

# Neighbours or enemies?

## Ethnic Germans in central and eastern Europe, 1919–39

Did all Germans outside the Reich want to join it?

### Key concept

#### Interpretations

##### Before you read this

Go over the big international crises of 1938–39. Who were the local Nazi leaders? What part did they play in the German takeover?

**Germany's controversial eastern frontier:** under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles Germany ceded territory on its eastern frontiers: Memel to Lithuania; Hultschin to Czechoslovakia; Poznan, East Prussia and Upper Silesia to Poland; the port of Danzig to the League of Nations. The territorial loss was bitterly resented by some Germans.

Willy Brandt was Chancellor of West Germany between 1969 and 1975 and won the Nobel peace prize in 1971. He once described Europe as 'a living community of peoples and states'. This idea of Europe as somewhere made vital and exciting by its variety and mixture of nationality groups contrasts markedly with the general view of the interwar years, particularly when the talk is about Germany. It is often maintained that the German communities beyond the borders of the German state were ripe for use as Berlin's tools in the period 1920–39. Perhaps support from Germany was supplied to help sustain these communities until a future time when their existence could be used as grounds to demand the alteration of **Germany's controversial eastern frontier**. Alternatively, maybe some of these people were prepared to be more active in promoting a German agenda abroad, specifically to become accomplices of Adolf Hitler's ambition for territorial expansion at any cost.

The idea that German minorities could become agents helping to destabilise a state gains some credibility from a conversation Hitler held on 29 March 1938 with Konrad Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten German Party. There were about 3 million ethnic Germans in the Sudeten region of the Czechoslovak state and, if Hermann Rauschning was correct that one of Nazism's main foreign policy aims was 'universal unsettlement', this borderland with Germany was as good a place as any to promote it. The strategy seemed to be simple: use German minorities to foment unrest, provoke crisis in a state and prepare the way for German intervention and ultimately annexation. In their 3-hour conversation, Hitler and Henlein agreed that Henlein would keep making demands which the Prague government could never satisfy. Two months later, on 30 May 1938, Hitler ordered Operation Green, which prepared the way for possible military action against the neighbouring state. Of course, following the Munich crisis of late





Thirteenth-century grand master and knight of the Teutonic order.

PETER NEWARK

## Key points

- It is a common assumption that, during the period 1920–39, German minorities living beyond the borders of Germany were potential agents willing to destabilise their home state to facilitate intervention and annexation by Germany.
- Hitler in 1938 certainly believed he could use such German minorities to foment unrest, provoke crisis and prepare the way for German intervention and ultimately annexation, for example in the Sudetenland on the German–Czech border.
- In contrast, Gustav Stresemann in 1925 did not see German minorities living outside the borders of Germany as a potential fifth column. He thought that they could play a valuable role as a bridge for promoting the German economy into these other societies. He also believed that they had to form themselves into self-supporting cultural communities — a ‘cultural autonomy’.
- There is no evidence to suggest that Stresemann intended more than economic cooperation between Germans.
- Underpinning Stresemann’s view were the opinions of the Baltic Germans, Ammende and Schieman. Ammende sought to promote the national economy and infrastructure of his native Estonia. Schieman believed that Germans should play a part in the state community, which involved promoting the economic welfare of the country and being prepared to defend it. At the same time, Germans should maintain the cultural heritage of their national group.
- These people were the inheritors of a long tradition of coexistence in lands outside Germany who were willing to try and adapt to the different social circumstances heralded by the end of the First World War. They undermine the stereotypes about ethnic Germans being Hitler’s fifth column in waiting.

so on the behalf of Peter the Great. Unsurprisingly, their corner of the Russian empire was run on traditional and conservative lines. For instance, the German aristocrats lived on massive landed estates which Baltic peoples farmed for them.

The University of Dorpat (today Tartu) functioned as a German-language seat of learning. Many famous doctors, generals and administrators were students here before going on to serve the tsar in St Petersburg or elsewhere across the Russian empire. Furthermore, down the centuries the Baltic lands saw an influx of intellectuals and businessmen from Germany, all adding a bit more zest to this German-speaking community. Not least, the famous philosopher Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) taught at the cathedral school in Riga for a time.

### Revolution and Russification

The position of the Baltic Germans became more complicated in the nineteenth century. On the one hand there was a national awakening among the Baltic peoples themselves. Increasingly aware of their own nationhood, they become politically active so that, for instance, Estonian political groups took over control of the Tallinn town council in 1903. The **1905 revolutions** in the

**1905 revolutions:** Bloody Sunday, when tsarist forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators and petitioners for political concessions, sparked revolts and strikes all across Russia.

September 1938, on 1 October German troops marched into the Sudetenland unopposed.

But is this example representative? Even if some members of German minorities abroad were prepared to go along with Hitler, in effect becoming the enemies of the peoples with whom they shared a state, were they typical? Were there others prepared to remain much better neighbours?

### Germans in the Baltic: a long heritage

#### Teutonic knights

In the first place it has to be remembered that, in many areas of the lands lying roughly between Berlin and Moscow, Germans and other nationality groups had lived side by side for centuries. For instance, Germans entered the region which today is home to the Baltic States as long ago as the twelfth century. They came as Teutonic knights bringing Christianity to the lands. Thereafter a relatively sparse German elite administered the region century after century, even being permitted to do

region also sometimes took the form of a rebellion by Baltic workers against German estate-owners.

If all of this was not enough, following the accession of Tsar Alexander III, the late nineteenth century also saw the attempted Russification of the Baltic provinces. Symbolically, in 1889 the University of Dorpat was renamed the University of Juriev. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that in the face of pressure from the tsar on the one hand and increasingly assertive Baltic peoples on the other, at this time Baltic Germans felt that all they could do was, to use Carl Schirren's famous phrase, 'hold out' until better times came along.

### German occupation and Baltic independence

To the thinking of some Baltic Germans, these better times seemed to have arrived when Germany occupied the Baltic region during 1917–18. In January 1918, without even asking the opinion of Estonians and Latvians, the Baltic German élites asked for the protection of the German Reich and hoped that their future was now secured. Their hopes soon proved illusory, however. German occupation fell away with Germany's defeat in the war, leaving the Baltic populations to fight for their independence against a **Red Army** that wanted to restore the region to a new kind of Russian empire — a Bolshevik one. The Baltic troops were successful, and Russia was forced to recognise Estonian independence in the Treaty of Tartu (2 February 1920), Latvian independence in the Treaty of Riga (mid-August 1920) and Lithuanian independence on 12 July 1920.

Now the position of the Baltic Germans was changed fundamentally. No longer an élite running a semi-feudal administration, they had become national minorities living in popular democracies which were home to majority Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian peoples. Their former power was all the more completely destroyed when the new governments enacted land reforms in 1919–20. At this time the estates of the Baltic 'barons' were seized and the acreages redistributed to the population at large.

### An economic bridge from Germany towards the East?

In the early 1920s, Germans made up just 1.7% of Estonia's population and 3.5% of Latvia's. Given that neither of these countries had borders with Germany, and in the light of land reform, in the years after the Treaty of Versailles it was hardly possible to believe that so few people could become outriders for a rejuvenated, freshly imperialistic Germany. In any case, Germany was, as yet, neither in a position to arise from the ashes of

### Questions

- How significant is it that the German minorities in the Baltic had also been the ruling classes in tsarist times?
- If the Nazis were so keen on rights for ethnic Germans, why did they reject Schiemann's philosophy of 'cultural autonomy'?
- Looking at Germans outside the Reich in the Nazi period, who do you think was more typical, Henlein or Schiemann?

defeat nor to channel large amounts of funding to these people. The actual position was outlined in a journal issued by the *Deutsche Schutzbund* in 1920:

The minorities ought not, in their economic struggle, to bank on material aid from Germany... Minorities must be able to lead an independent economic existence. Conditions will vary, inevitably, in each state, according to whether the [German minority] is made up of farmers, landlords, industrial labour or the middle classes... In each case the effort must be made to bind the German minority to the land. The attempt must be made to ensure that when making new trade treaties the large German minorities are called on by Germany to give advice, so that the self-help of the *Grenz- und Auslandsdeutsche* [border Germans and Germans abroad] will be given strong backing through such treaties.

And there certainly were ethnic German entrepreneurs who were well placed to fulfil this role. Ewald Ammende's family ran a business house in Pärnu, Estonia. Although this was hit badly by the Russian Revolution (which complicated access to raw materials in the Russian heartland, for example), Ammende (1892–1936) had numerous ideas about ways to develop Estonia's economy. He championed all manner of entrepreneurial schemes which were represented in local and national political meetings. For instance, he wanted the transport systems in the Baltic modernised thoroughly according to the needs of independent states rather than provinces of a larger empire. He wanted Estonia to set itself up as a tourist destination for Germans (coming to see historical sights) and Finns (in search of a good time). He even wanted his hometown to develop itself as a thoroughly modern seaside resort — and in this connection at least he probably had some influence.

That German minorities in central and eastern Europe could play a valuable role as a bridge for the German economy into these other societies, was recognised clearly in a memorandum written by the foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, in

**Red Army:** the army that Trotsky first improvised to defend Bolshevism during the Russian Civil War, 1917–21. The term was retained and later applied to the army of the Soviet Union.

### Weblink

There is a useful background essay on the Germans in the Baltic, as well as a biography of Schiemann, at: [www.suite101.com/article.cfm/polish\\_baltic\\_history/60957](http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/polish_baltic_history/60957).

Ammende wrote about the plight of ordinary Russians under Stalin and you can read parts of his book, *Human Life in Russia*, on Google Books, at <http://books.google.com/>.

1925. Its full title was 'The foreign policy imperative for a regulation of minorities' rights within the Reich corresponding to the needs of German minorities in Europe', and in Stresemann's words ethnic Germans provided 'valuable footholds for promoting the German economy abroad.' It was obvious that such a goal could only be achieved if these minorities operated as something other than subversive **fifth columns**.

## Surviving as communities

### Cultural autonomy

It was also clear, however, that the slender numbers of ethnic Germans living in, say, Estonia and Latvia meant that they had to form themselves into self-supporting cultural communities. This again was an issue that Stresemann recognised in his 1925 memorandum which supported the idea of 'cultural autonomy'.

This was a doctrine about the organisation of societies made up of multiple nationalities and it had complicated roots. Some Jewish authors from the pre-war Russian empire had advocated it for their communities, for instance Simon Dubnow (1860–1941) and Vladimir Medem (1879–1923); but left-wing thinkers from the Austro-Hungarian empire, such as Karl Renner (1870–1950) and Otto Bauer (1881–1938), also developed similar ideas. It was in the Baltic states after the First World War, however, that cultural autonomy thinking and experimentation reached its peak.

### Paul Schiemann

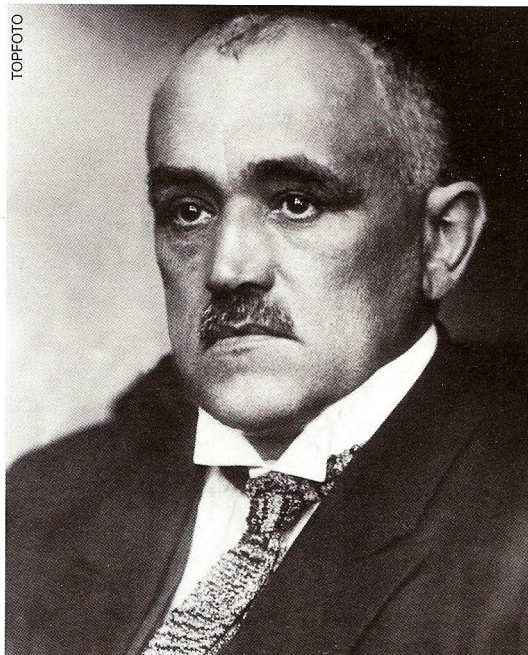
Paul Schiemann (1876–1944) was a respected Baltic German politician and journalist based largely in Riga. He argued that it was important to separate the demands of the 'state community' from those of the 'national community'. Playing a part in the state community involved participating in the economic welfare of the country and being prepared to defend one's homeland, i.e. these were the sort of things that any Latvian citizen had to view as contributing to the common good. Playing a part in the national community, however, involved helping maintain the cultural heritage of your particular national group — for instance, through supporting schools providing education in the mother tongue for the children of your particular nationality.

In other words, Schiemann was advocating the creation of a society based on everyone coming together to support issues that they shared in common, but going their separate ways for their cultural activities — to some extent at least. His theory was supposed to lay the foundations for a society in which everyone would be loyal to their home state, but which would be full of energy and vibrancy as individuals revelled in their particular, rich heritages.

### Cultural autonomy in practice

Ideas like these did not stay on the drawing board. In December 1919, the Latvian government passed a schooling law that permitted each of the country's national minorities to run their own mother-tongue schools. More remarkable still, on 5 February 1925, Estonia's parliament passed the Cultural Autonomy Law which allowed all national minorities of over 3,000 people to organise their own educational and cultural institutions. The law permitted minorities to set up their own cultural council of between 20 and 60 members which would sit in Tallinn, also to manage its mother-tongue schooling system and general cultural life (art exhibitions, schedules of talks, library facilities). In November 1925, Estonia's German minority set up its own cultural council and Estonia's Jewish community later followed suit.

The idea of giving nationality such a pride of place in a society may seem strange to us today. We live in a society where there is more talk about globalisation and an emphasis on what people share rather than what separates us, but individuals like Schiemann and (initially at least) Ammende felt their ideas were liberalising and progressive. Schiemann, for instance, emphasised that individuals had to be able to decide their nationality for themselves and likened this to the choice of religion. He argued that the state should not interfere in an individual's choice of church, and so it should not influence whether an individual felt, for instance, more Latvian, German or Jewish. Meanwhile Ammende argued more practically that, if Estonia granted cultural autonomy to its minorities, then logically the Estonian state could ask other states (such as Russia) to treat Estonians living there in an equally enlightened way.



Paul Schiemann.

**fifth column:** group of people who secretly undermine a larger group to which it is expected to be loyal, such as a nation.



Alfred Rosenberg.

### Opposition

The best proof that the ideas of people like Schiemann and Ammende were not insidious is provided by Alfred Rosenberg's response to them (1893–1946). The chief ideologist of the Nazi Party was born in Tallinn and educated for a time in Riga — and he hated what these people said. Since their ideas were not obviously shot through with Aryan supremacy, he termed them 'racial pollution and spiritual murder'.

### Conclusion

Schiemann died under house arrest imposed by Nazi authorities during the Second World War — although in his final years he did manage to save the life of a Jewish girl whom he employed as a servant. Ammende's fate was more mixed. Always an ardent anti-Bolshevik, he began to cooperate with the Third Reich's anti-Comintern policies before dying in China during a world tour in 1936. Nonetheless, the history of the Baltic German community across the centuries, and of people like these from the interwar period

specifically, shows how careful you have to be when it comes to assessing the relationship between ethnic German communities and both their host societies and Berlin during the period 1920–39.

These people were the inheritors of a long tradition of (admittedly not always easy) coexistence in the lands between Berlin and Moscow. They also included a number of progressive and lively minds which were willing to try to adapt to the different social circumstances heralded by the end of the First World War. As a result, we should acknowledge that stereotypes about ethnic Germans as Hitler's outriders in waiting are just too blunt to be satisfying.

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### Further reading

- Hiden, J. (2004) *Defender of Minorities: Paul Schiemann, 1876–1944*, Hurst.
- Hiden, J. and Housden, M. (2008) *Neighbours or Enemies? Germans, the Baltic and Beyond*, Rodopi.
- von Rauch, G. (1974) *The Baltic States*, Hurst.

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