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THE STORY OF ESTONIAN EUGENICS

The current research tries to give an introduction into the history of Estonian eugenics for foreign readers. As it is the first attempt of such kind, mainly general information is going to be given. More attention is going to be paid to some particular aspects, i.e. to the ethnic / racial dimension and to the introducing of the Sterilisation Law in 1937, the latter legalising obligatory eugenical sterilisation.

This important topic in the history of medicine and social history, or some aspects of it, have been dealt with in Estonia by Toomas Karjahärm [1] and by the author of this article [2, 3].

The ideas of social darwinism and eugenics reached Estonia already before the independence was achieved in 1918 [1]. The reason for Estonians to stress the possibility of counterselection – the main motor for activating eugenists everywhere – was backed by a tendency according to which educated Estonians choose either German or Russian cultural context to live in. Many people also emigrated. WW I, with its death toll among ethnic Estonians being remarkable, gave basis for an additional wave of pessimism. Yet it was only after the war, that the political situation favoured the people dedicated to eugenics, to become organised and aim towards improving the by then independent Estonian nation.

The first question asked is whether eugenics in Estonia was shaded by racial prejudices. The reason for such a curiosity derives from the word “*tõutervis*” (direct translation: “racial health”) meaning eugenics in Estonian.¹ In the light of German influences on Estonian culture it is obvious that Estonian must have derived its word for eugenics from German *Rassen-hygiene*. Coming to this conclusion it is yet important to continue the discussion, as a question

¹ Present Estonian explains the word “*tõug*” mainly in connection with animal stocks. In modern Estonian language “*tõug*” has been replaced in the discussed here context by the word “*rass*” (“race”) meaning a biological entity. “Racial hygiene” of the beginning of the century is not the same as it would be now. T. Karjahärm who has touched the ethnic understandings in Estonian society in the beginning of the century, writes: “*Under the word “tõug” were meant human races, language groups, cultural regions, nations and nationalities and even smaller entities of human society.*” [1]

remains whether Estonian eugenical thinking could have been racially based as numerous European and American examples.²

Amongst the not so numerous Estonian thinkers, politicians etc. there were no specialists-anthropologists to concentrate on the biological aspects of the racial issue. They remained mainly within the borders of cultural criteria while discussing the "*tõug*". According to the then scientific and popular approaches the latter did possess a notorious biological basis. It was seen also behind the intelligence, criminality, psychological characteristics etc.

Estonians joined the discussions about the biological aspects of their ethnicity only in the last decades of the 19th century. By then the theories viewing Estonians (and other Finnish peoples) as "Mongols" – and relevantly racially inferior – were already decaying among European scientists. Published by J. Deniker in 1900 racial theory described two "white" races in Europe – the Nordic and Eastern races. According to Deniker both should have been represented also in Estonia and Finland [4, pp. 195–198]. This and several already earlier notion [4] could be the turning point in viewing Estonians as "Europeans" and "Whites".

An other important aspect, perhaps prohibiting the Estonians to involve racial marker into the eugenical discussion, was the (biological) racial dualism of Estonians, stressed by anthropologists. As already mentioned, there should be two racial types prevailing in Estonia, the West-Baltic type of the Atlanto-Baltic race in the Western and Northern parts of the country and East-Baltic type of the White Sea-Baltic race in the remaining areas [6, 7]. In this way there was no particular race / racial type towards which to direct the national ideal. Finns even had such a temptation – in 1917, Kaarlo Hilden, a Finnish anthropologist, tried to reserve the East-Baltic race type for the Baltic Finns [4, pp. 248–250].

The educated Estonians of the time, perhaps being well aware about the theories "suspecting" Estonians and Finns to be "Mongols", did not let themselves be influenced and carried away by these ideas, keeping the Estonian national thinking far from racial issues. The Estonian "*tõug*" remained a linguistic and cultural issue and although its biological background was discussed, no biological nor racial graduation was accepted when evaluating local ethnic groups [1].

And even when the ethnic issue became a bigger concern in the thirties, especially after 1934 when nationalism can be viewed as the main ideology of the by then autocratic state, local Estonian eugenists had already chosen the so-called

² One has also to admit that while speaking of racial and ethnic issues, cross-cultural misunderstanding often occurs between Estonian and Western participants. For Estonians the words "race" and "nation" have become well distinguishable. The first remaining pure biological (whether scientifically correct or not, is a different problem) entity, while nation as a cultural subdivision is based mainly on language. Such a well argued nationalistic consciousness among Estonians could be explained as a counter-reaction against the national oppression during the Soviet rule.

reformed path of eugenics and biological / racial basis of nationality was luckily enough not stressed.

The Estonian eugenics in 1920s–1930s (during the independent Estonian Republic) was closely connected with Tartu University – the latter serving as the main scientific centre of the country. Similarly to the processes in other parts of the world, most of the local community of eugenists was formed by people with medical background and the ones engaged in the abstinence movement. The chairman of the Society was the professor of pediatrics at Tartu University A. Lütis, the vice-chairmen also mainly professors of medicine.

In 1920s the eugenists formed a tight union with the Abstinence League (*Karskusliit*) of Estonia, up to the issuing a common periodical *Tulev Eesti* (Future Estonia). In the comment to that, given by the editors, it is said that such unification is normal as far as the abstinence movement is a part of eugenics / racial hygiene. Similar is the methodological approach-educational work. Relevantly there should be much common in the goals, reasons and appliances [7, pp 1–2].

The Estonian Eugenic Society “*Tõutervis*” (from 1930 Estonian Eugenic and Genealogical Society) was founded in 1924 in Tartu. Its first conference accepted eugenical watchwords as a program. There were 43 of them based on the German example (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassen-Hygiene*). The Estonians themselves yet stressed immediately that there are some differences when compared to the German document – i.e. concerning mixed marriages [8, p. 93].

In general the watchwords continued the pre-war rhetoric. A nation may perish, as the hereditary material of the more valuable members of the society tends not to survive – social advance on individual level resulting in fewer children. A generalisation, by which the negative selection among civilised nations was common, was made also in Estonia. Much attention was paid to the problematic of sterilisation and other means for avoiding the “less fittest” to breed – i.e. to negative eugenics. The marriage laws of Estonia seemed clearly insufficient for local eugenicists, as prohibiting only the marriage of several very narrowly established groups.

One sentence of the watch-words contains some issues relevant to supposed racial aspect, saying: “*Too frequent intermarriages between Estonians with aliens are not recommendable either by family – nor racial aspects*” [7, p. 4]. The reason here is yet mainly the cultural issue – the eugenists and nationally thinking people were afraid that “strong” German and Russian cultures would assimilate the thin Estonian factor in a mixed family. Mixed marriages within different Finnic ethnic groups were even suggested to “improve” the stock [9, p. 281].

Spreading of eugenical ideology, raising fertility and improving health conditions – i.e. issues of positive eugenics, were dominating issues of the document. In the conclusion an idea is brought by which Estonia needs a Eugenic Institute, like the one already existing by then in Sweden. [7]

After the journal *Tulev Eesti* stopped to be issued in 1926, the periodical to continue most of the eugenical discussion was *Eesti Arst* (*Estonian Doctor*). Thus eugenics became a topic mainly approachable for specialists in the medical field.

Eugenists financed competitive scientific works for the students of the Medical Faculty. Some given topics: "*Family-constitution among different social layers of Estonia*", "*Mixed marriages in some border districts of Estonia and their relation to ethnicity*", "*Which child in the family can be viewed as most vital?*" etc. Already earlier the Abstinence League had proposed a theme: "*Alcohol and racial hygiene*". [10]

One of the most active writers on eugenics (especially on the issues of negative eugenics – sterilisation policy) seems to have been *Dr. med.* Hans Madisso(o)n³. He had been engaged in forensic medicine with particular attention on criminal anthropology and social medicine. He was also the first to start lecturing eugenics at the Medical Faculty of Tartu University in 1928 [10]. Madisson was a firm supporter of eugenical sterilisation. In his later publications he yet distanced himself from the most extreme theories of negative eugenics, admitting that although eugenic activities on an individual level are important, the late genetic research on twins has shown that also the improvement of social conditions and education plays an essential role in improving the "stock" [11, p. 665]. Other authors writing on the issue remained mainly within the realms of positive eugenics.

The most outstanding physical anthropologist of Estonia – Juhan Aul – was involved both in racial studies and eugenical movement. He stood thus close to the temptation to unite the two (and we know what has happened in such cases in many societies)! Yet he did not do that pointing not in his works to the sterilisation policy. His quest was the so-called ideal human type, information about which would be needed for example for fulfilling the state-run colonisation policy – anthropology was to be an applied science according to Aul. It was also to be used in pedagogic and criminology. In the latter connection of course physical anthropology and eugenics met in Aul's work [2].

In the years 1927 and 1935 the society of eugenists organised two conferences with a broad spectrum of discussions (*Rahvusliku Kasvatuse Kongress-Conference of National Education / Increase*) dedicated to demography and eugenics. The events draw a lot of participants and attention. The discussions mainly ranged within the realms of positive eugenics. The problems related to eugenical sterilisations were reserved perhaps for more competent decision-makers.

One of the dreams of eugenists fulfilled in 1939 when the Eugenical Institute of Tartu University was founded. H. Madisson became its director. The formation

³ Extra "o" added during the campaign of Estonialisation of family names – the remark given here to stress the sensibility of national / ethnic issues during the 1930s

of the Institute was strongly supported by the State Commission of National Increase and Welfare. The latter stressed that the institution should dedicate itself to the problematic of the natural increase of the population. The reading list at the institute was quite broad, stretching from genetics to selection, from hygiene to the obstruction of fertility [13]. Eugenics became an obligatory course for the students of Medical and Theological Faculties and for the students applying for an occupation of a teacher of hygiene, civics and natural history. For the others it served as an optional subject.

The institute yet didn't become – unlike its paragon in Sweden – involved deeply in racial studies. The anthropological institute to fulfil the racial research of Estonian population was in the plans of Juhan Aul. He succeeded the Institute of Anthropology and Racial Studies in founding in a very unpleasant time – in 1943, during the Nazi occupation of Estonia. A holy simplicity of a dedicated scientist!

After Estonia had been occupied by the Soviets the Institute was in 1941 turned into the laboratory of human biology. Regaining its position during the German occupation, the final end of the institute was to come in 1944. H. Madisson was imprisoned and spent years in Stalinist labour camps.

The second big victory was achieved by the eugenists in 1937. On April 1 of the same year a decree by the State Head, enacting the Sterilisation Law, foreseeing also obligatory sterilisation, came into force. In this way Estonians had joined the Nordic countries and Germany in the line of European states accepting obligatory eugenical sterilisation. The law anticipated obligatory sterilisation in cases when individuals with a diagnosis of a mental disease, weak-mindedness, severe epilepsy, or individuals physically handicapped on hereditary grounds, were by their high sexual desire dangerous to themselves and society or capable / tending to breed children with similar defects. It was prohibited to sterilise people less than ten years of age and in cases when the operation could be life hazardous. The subjects themselves could do proposals for the sterilisation (voluntarily sterilisation), official doctors, custodians, and heads of custodian-houses and hospitals. Social Ministry was to take care of the carrying out the law.

The law yet did not carry out all the demands carrying the programmatic approach of Estonian eugenist, sentenced in 1925 by the Estonian Doctors Days, who aimed to sterilise: Children who can not obtain the knowledge foreseen in the program of the first class of elementary school and if it is evident that the cause for that is hereditary (under this chapter also the blind, deaf-mutes and feebleminded by birth were to be understood); freely living idiots, blind, deaf-mutes and epileptics if the cause for the handicap's was hereditary; the previously mentioned when let out from the custodian; psychopathic and recidivistic criminals and chronically alcoholics if hereditary causes could be suspected behind their handicap. Volunteer sterilisation was suggested for people with mental disease, with severe tuberculosis, syphilis and the ones bodily handicapped [9, pp. 334–335].

According to present data there is no information about obligatory sterilisation's taking place in Estonia. The files could be lost (destroyed in the war) or there could have taken place no sterilisation's at all.

It has to be admitted that the sterilisation law and the eugenical ideologies in general did not bring along notorious discussions in the society. The latter was perhaps ready to accept the message of the contemporary sciences. Eugenists on their side did run a well organised campaign for the support of their ideology, the latter bringing along the already mentioned Congresses of National Increase but also things like exhibitioner court cases in the "cases of bachelors" etc. At the second congress of National Education, held in 1935, Hans Madissoon stresses, that the society has become much more tolerant on the issue (meaning mainly the sterilisation policy) during the past decade [12].

As a conclusion one may say that although ethnic aspects in the society's life were rather acute (especially in the 1930s) in Estonia – the reason being the seemingly numerous (Russians) or influential (German) ethnic groups in the country – the biological basis for ethos was not an issue of concern of the eugenicists. Although it is evident that much of influences were received from Germany, German racial-hygienic literature (*Volk und Rasse*, *Der Erbarzt*) was subscribed, anthropological instruments and photocameras ordered for the Institute of Eugenics, the main concern for Estonians was generally demographic. Racial aspects did not become stressed in the Estonian eugenically thinking. The marriage laws did not take the latter as a criterion for bordering critical groups. Thus it could be said that Estonia accepted the so-called reformed path of eugenics. It was also the positive aspects of the eugenics mainly developing in Estonia – the fight against genetic diseases, health issues (child- and mother care) and the supporting of the natural increase – especially the latter – which was the official agenda. In such way the whole ideology could be viewed more concerned about the quantity not the quality of the population.

Yet an important thing to stress in Estonian eugenics is the Sterilisation Law enacting from 1937, enforcing obligatory sterilisation. Estonia joined a group of European countries following similar path. It would be important to distinguish if Estonia's developments were similar to those in Nazi-Germany or Scandinavia. The reason to suspect the German path is the autocratic regime in power in Estonia from 1934 on, preaching nationalistic ideology, but also some evident German influences in the ideology of Estonian eugenics and Estonian sciences in general. Unlike Germany, the racial issue was not stressed in Estonia's case. The developments in this small Baltic country could thus more evidently have followed the path covered by the Scandinavian countries accepting similar legislation (and running the practice of eugenical sterilisation's even after the war). Some Scandinavian researchers have stressed three reasons favouring such processes in their countries: Protestantism, strong socialist traditions and a relatively monogenous society [15]. Such community could have been inclined to use scientific methods (both genetic and economic calculations) for the sake of its future generations. There are also counterarguments, especially

on the socialist influences in creating environments for sterilisation, concerning Scandinavia [16].

Yet, as Estonian state possessed a population similar to Scandinavian characteristics, there is a temptation to compare the local developments with the ones in the Nordic countries and assume that most probably the eugenical thinking of Estonia should have belonged to the Scandinavian realms, where the countries were laying foundations for their nowadays famous welfare system already during the interwar period.

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Abstract

In Estonia the presence of eugenic philosophy can be traced back to the last turn of the century. By then the Estonian community had become enough educated and "European" to accept the rapidly developing theories preaching biological determinism.

An organised eugenical movement in Estonia started after the independence was gained. In 1924 the Estonian Eugenic Society "*Tõutervis*" was founded. Mainly individuals whose speciality was biology or medicine, connected mainly with Tartu University supported the eugenic ideas. Juhan Aul and Hans Madissoo were the most devoted researchers mentioned in the paper. The latter delivered lectures on eugenics in Tartu University and was the head of the Institute of Eugenics established by the university in 1939.

Racial aspects did not rise to the focus of the Estonian eugenical movement, thus Estonia was mainly concerned with the so called reformed eugenics. The main area of interest was the medical aspect of "breed improvement" – general health and increase of population, fight against negative hereditary phenomena. Based on the conceptions prevailing at that period the latter should have included also these phenomena which today are predominantly reported as caused by social factors.

The areas of positive eugenics were relatively well organised. It certainly follows the bearings of Estonia at the end of the 1930s: an authoritarian state solving its demographic problems. The quantity of the nation was valued more than its quality.

Estonia goes on record as a fosterer of the so-called negative eugenics. In 1937 Estonia adopted the act of sterilisation which provided that obligatory sterilisation (interruption of pregnancy) was to be carried out when people diagnosed with mental disease, weak-mindedness, severe epilepsy, or physically handicapped on hereditary grounds, were by their high sexual desire dangerous to themselves and society or capable / tending to breed children with similar defects. This act was largely supported by the Estonian medical profession, having adopted the respective programme in 1925 already. So far the data about obligatory sterilisation's is lacking.

The sterilisation law under discussion placed Estonia into the same row of such European countries as Nazi-Germany on one hand and Scandinavian states on the other. There is a possibility for discussion, whether Estonia joined the example of an authoritarian state like Germany under the fascist rule, or followed the model of Scandinavian countries laying already then foundations for their well-known future welfare system.

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