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**Defining “Baltic Germanness”
in Post-Soviet Latvia and Estonia:
Ethnic Germans’ Life Stories
between East and West**

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Abstract: This article, based on interviews conducted in 2019 with Latvian and Estonian citizens ethnically defining themselves as “Baltic Germans”, aims to analyse the way this self-identification is shaped by the experience of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and by the ideological polarisation between East and West. Studying this hybrid ethnic belonging allows taking a look at individual life paths through a transnational lens and paying attention to all forms of mobility that play a role in its construction. By integrating the interviewees’ migratory experience, their discourses on other ethnic groups, and their perception of Germany, Latvia, Estonia, Russia and the USSR, this article intends to apprehend “Baltic Germanness” as a transnationally and trans-ethnically shaped category, to which the interviewees resort in order to make sense of their lives outside the framework of the nation-state.

Keywords: Latvia, Estonia, Baltic Germans, hybrid belongings, ethnicity

Introduction

The history of the German speaking population on the territories of today’s Estonia and Latvia began in the 12th century and is considered to have ended with World War II (Hehn 1984). This population is the result of social mobility and migration waves over seven centuries (Schlau 2001; Henning 2010; Plath 2014, 55–56; Johansen and Zur Mühlen 1973), so that German

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speakers in the three Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire were far from being socially, economically or culturally homogeneous when the term ‘Baltic (German)’¹ emerged in the 19th century (Angermann 2012; Brüggemann and Wezel 2019, 40–41). In a context when the dominant position of the German speaking upper class in the region was threatened both by the Estonian and the Latvian ‘national awakening’ movements and by the so-called ‘russification’, the promotion of the term ‘Baltic German’ went hand in hand with the idea of a bounded culture and position that had to be secured (Hackmann 2005; 2015). Even though this new category did not always succeed in transcending the social and cultural differences among the heterogeneous German speakers, it provided a basis for several organisations and parties in the first half of the 20th century (Bolin and Douglas 2017; Brüggemann and Wezel 2019). The degree to which the nobility, the *literati*, the German speaking merchants, peasants, or workers identified with or made use of this term has been unequally investigated, and not much is known about “little Germans” (Brüggemann and Wezel 2019). Especially regarding the last significant German migration wave toward the Baltic provinces in 1905 (peasants from Volhynia), it seems relevant to ask: “When did Germans living in the Baltics become Baltic Germans?” (Plath 2014, 69). However, the Nazi ‘*Heim ins Reich*’ policy, which aimed at ‘germanising’ the newly occupied Polish territories by having ‘ethnic Germans’ (*Volksdeutsche*) migrating toward it, did not make such distinctions. All ethnic Germans in Estonia and Latvia were considered ‘Baltic Germans’ (*Baltendeutsche* in the national socialist terminology) and eligible to migration. Agreements between Nazi Germany on one side and Latvia, Estonia, and later the Soviet Union on the other side, made it possible for about 84000 inhabitants of Estonia and Latvia to emigrate as ‘Germans’ between 1939 (*Umsiedlung*) and 1941 (*Nachumsiedlung*). The fact that this number exceeds the one of declared ethnic Germans in the Estonian and Latvian censuses of 1934 (Schlau 2001, 33) shows that the self-declaration as ‘Baltic German’ in the (*Nach*)*Umsiedlung* procedure was not only a matter of self-understanding, but also a matter of strategy and of dealing with political changes by calling upon language competencies (Liivik and Tark 2016, 414–16). Thus, at least for a minority, participating in the (*Nach*)*Umsiedlung* may not have been a sign of identification with the Baltic German category, and conversely, not participating in it did not automatically mean rejecting the identification as a Baltic German. A famous example of the latter is Paul Schiemann, a liberal Baltic German politician and fighter of national socialist ideology (Hiden 2008). However, based on the fact that the majority of Baltic Germans actually emigrated in 1939/41, Baltic German associations founded in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after the war developed a narrative in which Baltic German compatriots (*Landsleute*) were German speakers who left Estonia/Latvia (at the latest in 1941) and settled in Germany or elsewhere in the ‘free world’. Conversely, Estonians and Latvians

(whether living in exile or not) were labelled *Heimatgenossen* (homeland fellow) (von Kleist 1998). Thus, emigration from Latvia/Estonia before 1941 is a core element of this definition of Baltic Germanness, which has two consequences: after 1941, there could not be any Baltic German living in Latvia and Estonia, and ethnic Germans moving to Estonia or Latvia could not “become Baltic Germans” anymore, to borrow Plath’s phrase (von Kleist 1972).

The beginning of World War II represents a decisive break in such definition of Baltic Germanness, and this break matches the date (June 1940) stipulated in 1992 for the granting of citizenship by the newly independent states of Latvia and Estonia: the ones who lived in Latvia/Estonia until 1940 and their descendants became citizens, whereas those who settled there after this date were excluded from citizenship. The boundary between citizens and non-citizens runs through ethnic minorities as well, within which the official (Dribins 1996) and the scientific (Vēbers 1996; Ansviesulis and Dribins 1996) discourses soon distinguished between “traditional” and “immigrant” minorities. Among the ethnic “Germans” (which is the only category in the censuses), this quickly led to a distinction between two groups: “Baltic Germans” and “Russian Germans”, which reintroduces the idea of Baltic Germans living in Estonia/Latvia. And indeed, although almost the entire pre-war German minority emigrated in 1939/41 without returning, the statistics show that there still were ethnic Germans from the pre-war minority in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia, whose life paths challenge the definition of Baltic Germanness addressed above. Among the 3653 inhabitants of Latvia who declared themselves as Germans in 1996, 977 (27%) were Latvian citizens (Vēbers 1996, 8). This means that those people, or their parents, lived in Latvia before 1940. Such data is not available in the case of Estonia, since the first Estonian census dates back in 2000, when many inhabitants who had been excluded from citizenship in 1992 had in the meantime become citizens (Plasseraud and Pourchier 2002, 74). However, in 2000, 873 (46%) of the 1870 inhabitants declaring themselves as German were Estonian citizens (Statistics Estonia 2000), and a certain amount of them might belong to the pre-war German minority.

The present article deals with such marginal life paths. Beyond the well-known case of Schiemann, it pays attention to the trajectories of ‘normal’ individuals who could have participated in the (*Nach*)*Umsiedlung* but did not, or who did so and then returned. The interviews that provide the basis for the present analysis were conducted in 2019 with five Estonian and five Latvian citizens who to a certain extent identify as Baltic Germans. The interviews show that, unlike Schiemann’s case, their for Baltic Germans atypical migratory behaviour was not due in the first place to political reasons (rejection of national socialism is never mentioned in the interviews), but rather to the hybridity of their ethnic belonging at this time, which contrasts with the strong Baltic German identification some of them developed in the post-Soviet context. Paying attention to the way these Estonians and Latvians make sense of their life – in front of the researcher – as a (Baltic) German life, allows

us to question the boundaries of the group addressed by the ‘Baltic German’ *category*² after World War II.

When the interviews were conducted, eight of the 10 interviewees were older than 75 years and had experienced a series of radical political changes, among which at least one change of citizenship or of declared ‘nationality’, which is the word used in Soviet and post-Soviet Latvia and Estonia to refer to ethnic belonging (*nacional’nost’* in Russian, *rahvus* in Estonian and *tautība* in Latvian). ‘Ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic belonging’, which will be used in this article exclusively as a practical category used by individuals, organisations or administrations, are thus core elements of their biographies. They have all developed discourses about their own ethnicity and participated, from the Perestroika on, in different types of collective (Baltic) German practices: associations, religious communities, language courses, cultural events... When defining their own ethnic belonging, they cannot resort to ready-made narratives: neither did they experience the typical Baltic German trajectory, nor did they settle in Latvia or Estonia from other parts of the Soviet Union, like the larger group of so-called Russian Germans did. During the course of the interviews, multiple and contradictory definitions of Baltic Germanness arise, as the following quotes from the interviews suggest: “A Baltic German is not a German.” (Kārlis³), “A Baltic German [is] a real German.” (Peter), “I actually am... maybe Estonian. [A historian friend] said I am a Baltic German, because I grew up in this culture, and also my genes... Probably I have some German genes, from the women in the family. But the men ... [...] I think that my father identified as a Baltic German. But his mother was Russian, and his mother tongue was Russian.” (Maria) While these definitions can seem contradictory, they make sense as various personal responses to the same global circumstances. These responses will not be analysed as expressions of a Baltic German “identity”, but rather in terms of identification, self-understanding and self-representation. “Identification” is a relational categorisation process intrinsic to social life and mostly based on distinction between sameness and difference, while “self-understanding” refers to a self-referential, rather implicit and stable feeling, and “self-representation” to the demonstration of such self-understanding and its appearance in front of others (such as the researcher) (Brubaker 2006, 28–47). Thus, the purpose of the present article is not to depict a “Baltic German identity” that would be representative of those who “stayed” in Latvia/Estonia, but rather to study the mechanisms that shape the definition of Baltic Germanness depending on context and individual trajectory. As Maria’s quote suggests, the interviewees come from a background with several *possible* ethnic belongings and their definition of Baltic Germanness is a way of dealing with those potential identifications. It appears that these definitions develop *among* other, more recognised ethnic belongings shaping the social environment of the interviewees, and are primarily based on representations and expectations concerning them and the spaces they

implicitly refer to. The hypothesis at stake is that the personal definitions of ‘Baltic Germanness’ arising in the interviews have little to do with the historical definitions of it, but rather illustrate the complexity of the transnational and trans-ethnic context that shapes what I call the interviewees’ “mental spaces”. On the one hand, the multiple definitions of Baltic Germanness mirror the tense ethnic relations in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia, and on the other they prove the power of experienced or fantasised (im)mobilities toward Germany and from Russia.

I will start by summing up the current research on ethnicity in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia. The next part will be dedicated to the methodological and theoretical frame. After having briefly introduced the ten interviewees, I will analyse the interviews in the following sections by focusing on two levels: the individual and the collective one.

The Ethnic Issue in Post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia

The literature on ethnic questions in post-Soviet Estonia and Latvia concur that the ethnic issue in both countries is largely similar, while it is different from the situation in Lithuania (Best 2013; Eberhardt 2003, 58; Galdbreath 2005; Muiznieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka 2013; Plasseraud and Pourchier 2002). In Estonia and Latvia, the immigration from other parts of the Soviet Union since World War II has profoundly changed the ethnic structure of their populations: according to the census data, in Estonia, ethnic Estonians made out 92% of the country’s population in 1934⁴ and 61.5% in 1989; in Latvia, ethnic Latvians made out 75% of the country’s population in 1935 and 52% in 1989 (Eberhardt 2003, 34–61). After both countries regained their independence in 1991, they implemented similar citizenship politics, granting citizenship only to those who were born within the country before June 1940 and to their descendants, and excluding from the new democratic life about one third of the permanent residents (Plasseraud and Pourchier 2002, 69; Vēbers 1996, 8), in line with the idea of a “restoration” of the interwar republics (McLaren-Miller 2003, 224–33). The literature puts forward three characteristics common to both countries regarding the ethnic issue.

The first one is that both states’ legitimacy is based on an ethnic definition of the Nation (Bonnard 2011, 52; Filler 2016; Galdbreath 2005, 22; Plasseraud and Pourchier 2002), in which the “nominal nation” (ethnic Estonians or Latvians) is privileged, while the presence of (mostly Russian-speaking) non-Estonians or non-Latvians, as a product of the Soviet period, is perceived as illegitimate, potentially disloyal, and unworthy of political representation (Dorodnova 2003, 209; Agarín 2010; Pettai 2021, 5–6; Bonnard 2011, 60–64). The post-Soviet Latvian/Estonian ethnicity has thus primarily been constructed *against* a supposed Soviet-Russian ‘mentality’. The second characteristic is the role of language in the construction of a strict opposition between

ethnic Estonians/Latvians and ‘Russians’. Following a logic of “nationalisation of the linguistic sphere” (Muiznieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka 2013, 294), a supposed Russian identity is ascribed to Russian-speakers regardless of the diversity of their origins. This reification of ethnic categories impacts everyday life (Tocheva 2004), state policies (Dorodnova 2003; Agarin 2010), media (Cheskin 2012), as well as the socio-economic situation (van Meurs 2003). Consequently, the discourse on non-Russian minorities inherited this duality: the opposition between “traditional” and “immigrant” minorities amounts to differentiating between “true” and “false”, supposedly “loyal” and “disloyal” minorities (Bonnard 2011, 62). The third characteristic is that, in both countries, the ethnic issue has implications in terms of collective memory based on an ‘East’/‘West’ opposition: after the independence, the development of a new, anti-Soviet national narrative posits Europe and the ‘West’ as the natural sphere of belonging of the newly independent states, opposed to the Soviet ‘East’ (Brüggemann and Plath 2001; Cheskin 2012, 327; Kivimäe and Kivimäe 2002; Kõresaar and Jõesalu 2016; Priedīte 1999).

Even though recent research diagnoses a slow reduction of these strict oppositions (Cheskin 2012; Pettai 2021), they profoundly shaped the interviewees’ lives over three decades, so that representations of ‘Russianness’ paradoxically remain central in their definition of Baltic Germanness.

Interviews as Conversations or Individual Perspectives as Sources for the Inquiry into Mobilities and “Transnationalism from Below”

Beyond the national level, which is itself dominated by the heritage of a transnational Soviet past, the biographies of the 10 interviewees are shaped by a range of experiences in which national realities (such as citizenship laws or administrative ethnic categories) only interfere with phenomena happening at other levels and involving spaces beyond the national borders. Definitions of Baltic Germanness arise in a social and mental environment that is both transnational and shaped by (im)mobilities.

In migration studies, the transnational methodology “rejects the nation-state as the sole starting point of empirical analysis” (Amelina and Faist 2012, 1708), and investigates “transnational spaces” defined through social practices (Pries 2008; Clavin 2005, 438). In other words, it focuses on practices that take place simultaneously in different localities and connects them together (Amelina and Faist 2012, 1708), which makes economic networks a dominant object of transnational migration studies (Portes 2001). However, the “mobilities turn” (Cresswell 2006; Büscher and Urry 2009; Urry 2007) widened the approach by paying attention not only to migration and economic exchanges, but to all forms of mobility and their relation to immobility, because “investigations of movement, blocked movement, potential movement, and studies of immobility, dwelling and place making [show] how

‘moves’ make social and material realities” (Büscher and Urry 2009, 99). Consequently, immobility is far from being a “non-phenomenon” (Düvell 2021, 228). Paying attention to it helps understand a core element in the life paths of the 10 interviewees: they did not simply live their lives where they were born, they rather *stayed*, or *returned*, and *stayed* again in the 1990s when the borders opened. Thus, their ethnic self-understanding is based on ambiguous relationships with three countries: Germany, Estonia/Latvia and Russia. That is why the present analysis pays attention primarily to the (non-)movements that shape the interviewees’ definitions of Baltic Germanness, and shows how “transnational spaces” are not only social, political or economic, but also imagined, and thus mental.

Transnational scientists recognise the value of oral sources for the study of “transnationalism from below” because they are more likely exempt from undergoing a national logic and allow the reconstruction of trajectories as results of individual agency and collective schemes (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007, 6-13; 2014). Their aim is to document the collective level through individual cases within a qualitative perspective: the purpose is not to produce quantitatively representative data, but to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena through the exploration of case studies with “open and not standardised” methods following a “logic of discovery” (Rosenthal 2018, 13-14). Thus, such methods face two challenges: defining the level of standardisation of the methods used, and relating the individual to the collective. The general purpose of the present study was to collect life stories, but even low standardisation as proposed by Rosenthal (2018, 133-147, 155-185) was not compatible with the conditions in which the interviews took place: the interviewees, in many cases, did not want to plan an interview in advance, but rather invited the researcher to participate in some events (commemorations, religious celebrations, cultural events from their associations), or started the meeting by presenting documents (books, pictures, letters, copies of archives) they had brought, so that it was impossible to follow a recurrent structure, and even to strictly say when the interview began and ended, especially as some interviewees were met with several times. Far from being an obstacle to the inquiry, this situation deepened the understanding of the context and enriched the possibilities of testing hypotheses during the analysis. That is why the methodology used follows sociological and anthropological methods such as those theorised by Stéphane Beaud (1996) and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1995, 6-10; 1996). They both apprehend the interviews as dialogues, or “conversations” (Olivier de Sardan 1995, 8), embedded in a broader inquiry context producing other types of data that enable a more accurate analysis: based on a deep understanding of each individual case, the analysis does not focus on sameness, but rather on “meaningful differences” and non-coherent points of view, aiming to produce an interpretation that does not explain only the most representative cases quantitatively, but rather explores all the possible aspects of a

given problem (Olivier de Sardan 1995, 18). In the present case the purpose is to understand how contradictory definitions of Baltic Germanness such as “A Baltic German is not a German.” and “A Baltic German [is] a real German.” can arise, and why they are not incompatible with each other but rather express a range of possible ways of reacting to a single context.

Life Paths Between Nations and Nationalities: a Short Introduction to the 10 Interviewees

The interviewees were met through German Lutheran parishes and 11 associations in both countries, which were all founded between 1988 and 2002 in order to bring together ethnic Germans or to pass on German culture. This associative landscape is complex, involving stakeholders with different goals and ethnic self-identifications (German, Baltic German, Russian, Volga German, Latvian, and Estonian). About 20 interviews were conducted in German within these networks. The present article analyses the 10 interviews conducted with those who identify as belonging to the pre-war German minority. However, this similar way of identifying oneself does not go with homogeneous socio-economical characteristics, nor identical (non-)migration experiences.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the 10 cases on which the analysis is based, although not all 10 cases will be elaborated below. The figure aims at highlighting the diversity of Baltic German trajectories, focusing on two aspects that build up the most central “biographical resources” (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007, 13) of the interviews: the family history between 1939 and 1947 (a period during which their trajectories differed the most from the collective trajectory of the majority of Baltic Germans) and the experience of being a German in Latvian and Estonian SSR. Regarding these two aspects, the interviewees have rather diverse experiences. Five interviewees (or their families) participated in one of the *Umsiedlungen*. Three experienced migration in 1944, when a lot of inhabitants of Latvia and Estonia fled towards Germany. Two did not (nor did their parents) migrate at all, but, in both cases, parts of the close family did. All those who migrated went back to Estonia or Latvia at some point, most of them right after the war. This immediate post-war return migration happened in the context of confrontation with the Soviet authorities in Poland or in eastern Germany, either because they were identified by Soviet authorities as Estonians or Latvians, and thus as Soviet citizens, or because they declared themselves as such. There are also two cases of returning at a later stage: Maria, who settled in Estonia when she retired and is the only one who did not live under Soviet rule, and Paul, whose mother decided to go back to Estonia with her two children born in Germany, when she was told that her husband, missing since the war, was dead. Since Paul’s and Aiga’s fathers died, Ursula is the only interviewee whose family was reunited after the war. The other seven

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Name*	Date and place of birth	Current citizenship (s)	German citizenship in the past?	Migratory path (of the close family**) between 1939 and 1947	Date of “return” in Estonia or Latvia	Nuclear family split after War?	Experience of discrimination during Soviet Union perceived by the interviewee as due to his/her ‘Germanness’	
							minor***	major****
Kārlis / Karl	1924, Latvia	Latvian	No	Mother + brother: 1944 towards Germany, then towards the US. He + other brother: stayed in Latvia	–	Yes	No	No
Gudrun	1934, Estonia	Estonian	Yes (1941-45)	1941 <i>Nachumsiedlung</i> , settlement in Nazi-occupied Poland, from there voluntary return	1945	Yes	Yes	Yes (aunt deported, brother assassinated)
Aiga	1935, Latvia	Latvian	No	1944 flight towards Germany (East), from there voluntary return	1945	No	Yes	Yes (mother assassinated)
Ursula	1937, Latvia	Latvian	No	1944 flight towards Nazi-occupied Poland, then towards Germany (East), from there voluntary return	1946	No	Yes	Yes (father deported)
Maria	1938, Estonia	Estonian, Swedish	Yes (1941-45)	<i>Nachumsiedlung</i> 1941, settlement in Nazi-occupied Poland, 1945 flight towards Germany, then Denmark (DP-camp as Estonians), 1947 settlement in Sweden	2004	Yes	–	–
Werner	1942, Latvia	Latvian	No	1944 flight towards Nazi-occupied Poland, from there forced repatriation through Soviet authorities	1945	Yes	Yes	No
Paul	1943, Nazi-occupied Poland	Estonian	Yes (1943-56), GDR	1939 <i>Umsiedlung</i> , settlement in Nazi-occupied Poland, 1945 flight towards Germany, settlement in Soviet zone, later GDR, from there voluntary return	1956	No	Yes	No
Tatjana	1944, Nazi-occupied Poland	Estonian	Yes (1944-45)	1939 <i>Umsiedlung</i> , settlement in Nazi-occupied Poland, from there forced repatriation through Soviet authorities	1945	Yes	Yes	No
Ilze	1949, LSSR	Latvian	No	1940 <i>Nachumsiedlung</i> , settlement in Nazi-occupied Poland, 1944 flight towards Germany (East), from there voluntary return	1945	Yes	Yes	No
Harald	1971, ESSR	Estonian	No	Grand-mother: 1944 flight towards Germany (West), settlement there. Grand-father stayed with Harald’s mother in Estonia.	–	Yes	No	Yes (grand-father deported)

*All the names have been changed.

**When the interviewee was born after this date.

***Feeling of being seen as a ‘fascist’, impossibility to speak or learn German, financial difficulties, interdiction to live in certain place or to study what the interviewee wanted to study.

****Family members deported, imprisoned, or assassinated.

Fig. 1. Relevant steps in the life paths of the ten interviewees

grew up with close family members living in the so-called ‘free world’, mostly in Germany. The last two columns of the table are dedicated to the question of the discrimination experienced in Soviet times and perceived by the interviewees to be linked to their German ethnicity. Experiences of discrimination are highly dependent on the way the interviewees were categorised by Soviet authorities: some of them were never categorised as ethnic Germans, while others had their family members deported because of such ethnicity. The interrelation between ascribed ethnicity and self-identification will thus be addressed in the next section.

Beyond those rather heterogeneous life paths, it is striking that ethnic categorisation and self-identification only started to be at play for the interviewees or their parents in 1939, and then again gained significance in decisive moments, becoming, step by step, increasingly relevant to their self-understanding. When speaking about the time before 1939, most of the interviewees refer either to hybrid belongings or to indifference to such categorisations: “[My family members] were Swedish, but we spoke German at home... I don’t know. It was not so interesting at that time. [...] They went to German school and spoke like Germans. I don’t know... We don’t know at all who we are.” (Gudrun); “[Ethnicity] didn’t matter at all at that time!” (Kārlis). The case of Maria is emblematic of the role played by external circumstances in the evolution of ethnic self-representation and self-understanding: her family belonged to the German-speaking high society, but did not identify as Baltic German. Her grand-parents took part in the *Umsiedlung*, while her parents stayed. After the annexation of the Baltic States by the Soviet Union, they

finally thought it safer to leave, considering their wealth and social position, and they took part in the *Nachumsiedlung*. Maria explains: “Because we could present evidence... I had been baptised in the German parish.” During the war, they became German citizens, but in 1945 her mother decided to flee toward Sweden. From that moment on, the mother presented themselves as Estonians: “We had to always be Estonians, it was better.” Such sudden switches in the way the interviewees declared themselves to the authorities during and at the end of the war make it clear that ethnic belonging was far from being merely a matter of self-understanding, but rather of strategic choice. And yet, recurrent confrontations with such moments of strategic choices in the course of the interviewees’ life end up producing a stronger ethnic self-understanding, which is in turn shaped by the marginality of the trajectories taken in the first place.

Ethnic Self-representations Shaped by Transnational Mental Spaces

This part on individual definitions of Baltic Germanness focuses on two aspects: (1) the interrelation between the several ethnic self- and hetero-identifications found in the interviews, and (2) the role played by migration and mobility. The first aspect focuses on the *trans-ethnic* dimension of the definition of Baltic Germanness, while the second highlights the *transnational* context in which it is produced.

(1) Identifying as a Baltic German appears in the interviews as a way of positioning oneself within a range of co-existing ethnic belongings that are always more or less strictly and explicitly ‘ranked’ by the interviewees, depending on their closeness to the own identification, as well as on their positive or negative connotation. The identification as Baltic German thus has to be understood in relation to four other ethnic categories: Russian (or Soviet, which is sometimes used as a synonym), Latvian or Estonian (depending on the interviewee’s citizenship), German, and Russian German.

The field research made it clear that being a German is positively connoted (be it a Baltic German, or a German living in Germany), and being a Russian perceived negatively. Russian Germans in turn have a hybrid position, as shown below. The ways through which the interviewees resort to these categories show that, the less positively a category is connoted, the less selective it becomes. In front of the researcher, the interviewees do not hesitate to ascribe ‘Russianness’ to anyone who seems suspicious to them, and they are quite assertive about it: “She is a Russian, a communist.” Conversely, they do not easily grant ‘Germanness’ to others and answer only cautiously when the researcher asks whether they consider someone a German: “I don’t know, you have to ask him [whether he has German roots].”, “She says so [that she is an ethnic German], but I have not seen her documents.”, “One has to be careful... Sometimes he says he is Latvian, sometimes German... But... yeah... as I said, you will see by yourself. I

don’t know.” Based on the underlying russophobia characteristic of the post-Soviet Estonian and Latvian context, the top of the ethnic hierarchy is thus linked to some kind of ‘Germanness’ and the bottom to ‘Russianness’. However, the way the interviewees rank the five categories within this framework varies depending on their perception of each category. The first two definitions of Baltic Germanness mentioned in the introduction exemplify these variations: “A Baltic German is not a German.” (Kārlis) and “A Baltic German [is] a real German.” (Paul). How can such contradictory definitions be both explanatory, and how can we analyse them without subscribing to one more than to the other? A way of doing so is to find out *why, in front of the interviewer, it is relevant for Kārlis to draw a boundary between himself and the Germans, and for Paul to distinguish ‘true’ from ‘false’ Germans.* This way, the definitions appear to be produced at the intersection between one common context and two diverging individual life paths, in which (potential) ethnic ascriptions by others or by administrations play a decisive role.

While Kārlis refers to his mother as a Latvian and to his father as a Hungarian, he defines himself as a Baltic German. Like Maria, he grew up in a wealthy family of the interwar German-speaking high society, in which the sense of belonging to the Baltic German community was not self-evident. However, unlike Maria’s, Kārlis’ family did not participate in either of the *Umsiedlungen*. Only his mother and one of his brothers finally fled Riga in 1944 and later settled in the United States, while the rest of the family stayed in Latvia. Under such circumstances, it is clear that Kārlis, even though he technically fits a certain historical definition of Baltic Germanness as referring to the German-speaking high society (Angermann 2012), has never been categorised as a German by any authorities. In 1988, he was one of the first founders of the German associations that will be described in the next section, and from then on he developed a very strong identification as a Baltic German. In such context, it is not surprising that his definition of Baltic Germanness has little to do with the German state or a German descent, to which he has no direct bonds. On the contrary, in front of an interviewer who might, in his view, question his ethnic belonging, he argues that Baltic Germanness is a culture and a mentality that are specific to the German-speakers on the territories of Estonia and Latvia and that differentiate them from Germans living in Germany. He refers to the Baltic Germans as “a caste, a dominant social stratum” having kept alive “the quintessence of European culture” brought by the Teutonic knights to the “last barbarians” of Europe, while Germans from Germany have in his view lost it. He thus calls on the racist myth of *Kulturträgertum*, but reinterprets it in the sense of a supposed superiority of the Baltic Germans over the Germans from Germany. At the same time, he merges Russians and Russian Germans into one category, that of the “*homo sovieticus*”, which he considers the exact opposite of the European Baltic Germans.

Paul has had a completely different life path. His parents were “little Germans” from Estonia and participated in the *Umsiedlung* in 1939. He was born

a German citizen during the war, grew up in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and arrived in ESSR at the age of 13, when his widowed mother decided to remigrate. Upon his arrival in ESSR, he spoke neither Estonian, nor Russian, and went to a Russian school where he was mocked as a “fascist”. Both the trauma of the arrival in 1956 and his strong bonds to an Estonian friend returning from Siberia he then met are recurrent motives during his interview. When it comes to defining ‘Baltic Germanness’, the German ethnicity of his parents is less relevant than his strong ties to both Estonia and Germany. For him, ‘Baltic Germans’ are present-time individuals, “mixed” between Estonia and Germany, both in a biological and a geographical sense. He sees Estonians and Baltic Germans, who share the experience of suffering under the Soviet rule, as the exact opposite to Russians and Russian Germans, who embody the USSR. When he says that he is “a Baltic German, a real German”, he thus means that he is not a Russian German, because he is committed to Estonia. This precision is of special significance in front of the interviewer, since Paul went to a Russian school and speaks Russian better than Estonian: assuming that the interviewer might associate a Russian-speaking German with Russian Germans, he wishes not to be mixed up with them, whom he perceives as “false” Germans.

By defining Baltic Germanness either in opposition to Germany or in opposition to Russian Germans, both Kārlis and Paul are positioning themselves, although from different backgrounds, in an ethnic context they analyse the same way: while they relate differently to Germany, attachment to Latvia/Estonia is a core element of their Baltic Germanness, and they both reject Russia, which they associate with USSR. Their definitions of Baltic Germanness thus follow typical schemes of ethnic categorisation, by drawing boundaries between the own and alien groups. The interesting point is that, while the interviewees always define Baltic Germanness in opposition to Russians, Russian Germans, and sometimes to Germans living in Germany, they never stress any differences from Estonians or Latvians. On the contrary, they mostly put forward their closeness and the shared experience of suffering under the Soviet rule. It is all the more striking, since the close ties Russian Germans have with Russia corrupt their Germanness in the interviewees’ view: Russian Germans are presented as “russified”, “sovietised”, “half-Russians”, “to some extent Russians”. Yet, the close ties Baltic Germans have with Estonia/Latvia do not make them “latvianised” or “estonised” Germans, they rather confirm their Germanness: precisely because they can put forward their belonging to the pre-war minority and thus their commitment to Latvia/Estonia, they, as Estonian/Latvian citizens, are legitimate in claiming a specific belonging, without fear of being suspected of disloyalty (Bonnard 2011). The fact that they do not feel the need to explain to the researcher why they are not ethnic Estonians/Latvians is also characteristic of the reification of ‘East’ and ‘West’ as opposite systems of values (Cheskin 2012, 327; Dauchert 2008,

91–92; Tocheva 2004, 75–84): Baltic Germans, together with Latvians and Estonians, are presented as belonging to the ‘West’.

(2) Yet, these categories are not static. They develop in a context where (im)mobilities play a significant role, so that migration is a central topic in all the interviews, concerning not only the interviewees’ own experiences, but those of others as well, and especially of the so-called ‘Russian Germans’. This discourse on mobility is fundamentally transnational not only because it is implicitly shaped by the Soviet-period immigration of the so-called Russian Germans toward Latvia/Estonia, but also due to FRG’s *Aussiedler*-policy, which made it possible for ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union and other communist countries to migrate toward Germany as German citizens (Panagiotidis 2019). While it was difficult to make use of this opportunity under Soviet rule, because emigration was rarely authorised, the collapse of the USSR and the reopening of the borders made it suddenly an option for ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union. Even though the FRG reacted by sharpening the criteria for recognising German ethnicity and rejecting many applicants, potential emigration toward Germany had become part of the interviewees’ mental horizon. Thus, their discourse on Baltic Germanness is shaped both by experienced and by considered, attempted or hindered migrations.

However, the migrations addressed in the interviews are mostly migrations or migration wishes attributed to others, namely the Russian Germans. Following the logic of drawing boundaries between Baltic Germans and Russian Germans, the interviewees interpret the Russian Germans’ migration or attempts to migrate as a sign of disloyalty, whereas they represent their own immobility as a proof of sincere Germanness, while keeping quiet about their own attempts to migrate. In the interviews, Russian Germans are assimilated to migrants driven by illegitimate economic interests, or “rouble migrants” (van Meurs 2003, 186). Their migration toward Latvia/Estonia during Soviet times and their attempts to migrate further as *Aussiedler* toward FRG since the ‘90s is presented as one single movement, in which Latvia/Estonia would just be used as a way to get a better life in Germany, a country they would not sincerely love⁵. The assumption that the Russian Germans do not sincerely identify with the state they live in or wish to live in stems from the representation of them belonging to the ‘East’ and being incompatible with the ‘West’, and is a recurrent cliché about Russian-speakers in general, that has been proven false (Cheskin 2012, 336; Dorodnova 2003; Koort 2014; McLaren-Miller 2003; Pettai 2021). In opposition to this, the interviewees put their own immobility at the heart of their self-representation as Baltic Germans: “I could [emigrate], but what would I get from it? I can be [a Baltic German] everywhere.” (Tatjana); “It is my country, that’s where I belong.” (Ursula). However, beyond such discourse, the interviewees’ life stories draw a much more complex picture of their experience with mobility. The cases of Tatjana

and Ursula give a hint that the Russian Germans’ and the Baltic Germans’ migratory experiences in Estonia and Latvia may not be that different.

Tatjana takes up the stereotype of Russian Germans as self-interested, perpetual migrants and of Baltic Germans as selfless non-migrants, thus loyal to both Germany and Latvia/Estonia. She defines her own “Baltic Germanness” (she stresses the Baltic part) both through the fact that she knows Germany “from a to z” due to several opportunities she had to visit her father’s family, and that she stays in Estonia. This would not be surprising if it was a way of explaining the difference between her and a German from Germany. Yet, again, her aim when saying so is to draw a boundary between herself and the “russified” Russian Germans (in her words), assuming that they are not committed to Estonia/Latvia because they did not choose to live there. This makes her feel like a “stranger” among them, she asserts. There may be several other reasons why Tatjana feels like a “stranger” among Russian Germans, but the criterion of mobility she stresses seems inconsistent with her own life, because Tatjana’s family did not choose to live in Estonia either. Her family emigrated in 1939 and was forced by Soviet authorities to return to Estonia in 1945. Her father, who lost contact with the family during the war, first settled in Western Germany until he found the family again and migrated back to Estonia, since it was impossible for Tatjana and her mother to emigrate. The family was thus reunited in 1973 without having freely chosen to live in Estonia. Additionally, Tatjana was raised in a Russian-speaking family, without any links to Germany until she was almost 30, except from the fact that her mother had made her learn German. This means that she has several of the characteristics she typically assigns to the Russian Germans, but, since her family belongs to the pre-war population of Estonia, it makes sense for her to clearly distinguish herself from Russian Germans, by interpreting similar migration experiences differently.

The life of Ursula is quite different: she experienced migration as a child and, after a return she describes as “voluntary”, she grew up in Latvia with both parents being ethnic Germans. In spite of the differences, her discourse is similar to Tatjana’s, inasmuch as immobility is a core element in her definition of Baltic Germanness, as opposed to the migration of others: “Many [ethnic Germans] go away, many of them want a better life in Germany. [...] But Latvia is my homeland, my graves are here. If everybody runs away, who will stay?” What Ursula does not mention during the interview is that she did try to emigrate to Germany in the 1990s and that her application was rejected, like in the case of two other interviewees: Werner, who mentions it in his interview, and Ilze, who, like Ursula, does not mention it⁶. The interviewees could put forward other characteristics that in their view differentiate them from Russian Germans, but it is striking that their discourse is structured on a supposed opposition between two different migration practices, even though their own biographies do not match with such discourse.

This probably shows the difficulty to make sense of a rejection by the German state in spite of a personal identification as Germans, and also explains why Baltic Germanness, as mentioned above, is never defined in opposition to ‘Latvianness’ or ‘Estonianness’, but rather as linked to it. In a context where the German state does not, or may not, recognise the interviewees as ethnic Germans and thus as *Aussiedler*, Latvia/Estonia plays a central role in the construction of their self-understanding. Emblematically, Kārlis speaks of the Baltic Germans as “those who commit to Latvia”. To summarise: the role played by Germany in the definition of Baltic Germanness is much more complex than the role played by Estonia/Latvia. Even though the interviewees mostly hesitate whether to call Germany or Latvia/Estonia their ‘homeland’ (*Heimat*), they perceive Estonia/Latvia as the state to which they belong, whereas Germany shapes their narratives in other ways: as the repository of many memories (either from visits or from a period where the interviewees lived there); as the reference taken by Soviet authorities for the identification as ‘German’, which could have dramatic consequences⁷; as an area to which the interviewees feel permanently linked, through personal contacts (letters, phone calls, emails), material items (reception of books and newspapers, television) and collective initiatives (associations and parishes); as a linguistic area with which the interviewees identify; as an area of self- and hetero-projection, toward which migration is fantasised, stigmatised, considered or failed. Together with the constitutive rejection of Russia, this builds up a transnational space which is not only social (through the associative and personal contacts), but mental as well: the interviewees’ life stories are shaped by representations, expectations and perceptions of the state they live in (Latvia/Estonia), the state they used to live in (USSR), the one they now consider its equivalent (Russia) and the state they do not live in (Germany). Since transnational approaches rely on “the assumption that geographical and social space have become decoupled from each other” (Apitzsch and Siouti 2007, 18), it seems that, in the case of Latvia’s and Estonia’s Baltic Germans, the mental space comes in addition to these two other spaces and is indeed transnational: the interviewees make sense of a life that *could have been* lived in Germany, which blurs the traditional distinction between the “country of origin” and the “country of settlement”.

Re-building Collective Trajectories? Including and Excluding Patterns in Associative Practices

Both in LSSR and ESSR, the first ethnic associations were created in 1988 and gathered under so-called “nationalities’ forums” (founded in September 1988 in ESSR and December 1988 in LSSR), originally in relation with the popular fronts (*Rahvarinne* in ESSR and *Latvijas Tautas Fronte* in LSSR) which embodied the opposition to the Soviet regime. From that moment on, it became possible to gather people in the name of a specific ethnicity,

language or culture, and thus to experience the individual feeling of ethnic belonging at a collective level. Except for Maria, who came to Latvia later than that, all the interviewees took part in this movement, either as participants or as organisers. The purpose of the present section is to provide an insight into the ways the representations of Baltic Germanness sketched in the previous section are both embodied in and reshaped by this associative landscape.

The initiatives were local at first: in several cities, people started to gather as ethnic Germans, to initiate German language courses, to renovate German graves, to hold church services in German or to organise conferences on ‘Baltic German’ culture. Each group’s shape and purpose was dependent on the person(s) organising it, so that the associative landscape was split into many small organisations. However, it is possible to identify an evolution of this associative landscape in line with macro-level evolutions (independence, collapse of the USSR, citizenship and language laws). During the very first few years, conflicts arose between those who wanted associations dedicated to ethnic Germans and those who wanted to pass on German language and culture to anyone interested. The first ones were selective and required candidate members to provide documents proving their German ethnicity, following the Soviet categories, namely without differentiating between Baltic and Russian Germans. They provided language courses and their main concern was emigration toward Germany. The associations open to everyone were mostly founded by non-ethnic Germans in the first place and will be addressed below. Yet, as it became more and more difficult to emigrate toward Germany, the national contexts gained greater influence on the German associations: new kinds of conflicts arose regarding the language to be used within the associations. Following the logic of “nationalisation of the linguistic sphere” (Muiznieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka 2013, 294), the use of Russian was highly antagonising. The purpose was not that one should exclusively speak German in a German association (most of the members were there precisely to learn German), but that they should speak Latvian/Estonian instead of Russian, which most Russian Germans could not do. It is the reason why, Kārlis, for instance, who presided over a German association in Riga from 1989 onwards, decided to create in 1992 a new association only for those whom he perceived as Baltic Germans, namely those who spoke Latvian. The Russian Germans in turn, as non-citizens, soon had interests that were different from the Germans belonging to the pre-war minority, and founded an association for Russian Germans, *Wiedergeburt*, which was affiliated in the beginning to an association of the same name in Russia (Balaško, Krokša, and Dribins 2009, 75–131). Thus, the evolution of the associative landscape reified the opposition addressed above between the “traditional” and the “immigrant” minorities, and thus sharpened the relevance of a distinction (Baltic/Russian German) that was not decisive in the first place. So, the gathering of ethnic Germans through these associations might have had a great influence on how

each ethnic German perceived him/herself and the others, and it is likely that, if the interviews had been conducted in 1989 or 1990, the interviewees would *not* have primarily based the definition of their own ethnicity on the distinction between ‘Russian’ and ‘Baltic Germans’ and on the question of loyalty toward Estonia/Latvia, but rather on the relationship to Germany itself in the context of the *Aussiedler* policy.

Besides these internal conflicts, the associations also developed transnational connections with Baltic German associations in FRG, which had been created after the war by Baltic Germans who had emigrated in 1939/41, and were run by them and their descendants in the 1990s. Among these numerous associations, we will focus on the umbrella association on a federal level *Deutsch-Baltische Landsmannschaft im Bundesgebiet e.V.* (DBLiB)⁸ and the cultural association *Carl-Schirren-Gesellschaft e.V.* (CSG). Since, as addressed in the introduction, ‘Baltic Germans’ still living in Estonia and Latvia were not a valid category to the Baltic Germans from Germany, the first contacts in Estonia and Latvia at the end of the 1980s were made with associations passing on German culture and language, and not with associations gathering ethnic Germans. A Latvian-Baltic German association was even created in 1992 in Riga at the initiative of Latvians and the CSG. Kārlis makes the following significant statement about it: “It was where Latvians met Baltic Germans [from Germany], but a Baltic German from Latvia wouldn’t belong to this program.” Such cooperation aimed at rehabilitating the memory of Baltic German history in Estonia and Latvia⁹, which happened to match the local concern for re-writing their own history and overcoming the Soviet historical narrative.

However, even if ethnic Germans were not the main concern of the DBLiB at the beginning, it then engaged in cooperation with associations gathering ethnic Germans, distributing humanitarian aid through their networks and helping them get funds from the German Home Office, which supported ethnic Germans abroad (Balaško, Krokša, and Dribins 2009, 79). By providing help, the DBLiB was in a dominant position and had influence on Latvia’s and Estonia’s German associations. It put forward the cultural aspect, while rejecting the ethnic one. For instance, the former president of a German association in Latvia reports the following: “[The president of the DBLiB] made an appointment with me and [...] told me: ‘If the associations are not made accessible to anyone interested in German culture, the Germans won’t give any money anymore.’” This is emblematic of the misunderstandings between the German and the Latvian/Estonian sides (Dauchert 2008, 154–62). Ethnicity was the reason why many of the associations were created in Latvia and Estonia in the first place, because affirmation of ethnicity was experienced as an act of freedom after the coercive Soviet homogenisation. Yet, for obvious historical reasons, it was not possible for German funders to support associations that were ethnically selective or claimed any kind of strong German ethnicity, that is why the DBLiB urged the Latvian and Estonian associations

to be less “exclusive”. However, cultural associations proved to be no less exclusive, inasmuch as they take up a normative narrative on Baltic Germanness, focusing on the former German speaking elite of Estonia and Latvia. They target people with a higher education interested in history rather than ethnic Germans who, like Gudrun, have been simple workers all their lives and do not define Baltic Germanness the same way.

Conclusion

The biographies analysed in the present article show how ethnicity gradually became a central concern to the interviewees in the course of their lives. They or their parents did not belong, in a strong sense, to any defined ethnic group before 1939. Their lives were anchored in a series of linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics that shaped hybrid, multiple potential belongings. The events of the war made them make decisions that distanced them from the Baltic German collective trajectory of the majority. Yet, during the decades following the war, most of them developed a stronger relationship with Germany because of their family members living there. The violence experienced during that period of time, interpreted by the interviewees as discriminations due to their Germanness, mostly made them hide the fact that they spoke German or had contacts with Germans. Under those circumstances, the nationalities’ forums in 1988 were created and the first German associations appeared as spaces of freedom. Most of the interviews describe that moment as a “relief”, when they could at last accept who they then felt they were: Germans. The tense ethnic context in independent Estonia and Latvia probably had a great influence on the sharpening of this self-identification into a more precise one: Baltic Germanness. Each interviewee then developed very individual definitions of what it meant to be a “Baltic German” in present-day Estonia or Latvia, which appear as “creative acts” of engagement with “in-between spaces” (Yildiz 2013, 150) aimed at positioning oneself in a social environment while making sense of the personal life trajectory. Thus, experiences of ethnic ascription or of forced “choice” between possible belongings made them develop a discourse based on hybridisation and shaped by a transnational space, both in a mental and in practical sense.

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Endnotes

- 1 In German: *Balten, Deutschbalten, Baltendeutsche*.
- 2 Following the distinction theorised by Brubaker (2006, 7–27).
- 3 The names refer to the interviews analysed below, see figure 1.
- 4 88% if one considers the limits of the contemporary Estonian territory (Muiznieks, Rozenvalds, and Birka 2013, 290).
- 5 The migration of ethnic Germans from other parts of the Soviet Union through the Baltic republics toward Germany during and after Soviet time is a phenomenon that has not been studied per se yet, but the emigration files (fonds n°3556) toward Germany at the *Personāla dokumentu Valsts arhīvs* (Latvian State Archive of Personnel Files) in Riga allow drawing a much less simplistic picture of the ‘Russian German’ trajectories in Latvia.
- 6 The applications to emigration as *Aussiedler* were collected in the *Spätaussiedlerkartei* in Friedland (Germany).
- 7 Ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union were the target of large deportation actions at the beginning of World War II (Polian 2004, 123–40), but also of smaller actions like in Riga in February 1945 (Riekstiņš 2007) and in Estonia in August 1945 (Rahi-Tamm 2005). The question whether specific discrimination toward ethnic Germans existed after the deportations has not been much studied yet, but the feeling of having been discriminated because of their Germanness is recurrent in the interviews.
- 8 The DBLiB changed its name into „*Deutsch-Baltische Gesellschaft e.V.*“ in 2006.
- 9 See for example the translation of *Die Deutsch-Balten* (Taube and Thomson 1973) into Latvian and Estonian in 1993.