41–50.

Both liberal Britain and republican France should be content with the exercise of the right of national self-determination in the above-described manner. In this way, the questions of Poland, Finland, the former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces (Estland, Livland, Ingria), and Alsace-Lorraine would be solved, and guidelines would be established for solutions to the Balkan questions.

The drawing of customs borders should certainly be avoided, lest German industry be suffocated. Thus the peace treaty must guarantee certain commercial rights to Germany, above all to colonies in Africa. But German forces must be drawn out from Belgium, Poland re-established as a free state, and the Baltic Sea countries handed over to their native populations (Estonians and Lithuanians). Even the part of the population that had emigrated due to oppressive Russian policies would, in that case, happily return to their homes. It would not be necessary to extend the territory of Germany at the expense of others, as long as other German interests in foreign countries would not be infringed. Quite the contrary, Germany and other states would get a chance to demonstrate their cultural supremacy in free competition with others.

Because all belligerents have suffered such great losses, that it is impossible to expect them to be compensated for, the peace terms have to include the general abolishment of war, the use of respective military budgets for other purposes, and the creation of a general court of arbitration.

In the last part of the text, the aforementioned peace terms are repeated in the form of a numbered list. The text is concluded by a plea to the delegates of the conference; that they take notice of the suffering and wishes of the Estonian people, “who for 200 years have been hampered and hindered by a foreign, barbarous power.”

The peace terms of “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” and the seven principles of the Neutral Conference, and the question of authorship

The argumentation of Grundbesitzer’s Neutral Peace Conference text proceeds from the assumption that the principle of national self-determination is applicable to even smaller nations. Not demanding national independence but merely autonomy for the national minorities of Russia, the author nevertheless sees their autonomy as an international issue, the positive solution of which would serve the interests of both warring sides with the exception of Russia. At the same time, it was supposed that the total collapse of either side would be unlikely, meaning that even after the war, a roughly similar geopolitical balance of power would continue to exist.

This part of the reasoning might have been the creation of Ploompuu, but the rest of the text mirrors so closely the efforts and goals of the Neutral Peace Conference that even this seems rather unlikely. In fact, remarkable commonalities can be found between the Grundbesitzer's text and the main result reached by the Neutral Conference in April 1916.⁵⁰ Its appeal to the international community is sometimes regarded as a predecessor to Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points.⁵¹

The appeal of the Neutral Conference consists of a list of proposals for how a lasting peace might be achieved (the so-called seven universal principles), and examples of how these should be put into practice. It was intended that the inclusion of these principles in future peace treaties and their universal recognition would ensure a peace that would "not only satisfy the legitimate needs of the warring nations themselves, but also advance the welfare of the humanity at large."⁵²

The first principle of the Neutral Peace Conference (A.) establishes that "no transfer of territory should take place without the consent of the population involved, and that nations should have the right to decide their own fate." This meant that Belgium's, Serbia's, and Montenegro's independence would have to be restored, the occupied French territories (Alsace-Lorraine) returned to France, and Poland reunited. The second principle (B.) demands that the "economic activity of all peoples should be afforded development on equal terms", meaning that the German colonies would be returned and "Germany's access to Near East" guaranteed. The third principle (C.) calls for the freedom of the seas; the fourth (D.) for parliamentary control of foreign policy – so that secret diplomacy would no longer endanger the interests of the nations. The fifth principle (E.) calls for the establishment of an international organization that would offer peaceful settlements to conflicts between states. The sixth principle (F.) insists on disarmament by international agreement and the seventh principle (G.) demands a "World Congress" to be established, including representatives from both belligerents and neutrals, so that a peaceful world order could be guaranteed for the future, not least by "guaranteeing political and spiritual freedom to special nationalities united with other peoples."⁵³

⁵⁰ See: Lochner, *America's Don Quixote*, 147–150 and Kraft, *The Peace Ship*, 221–222.

⁵¹ As noted by Barbara S. Kraft: "[w]ith the exception of the suggestions regarding Germany, every provision suggested was included in Wilson's Fourteen Points Address of almost two years later", Kraft, *The Peace Ship*, 222.

⁵² Lochner, *America's Don Quixote*, 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148–150.

It is a remarkable fact that Grundbesitzer's memorandum concludes likewise with a list of seven peace terms that correspond rather well to those listed in the Neutral Peace Conference's appeal. The first of those is a demand for guaranteed national self-determination (in the form of a "*Home rule*") to all oppressed peoples (1. corresponding to A.), the second asks for trade concessions to Germany, as well as freedom of the seas and international trade (2. corresponding to B. and C.), the third claims African colonies for Germany (3. corresponding to B.), the fourth demands the restoration of independence for Belgium, Serbia, and Montenegro (4. corresponding to A.). This was followed by a demand for a referendum in Alsace-Lorraine and Poland over the question of which state they belong to (5.), a demand to abolish all national and religious persecution and to institute international control over the issue (6.), and a demand for general disarmament and the establishment of a higher international court of arbitration (7. corresponding to E. and F.).

The ways in which Grundbesitzer's text differs from the principles of the Neutral Peace Conference can be seen in the tendency towards favoring "repressed nations" (particularly the inhabitants of the "former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces") and disfavoring Russia. In Otto Järte's copy of the text, there are some telling marginal notes, probably originating from Kesküla's hand. For example, next to condition 1., there is a note "Zu 90% gegen Russland gerichtet" ("By 90% directed against Russia") and next to condition 6., again, "Gegen Russland gerichtet!" ("Directed against Russia!"). This certainly seems like a fair judgment. Similarly, the demand for referendums in 5. (instead of the restoration and return of territories demanded in the Neutral Conference's appeal) can be seen as a strategic change intended to eliminate the possibility that the pre-war situation might be reinstated during peace talks, or Estonian territories given to Germany. This is a pattern in full harmony with Kesküla's characteristic anti-Russian and anti-Baltic German convictions.

It would be interesting to know how much Ploompuu knew about the Neutral Peace Conference; whether addressing it had been one of the aims of his stay in Stockholm from the outset, and what exactly Kesküla's role was in "facilitating" the meeting and Ploompuu's presentation. However, for the lack of better knowledge, it seems most likely it was Kesküla himself who was the source of detailed knowledge about the aims of the peace conference displayed in the text. It is also probable that he was the main author, perhaps of the speech, but certainly of the memorandum. Furthermore, the conference's appeal had not yet been made public at the time

of Ploompuu's presentation, which makes it even more likely that the text in its present form is the work of Kesküla, composed some weeks after Ploompuu had left Sweden. But even if it was in fact written earlier, it seems rather unlikely that Ploompuu, not knowing much Swedish or German, could have been so well informed without Kesküla's help. This conclusion can probably be extended to other Grundbesitzer texts, which seem to be even more clear-cut cases.

Of course, from the perspective of Kesküla's own habits of thought, an argument based on the right of national self-determination is rather surprising. Olavi Arens, in his judgment of Kesküla's aims, has emphasized the exact opposite: his preference for the principles of *Realpolitik* and a disregard for the idea of national self-determination.⁵⁴ But Kesküla was nothing if not a political opportunist. As Ploompuu's stay in Stockholm provided him with a convenient pretext of expressing out-of-character thoughts, it is easy to see why he would do it. And finally, there is nothing in Grundbesitzer's text that would exclude the possibility of the Estonian national self-determination resulting in a union with Sweden – which was, in any case, Kesküla's true goal.

The appeal to Swedish patriots

Whereas some background information has been preserved about the Neutral Peace Conference text, there is little direct extra-textual evidence of who might have been the target audience of the second of Grundbesitzer's texts. A clue, however, is provided by the fact that together with others, this text is preserved among the papers of leading Swedish activists, Otto Järte and Adrian Molin.

The fortunes of Swedish activists seemed to fluctuate with German victories and defeats. A high point of their propaganda for Sweden becoming a German ally and reestablishing itself as a regional great power, was the publication of the book "Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning" ("Sweden's Foreign Policy in the Light of the World War") in the summer of 1915, when Germany was scoring major victories on the Eastern Front. At that time, the activist cause had important sympathizers among Swedish high society (including the queen of Sweden), and their propaganda for "bold involvement on the side of Germany" (*modig uppslutning vid Tysklands sida*)⁵⁵ was a current, if not dominant factor in Swedish public

⁵⁴ Arens, *Aleksander Kesküla*, 30.

⁵⁵ Järte *et al.*, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, Förord.

opinion. This period of success lasted until May 1916, when the failure of Gustaf Steffen's interpellation in the Åland question dealt the movement a hard blow and partially changed its character.⁵⁶

In March and April of 1916, however, hopes were still running high. Therefore, the claim of Olavi Arens that Kesküla's contemporary idea of Sweden participating in the war against Russia was "wholly unrealistic"⁵⁷ must be taken with some caution. The evidence also contradicts Aleksander Loit's assumption that there was no cooperation between Kesküla and the Swedish activists.⁵⁸ At least according to Gummerus, Kesküla had close ties to the activist circles.⁵⁹ Adrian Molin indeed mentions acquaintance with Kesküla in his unpublished memoirs.⁶⁰ It also seems that Kesküla had some kind of contact with Järte.⁶¹

All in all, there is nothing particularly surprising about the writings of "Grundbesitzer aus Estland" ending up among Molin's and Järte's papers. Already on the basis of this circumstantial evidence, it seems very likely that it was, in fact, the Swedish activists who were the target audience of Grundbesitzer's second memorandum.

The contents of the text are summarized as follows:

Already from the outset of the war, the people in the former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces have been awaiting Sweden's entry into the war with the aim of protecting its interests and hindering Russia's advance to the Atlantic ocean. More than ever, they have started taking seriously old tales about the victorious return of the Swedish army (such as the story about a stick of wood that Charles XII stuck into Estonian soil with the words "Once it will grow into a tree, the Swedish army shall return to Livonia" and which did, indeed, grow into a large tree by the road between Viljandi and Tartu). Such tales had been born out of the folk masses' yearning for the good old times.

Immediately after Swedish rule had remarkably eased the situation of the peasants, they were forced again into hard slavery during Russian rule. But the memory of the "good Swedish times" remained in the soul of the

⁵⁶ Kihlberg, *Aktivismens huvudorgan Svensk Lösen*, 13.

⁵⁷ Arens, *Aleksander Kesküla*, 31.

⁵⁸ Loit, *Baltisaksa riütelkondade seisukohad ja tegevus Eesti iseseisvumisel 1918–1920*, 64.

⁵⁹ Gummerus, *Jägare och aktivister*, 192.

⁶⁰ KB, Adrian Molins Efterlämnade Papper, Loo46:16A Aktivismens historia 1914–1917, 50.

⁶¹ Among Kesküla's papers in the archive of Auswärtiges Amt, there is an empty envelope dated 28 July 1916 bearing Otto Järte's address written in Kesküla's hand together with the note "Einschreiben!" ("To be registered!"): Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Secret 11, Varia III, 1, l. 248785; see also EAA, f. 5377, n. 1, s. 74, l. 12.

people and is strong even today, as people know that it was in the Swedish times that the foundations for the development of Estonian culture were laid, whereas the Russian administration did nothing but try to hinder and persecute Estonian education, literature, and art in any way possible.

The news of Russian war losses are not received with displeasure by Estonians, but neither is the advancing German army regarded as a liberator. Rather, it is seen as an even more grave danger, since it is known how Germans have treated nations subjected to them in Lotring, Schleswig, and Posen. The Baltic German nobility has also given much ground for hostile attitudes towards Germans. It was, after all, they who let the former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces be moved under Russian rule, receiving extensive feudal privileges in return. The majority of Estonians are therefore afraid that with German rule, these privileges would be affirmed once more.

Until now, Estonians had been hoping that as German troops arrive, Sweden would also enter the war in order to secure its future, and would, in the case of German victory, become a just and neutral ruler over these territories. But now people have begun to understand that Sweden has no certain wish to participate in the war, meaning that one hated foreign rule might have to be traded for another. This is why Estonians turn to Sweden in their conviction that Sweden would not remain indifferent to the fate of the people, whose culture it itself once established, and hoping that Swedish patriots would use their personal influence and connections to protect Estonians. In particular, they should inform the German General Staff about the situation, so that all misunderstandings with Germans could be avoided.

In case Sweden does not want to give up its neutrality before the end of the war, it should at least ask for compensation at the peace talks from the Entente for having remained neutral. In order to stop the Russian advance towards the Atlantic ocean, Sweden should demand that full autonomy be guaranteed to all the small nations living across the coast of Sweden. In the case of German victory as well, it would be natural if the Swedish government did everything possible during the peace talks so that Estonians would be conferred as large a degree of self-determination as possible. Finally, it would be in Sweden's own interests, if a buffer zone of strong peoples with their unique culture and a form of self-government would come into existence between Sweden and the great powers.

“Grundbesitzer aus Estland” and Swedish activism

The hypothesis that the second of Grundbesitzer’s texts was targeted at Swedish activists can be checked by comparing its ideas to those expressed in the book *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning* (commonly known as the “war book” or the “activist book”). In the Grundbesitzer text, the main motifs are the need to weaken Russia, the traditionally positive Estonian attitude towards Sweden (and the corresponding call for a Swedish *noblesse oblige*), and a distrust of Germany. It can be said that at least concerning the first two themes, Grundbesitzer’s common ground with Swedish activism is remarkable indeed.

In the preface of the war book, written by Rudolf Kjellén, two geopolitical motivations are ascribed to Russia: an attraction towards Constantinople and a desire to break out onto the world seas.⁶² In the war, where Russia and Britain have become united in common hate against Germany, Sweden, as it is caught between the great powers, has to do something in order to protect its national interests. Swedish interests, however, are primarily connected to the Baltic Sea, for “the natural face of Sweden is turned towards the East” and the main geographical fact that determines the political status of Sweden in the world is therefore its relation to Russia. But as Russia is naturally inclined to move towards the Atlantic, and Sweden is a hindrance on its way, two political correlations can be derived from this fact: when Sweden is strong, it has to expand towards the east, and conversely, when Sweden is weak, it is endangered from the east.⁶³

Twice in its history – in the early Middle Ages and in the seventeenth century – Sweden had been a great power. Now, time had come again for Sweden to regain its position in the Baltic Sea area, to avoid falling prey to the fate of Galicia or Finland. Furthermore, Sweden shares a common destiny (pressure from the east) and a common interest (the freedom of the Baltic Sea) with Germany. Therefore, there exists a natural basis for a Swedish-German alliance, further supported by shared memories of the battles of Gustav Adolf.⁶⁴ The grave Russian danger to the Swedish future can be avoided only in one way: through a “bold involvement on the side of Germany”⁶⁵, which would enable Sweden to fulfill its “historical mission”

⁶² Järte, *et al.*, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12–14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Förord.

as a champion of Germanic culture and a bulwark against the barbarity threatening from the east.⁶⁶

In a similar fashion, Grundbesitzer's text presents the entry of Sweden into the war, in order to "protect its interests" and hinder the Russian scramble for the Atlantic, as a geopolitical necessity long counted on by the people of the "former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces". Likewise, the text puts a strong emphasis on the importance of the memory of the seventeenth century. A major difference, as might be expected, lies in the attitude towards Germany. Although Sweden is regarded, as by activists, as a probable ally of Germany, the author of the Grundbesitzer's text does not mean that their aims would be wholly compatible. Rather, Sweden is supposed to exert a controlling influence over Germans, remembering the historical treacherousness of the Baltic German nobility. But even if Sweden would decline to enter the war, the author regards it to be morally, geopolitically, and mnemopolitically obliged to act benevolently towards Estonians, at the very least guaranteeing their post-war autonomy. This aspect in particular makes this memorandum rather close in intention to the Neutral Peace Conference text.

The most remarkable rhetorical commonality between the texts, besides how Russian geopolitical interests are being depicted, is the emphasis on common historical memories and cultural roots from which the historical mission of Sweden is derived. In a *Beilage* added to one of the copies of the text, "Der Uebersetzer" writes that the "naive helplessness" of the text at hand reflects the historical plight of the "forgotten Transbaltic irredenta" of Sweden. At the same time, it is supposedly indicative of a wider political suffering of Northern Europe, the leading state of which does not seem to know or want to know anything about its historical mission – "the political consolidation of the Northern European economical and cultural region".

Adrian Molin clearly means something similar when he writes that Sweden has to accept its "naturally leading position in *Norden*" and as a leader of Northern Germanic peoples unify both Finland and other Scandinavian countries in the struggle against the lower races.⁶⁷ No neutrality policy can free Sweden from fulfilling this mission, as it arises from Sweden's own location and history.⁶⁸ Sweden's main concern should be with Finland. "Finns are our own, Swedish people," writes Molin, founded on Swedish order, laws and religion. It is in Finland, where 400,000 people of

⁶⁶ Kihlberg, *Aktivismens huvudorgan Svensk Lösen*, 15.

⁶⁷ Järte, *et al.*, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, 22–23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

Swedish origin are still living, that “Sweden has its own irredenta.”⁶⁹ Therefore, Sweden is obliged to guarantee that Finland would not be russified, but would form a bulwark between Sweden and Russia.⁷⁰ Something very similar is being demanded in the Grundbesitzer’s text in connection with the territory of Estonians, also depicted as having a strong historical connection to Sweden and a possible buffer zone between Sweden and Russia.

Achieving some sort of an Estonian-Swedish union was perhaps Kesküla’s main aim during the war. A statement to that effect is found already in his earliest letter to Germans from September 1914.⁷¹ The idiosyncratic formulation “former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces” also has its origins there.⁷² The most thorough treatment of “the centuries-old historical mission of the Northern European civilization” to consolidate itself for the sake of common defense and cultural development, is found in the memorandum that Kesküla presented in Lausanne later in 1916.⁷³ The fact that he had been skillful in making use of the motif of the “good old Swedish times” in his relationship with the Swedish activists was already noted by Gummerus.⁷⁴

In conclusion, Grundbesitzer’s appeal to the Swedish patriots, if not written with the activist war book literally open next to the typewriter, at least seems to have been consciously modeled on activist rhetoric, departing from it only by a certain wariness of Germany. In addition to that, there are clear parallels in form and content to Kesküla’s other similar writings.

The proposal of a political program in case of a German invasion

The third of Grundbesitzer’s writings, “The proposal of a political program in the case of the invasion of the German army into the land of Estonians”,⁷⁵ is similar to Ploompuu’s 1915 memorandum to the Swedish General Staff, insofar as it also contains a proposal for a post-invasion manifesto. Unlike the earlier text, this one is not addressed to the Swedes but the Germans,

⁶⁹ Järte, *et al.*, *Sveriges utrikespolitik i världskrigets belysning*, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Wk, 11c, secr. Bd. 1, l. 113. See also Jaanson, *Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja Berliin: avang*, 14, Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918*, 54.

⁷² “[D]ie früheren schwedischen Ostseeprovinzen: Ehstland, Livland & Ingermanland (offiz. Gouvernement St. Petersburg)”, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes, Wk, 11c, secr. Bd. 1, l. 113.

⁷³ [Kesküla], *La Question Esthonienne et la Question Septentrionale*, 20.

⁷⁴ Gummerus, *Jägare och aktivister*, 192.

⁷⁵ KB, Otto Järtes Efterlämnade Papper, L78:5 Entwurf eines politischen Programmes ..., KB, Adrian Molins Efterlämnade Papper, L0046:25C.

and it remains unclear whether it was to some extent modeled on the earlier memorandum.

In summary, the contents of the text are as follows:

The reason why victorious German armies are not greeted as liberators by the oppressed nationalities of Russia, as the whole of Europe once exaltedly welcomed the troops of Napoleon, is that a banner of liberty was put out for the whole world to see at the beginning of the Napoleonic wars. The German victory, on the contrary, is understood as something benefiting only Germany and nobody else. For that reason, the nations on the periphery of Russia, although terribly oppressed by the central administration, cannot regard Germans as liberators, for it is known how roughly Germany had treated other subjugated peoples: Danes and Poles.

Estonians cannot understand why Germans, who otherwise have put everything in service of the war effort, would not attempt to provide the Russian national minorities with a greater degree of freedom and better chances of development, thereby winning their sympathy.

In order to avoid the waste of resources and expressions of hostility, the German troops, once they have invaded the Estonian territory, have to make public a manifesto in the local language and signed by the highest state instance. In the manifesto, it should be guaranteed that the German population would have no special privileges in comparison with the Estonians, that the German language would enjoy no special rights, that all taxpayers would be given a chance to take part in the self-government of the land, and that Estonians would be given full autonomy inside the borders of the former Swedish Baltic Sea provinces of Estland, Livland, and Ingria. Self-government would be based on a general right to vote and have the same rights that the Finnish Diet had in the constitutional period. Should the Estonian and Finnish peoples want to attach themselves to Sweden by majority vote, Germany would not be allowed to hinder it in any way.

As soon as these promises were made public, all reasonable people would use all their personal influence to avoid any kind of expressions of hostility. In that way, order would be ensured in the country and the army would not have to needlessly waste its resources. Furthermore, there would certainly be numerous people even wanting to help the German army.

The oppressed nations of Russia and German war aims

To untangle the context of the third of Grundbesitzer's texts, it is useful to start with the handwritten marginal notes added to the copy of the text

found in Otto Järte's archive. The section concerning Napoleon is accompanied by the note "cf. the following Reichstag speech". At the end of the text, there is a second note: "Sent to the German government before Bethmann Hollweg's Reichstag speech on the 'liberator mission' of Germany". The *Reichstag* speech referred to can only be chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's famous speech from 6 April 1916.⁷⁶ Replying to the criticism of British prime minister Asquith,⁷⁷ Bethmann Hollweg included for the first time liberation and protection of the small European nations among German war aims. As argued by Fritz Fischer: by making Germany the protector of "the long-suffering Flemish people" and thus of the nationalities principle itself, Bethmann Hollweg turned a whole new page in the Belgian question.⁷⁸

But German ambitions were not to be limited to Belgium. Bethmann Hollweg also assured his listeners that Germany would never concede to the peoples "between the Baltic Sea and the Volynian Marshes", liberated by Germany and her allies, being re-unified to reactionary Russia, "whether they be Poles, Lithuanians, Balts or Latvians".⁷⁹ It seems as if the author of the marginal notes in the text (probably Kesküla himself) wanted to underline the prophetic nature of the mysterious Grundbesitzer, having rightly guessed – or even influenced – the direction that the German nationalities policy would be shortly taking.

There is, however, another possibility: namely that the author of the third Grundbesitzer text was aware of the German interest in the oppressed nationalities of Russia before it became publicly known thanks to Bethmann Hollweg's speech. This interest was obviously not idealistic, as the chancellor made it seem, but intended to weaken Russia by taking advantage of the national tensions inside it. By supporting separatist movements, Germany also hoped to win the trust of anti-Russian circles in Great Britain and the United States.⁸⁰

At the time of Ploompuu's stay in Stockholm, on 10 March 1916, the German ambassador in Bern, Gisbert von Romberg, was visited by Lithuanian exile politician Juozas Gabrys. In 1912, Gabrys had been one of the

⁷⁶ *Bethmann Hollwegs Kriegsreden*, ed. by Friedrich Thimme (Stuttgart und Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1919), 90–102.

⁷⁷ Asquith had demanded the full restoration of Polish independence, security guarantees to France, protection of the rights of the small European nations and the destruction of Prussian militarism: Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht: die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands 1914/18*, 3. ed. (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1964), 297.

⁷⁸ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 297.

⁷⁹ Thimme, *Bethmann Hollwegs Kriegsreden*, 97.

⁸⁰ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, 296.

founders of *Union des Nationalités*, an organization representing the interests of otherwise unrepresented nations. This time, he proposed something along the same lines: a pro-German League of the Small Nations of Russia.⁸¹ On exactly the same day as Gabrys visited Romberg, a comparable meeting took place in Berlin, organized by the Baltic German, Friedrich von der Ropp. His prospective nationalities organization was to be called *Los von Russland* and had as its aim the dissolution of Russia along national borders.⁸² Auswärtiges Amt brought Gabrys and Ropp together, resulting in the German-financed organization *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands* being formally established on 25 April 1916.⁸³

Kesküla had in fact predated Gabrys and Ropp by more than a year, presenting a similar plan to Romberg already in February 1915.⁸⁴ Once the *Liga* was established, Kesküla decided against joining due to its pro-Baltic German character,⁸⁵ but nevertheless participated as an independent delegate in the III Conference of the *Union des Nationalités* in Lausanne,⁸⁶ dominated by the *Liga*.⁸⁷

In any case, it seems clear that for such a statement as in the third Grundbesitzer text to be made – superficially critical of Germany as it seems to be – the timing was precisely right in March 1916. Whether it could have played some role in the final formation of the new German liberator-mission, thus lending some credibility to Kesküla's marginal notes, is more doubtful. But in any case it seems that Kesküla himself, privy to inside information about the German nationalities policy, must have consciously modeled his text with that goal in mind.

The aspect in which the memorandum differs from Bethmann Hollweg's speech is its anti-Baltic German agenda, characteristic of Kesküla. As a way of guaranteeing Estonian support for Germany, equal treatment of all local nationalities is demanded, while also leaving open the possibility of a union with Sweden. Thus, even if accepting the possibility of German invasion – about which he had posed a question to Auswärtiges

⁸¹ Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918*, 67–68; Jaanson, *Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja rahvuste uniooni III konverents Lausanne'is 1916. aastal*, 1833.

⁸² Jaanson, *Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja rahvuste uniooni III konverents Lausanne'is 1916. aastal*, 1838.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1846.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1834.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1849.

⁸⁶ Zetterberg, *Die Liga der Fremdvölker Russlands 1916–1918*, 116–117.

⁸⁷ Jaanson, *Eestlane Aleksander Kesküla ja rahvuste uniooni III konverents Lausanne'is 1916. aastal*, 1852–1853.

Amt already in September 1914⁸⁸ – Kesküla could use the guise of Grundbesitzer to attempt to influence its exact course in a favorable direction.

Conclusions

It seems very likely that Aleksander Kesküla's role in producing the Grundbesitzer texts was rather that of the author, not merely of the translator and commentator. As Kesküla himself wrote to Steinwachs already before meeting Ploompuu, the arrival of the latter was a good chance of underpinning his own propaganda – a chance he apparently attempted to exploit to the fullest. His main aims of weakening Russia, bringing Estonia closer to benevolent Sweden, and averting the danger of Baltic German dominance are all being furthered in the writings signed “Grundbesitzer aus Estland.” By using this mystification loosely based on Ploompuu, instead of signing with his own name Kesküla could target American pacifists, Swedish activists, and the German government with similar ease, unburdened by the baggage of his reputation. The Grundbesitzer texts are skillfully adapted to make use of tendencies in each of its target groups, including the increasing attention paid to the idea of the self-determination of nationalities, the Swedish great power dreams, and the German self-interested support for the national minorities of Russia. By writing in the name of an envoy supposedly representing a patriotic organization in Estonia (and the Estonian middle classes) and visiting Sweden on his own initiative, Kesküla could show that attitudes similar to his own had broad support among Estonians.

Of course, the real validity of this theory is hard to judge, but in any case it seems justified to regard “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” more as Kesküla's pseudonym, rather than Ploompuu's.

It is similarly difficult to judge whether Jakob Ploompuu was simply a small cog in Kesküla's propaganda machine, or whether the Grundbesitzer texts also somehow reflect his own initiative – or that of the mysterious patriotic circles in Estonia he claimed to represent. But already a superficial analysis of the texts nevertheless seems to reveal them to be written by a skillful and informed politician, knowing much about the current political issues in Sweden, Germany, and the world at large. It therefore seems rather unlikely that Ploompuu's role could have been very major – especially since his previous attempt from 1915 seems rather amateurish in comparison, if Kesküla's account of it is to be believed.

⁸⁸ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtiges Amtes Wk, 11c, secr. Bd. 1, l. 113.

At the same time, the episode with “Grundbesitzer aus Estland” nevertheless shows that “Estonian activism” as a phenomenon was not necessarily confined to the person of Aleksander Kesküla, but – as Kesküla himself was pleased to admit – industrious private politicians could be found in Estonia itself attempting to take advantage of the ongoing war in order to draw Swedish attention to the Estonian question, however naively they went about it.⁸⁹ In a way, the fact that there was an Estonian variant of activism itself confirms the idea of the historical unity of the Baltic Sea region, so close to Kesküla’s heart.

From Estonian historiography concerned with these pivotal years, the lone wolves of Kesküla’s and Ploompuu’s kind are usually either absent or belittled as adventurers and fortune-seekers.⁹⁰ But still, to consider their activities illegitimate, utopian, and isolated might be somewhat anachronistic. In a situation where free and democratic elections could not be organized, nobody had more right than others to speak in the name of the whole people of Estonia. The practicality of their plans can only be judged in hindsight, and there could have hardly been anyone in 1916 who would have thought the likely outcome of the war to be the defeat of both Russia and Germany, as it actually happened. Even the impression of their isolation is premature. Probably no Estonian at the time was internationally as well-connected as Kesküla, and even Ploompuu had functional contacts with Finnish activists (and probably other Estonians as well), both being part of an extensive transnational movement, long-forgotten nowadays as it may be. Even though the efforts of activists ultimately led to a dead end, they nevertheless were a sign of the bold dreams and ambitions that could raise their head in times of confusion, only to subdue once the situation had been stabilized.

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⁸⁹ About Ploompuu’s speech, Kaido Jaanson remarks that it is “a case of raising the Estonian question on an international arena that has not been registered by any generation or school of Estonian historians” (Jaanson, “See kummaline eestlane”, 966).

⁹⁰ See what Ants Piip and Eduard Laaman have to say about Kesküla: Piip, *Tormine aasta*, 4–5; Eduard Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse süünd* (Stockholm: Vaba Eesti, 1964), 489.

KOKKUVÕTE: „*Grundbesitzer aus Estland*“: *aktivistlik regionalism Läänemere ruumis 1916. aastal*

Artikkel vaatleb ühte seni väheuuritud Esimese maailmasõja aegset katset Eesti küsimust rahvusvahelisel tasandil tõstatada, asetades selle nn aktivistliku regionalismi kui rahvusvahelise nähtuse konteksti. Aktivistliku regionalismi all pean silmas peamiselt Rootsi ja Soome patriootide tegevust hõlmanud liikumist Esimese maailmasõja ajal, mille sihiks oli tõmmata Rootsi sõtta Saksamaa poolele, et nõrgestada Venemaad, tagasi vallutada Soome ning anda Rootsile tagasi regionaalse suurvõimu staatus. Soome ja Rootsi aktivistid, kelle eesmärgid põhiosas ühtisid, tegid omavahel tihedat koostööd. Ka vähemalt ühte eestlast, eradiplomaat Aleksander Kesküla, võib pidada aktivistik, kuna temagi poliitilised eesmärgid olid samalaadsed – vaid selle erinevusega, et lisaks Soomele eeldas ta ka endiste Rootsi Läänemereprovintside tagasivallutamist Rootsi poolt. Lisaks oli ta isiklike sidemete kaudu lähedalt seotud Rootsi ja Soome aktivistidega.

Episood, millele artikkel keskendub, on seotud Jakob Ploompuu salajase saabumisega Stockholmi 1916. aastal märtsis ning koostööga tema ja samuti Stockholmis viibinud Aleksander Kesküla vahel. Soome aktivistidega kontakte omanud Ploompuu eesmärk oli uurida Rootsi sõtta astumise võimalust ja selle võimalikku mõju eestlastele. Tema reisi kõrgpunktiks kujunes esinemine nn Neutraalsel Rahukonverentsil.

Peatselt pärast Ploompuu lahkumist loodi mõned memorandumilaadsed, väidetavalt eesti keelest saksa keelde tõlgitud tekstid allkirjaga „Grundbesitzer aus Estland“, mille autorlus on omistatud anonüümsele, hiljuti Stockholmis Eesti patriootlike ringkondi esindamas käinud eestlasele (st Ploompuule). Nimetatud tekstideks on esiteks Neutraalsele Rahukonverentsile mõeldud pöördumine, teiseks nn. apell Rootsi patriootidele, kolmandaks tekst pealkirjaga „Ettepanek poliitiliseks programmiks Saksamaa sisse marsi puhuks Eestisse“ ja neljandaks tõlge Tallinna Teatajas ilmunud artiklist eestlaste vastu tõstatatud süüdistustest ülemäärases rahvustundes.

Artiklis on nn Grundbesitzeri tekste analüüsitud eesmärgiga selgitada välja nende tõenäoline autor ja sihtgrupid. Nii tekstide sisu kui teisi kaudseid tõendeid arvesse võttes näib, et autoriks oli ilmselt Aleksander Kesküla ja mingigi tõendatav seos Ploompuu endaga tundub eksisteerivat vaid nn Rahukonverentsi-teksti puhul. Selle teooria kasuks räägib nii see, et tekstid annavad tunnistust väga heast poliitilisest informeeritusest, kui ka see, et neis leidub paralleele Kesküla teiste kaasaegsete kirjutistega. Ka tekstides ära toodud ettepanekud vastavad Kesküla isiklikele eesmärkidele.

Poliitiline informeeritus väljendub selles, et tekstide autor on olnud hästi kursis oma sihtgruppide – Neutraalse Rahukonverentsi, Rootsi aktivistide ja Saksa välisministeeriumi – aktuaalsete taotlustega 1916. aasta kevadel. Viimaste seas oli rahutingimusi sisaldava rahvusvahelisele üldusele mõeldud apelli koostamine, milles oli pööratud suurt tähelepanu rahvuste enesemääramise printsiibile; Rootsi taaskehtestamine Läänemereregiooni suurvõimuna ning Venemaa võõrrahvuste separatistlike meeleolude ära kasutamine, et Venemaad sisemiselt nõrgestada.

Nagu nähtub ühest kaasaegsest Kesküla kirjast, oli Ploompuu saabumine tema jaoks õnnelik juhus, mis andis talle võimaluse tõendamaks, et tema Skandinaavia-suunalistel püüdlustel on Eestis ka laiemat kõlapinda. Ilmselt seetõttu kirjutab Kesküla nimetatud memorandumid just sel viisil, omistades neis (küll nimesid mitte nimetades) Ploompuule autori, endale aga tõlkija rolli. Lisaks võimaldas varjunimi tal väljendada mõtteid, mis erinesid tema harjumuspärasest (nt asetada rõhku rahvuste enesemääramise õiguse ideele).

Samal ajal näitab Grundbesitzeri-juhtum siiski, et „Eesti aktivism“ ei piirdunud vaid Kesküla isikuga, vaid ka Eestis leidis erapoliitikuid, kes püüdsid Esimest maailmasõda ära kasutada juhtimaks Eesti küsimusele Rootsi ja rahvusvahelist tähelepanu. Vähemalt selles mõttes vastab Keskülale nii südamelähedane mõte Läänemereregiooni ajaloolisest ühtsusest tõele.