TITLE: BORDERLAND FAMILIES AND AGRARIAN REFORM: THE CASE OF THE RUSSIAN BALTIC PROVINCES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

AUTHOR: ANDREJS PLAKANS, Iowa State University

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
PROJECT INFORMATION:

CONTRACTOR: Iowa State University

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Andrejs Plakans and Charles Wetherell

COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 810-23

DATE: October 23, 1996

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

Individual researchers retain the copyright on work products derived from research funded by Council Contract. The Council and the U.S. Government have the right to duplicate written reports and other materials submitted under Council Contract and to distribute such copies within the Council and U.S. Government for their own use, and to draw upon such reports and materials for their own studies; but the Council and U.S. Government do not have the right to distribute, or make such reports and materials available, outside the Council or U.S. Government without the written consent of the authors, except as may be required under the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 5 U.S.C. 552, or other applicable law.

1 The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).
BORDERLAND FAMILIES AND AGRARIAN REFORM: 
The Case of the Russian Baltic Provinces in the Nineteenth Century

ANDREJS PLAKANS
Department of History, Iowa State University

ABSTRACT
In the new states created in Eastern Europe after World War I, there was a systematic effort to minimize the importance of pre-war borders in order to stress national unity in the present. Yet in order to understand the socio-demographic patterns of the area’s nineteenth-century populations, borders that historically divided subsequently unified populations have to be taken seriously. In the pre-World War I period the borders of the Russian Baltic provinces (Estonia, Livonia, Courland) reflected historical political decisions rather than linguistically or ethnographically defined communities. There were also social borders, insofar as the provincial populations were allocated to rigidly defined corporate entities called "estates" in English and Stände in German. These political and social borders created a filter through which reforms of various kinds passed before they began to affect the lives of rural peoples. Thus nineteenth-century agrarian reforms were implemented in the three Baltic provinces at somewhat different times, thus changing the expectations of different generations. Moreover, reforms in the Baltic provinces proper did not touch linguistically related populations residing just beyond the Baltic borders. About a fifth of the Latvian-speaking peasantry, for example, resided not in the Baltic provinces proper but in districts in Vitebsk province adjoining Livonia. Whereas in the Baltic provinces emancipation of serfdom took place in the 1816-1819 period, in the Vitebsk districts emancipation did not occur until 1861. Similarly, the right to buy holdings was implemented differently in the different Latvian-language regions. Any analysis of patterns of socio-demographic change must be sensitive to these border question, and must not project consciousness of unity into the past.

Introduction

The new post-World War I states in Eastern Europe not only made international politics more complicated but also threw a veil over the past of the territories they now occupied. New borders were fixed by treaty, but that was thought insufficient for their internal legitimization. Old borders now had to be shown as having been of little consequence in the past, even though in some cases they had separated a new state's current inhabitants for a century or more. Thus new national histories were written on the premise that the core inhabitants of these new states had always been a single entity, if in no other than a spiritual sense, with statehood being portrayed as inevitable. A systematic examination of pre-state diversity and the borders that may have created it was one casualty of this premise, and another was the accurate presentation of statistical data from the national past. Historical borders were continually violated in tables that extracted from their past counterparts only that information that was pertinent to the populations included in the post-WW I state territory. In dealing with culturally and linguistically heterogeneous areas of Eastern Europe
historians have had to work doubly hard to reconstruct historical borders as such so that their relevance could be investigated.

These seemingly inevitable byproducts of the state-building process produced different outcomes in different parts of the European east, of course. In the present paper, I deal with only one corner of that region—the three so-called “Baltic Provinces” of the Russian Empire—where incorporation of the border problem into descriptions of socio-demographic change seems particularly apt. Here in the nineteenth century borders with different meanings criss-crossed the territory and its population, rendering all generalizations highly suspect. There were, first, the political borders, which separated the province of Estonia (Russ. Estlandskaia guberna; Ger. Estland) from the province of Livonia (Russ. Lieflandskaia guberna; Ger. Livland), and both of these from the province of Courland (Russ. Kurlandskaia guberna; Ger. Kurland). Second, there were linguistic borders which, in the case of Livonia divided the province roughly in half into a primarily Estonian- and primarily Latvian-speaking part. Third, there were the ethnographic borders, which marked not only the Estonian-Latvian division of Livonia but also the inclusion into a Latvian ethnographic zone of four districts of the adjoining non-Baltic province of Vitebsk (Dvinsk, Rezhitsa, Ludza, Drisa—collectively referred to as Latgale). Fourth, there were the socio-political borders created by official registration of the entire population by social orders (Ger. Stände), which divided nobles from burghers, burghers from state functionaries, all these groups from resident peasants, and resident peasants from “foreigners.” And, fifth, there were the borders created by differing religious faiths. Though most of the Baltic-area inhabitants were Lutherans, each province had its own consistory; and, in addition, in the Latvian ethnographic area, there were important subpopulations of Roman Catholics (particularly in Latgale), Russian Orthodox, and, in Courland, Jews. Beyond these vertical and horizontal, and official, borders, there were unofficial ones that appeared frequently in common speech. All these borders should be assumed to have shaped the lives of the region’s inhabitants until 1918, when the post-war states of Estonia and Latvia established not only new territorial borders but also abolished the society of social orders through new relatively egalitarian constitutions and codes of law.

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the existing borders—both civil and social—perpetuated a grid of niches, each containing population clusters within which there took place what Susan Watkins refers to as “face-to-face interactions among members of the same small community.” Watkins has argued persuasively that in the twentieth century the formation of new states in effect has nationalized demographic patterns—that residents of a single state are now, in the aggregate, more like each other than they are like members of other states—and that the consolidation of states as language communities played an important role in producing this outcome. Correspondingly, diversity of patterns was the norm before this nationalization process began. Her argument seems descriptive of the long-term Baltic experience, but leaves us with three questions:
first, how to define "community" in the Baltic area so that the result will be the unit of analysis most relevant to a contextual understanding of family life and changes in it?; second, how would those changes -- such as agrarian reforms -- that were most likely to affect and alter family life reach the relevant communities?; and, third, how should provincial-level statistics be read in light of what is known about sub-provincial populations and their differing behaviors? These are historiographical questions, but they need answers before analysis of empirical data can proceed.

**Baltic Particularism**

Throughout the nineteenth century, no subpopulation in the Baltic area was immune to particularistic self-identification. Even the dominant regional political elite -- the Baltic German landowning nobility -- which normally articulated its interests vis-a-vis the Russian crown as a more or less unified collective, defined itself locally not only with reference to its *Stand* designation (thus separating themselves from the German-speaking urban population) and language (thus separating themselves from the Latvian- and Estonian-speaking peasantry), but also in terms of regional registers that sustained four separate corporations of the nobility (the Estland, Kurland, Livland, and Ösel Ritterschaften) as well as four separate sets of provincial government institutions. For the peasantry, their *Stand* (*Bauernstand*), language, and religion were also significant, but as important were the boundaries of the landed estates that until the third quarter of the century defined for most peasants the geographic areas within which they could move and marry freely. News of modifications of provincial-level law did not reach the peasantry quickly or directly but through the filter of local estate and clerical personnel, who often deliberately withheld "news" of change because they feared its consequences.

Even this abbreviated description makes obvious the challenges to any general statements about the population of the Baltic region in the nineteenth century. The historic borders, drawn by the differing historical experiences of the subregions, were facts of everyday life, and intrude on any attempt to apply to the region national-level grouping principles created by twentieth-century experience. We would be on safer ground if the effects of nineteenth-century borders had already been found to have been trivial, but little research effort has been spent in this direction because primary sources tend to encourage avoidance of the question. Virtually all statistical sources for the nineteenth century in the area do use the designator "nationality" (*Nationalität*) for cross-classification, implying some kind of similarity in people of the same "nationality" living in such different socio-economic units as landed estates. This language invites premature generalizations, e.g. the use of patterns among *Latvian* peasants in a particular estate as an example of patterns among *Latvian* peasants generally. How misleading such an approach is can be illustrated by looking carefully at the connections between family life and agrarian reforms, the latter of which were an important component of nineteenth-century history in all three Baltic provinces.
In earlier research dealing with nineteenth-century Baltic peasant family life in a single landed estate, it has been relatively easy to ignore the existence of provincial borders because the analyzed peasants seldom crossed estate, let alone provincial, boundaries. On the estates, peasants lived in a dispersed farmstead settlement pattern rather than in villages, and this, especially in large estates, created further internal borders that prevented the whole estate from being, for example, a marriage market (Heiratskreis). What we do know about Latvian peasant families from studies of a particular estate can be assumed about other estates only with great care, because estates themselves differed with respect to size, ownership, and internal regulations. The household lists (soul revisions) in the first half of the century show that in many estate populations the developmental cycle of the family of a farmstead head could at times contain phases of complexity, as married sons brought their wives into the father’s farmstead, raised their children there, and, as the parental couple, continued to live in the farmstead when one of the married sons took over as head. How frequently this happened and what degree of complexity resulted depended upon the composition of the offspring groups and the workings of mortality. Furthermore, age at first marriage among these peasants was relatively high—in the mid-twenties for women and late twenties for men—and an appreciably high proportion of persons never married at all. This combination of traits—a strong tendency toward familial complexity, high marriage ages, and high proportion of persons remaining single—was not normally combined in pre-modern European peasantries, but it appears repeatedly in the estates housing the Latvian peasants of Courland and the Latvian and Estonian peasants of Livonia, during the period they were formally serfs and even after emancipation in between 1816-1820.

Sensitivity to the importance of borders brings up a further problem. Speaking only of the Latvian peasantry, we know that not all of them lived in the Baltic provinces proper. An informed estimate of the size of the end-of-the-eighteenth-century Latvian population in the adjacent territories, which in 1918 became the Latvian state, places 293,000 persons in Southern Livonia, 390,000 persons in Courland, and 190,000 persons in Latgale, the three districts in Vitebsk province adjoining Livonia on the east. Of these numbers an estimated 85-90% were peasants. There were therefore three distinct Latvian peasant populations, and as soon as the eastern border of Livonia is crossed and the Latgale districts are entered, the basic patterns begin to change. Landed estates as well as peasant holdings tended to be smaller, peasants lived in hamlets and villages rather than in dispersed farmsteads, and marriage was early and nearly universal. The proportion of complex domestic groups tended to be lower here than in the western Latvian populations. If we were tempted to see the familial characteristic of the Courlandic and Livonian Latvian peasantry as typically Latvian, then we have to cope with the fact that the Estonian peasantry of Livonia shared most of these familial characteristics with their Latvian co-residents of Livonia, while the Latvian peasantry of Latgale shared only a few. Neither the outside nor the inside borders of the Baltic provinces demarcated populations in which “nationality” and familiar characteristics coincided absolutely.
Agrarian Reform in the Baltic Provinces and Latgale

The provincial borders mattered in another sense, however, in that they filtered changes the St. Petersburg government dictated for the region as a whole, and rendered unique those which each provincial nobility sought for the territory under its control. These changes created differing local environments to which rural families had to adapt their internal decisions, ways of life, and expectations, starting from the diverse patterns that already existed. In the nineteenth-century Baltic area, the most significant external changes in familial contexts were brought by a series of agrarian reforms, the first of which took place in 1804. In that year, the Livonian nobility promulgated a new peasant Law (*Bauernverordnung*) that applied to all peasants – Estonian and Latvian -- in the province. The intent of the new law was (1) to recognize peasants (who were all serfs) as persons rather than as property; (2) to fix labor norms; and (3) to prevent the adding of peasant land to the territories of the demesne. The new law by definition did not affect the everyday lives of the peasantry in Courland or in Latgale, however. In those territories the conditions of the last half of the eighteenth century continued in full force.

The next set of reforms came hard on the heels of Napoleonic period, when Czar Alexander I. inspired by his western involvements, placed pressure on the Baltic nobilities to emancipate the serfs under their control. The response was a set of three emancipation laws – 1816 in Estonia, 1817 in Courland, and 1819 in Livonia. Again, by definition, these laws did not affect the everyday lives of the peasants of Latgale, because Alexander declined to pursue emancipatory activities in the other Russian provinces. The Livonian and Courlandic laws were very similar – both, for example, granted to the peasantry personal freedom but no land -- which meant that from the early 1820s onward the family lives of the peasants of those two provinces unfolded within relatively similar legal contexts. But even then no identity of conditions can be assumed, due to the differing times these provinces had entered the Russian Empire. Livonia had been added to the Empire in 1710, as one of the prizes of the Russian victory over Sweden in the Great Northern War. From the time of Peter the Great, therefore, Livonia therefore had felt the presence of the Imperial government in a myriad ways, including a rapidly growing number of government-owned landed estates. Courland and Latgale, by contrast, had not become Imperial territory until 1795, as a result of the third partition of Poland, and government-owned estates in these areas were relatively few. Conditions on crown and private estates differed in many respects, such as the relative weight of obligatory labor, and permission for peasants to leave. The emancipation laws differed in their application in crown and private estates, interacting differently with different pre-existing conditions. Yet these provinces of Livonia and Estonia were more similar to each other than either or both were to Latgale, where the serfdom and its typical practices remained in force until 1861.

The next set of reforms came less than a generation after the 1816-1819 emancipations, the implementation of which in fact lasted until the early 1830s. In 1849 the Livonian nobility passed a
temporary reform measure that, among other things, permitted peasants to purchase the holdings they were working on the basis of labor rents. This law was made permanent in 1860 in Livonia, but it was not until 1863 that a ukase from the Tsar extended the same privileges to the peasantry of Courland. At the same time, in Latgale a two-fold reform was taking place. The Latgale peasantry were emancipated in the general Russian emancipation of 1861, but the land question here was dealt with differently than in the Baltic provinces proper. The Latgale peasants received land grants along with emancipation, though not in the form of individual holdings. The grants were made to communal entities, with which each peasant family had to deal concerning purchase, inheritance, and ultimate ownership.

These latter reforms had long-term consequences for the three areas, because for the next forty years the number of owner/ cultivator farms in all three continued to expand, though at a somewhat different pace in each. By 1905, 38.0% of all arable in Courland, 37.9% in Livonia, and 43.5% in the Latgale districts had been separated from landed estates and communes and were in the hands of peasant owners/ cultivators. Although in Latgale the incidence of individual ownership also showed a healthy increase, communal ownership there continued to predominate until the First World War. It should be noted, however, that the proportion of peasant families that did not own land remained high in Courland and Livonia (about 80% of all rural inhabitants in both provinces). By contrast, in the Latgale districts, where land grants had been made together with emancipation, the proportion of the outright landless was minuscule, but so was the average size of farmsteads. Over the century, therefore, the peasant families in the three areas had to adapt to changes that arrived at different times and had different forms, or, put another way, the generations that had different expectations were somewhat different in each, rendering the populations different when they entered the twentieth century. In Livonia and Courland, the farmstead heads and their families had emerged as the most important new layer of peasant society, and had retained their tendency to develop complex familial groups; whereas most peasant families either rented or earned their living as paid agricultural laborers and lived in simple family households. In the Latgale districts land had been distributed so generously and purchased so avidly as to make almost all peasants landed, but the holdings here were so small that complex family households were difficult to sustain and virtually all peasant families had to rely on non-agricultural incomes for survival.

The Meaning of Province-Level Statistics

While we can present a prima facie case to demonstrate that borders in the Baltic provinces resulted in a wide variety of differing local conditions to which family life had to adapt throughout the nineteenth century, direct evidence that these heterogeneous adaptations in turn produced significantly different demographic-familial behavior as measured at the provincial level remains at this moment fragmentary. The maps illustrating the findings of the Princeton European Fertility
Project do suggest that the Baltic was not all of a piece. Ansley Coale and his colleagues place the beginnings of a sustained decline of $I_g$ (index of marital fertility) in Courland in the 1860-1870 period, but in Livonia and Vitebsk (where Latgale was located) two decades later (1880-1890). In 1870 the value of $I_g$ was in the .460-.530 range in Courland, in the .670-740 range (two categories higher) in Livonia, and in the .880 and over (six categories higher than Courland) in Vitebsk. By 1900, the $I_g$ index in Courland and Livonia was in the same range (.530-.600), but in Vitebsk still stood three categories higher (.740-.810). The $I_f$ index (general fertility index) in 1870 was the same for both Courland and Livonia (.320-.365) but in Vitebsk stood four categories higher (.500-.545). In 1900, almost the same relationships (Courland and Livonia the same, Vitebsk three categories higher) obtained between the three areas but at lower levels of $I_f$. On the $I_m$ measure (index of marital status in relation to childbearing), Livonia stood in the lowest category (.450-.500), Courland next highest (.500-.550), and Vitebsk one step higher (.550-.600). We might add that in the all-Russian context, all the indices for the Baltic area tend to be lower than for most other provinces of European Russia, to the extent that Coale, Anderson, and Harm portray the Baltic Sea provinces (but not only the Baltic provinces proper) as the earliest to exhibit behaviors that led to a sustained fall in the relevant indices.

In light of what we have said earlier, some meanings of the Princeton province-level findings are obvious and other less so. By the end of the century, reforms and familial responses to them had made Livonia and Courland more similar on the cited measures, while Vitebsk (Latgale) continued to be out-of-step. Some possible explanations offer themselves for this trend. In Courland and Livonia farmstead heads had to become more calculating after emancipation because of the new regime of labor rents, and, included in these calculations was the fact that the headships (and the farmsteads) could be bequeathed to only one heir. Under these circumstances, marriage and many children would not have seemed as attractive to the subpopulation of heads. For the farmhands, whose designation in local parlance as gajeji (those who move) describes their manner of life, early marriage and many children was by force of circumstance not an option, nor was the accumulation in the same domestic group of married relatives and elderly parents. In these provinces shortages of farmsteads (in the pre-1860 period) and continued shortages of salable land in the second half of the century continued to enlarge that proportion of the population in which the small (and mobile nuclear family) was the best adaptation. One historian of the Latvian population has hazarded the guess that the possibility as such of purchasing one’s farmstead after the 1860s may also have reduced the desire for large families. Since mortality rates in the Baltic provinces were falling in the second half of the nineteenth century and there was greater expectation of children surviving into adulthood, additional children would have been weighed against the costs of twenty- to-thirty year mortgages, which the purchase of a farmstead entailed. In this reasoning, the adaptation to their differing circumstances for
both the landed and the landless in Courland and Livonia was to marry later and to reduce family size.

By contrast, in the Latgale districts of Vitebsk, the circumstances were quite different from the beginning of the century to its end. The patriarchal regime of landed estates continued until 1861, and emancipation came with grants of land. Throughout the century holdings were smaller than in the western provinces, and residential patterns (hamlets and villages rather than the dispersed farmstead system) permitted residential propinquity (rather than coresidence) among married relatives and among parental and married children's generations. These conditions did not require either later marriage nor reduction in the numbers of children. There was, moreover, a major difference in the dominant religions of the two areas. The Courlandic and Livonian countryside was almost entirely Lutheran, whereas the Latvian districts of Latgale almost entirely Roman Catholic. Differing religious imperatives may have played a role in sustaining demographic differences in the two areas even after all Latvian-speakers had become "free" peasants, and all had the possibility to purchasing holdings.

Conclusion

Though relatively small, the Baltic provinces in the nineteenth century were not the natural analytical units for the best understanding of family life and its changes. Their external and internal political orders hid other kinds of borders that may have created subpopulations more germane to analysis of diversity at the familial level. But the most important of these sub-provincial borders were not necessarily those which demarcated "nationalities," although it is precisely these that came to be used to organize historical explanations after the Baltic area was redefined as the states of Estonia and Latvia. Even in so small a corner of eastern Europe as the Baltic, the full significance of the border concept for historical understanding has yet to be exhausted.

ENDNOTES


2. This was the main theme of Latvian nationalism from its first decades (1850 and 1860s) onward. See Andrejs Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), pp. 91-95.

3. In the Latvian case, this habit began immediately after the founding of the state in 1918 (see M. Skujeneeks, Latvija - zeme un iedz veta\ji (Riga: Valsts statistikas parvalde, 1922) and has lasted into the period of renewed independence (see P. Zvidrins and I. Vanovska, Latvies\i: statistiki demogra\ffiks protrete\jums [The Latvians: A Statistical Demographic Potrait] (Riga: Zinatne, 1992).
4. The classic work on the ethnographic borders of the Latvian population – August Bielenstein, *Die Grenzen des lettischen Volkstammes und der der lettischen Sprache in der Gegenwart und im 13. Jahrhundert* (St. Petersburg, 1892) -- was used to set the external borders of the Latvian state in the negotiations of the 1918-1920 period.


7. In the primary sources, the use of the term *Nationalität* in reference to Latvians changed in the course of the century from an external designator of what was primarily a language community to one that pointed to a Baltic subpopulation in which the consciousness of nationality was becoming widespread. There is no convincing evidence that even by the end of the century all persons in the Baltic area whose primary tongue was Latvian thought of themselves as *Latvians* in the sense the nationalists used that term.


