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The Nationalist Instrumentalization of Religion in Secularizing Societies: Fighting against the Private Theological-Philosophical Luther Academy in Early 1930s Estonia

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses a controversy in early 1930s Estonia concerning the German-language Private Theological-Philosophical Luther Academy. The article discusses this case as an example of the nationalist instrumentalization of religion in secularizing societies, which interwar Estonia was turning into. An analysis of the press coverage concerning the Luther Academy shows that the case received a disproportionate amount of attention considering the marginality of this small educational institution, yet the reactions were ambiguous. On the one hand, the academy was presented as a nationalist project by Germans to restore their power and as an existential threat to the survival of Estonians as an ethnic group, inasmuch as it allegedly facilitated the Germanization of Estonians. On the other hand, it was claimed that the whole controversy was artificially inflated and the academy was not posing a particular threat to Estonians. This article argues that the quarrel stemmed from the instrumentalization of the case by some Estonian nationalist circles, whereas extensive public attention was ensured by associating the academy with the issue of Germanization which had been a significant subject of press interest for many years.

KEYWORDS

ethnic relations, interwar Estonia, Lutheran Church, nationalism, secularization, theological education.

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Introduction

It is common in the scholarly literature to treat religion and nationalism as closely intertwined phenomena (Brubaker 2012; Marsh 2008; Rieffer 2003). Secular and religious expressions of nationalism are thereby often juxtaposed, implying their mutual exclusion or even attributing to nationalism the role of a substitute for religion (Friedland and Moss 2016; Juergensmeyer 2006; Soper and Fetzer 2018). However, several studies have demonstrated that religion has not completely lost its importance even in societies where secular institutions have started to play the main role in the organization of people's lives (e.g. Halman and Draulans 2006; Abbasov 2023). Thus, religion may have the potential to influence nationalism in secularizing societies as well.

One aspect of the complex relationship between nationalism and religion that deserves attention is the question of whether and how religion is instrumentalized by nationalist rhetoric. Ostensibly, if religion is losing importance in society, then nationalists should not be particularly motivated to use religion-related arguments, given that such references would have no significant effect in influencing their audience detached from religion. Yet, as this article will show with a case study from interwar Estonia, under certain conditions the issues associated with religion can prove to be a useful rhetorical device for nationalists even in secularizing societies.

Estonia, which was declared an independent state in 1918, subsequently and slowly tended to turn into a rather secular country (Ivask 2012). Yet it was a society where religion, particularly the dominant Lutheran Church, had not completely lost its social importance (Altnurme 2021). This is most vividly demonstrated by the early 1920s referendum on religious education in primary schools, which gave a landslide victory for its supporters, eventually leading to the dissolution of the parliament and the calling of early elections (Gortfelder 2021; Valge 2016). Thus, the religion did have the potential to become a rhetorical tool for nationalists, all the more so since religion had long been closely intertwined with ethnic relations in Estonia.[1] The confrontation between Estonians and Germans, the latter having been in power in the area for centuries, was already developing in the society and in the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church by the last decades of the 19th century and it continued in independent Estonia (Ketola 1999; Ketola 2000; Remmel 2016; Saard 2020).

It was in this social context that the German-language Private Theological-Philosophical Luther Academy was created in 1931. It is known that its founders had not merely theological but also nationalist motives for their actions, which eventually caused a strong reaction in Estonian society. The case has hitherto been analysed mainly in the context of Estonian church history and framed as the reaction of Estonians to the nationalist intentions of key persons behind the academy (Ketola 2000; Ketola 2015). This article complements the study of this case by analysing it in a wider social context, assuming that the grounds of the controversy were also nationalist on the part of Estonians and did not necessarily stem from the actions or statements of the founders of the academy. Thus, through the analysis of the relevant press coverage it will be shown how Estonian nationalist circles instrumentalized religion by contesting the Luther Academy in the context of their ideological agenda and how they thereby gained extensive press coverage.

The article is based on the analysis of material collected from the Estonian Database of Digitized Newspapers (National Library of Estonia, n.d.), using keyword searches and following the references in other sources and in the literature.[2] This method allows, first, for a broad overview of arguments and narratives throughout the couple of years of press interest in the academy, and second, to assess the public interest in the case. In order to avoid overloading the text with citations, references are followingly given only to direct quotes and unique statements from specific articles.[3]

[3] All translations of quotes are mine.

Ethnic Relations in Interwar Estonia

According to the census data from 1922, the proportion of all ethnic minorities in Estonian population was 12,3%, of which the biggest minority groups were Russians with 8,2% and Germans with 1,7% (Riigi Statistika Keskbüroo 1924, 31). Historically, Russians had been a titular nation of the Russian Empire, to which the Estonian area belonged until 1918 and Germans had been the local elite since the Baltic Crusades in the 13th century (Katus, Puur and Sakkeus 1997).[4] However, Russians and Germans did not have equal status in the perception of Estonians, the latter group being seen as a greater existential threat. Russians were never such a significant subject of public tension as Germans, even though the Estonian area had experienced a state-run Russification campaign by the end of the 19th century (Thaden 1981) and in independent Estonia, as the most numerous minority, they were an urgent issue for the state authorities to deal with (Alenius 2012).

Relations between Estonians and Germans in the newly independent Estonia were affected by a whole range of historical problems. Both groups had different collective views on the history of the Estonian area and their members often had diverging personal experiences and memories. Among Estonians, the myth of 700 years of serfdom allegedly caused by Germans as a result of the 13th century crusades was widespread and formed the basis of historical consciousness (Selart 2020). This myth linked Christianity with the existence of Germans in Estonia and with their former dominant position in society. The Germans, particularly the German elite, in turn, were struggling to cope with their loss of power and to get used to the role of simply a tolerated minority with limited minority rights (Brüggemann 1995). Strained relations were thus mutual and consequently affected the functioning of many institutions and aspects of life.

There was also another factor that affected the relationship between Estonians and Germans in independent Estonia. In the Estonian area, it had been common for centuries that people who came from an Estonian-speaking peasant background but had risen in society almost inevitably started to self-identify as Germans inasmuch as the upper echelons of society were primarily equated with the latter (Jansen 2003). However, the leaders of the Estonian "national awakening"[5] in the second half of the 19th century portrayed such a transformation of self-identification – widely referred to as Germanization – as a threat to the existence of Estonians as an ethnic group. The perception that Germanization continued was also reproduced in independent Estonia through the press as well as politicians' declarations and actions, eventually leading to, to name only one of the most telling examples, the establishment of the state's legal right to decide on individuals' ethnic belonging (Tark and Liivik 2020).

Despite strained relations between Estonians and Germans, the Estonian elite and politicians nevertheless promised extensive minority rights, particularly ethno-cultural autonomy. This promise found its way into the Estonian Declaration of Independence of February 1918, titled "Manifesto to all the Peoples of Estonia," and into the Constitution, adopted in June 1920 and entered into force in December of the same year. Subsequently, the Law on Cultural Self-Government for Ethnic Minorities was adopted in February 1925, after which only Germans and Jews used the right to create their own cultural self-government in 1925 and 1926 respectively (Aava 2023; Alenius 2007; Smith and Hiden 2012). The slow process of adopting the autonomy legislation and its press coverage reflect the public reluctance to it, particularly since its main advocates were Germans. Fears were expressed that the German minority elite would use autonomy to restore their dominance and that autonomy would contribute to the further Germanization of Estonians.

The insecurity of Estonians affected the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church as well. Once dominated by the German clergy and church leaders, it tried to become a truly Estonian church step by step, starting already before Estonia was declared independent (Saard 2020). This process was difficult

[4] Here and below, ethnonyms are used to refer to the collective entities as they were usually perceived by contemporaries. However, belonging and not belonging to the elite did not necessarily always follow ethnic lines.

[5] In Estonian historiography 'national awakening' (*rahvuslik ärkamine*) or 'time of awakening' (*ärkamisaeg*) are common terms to refer to the period of the rising nationalism of Estonians in the second half of the 19th century.

and characterized by numerous conflicts. The fact that even in independent Estonia there were German pastors serving Estonian congregations was one of the most contested issues. Although local parishioners might or might not have been satisfied with their German pastors, the most fiercely critical opinions were rarely publicly expressed at the local level (Tark and Liivik 2020, 36). They were voiced rather by various often politically active leading church figures and like-minded journalists who continually complained about German influences in the Estonian church and in local congregations. Yet within the church, ethnic relations were also influenced by personal ties and not necessarily by apparent public opinion expressed in the newspaper columns.

Another institution, affected by tense ethnic relations, was the University of Tartu. The university was reorganized from the former Provincial University dominated by the German and Russian languages into the University of Tartu of the Estonian Republic with the aim of promoting Estonian as a language of higher education and science. From its reopening on December 1, 1919 the university had the aim of switching to Estonian-language teaching. This process was slow and the administration of the university had to make several exceptions, allowing the lecturers to teach in German or Russian if needed (Lõbu 2014). However, by the beginning of the 1930s, the situation changed, as lecturers who had already received their education in independent Estonia were able to replace the older ones who did not speak Estonian.

Changes in the language of instruction might not have been welcome for the German minority elite. On the one hand, it has been argued that the education provided by the University of Tartu was not deemed suitable for Germans, given that the German elite and later Cultural Self-Government regularly organized additional lectures and presentations for German students (Laurits 2008, 120). On the other hand, the German elite in Estonia was anxious about the chances of survival of their ethnic group. In particular the number of German students at the University of Tartu was declining to a worrying extent since young Germans often preferred to continue their studies outside Estonia, mostly in Germany (Tark 2010, 106), which indicates that they were not able or willing to study in Estonian. Thus, to keep more young Germans in Estonia, German-language higher education was deemed necessary in several circles of the German elite, a view which paved the way for the Luther Academy.

The Luther Academy

The Private Theological-Philosophical Luther Academy originated from the ideas of the private *docent* at the University of Tartu Werner Gruehn and from the mission plans to German settlements in the distant areas of the Soviet Union, expressed by several Lutheran organizations in Germany. In communication with these organizations, Gruehn proposed Tartu as an appropriate place to educate the pastors for work in the East (Wittram 1988, 255). Gruehn was convinced that Tartu should be the centre of Baltic theological education, despite the fact that in 1927, the Herder-Institut had been established in Riga, the capital of Latvia (Bičevskis and Brombach 2019), which provided theological education among other subjects, thus making the need for yet another similar institution questionable. These partner organizations in Germany were thus sceptical about Gruehn's ideas, but he still managed to get the necessary funding for the establishment of the Luther Academy (see for more detail Ketola 2015). He became rector of the academy, was one of the most influential figures in preparing its statute and basically made it his personal project (Hehn 1979, 615).[6]

In spring 1931, after obtaining the necessary support from Germany, the initiators founded the Academic Luther Society (*Akademische Luther-Gesellschaft*) for the launching and management of the academy (Ketola 2015, 198). The society soon applied for an operating licence for the academy from the Ministry of Education. The Minister of Education and Social Affairs Jaan Piiskar approved the proposed statute in August 1931 after two rejections and several amendments, followed by the ceremonial opening of the academy on September 22 (Academic Luther Society 1933; Riigikogu 1931,

[6] Gruehn was also the founder of the Institute of the Psychology of Religion in Tartu in 1929 continuing the "Dorpat school" of the psychology of religion, founded by Karl Girgensohn (see for more detail Wulff 1985). He integrated this research field into the activity of the Luther Academy.

3382). Despite the setbacks, the founders of the academy noted at one meeting in autumn 1931 that the negotiations with the Ministry of Education had proceeded "amazingly easily" (Academic Luther Society 1931), implying that they might have been prepared for many more difficulties and knew that such an educational institution might cause opposition among Estonians.

The statute and statements of several key people behind the academy did indeed act as a trigger in Estonian nationalist circles. According to the statute, the goals of the Luther Academy were to prepare clergy and pastors for German congregations in Estonia and for places where religious life was threatened, as well as for German evangelical congregations in foreign countries (mostly in the Soviet Union), but also to advance scholarly research on religion (Ketola 2000). These goals, except for the latter one which did not cause much reaction, were later interpreted as the continuing efforts of the German elite to restore its power and Germanize Estonians, although it is not possible – at least directly – to read anything of the kind into them, just as no such intentions are reflected in the statements of key persons behind the academy.

One of the future lecturers of the academy Leonhard Brunowsky published on September 8 and 9, 1931 a two-part opinion piece in the *Dorpater Zeitung* in which he referred to the Academia Gustaviana, the predecessor of the University of Tartu under Swedish rule in the 17th century, as well as the *Landesuniversität* of the 19th century. In this way he implied that German culture and higher education, as represented by these institutions, would be at least partly restored by the Luther Academy (Brunowsky 1931, 1, 1–2). However, Brunowsky as well as the head of the Luther Society Alfred Walter, writing on September 21 in the same newspaper, emphasized that the academy was not a threat to the university but wanted to cooperate with it. Walter pointed out the right of Germans to native language higher education and by referring to the Russification era tried to appeal to the conscience of Estonians. According to Walter, Germans and Estonians were in the same position back then and the latter should therefore know how hard it was to obtain a higher education in a foreign language (Walter 1931, 1).

These statements by Brunowsky and Walter, among other factors, triggered a particularly angry reaction among students at the University of Tartu, aided by political pressure to do something about the academy, both of which led to extensive media coverage. All these developments, described in more detail below, took place despite the fact that it was known from the beginning and was later confirmed in practice that the academy itself remained on the margins throughout its entire period of activity, having only a small number of students and low status among the German minority in Estonia.

Student Reaction

The first reports in the Estonian-language press about the soon-to-be-opened Luther Academy appeared approximately ten days before its festive opening ceremony. In the days that followed, more articles on this topic began to be published, and at the same time information about the establishment of this new and suspicious educational institution in Tartu agitated the student body there.

The leader of the developments in the student body turned out to be Ilmar Tõnisson, the son of the politician as well as editor-in-chief and former owner of the newspaper *Postimees* Jaan Tõnisson (Aru 2019). Ilmar Tõnisson was a young and ambitious philosophy student at the University of Tartu and was developing his own nationalist theories at the time (Veski 2015, 95–100). He belonged to the student representative body from 1930 and to its board from 1931, being exceptionally active and productive (Rohi 2013, 28–29). He also had political ambitions, for the realization of which he now found a suitable opportunity. He evolved into the fiercest of critics of the academy, organized student demonstrations against it and wrote in newspapers justifying his actions (e.g. Tõnisson 1931, 2). While there is no definite information, it cannot be ruled out that he also wrote anonymously for his father's *Postimees*, given that he was later a member of its editorial staff (Aru 2019, 776).

Tõnisson did not have to look far to find like-minded people, since the student body of the University of Tartu was one of the most nationally minded groups in Estonian society and easily irritable. The students caused the situation in Tartu to escalate on the day of the festive opening of the academy and afterwards. What actually happened is unclear since different reports emphasized different aspects and contradicted each other. The German-language newspapers *Revalsche Zeitung* and *Dorpater Zeitung* covered the events as an act of aggression by Estonian students. They reported that some demonstrators attacked the opening ceremony, broke a flower vase and behaved in such a way that it was necessary to call in the police (*Dorpater Zeitung* 1931, 1; *Revalsche Zeitung* 1931, 2). *Postimees*, however, painted a different picture and ridiculed the reaction of Germans. The demonstrators had moved in an organized procession through the city while the Germans had called in the police out of their own paranoia (*Postimees* 1931d, 1). However, as reported in many newspapers in connection with the opening of the academy, several days later the flag of the Baltic German student corporation[7] Livonia was stolen and a sign "Private Academy" placed on the building of one of the public toilets in Tartu. Since some Estonian-language newspapers condemned the demonstration together with the events that followed, the protests might indeed not have been as organized and peaceful as *Postimees* tried to argue.

The most important student reaction to the academy was, however, not the controversial street protest but the creation of a new organization at the initiative of Ilmar Tõnisson and another student activist Harald Raudsepp, initially under the name of the Estonian Academic National Church Society (*Eesti Akadeemiline Rahvuslik Kirikuühing*), soon to be reorganized into the Estonian Academic National Culture Society (*Eesti Akadeemiline Rahvuslik Kultuuriühing*) (Rohi 2013, 59–61). While the key actors behind this society argued that such an organization had already been planned earlier, it was the creation of the academy that sparked its hurried establishment (*Postimees* 1931d, 1). Its ceremonial opening took place on the same day as the opening of the academy, while its official registration under the meanwhile altered name followed much later. Changing the name already at the foundation stage of the society is noteworthy as it indicates that the main concern of its founders was not the church, and the reference to the latter in the initial name was necessary merely to establish a connection between this organization and the opening of the Luther Academy.

Moreover, the academy was condemned by other student organizations which demonstrated at least apparently the unanimously critical attitude of students. On September 24, 1931 the board of the Student Council issued a declaration that the "student body of the University of Tartu has nothing to do with the students of the German academy founded in Tartu," which was formally approved by the general assembly more than a month later, on November 6 (Board of the Student Council 1931; Student Council 1931), following the course of the controversy that had reached the parliament in the meantime. Estonian student corporations and societies also joined in the condemnation, under public pressure including those whose relations with German student organizations had previously functioned well (Tark 2012, 304).

Together with the opening of the Academic National Culture Society, which incidentally received extensive press coverage and thus helped inflate the overall controversy, the nationalist atmosphere in the student body was roused even more. Several articles in the student newspaper *Üliõpilasleht* discussed the Luther Academy in a nationalist context, suggesting in particular the need to build a truly Estonian culture free of foreign influences. In this way the authors were actively and explicitly spreading the narrative that the academy had the goal of expanding German influence:

> *There is no need for me to repeat the statements from the opening days of the academy, the Germans have clearly declared the political-national programme of the new educational institution, the task of the academy as a school to inculcate Baltic German orientation in the future educators and leaders of Estonian "landfolk" – the pastors (Leesment 1931, 163).*

[7] Corporations are student fraternities and sororities common in Germany as well as in Estonia and Latvia.

Contributors to *Üliõpilasleht* focussed particularly on the justification of the newly created Academic National Culture Society, with which at least some of them, including Ilmar Tõnisson personally, were directly connected. According to their articles, the aim of the society was to help the Lutheran Church rid itself of dangerous German influences. With this goal in mind, the society was also actively promoted in general newspapers. However, while the society in its first months was remarkably active and even founded a branch in Tallinn, it later turned out to be a phantom organization without any societal influence. Ilmar Tõnisson, for whom these autumn events nevertheless were an important springboard for a political career, finally lost his interest in developing this project and the student body seemed to forget the existence of the Luther Academy.

Political Reaction

Simultaneously with the developments in the student body in Tartu the controversy gained momentum among the Estonian political elite and particularly in the parliament. At first, in the beginning of October, the Minister of Education explained the situation to the journalists by arguing that there were no legal grounds to refuse to approve the statute of the academy and to prohibit its work. He emphasized that the ministry had required several amendments to the statute before its approval, so the decision was not merely formal either (*Postimees* 1931e, 3).

Politicians were not convinced and so the matter developed further in the parliament. Twenty-five parliamentarians from various parties, from both the opposition and the coalition, decided to take the issue to a plenary session. On October 14, 1931 they submitted a request to get the comment of the government by asking whether the approval of the academy was legal, whether the opinion of the University of Tartu and the Evangelical Lutheran Church had been asked, whether the statute was appropriate and whether the approval of lecturers was legal (Riigikogu 1931, 3187–3188). The Minister of Education, in turn, repeated the argument that since the statute was in line with current legislation, the ministry had no reason to reject it (Riigikogu 1931, 3382–3384).

Although it must have been clear to all parties involved that this request for information was not substantially justified, the politicians of the Baltic German Party decided to distance themselves from the Luther Academy due to the tense atmosphere. Carl Schilling, a parliamentarian from the Baltic German Party, argued that the mindset of a small circle of people behind the academy should not be projected on the whole German minority, implying that the fierce criticism of the academy was at least partly justified (Riigikogu 1931, 3403). Similarly, the German Cultural Self-Government distanced itself from the academy (Hehn 1979, 615–616). It shows how, under pressure, the connection with the Luther Academy turned out to be a threat to the German minority elite and forced the denial of any ties with it (see for more detail Ketola 2000).

There were also rumours in the press that raising the issue in the parliament in the first place was related to the merger of Jaan Tõnisson's party, the People's Party being in the coalition at that time, and the opposition party, the Christian People's Party; this process was finalized precisely that autumn.[8] Indeed, it was foreseeable that the coalition could not survive for very long in this situation and Jaan Tõnisson no longer needed to show loyalty to his coalition partners. Against the backdrop of these political changes, Tõnisson's son, as discussed above, was developing his own ideological project and his father's newspaper *Postimees*, which now could allow itself strong criticism of the academy, came to his aid in this. *Postimees* was in fact one of the driving forces of the controversy, which, in turn, encouraged more politicians to step in and this way the party merger and raising the issue in the parliament could be linked. In general, however, the reaction of politicians was across various parties, regardless of whether they were in the coalition or opposition, which shows that the developments in the parliament cannot be reduced merely to the manipulations of some actors.

[8] A few months later, at the beginning of 1932, the Labour Party was also merged with those two under the new name the National Centre Party.

Those 25 parliamentarians of different parties joining the request for information might all have had their own reasons for it, either seeing the controversy as an opportunity to reap personal benefit or expressing genuine concern for Estonian national interests. On the one hand, references were made to the political tensions in Germany that later took the Nazis to power and the academy was perceived as a potential means of importing these issues to Estonia.[9] On the other hand, the parliamentarians from the clergy Jaan Järve and Leopold Raudkepp, both members of the Christian People's Party, who most actively spoke on the subject and whose speeches filled most of the discussion time, may have had strong personal, professional or political motives in fuelling the controversy and in doing so they achieved at least a limited long-term impact.

Possibly under the influence of the declaration by Järve about the incompatibility of the Law of Private Educational Institutions with social conditions, the Ministry of Education and Social Affairs started to prepare its amendments by the end of 1931. The processing was quick, the draft law going from the Ministry to the Government on December 16, 1931 and then sent to the Parliament on January 27, 1932 (Ministry of Education and Social Affairs 1932). Two provisions in these amendments, adopted on March 11, 1932, particularly reflect the potential impact of the controversy. First, the Government now had the right to close a private school if it was detrimental to state interests. And second, all existing private educational institutions were obliged to re-register their statutes as they might have needed changes in accordance with the amendments (*Riigi Teataja* 1932, 365–366).

During the re-registration process of the Luther Academy, the Ministry consulted with the University of Tartu and the Consistory, having previously been accused of not seeking their opinion although it was not obliged to do so neither back then nor now. While both institutions were critical of the statute and thus required changes, they did not call for the academy to be shut down, which clearly shows that they did not perceive it as a threat. As a result, the academy had to make adjustments in the statute at the request of the ministry, which resulted in its registration as an institute on June 21, 1933 (Ministry of Education and Social Affairs 1933).

It was the government of Jaan Tõnisson that approved the re-organized institute and thus, in the coverage of the approval, his newspaper *Postimees* emphasized that the reorganized institute had no right to award academic degrees, the graduates had no equal rights with the graduates of the theological faculty at the University of Tartu, the lecturers were no longer called professors and *docents* but rather teachers etc. In this way, *Postimees* argued that now there were no legal reasons to reject the statute of the institute while earlier such reasons had been present (*Postimees* 1933, 1). In fact, the academy had no right to award academic degrees from the beginning and its graduates had no equal rights with university graduates, which the Minister of Education stressed from the beginning. Thus, such a rhetorical turn on Tõnisson's part once again suggests that the hostile political reaction one and a half year earlier had been essentially unjustified.

Polemics in the Press

Estonian newspapers covered the case of the Luther Academy from autumn 1931 to 1933, when it was renamed to institute, with fluctuating interest and activity. More or less polemical articles were published by almost all nationwide and numerous local newspapers; in the case of the latter, reprints of articles published earlier in other newspapers were also common. Such publishing patterns demonstrate that public interest in the case was high, yet the coverage turned out to be ambiguous, and not all published pieces shared the concern of students and politicians about the danger of the academy to Estonian national interests. It is no coincidence that it was primarily Jaan Tõnisson's *Postimees* that placed a lot of emphasis on precisely the latter.

At first, the newspapers expressed irritation with the statute of the academy and statements by its key actors, pointing out the allegedly hostile attitude of Germans towards the Estonian university for it being

[9] These concerns were rather minor, though, since breeding pigs and spirit smuggling were at the time much more important subjects of discussion.

too Estonianized. It is noteworthy that whereas one of the first articles on the subject, published in the newspaper *Päevaleht* on September 12, 1931, did not highlight the alleged efforts of Germans to regain their lost power and Germanize Estonians (*Päevaleht* 1931, 3), a few days later these narratives began to spread, led by *Postimees*, which ironically also emphasized the insignificance of the Luther Academy from the beginning (*Postimees* 1931b, 1). This apparent contradiction can be explained by the suspicion that an essentially unnecessary nationalist project managed from abroad was intended to attract Estonian theological students from the University of Tartu as well, which, in the light of the social context and later press coverage, implied the fear of stealthy Germanization:

> *The goals of the "private academy" are as clear as day. They are not intertwined with the deepening and advancing of evangelical culture but rather with the Great German propaganda threads [...] [S]ince the "private academy" is still established, it must be assumed that it will also reach out to Estonian students to recruit students [for itself]. I would definitely like to believe that this attempt will be fruitless, even though our sense of nation often expresses itself as very weak and even though there are a lot of high-school graduates with purely Estonian names among those entering Estonian universities, whose documents show that they graduated from a German school (Postimees 1931c, 2).*

In the weeks and months that followed, it was one of the main narratives of the press coverage that with the help of the academy, Germans were trying to restore their previous power in Estonia achieved through crusades centuries ago, to amplify the influence of "Germanness" and "Germanize" Estonians, while it was also suggested that Germans were trying to keep their declining ethnic group alive. A related core idea was the assumption that the Estonian state authorities had shown a great generosity towards minorities, particularly by way of cultural autonomy. The same applied to the University of Tartu which had been extremely tolerant "towards other ethnic groups" (*Postimees* 1931a, 2), but Germans, according to the press, were ungrateful and not satisfied with these wide-ranging minority rights.

The press also started to look for suspicious details in the known factual information, particularly by pointing out that the Ministry of Education allegedly had kept the preparations of the academy secret from the Church, the University of Tartu and the public. Also, the academy was allegedly illegal, its funding schemes dubious, and it had assumed rights it could not have had by awarding academic degrees and naming lecturers as professors and *docents*. There was also a court case relating to an actual violation of the law: Werner Gruehn, the rector of the academy, a few days after the opening ceremony, was accused of employing foreign lecturers without a work permit. The trial, which along with the appeal, lasted until March 1932 and ended with a fine, was regularly covered in the press yet without significant hostility compared to various accusations of nationalist intentions behind the academy. Thus, despite legal issues, real or imagined, emotional arguments grounded in nationalism prevailed in the press coverage.

Directly religion-related arguments, however, were rather relegated to the background and mostly touched upon the position of the theological faculty at the University of Tartu. The academy had allegedly tried to completely replace the faculty and had been deliberately created to oppose it. There were several arguments that as a result, after several years the graduates of the Luther Academy would compete for clerical positions on equal terms with the graduates of the theological faculty and, as distinct from the latter, had been brought up in a dangerously Baltic German spirit. The issue of sectarians and orthodoxy was also occasionally raised by arguing that the academy would help these religious currents flourish and thus reduce the role of the Lutheran Church in society.

Encouraged by the statements of key actors behind the Academic National Culture Society, the press also called for taking advantage of the situation and cleansing the Lutheran Church of German influences. Yet, despite these calls, only two such cases of alleged dismissals circulated in the press extensively, their connection with the academy remaining vague and their origins unclear. In one case, the pastor of the congregation in Ambla, a small town in Central Estonia, was accused of participating in the opening of the academy and according to several press reports, an attempt was made to dismiss

him. According to other reports, however, he had already retired much earlier and continued as a deputy pastor. Furthermore, there were also voices in his defence (Tark and Liivik 2020, 35). Another case took place in Tartu, in the St. Paul's congregation, where one of the assistant pastors was dismissed. Although the event was widely associated with the controversy, the position he held was formally completely eliminated. There were insider reports that this was done to reduce costs, indicating that even if the controversy had an influence on the decision, it was not intended to be publicly displayed.

It also appears that the interest of the Lutheran Church in the case remained slight. Compared to the high level of interest of general newspapers, the coverage of the events in autumn 1931 in the Consistory magazine *Eesti Kirik* was infrequent and cautious, which gives the impression that the Lutheran Church did not want to discuss the topic, but could not completely ignore it either. This magazine also gave page space to the representatives of the Luther Academy to respond to a short overview of wider press controversy published in one of the earlier issues. Furthermore, the Academic Society of Theologians (*Akadeemiline Usuteadlaste Selts*) which brought together teaching staff, students and alumni of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Tartu and was closely related to the Lutheran Church did not join in the controversy as an organization and apparently even wanted to prevent its individual members from doing so. This led to accusations in the press that it was persecuting those members of the organization who nevertheless participated in the protests.

The mild reaction of the Lutheran Church as well as balanced or downright derisive articles in several newspapers show that there was no unanimous perception of a threat to society. For example, one rather analytical piece was published in the newspaper *Sõnumed* and while it argued that both sides were to blame for the controversy, it also explained how precisely the nationalist background makes the case relevant:

> *We do not have the data to decide to what extent the pedagogical and to what extent nationalist considerations caused the actions of the Germans, but the events that took place indicate that the struggle over the Faculty of Theology has been transferred purely to nationalist grounds. It gives the whole story a completely different complexion and therefore deserves wider attention (Sõnumed 1931, 1).*

Some other newspapers, however, argued that the whole problem was created out of thin air and ridiculed the fierce reaction. The newspaper *Tõe Hääl*, published by the Society of House Owners in Tartu (*Tartu Majaomanike Selts*) explicitly associated the controversy with the political ambitions of some circles, thereby implicitly referring to Tõnisson and his *Postimees*:

> *One must note that certain circles see the establishment of the German private academy as a national threat, and directly incite a backlash in an attempt to create political profit from it. For this, the Germans are vehemently attacked and labelled as the root of evil. However, they forget too easily that the permission to open the private academy was given by the government in which the leaders of the same circle take part. Why did these gentlemen not see the danger when giving permission to open the private academy was on the government's agenda? (Tõe Hääl 1931, 2)*

Yet, even the authors of such articles were careful not to give the impression that they were siding with the academy or even with the Germans in general. Furthermore, they too tended to agree that the intentions of the founders of the Luther Academy were questionable and related to the efforts of the German elite to restore its influence and Germanize Estonians. Thus, in addition to the reaction of German minority politicians in the parliament, the press coverage also shows how ties with this institution turned undesirable for everyone.

However, the general public, without direct contact with the Luther Academy or other related institutions, did not seem to take the case particularly seriously. The press coverage reveals wide public awareness of the controversy, yet only insofar as it introduced a new catchword "private academy"

(*eraakadeemia*) that was not common in Estonian language before. It was used several times as a metaphor in unrelated contexts, sometimes in a humorous way. As such cases occurred even months after the larger controversy had subsided, it can be assumed that this catchword lived on in the people's language usage longer than press interest in the Luther Academy lasted.

Conclusion

The case of the Luther Academy was characterized by ambivalent press coverage and reception in society. On the one hand, it received an unusual amount of attention, given the secularizing nature of interwar Estonian society, and caused a strong reaction among the students at the University of Tartu and among parliamentary politicians. On the other hand, the press coverage shows that the society did not perceive the Luther Academy as dangerous to the extent argued in the most polemical articles published in the newspapers. The perception that the hostility towards the Luther Academy was artificially inflated was as prevalent in press coverage as strong criticism. This could also partly explain the mild reaction of the Lutheran Church, though the reasons for its indifference would still merit further investigation.

The fiercest reactions can be associated with, first, the newspaper *Postimees* which published most of the polemical articles, second, the student activist Ilmar Tõnisson, who was connected with *Postimees* through his family ties, and third, several parliamentarians with a clerical background. Although without reading the minds of these key actors it is impossible to judge to what extent they were driven by self-interest and to what extent they were genuinely concerned about Estonian national interests, it is clear that they instrumentalized this small religious institution for their nationalist rhetoric particularly by linking it to the widespread perception of ongoing Germanization and the attempt by the German elite to regain its power. While in general giving the national dimension to the issue was easy since the key persons behind the Luther Academy did indeed express their own national interests, the link to Germanization, which had come to dominate the controversy, was arbitrary as neither the statute of the academy nor its founders expressed the intention to Germanize Estonians or restore the power of Germans in Estonia.

Germanization had been one of the most consistent topics of interest in the press for many years. The idea that Estonians were still being turned into Germans was regularly circulated in the newspapers, and even if it was not perceived as a real threat in the public, it was a phenomenon with an unequivocally negative connotation. By associating the Luther Academy with this topic, regardless of whether this rhetorical ploy was deliberate or formed spontaneously under the influence of the social context, it was possible to present this institution as a pariah with which even German minority politicians did not want to associate themselves. Despite scepticism about the threatening nature of the Luther Academy, this arbitrary connection was spread through several newspapers, and was not merely the argument of a narrow nationalist circle. Thus, the results of this article suggest that in interwar Estonia as a secularizing society, successful nationalist instrumentalization of religious issues was connected with their arbitrary framing within topics of greater public interest.

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