

LATVIAN-ESTONIAN CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTACTS, 1900–1914

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This article focuses on cultural and political contacts between Latvians and Estonians in the Baltic Provinces during the waning years of the tsarist Russian empire. For background, it briefly treats factors that worked against close ties between the two ethnic groups in previous centuries, and it provides an overview of the demographic situation at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Education, belletristic literature, and music are considered as venues for cultural contacts. In the political realm the article looks at the common experience in the Revolution of 1905, participation in the State Duma, and involvement in the municipal government of the border city of Valga/Valka.

The historiography of the Baltic Provinces in the late tsarist era remains overwhelmingly compartmentalized by ethnic group, focusing on Baltic Germans, Latvians, or Estonians in isolation from each other. Those cross-nationality studies that do exist nearly all draw a line between the northern and southern halves of the three provinces and concentrate on relations between the dominant Baltic German elites, on the one hand, and the rising Estonian or Latvian majorities, on the other. Strikingly little work has been done on the interaction between the two largest ethnic groups in the region, to the detriment of our understanding of the complexity of Baltic – and Estonian and Latvian – history. In view of their similar historical experience since the German invasion of the thirteenth century and their close proximity, including a long and porous ethnic border through the middle of the “core province” (Ger. *Kernprovinz*) of Livland, it would seem that a closer look at relations between the Latvians and Estonians on the eve of the Russian Revolution is in order. Recognizing that it can only broach the topic in a preliminary way, this article will focus on cultural and political contacts between these two nationalities in the last decade and a half before the World War I.

In order to place this topic in proper perspective it would be useful, however, to begin with a brief discussion of factors that inhibited interaction between Estonians and Latvians in this period. Probably most important in this regard was the absence of any ethnic or linguistic connection between the two nationalities,

particularly in an era of growing nationalism. In the second half of the nineteenth century the Estonians turned above all to the Finns as a “kindred people” (Est. *hõimurahvas*) who had developed from the same cultural and linguistic base and with whom it was relatively easy to communicate.¹ For their part the Latvians looked to their related southern neighbors, the Lithuanians, as expressed, for example, by Atis Kronvalds in his call for a Latvian–Lithuanian rapprochement to the point of perhaps forming a single nationality.² It was precisely the absence of this kind of ethnic tie that militated against the development of close relations between Latvian and Estonian intellectuals. Furthermore, the attraction of an Estonian or Latvian connection for members of the other nationality was substantially diminished by the equally low status of the other ethnic group, although it can be argued that this situation began to change by the last decades of the tsarist regime and especially after the Revolution of 1905. Nevertheless, it was characteristic that even in the early twentieth century many educated Estonians and Latvians continued to assimilate into the German or Russian cultural worlds.

A second factor that dampened the enthusiasm for a tight Latvian–Estonian connection might be termed the burden of historical memory. For reasons that probably defy any close scientific analysis the mutual perception of the two nationalities at the end of the nineteenth century was far from positive. At mid-century, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, the grand old man of Estonian letters, wrote of an “inherited national antagonism” between Estonians and Latvians,³ and there are numerous indications on both sides that popular attitudes remained largely negative at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ The most often mentioned causal factor in shaping these views was a difference in interpretation of how the two ethnic groups reacted to the German invasion of the early thirteenth century. Although the facts of the situation were lost in the mists of time, there was mutual recrimination about who was most responsible for the defeat at the hands of the invaders – and thus for centuries of foreign rule. It is obviously not possible to document the beginnings of such attitudes, but it is safe to say that they were not of recent origin.

The ethnic border between Latvians and Estonians – and their Baltic and Balto-Finnic ancestors – showed substantial mutability in earlier centuries. Linguistic evidence suggests that Balto-Finnic and Estonian settlement extended well into modern-day northern and eastern Latvia in the first millennium AD, but the general outlines of the current language border were already in place by the beginning of

¹ See, for example, **Raun, T. U.** Die Rolle Finnlands für das national Erwachen der Esten. – *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung*, 1985, 34, 4, pp. 568–578.

² **Pukits, M.** *Läti kultuurilugu*. Tartu, 1937, p. 43.

³ F. R. Kreutzwald to P. Koeppen, October 21, 1849. *Fr. R. Kreutzwaldi kirjavahetus*, 6 vols. Tallinn, 1953–1979, I, p. 467.

⁴ **Grünthal, V.** Eesti asundused lätlaste seas. – *Eesti Kirjandus*, 1911, 6, pp. 321, 326; **Wuolijoki, H.** *Koulutyttöinä Tartossa vuosina 1901–1904*. Helsinki, 1972, pp. 27–28; *Eestlased ja lätlased*. – *Päevaleht*, 1913, 19. aug.

the historical era at the start of the thirteenth century.⁵ Nevertheless, the Estonian–Latvian frontier was not a rigid dividing line, but quite permeable, especially since there were no particular natural barriers to movement and the same political sovereign ruled on both sides of the ethnic border during nearly all of the period between 1200 and 1900. Assimilation of individuals or small groups took place easily, but some “language islands” such as the Leivu Estonians of northeastern Vidzeme, who were most likely age-old inhabitants of the region, and the Lutsi (Lat. Ludza) Estonians of the Latgale region, who probably migrated to the area in the seventeenth century, preserved their existence into the twentieth century.⁶

Turning now more specifically to the demographic situation at the beginning of the twentieth century, we can make use of the 1897 all-Russian census for a concise overview, although any tsarist era population count should not be utilized uncritically.⁷ If Livland is divided along ethnic lines with the five northern districts allotted to the Estonian region and the four southern ones to the Latvian area, the following picture emerges. There were 5,470 Latvians (0.6 percent of the total population) in the northern half of the Baltic Provinces, and 17,379 Estonians (1.2 percent of the total population) in the southern half. The main reasons for this disparity in numbers were the strong drawing power of the metropolis of Riga and the fact that Valka/Valga – with its mixed Latvian–Estonian population – was located on the Latvian side of the administrative border. Neither Estland for the Latvians nor Kurland for the Estonians held any particular attraction; in both cases they comprised only 0.1 percent of the respective province’s population in 1897. Similarly, the major provincial centers of Tallinn and Liepāja managed to pull in only a slightly higher rate of members of the other nationality (0.4 percent in each case).⁸

In the rural areas in the middle of Livland there was a notable Latvian population in the Võru district on the Estonian side of the ethnic border and even larger Estonian population in the Valka and Valmiera districts on the Latvian side.⁹ In Riga the Estonian numbers, mainly members of the working class, nearly doubled from 3,523 in 1897 to 6,721 in 1913, but the proportion of the total

⁵ Vaba, L. *Uurimusi läti-eesti keelesuhestest*. Tallinn, 1997, pp. 28–29; Zeps, V. J. *Latvian and Finnic Linguistic Convergences*. Bloomington, Ind., 1962, pp. 42–43.

⁶ Vaba, L. *Uurimusi läti-eesti keelesuhestest*, pp. 30, 33, 39–40; Ariste, P. *Ühest keelekontakti juhust*. – *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1962, 5, 550.

⁷ On this issue, see Raun, T. U. Social change in Estland and northern Livland, 1871–1897: The limits and uses of census data. – In: *Bevölkerungsverschiebungen und sozialer Wandel in den baltischen Provinzen Russlands 1850–1914*. Eds. G. von Pistohlkors, A. Plakans, and P. Kaegbein. Lüneburg, 1995, pp. 85–88.

⁸ *Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской империи, 1897 г.*, 89 vols. Ed. Н. А. Тройницкий. Санкт-Петербург, 1899–1905, XIX, pp. 78–81; XXI, pp. 78–81; XLIX, pp. 42–43.

⁹ For a recent overview of an Estonian community on the Latvian side of the ethnic border, see Cimermanis, S. Igaunī Vecsalacā 19./20. gs. mijā. – *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, 1993, 6, pp. 23–26.

population remained steady at 1.4 percent.¹⁰ As a point of contact, arguably the most interesting environment was provided by the border town of Valka/Valga since it contained substantial numbers of both Latvians and Estonians throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The total population of the city nearly quadrupled from 4,115 in 1881 to 16,164 in 1913.¹¹ The following figures provide an overview of the changing ethnic composition of Valga/Valka (in percentages).¹²

Year	Estonians	Latvians	Germans	Russians
1867	20.7	37.3	31.6	8.5
1881	23.3	38.2	24.8	7.4
1897	32.9	40.7	10.4	11.1
1913	51.3	c. 25	4.0	15.5

There was considerable debate in Latvian and Estonian public opinion about the significance of the trend toward a more dominant Estonian presence in Valga/Valka. Although some Latvian observers saw this as evidence of greater Estonian socioeconomic strength, the more persuasive explanation is that the powerful lure of Riga, in which the Latvian population was nearing 200,000 by 1913, continued to siphon off potential Latvian immigrants to a small border town.¹³ Overall, it must be concluded that the Estonians and Latvians, despite their proximity in the Baltic Provinces, lived relatively segregated from one another at the end of the tsarist era.

Let us now turn to the issue of Latvian–Estonian cultural contacts. One of the most important vehicles for cultural interaction between the two nationalities was their attendance at various educational institutions in the Baltic Provinces, most notably Tartu University. Although only a small elite was able to attend universities or training institutions for teachers or clergy, the numbers of Estonian and Latvian students gradually increased in the second half of the nineteenth century and grew especially rapidly in the years before World War I. Although exact figures are not available, it is striking that the number of Estonians at Tartu University more than quintupled in the period 1900–1914, and the number of Latvians also increased significantly compared to the level of previous decades.¹⁴ By 1914, students from

¹⁰ *Rīga 1860–1917*. Riga, 1978, pp. 22–23.

¹¹ **Pullat, R.** *Eesti linnad ja linlased XVIII sajandi lõpust 1917. aastani*. Tallinn, 1972, p. 37.

¹² *Valgamaa: maateaduslik, tulunduslik ja ajalooline kirjeldus*. Tartu, 1932, p. 562; **Pullat, R.** *Eesti linnad ja linlased*, p. 60.

¹³ *Valgamaa*, pp. 564–565; **Juhanson, E.** *Eesti–Läti vahekorra*. – *Vaba Sõna*, 1915, 2, 38–39; *Eestlased ja lätlased*. – *Päevaleht*, 1913, 19. aug.

¹⁴ **Raun, T. U.** *The role of Tartu University in Estonian society and culture, 1860–1914*. – In: *Die Universitäten Dorpat/Tartu, Riga und Wilna/Vilnius 1579–1979*. Eds. G. von Pistohlkors, T. U. Raun, and P. Kaegbein. Cologne, 1987, p. 125; **Viksna, A.** *Tērbatas universitāte un mēs*. – *Karogs*, 1982, 11, 151.

the Baltic Provinces – overwhelmingly Latvians and Estonians at this time – constituted 40.7 percent of the total student body at Tartu University.¹⁵ Thus, the opportunity for contact was increasingly available, and in the freer atmosphere of the post-1905 era, witnessing the formation of numerous new Estonian and Latvian student organizations, it was also increasingly likely.¹⁶

Although it was much less significant in terms of numbers, a second institution of higher learning in the Baltic Provinces that fostered contacts among the two nationalities was the Riga Polytechnical Institute, founded in 1862. If in earlier decades many Latvian and Estonian students had joined German fraternities and usually became Germanized, by the end of the nineteenth century student organizations such as the Latvian Selonia (certified by the authorities in 1897) and the Estonian Vironia (certified in 1900) provided each other with mutual support and maintained close contacts in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Finally, it should not be forgotten that Estonian and Latvian university students also had increasing opportunities for interaction at the many institutions of higher education in other cities in the Russian Empire, especially St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Below the university level there were other educational institutions in the Baltic Provinces that brought Latvians and Estonians together. For example, the Baltic Teachers' Seminar, established in Riga in 1870 and located in Kuldīga in the period 1886–1915, catered mainly to Latvians (75.4 percent of all graduates), but also to Estonians (11.2 percent), although the Estonian presence was most noteworthy in the decades before 1900.¹⁸ Similarly, on the Estonian side of the ethnic border the Tartu Teachers' Seminar, founded in 1828, served an overwhelmingly Estonian student body in the last decades before World War I, but also had some Latvians among its graduates.¹⁹ For the Estonians a particularly significant institution was the Riga Orthodox Seminary, established in 1846 during the time of the conversion movement to Orthodoxy among Latvian and Estonian peasants in Livland.²⁰ Among its students were the future interwar president of Estonia, Konstantin Päts, and the future foreign minister Jaan Poska. Overall, 638 Estonians attended the Riga seminary and 270 of them finished the entire course of study. Since this institution's guidelines called for equal numbers of Latvians, Estonians, and Russians as students, it formed another important

¹⁵ **Sepp, H.** Üliõpilaskond Tartu vene ülikoolis. – In: *Tartu üliõpilaskonna ajalugu seoses eesti üliõpilaskonna ajalooga*. Ed. J. Vasar. Tartu, 1932, pp. 61, 63.

¹⁶ **Raun, T. U.** Role of Tartu University, p. 134; **Sepp, H.** Üliõpilaskond, pp. 80–81.

¹⁷ **Ehrlich, E.** Eesti üliõpilased Riias. – In: *Tartu üliõpilaskonna ajalugu seoses eesti üliõpilaskonna ajalooga*. Ed. J. Vasar. Tartu, 1932, pp. 145–149.

¹⁸ **Tomäss, Ed.** Semināra audzēkņi. – In: *Baltijas skolotāju seminārs 1870–1919*. Ed. Tomäss, Ed. Riga, 1940, p. 167, 171.

¹⁹ *Tartu Õpetajate Seminar 1828–1928*. Tartu, 1929, p. 152.

²⁰ During the years 1845–1848, 65,683 Estonians and 40,497 Latvians converted to Orthodoxy in the province of Livland. No analogous movements occurred in Estland or Kurland. See **Kruus, H.** *Talurahva käärimine Lõuna-Eestis XIX sajandi 40-ndail aastail*. Tartu, 1930, 400n.

contact point for the youth of the two major Baltic nationalities.²¹ Although no doubt intended as a means to integrate the Baltic natives into Russian culture, the seminary's teaching staff included numerous Estonians and Latvians, and it was the only secondary school in the Baltic Provinces in the Russification era before 1905 that taught Latvian and Estonian as subjects. Despite its ostensible focus on producing future members of the clergy, the seminary also served as an important training ground for further secular education at the university level, especially after 1905 when graduates of Orthodox seminaries could move directly into institutions of higher learning in the Russian Empire.²²

Another key venue for Estonian–Latvian cultural contact was belletristic literature, particularly in view of the high literacy rates prevailing among both nationalities.²³ Translation of each other's literary works gradually increased from the mid-nineteenth century, and especially picked up speed in the early twentieth century. For example, in the years 1901–1917, 20 Latvian prose and dramatic works were published in Estonian translation in book form, ranking Latvian tied for seventh (with Norwegian) behind German, Russian, English, French, Finnish, and Danish (in that order), but ahead of Swedish or Hungarian.²⁴ Much more numerous than books were translations of shorter works that appeared in newspapers (often in serialized form), journals, and calendars.²⁵ It is noteworthy that the volume of translation from Latvian to Estonian was greater than from Estonian to Latvian.²⁶ Access to translations, of course, depended on the availability of translators. On the Estonian side, one of the most prolific was Mart Pukits, who also published an important overview of Latvian literature in *Eesti Kirjandus* in 1911. On the Latvian side, a major translator was Lapas Mārtiņš (Märt Lapp in Estonian), of mixed Latvian–Estonian background from the Valka district.²⁷ A second type of contact in the literary world was on the personal level among authors. For example, the leading Estonian writers Eduard Vilde and August Kitzberg both spent considerable time in Riga in the 1890s, and Vilde worked with

²¹ **Raudsepp, A.** Riia Vaimulik Seminar (1846–1918) eesti rahvusliku akadeemilise haritlaskonna kujunemises. – *Kleio*, 1996, 2, 24–26.

²² **Paavel, J.** Õppeaastad Riia vaimulikus seminaris. – In: *K. Päts: Tema elu ja töö – kaasaegsete mälestusi*. Tallinn, 1934, pp. 27–28; **Raudsepp, A.** Riia Vaimulik Seminar, pp. 25–26.

²³ In 1897, for the population 10 years of age and older, 96.1 percent of the Estonians and 91.1 percent of the Latvians in the Baltic Provinces could read. **Raun, T. U.** Cultural Russification in Lithuania and the Baltic Provinces in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Comparative perspectives. – *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised. Humanitaar- ja Sotsiaalteadused*, 1994, 43, 3, 241.

²⁴ *Eestikeelne raamat 1901–1917*. Ed. E. Anus. Tallinn, 1993, pp. 1005–1007.

²⁵ **Linde, B.** Läti kirjandus eestikeelseis tõlkeis. – In: *Läti*. Eds. B. Linde et al. Tallinn, 1934, pp. 98–104; **Исаков С. Г.** Сквозь годы и расстояния: Из истории культурных связей Эстонии с Украиной, Грузией и Латвией в XIX–начале XX века. Таллинн, 1969, p. 232.

²⁶ **Исаков С. Г.** Сквозь годы, p. 243.

²⁷ **Pukits, M.** Pilk läti kirjandusse. – *Eesti Kirjandus*, 1911, 6, 10–25; **Ziedonis, A.** *A Study of Rüdolfs Blaumanis*. Hamburg, 1979, pp. 18–19; **Исаков С. Г.** Сквозь годы, pp. 195–196.

the Latvian writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis on the staff of the newspaper *Zeitung für Stadt und Land*. Ironically, the forced emigration of Baltic writers after the defeat of the Revolution of 1905 also afforded new opportunities for personal contact, e.g., Eduard Vilde and Jānis Rainis in Switzerland, and Friedebert Tuglas and Kārlis Skalbe in Helsinki.²⁸

A final arena of cultural contact that can be mentioned is music. For many leading Estonian and Latvian musical figures the common alma mater was the St. Petersburg Conservatory, e.g., Mart Saar, Rudolf Tobias, and Heino Eller, among the Estonians, and Jāzeps Vītols, Emilis Melngailis, and Alfrēds Kalniņš, among the Latvians.²⁹ As in other fields of higher education, the Latvian and Estonian involvement in professional musical training increased markedly in the decade and a half before World War I. Drawing on the same German and Baltic German sources for inspiration, the Estonians and Latvians shared a parallel song festival tradition that began during their respective national awakenings. There were six Estonian national song festivals in the period 1869–1894 and four Latvian ones in the years 1873–1895. However, in the first decade of the twentieth century, this tradition was stymied by political reaction at the central government level, which feared the impact of such mass gatherings, as well as disagreements among the Baltic natives themselves. Only in June 1910 were the last national song festivals of the tsarist era in both cases able to take place. Nevertheless, they were considerably publicized and reported on in the press of the other nationality.³⁰

In the prevailing context of reaction in the Russian Empire in the years before 1905, Latvian and Estonian political contacts were perforce limited. The tsarist authorities kept a close eye on alleged separatist tendencies, and the only political parties that were formed on the very eve of 1905 were socialist and underground. However, although it ultimately failed in its goal of overthrowing the autocracy, the revolution of that year had a lasting impact on political and social thought in the Baltic Provinces, and its activizing legacy survived even the ensuing reactionary period. At the same time it created unprecedented opportunities for political contacts among the Latvians and Estonians.³¹ Although the course of the revolution was more violent and destructive in the Latvian areas than in the Estonian ones, it is not coincidental that the same basic goals – cultural and political autonomy – emerged in both halves of the Baltic Provinces.³² In short, the

²⁸ Ziedonis, A. *A Study*, p. 361; *Eesti kirjarahva leksikon*. Toim. O. Kruus. Tallinn, 1995, p. 204; Kuningas, O. *Eesti-läti kirjandussuhete arengust läbi aegade*. – *Looming*, 1983, 9, 1206.

²⁹ Olt, H. *Estonian Music*. Tallinn, 1980, pp. 32–34; Pukits, M. *Läti kultuurilugu*, pp. 105–107.

³⁰ Šmidchens, G. *A Baltic music: The folklore movement in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, 1968–1991*. Unpublished PhD diss. Indiana University, 1996, p. 270; *Päevaleht*, 1910, 19., 21., 22. juuni; Pukits, M. *Läti kultuurilugu*, p. 107.

³¹ For a comparative overview of the revolution in the Baltic Provinces, see Raun, T. U. The revolution of 1905 in the Baltic Provinces and Finland. – *Slavic Review*, 1984, 43, 453–467.

³² Longworth, J. G. *The Latvian Congress of Rural Delegates in 1905*. New York, 1959, pp. 56–57n; Raun, T. U. 1905 as a turning point in Estonian history. – *East European Quarterly*, 1980, 14, 327–329.

fundamentally common experience of the movement for change brought the two nationalities closer together, including the first attempts at political cooperation, e.g., a meeting of Baltic political leaders in Tallinn at the end of April (New Style).³³

Although the tsarist regime ultimately managed to survive, it could not turn the clock back to the status quo ante, and in the freer atmosphere of the post-1905 era, Estonian and Latvian political contacts continued and developed further. In both halves of the Baltic Provinces the Latvian and Estonian press now reflected much greater awareness of the other nationality, and it seemed clear that any political solution to the problems of the day would have to take full account of the nationalities question in the Russian Empire as a whole.³⁴ An important vehicle for Estonian–Latvian cooperation was in the elections to and participation in the State Dumas. For example, in the elections to the first two Dumas from Livland, the Latvians and Estonians worked together to block Baltic German representation and thus divide the allotted seats among themselves.³⁵ In the Duma itself Estonian and Latvian representatives often supported each other's presentations or initiatives, e.g., Jānis Kreicbergs and Jaan Tõnisson in the First Duma.³⁶ Although the historical tensions between Latvians and Estonians were not overcome in the decade after 1905, there was a growing number of voices on both sides that called for close political cooperation in view of the common interests and goals of the two peoples.³⁷

Finally, with regard to political contacts, an interesting case study is provided by the city of Valka/Valga where the changing demographic and economic picture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to a temporary alliance in 1901 between the Latvian and Estonian forces in order to gain control of the municipal government. Although they were successful in unseating the entrenched Baltic Germans in 1901, the two nationalities could not agree on how to divide the top administrative positions. In the end the Estonians ruled in alliance with a small Russian bloc, and in subsequent elections in 1906, 1910, and 1914, they stood on their own because of their growing dominance among the electors (52 percent in 1906 and 59 percent in 1914). Thus, Estonian–Latvian political cooperation in Valga/Valka had a short life and only worked when it was absolutely necessary in the late tsarist era, i.e., to overthrow the traditional power of the Baltic Germans.³⁸

In conclusion, it may be noted that although the absence of ethnic and linguistic ties as well as the existence of historical tensions continued to work

³³ **Rei, A.** *Mälestusi tormiselte teelt*. Stockholm, 1961, pp. 47–48.

³⁴ See, for example, *Päevaleht*, 1907, 28. sept.; 1913, 19. aug.; *Postimees*, 1913, 1. märts, 8. mai.

³⁵ **Jürgenstein, A.** *Minu mälestused*, 2 vols. Tartu, 1927, II, pp. 19, 36.

³⁶ **Švābe, A.** *Latvijas vēsture 1800–1914*. Uppsala, 1962, p. 663; **Kreicberg, J. J.** Tõnissoniga I Vene Riigiduumas. – In: *Jaan Tõnisson töös ja võitluses*. Tartu, 1938, p. 192.

³⁷ See, for example, **Juhanson, E.** Eesti–Läti vahekorra, 39; **Kuningas, O.** Eesti–läti kirjandusuhete arengust, p. 1206.

³⁸ *Valgamaa*, pp. 495, 569–570; *Päevaleht*, 1910, 8. apr.; *Balss*, 1902, 27. February.

against a full rapprochement between Latvians and Estonians in the late tsarist era, there were indications of a thaw in relations during the Revolution of 1905 and the ensuing decade before World War I. Cultural contacts through, for example, education, literature, and music increased, and unprecedented opportunities for political cooperation during 1905 and the Duma era emerged. Further investigation of this topic should yield a fuller understanding of the history of the Baltic Provinces as a whole and serve as an antidote to an ethnically compartmentalized approach to the region.

LÄTI JA EESTI KULTUURILISED JA POLIITILISED KONTAKTID AASTAIL 1900–1914

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Eesti ja Läti kui Balti provintside suhted tsaariaja lõpul on veel läbiuurimata teema. Kahe rahvuse vahel puuduvad etnilised ja keelised sidemed ning nende kontaktid jäid 19. sajandi teisel poolel võrdlemisi tagasihoidlikuks, eriti arvestades rahvusluse mõju kasvu sellel ajajärgul. Pealegi vajutasid ajaloolised pinged oma pitseri vastastikusele läbikäimisele. Migratsioon Läti ja Eesti ala vahel jäi samuti väheseks, välja arvatud etnilistes piirirajoonides, nagu Valgas.

Nendele takistustele vaatamata tihenesid kontaktid 20. sajandi algul. Kultuuri alal olid tähtsaimad suhtluskohad õppeasutused, eriti Tartu Ülikool, aga samuti Riia Polütehnikum ning õpetajate seminarid Riias ja Tartus. Ilukirjanduse vastastikune tõlkimine võttis sel ajal hoogu ning kirjanike vahel tihenes side isegi väljaspool Baltikumi, näiteks paguluses Soomes ja Šveitsis. Oluliseks kohtumispunktiks muusika alal oli Peterburi Konservatoorium ning laulupidude traditsioonil olid samad juured ja arengufaasid nii Eestis kui ka Lätis.

1905. aasta revolutsiooni vabastusliikumine pakkus esimese šansi tõsisemate poliitiliste kontaktide loomiseks eestlaste ja lätlaste vahel. Riigiduuma valimised ja osavõtt selle asutuse tööst andsid samuti soodsa võimaluse koos tegutseda. Eriti huvitav seik poliitiliste suhete alal oli kahe rahvuse osalemine Valga linna omavalitsuse valimistel ja volikogu töös, kuigi ühistegevus jäi üsna piiratuks.