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Memellanders in Norway after World War 2

David Sætre Ludvigsen

Scientific degree: Master of history

Vestland Fylkeskommune

✉ David.Setre.Ludvigsen@vlfk.no

In the aftermath of World War II, a group of 843 individuals from the area that today constitutes Lithuania found themselves stranded in Norway. Included among them were a number of people from the formerly German Memel region (Klaipėdos kraštas). As repatriation efforts commenced in 1945, the Western Allies made a distinction between Lithuanians and Memellanders in such a way that it directly impacted where each individual could settle after the war. Lithuanians were offered to either go home, or to resettle in the West, while Memellanders on the other hand primarily were repatriated to Germany. This decision forced individuals to weigh their personal identities against practical considerations. In this situation, some individuals aligned with their true nationality while others made more pragmatic choices based on what they saw as the most favourable outcome. This article explores the situation of the Memellanders in Norway during the war, and the circumstances surrounding their repatriation.

Keywords: Memel, Memellanders, Volksdeutsche, East Prussia.

Introduction

In the years after World War 1, the Memel area (now Klaipėdos kraštas) was a both bilingual and bicultural area. Situated between the young Lithuanian state and the dominating republic of Germany, this borderland had a mixed population of both Germans and Lithuanians, in addition to other minorities. In the years before and after Lithuania acquired Memel in 1923, this area saw a certain amount of cultural blending. People living side by side over time naturally interact and communicate, and inevitably develop some shared cultural traits while still maintaining separate national identities. On the individual level, however, this created a situation where it could at times be difficult to distinguish clearly who belonged to which ethnic group. People intermarried, shared cultural and linguistic traits, and interacted within the same society. The two groups had many similarities, but there were also notable differences. The most important one perhaps being religion, since the Germans were predominately Lutheran,¹ while most of the Lithuanian population was Catholic. Since religion is a matter of personal persuasion, it is among the traits more likely to withstand cultural influence and blending.

A census conducted in the Memel area (Klaipėdos kraštas) in 1925, further revealed that the people living in the area could be described as belonging to three categories. The first being Germans, who made up a bit less than half the population, and in that respect was the dominating group in the area. The second half of the population consisted of people who identified as either Lithuanians or Memellanders.² Now, what the term Memellander implied must have been a bit unclear even at the time, but given the other options, it must have appealed to those who identified as a citizen of the area, rather than as predominately German or Lithuanian. This anyway shows that this area was not particularly homogenous in terms of nationality, and that the term Memellander was somewhat open for interpretation. For that reason, my definition of a Memellander in this article is geographical. The term is used to describe people residing within, or originating from, the Memel area. Regardless of which nationality they claimed at any given time. The definition thereby includes not only the portion of the population that identified as Germans, but also those identifying as Lithuanians. It also finds room for those who perhaps considered themselves citizens of the area, rather than belonging to any of the other nationalities. In this bilingual and bicultural area, such an option probably made sense to a lot of people who in everyday life found themselves with one foot in each culture. This situation of being between cultures would normally have posed few problems, but in times of change people could be forced to pick sides. Such choices can often have practical implications and offer both benefits and disadvantages.

¹ Vasilijus Safronovas, *A war experience in a bilingual border region: The case of the Memel Territory*, London: Routledge, 2019, p. 229.

² Vasilijus Safronovas, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

In the Memel area (Klaipėdos kraštas), things were changing quite often during the first half of the 1900s. The area changed hands several times before the outbreak of the second World War, and each time the question of identity also became a choice with consequences for the people of the Memel region. After Lithuania acquired the area in 1923, a number of Memellanders left the area and resettled in Germany. Others chose to stay and become citizens of the Lithuanian state. This effectively made them a minority within Lithuania, different from other Germans living there in the sense that they had until recently been citizens of Germany. On the eve of war, just after the German re-annexation of Memel in 1939, this minority again faced a familiar choice. Should they favour the reintroduced German rule, or hold on to what ever identity they had as Lithuanians. The area had after all been under Lithuanian control for a number of years, and a considerable part of the people in the Memelland (Klaipėdos kraštas) were bilingual. Those Memellanders who were sympathetic to German rule, and identified as Germans rather than Lithuanians, could enjoy better civil rights as citizens of Germany. On the other hand, this would also make them subject to German conscription laws. Memellanders identifying primarily as Lithuanians, however, suffered poorer civil rights and an increased risk of being recruited into forced labour. Many welcomed this as opportunity to rid themselves of their minority status and accepted German citizenship, but not all. And although unknown to them at the time, this choice between nationalities was one they would have to face yet again at the end of the war. And at that time, yet again, the choice would have a considerable influence on their further lives.

Object of the article

The object of this article is people from the formerly German Memel region (Klaipėdos kraštas), present in Norway at the time of the German capitulation in 1945. Since the Memel area was a culturally mixed region in the years before the outbreak of war, that group would include but Germans and Lithuanians.

Task of the article

The article aims to show how people from the Memel region were treated as a separate group by the western repatriation authorities in 1945, based on their connection to a specific geographical area. And further that they, as largely bilingual inhabitants of that specific area, found themselves in a situation where they in affect could choose national identity. That choice would have a direct influence on where each person could settle after the war. We have seen in other instances that groups of people in similar circumstances tend to favour pragmatic decisions rather than idealistic ones, and this article suggests that the Memellanders tended to do the same. It is therefore problematic to conclude abo-

ut persons from the Memel area, solely based on their own claimed nationality, whether they are Lithuanians or Germans.

Historiography

The events of The Second World War have received much attention from Norwegian historians over the years. Much of it has of course been supportive of the greater national narrative, in which there were little space left over for people from other countries. Even though there were over 400.000 foreign nationals present in the country at the end of the war. Around three quarters of those were German forces, who so far have received very little attention from historians, but the remaining quarter did consist of over 100.000 people. The vast majority of whom were forced labourers of some kind, and many lived under appalling conditions with high mortality rates. Eventually, that caught both scientific and popular interest, and in recent decades quite a bit of work has been done on their story. Particularly that of the soviet prisoners of war, of whom there were around 87.000 of after the war. In that literature, little or no distinction has been made in terms of national identity withing the broader definition of "Soviet citizen". Even though the territory held by the Soviet Union in 1945 contained many national groups, all people repatriated there were considered "Soviet citizens". This rough categorisation contributed to blurring the large diversity of nationalities present in Norway during the war, making particularly all people from the Soviet-controlled area appear as belonging to one big uniform group. If the bigger narrative about the repatriation continues to use this generalisation, we lose track of the different stories on the national level. In previous works I have focused on distinguishing Lithuanians as one such national group, often described by Norwegian historians as "Soviet citizens", and it was during that work I became familiar with the rather special situation of the people from the Memel area. Their predicament was certainly known to some of the personnel involved with the repatriation process, but it is very little known in the general public, and I believe there is no other scientific work done on this group from a Norwegian perspective. As for many of the other nationalities that were present I Norway during the times of German occupation, they also deserve some attention to their particular story, rather than just being part of a larger generalisation.

Memellanders in Norway during WWII

Regardless of which national identity the Memellanders chose, they were all at risk of being transported away from their homelands by the events of the impending war. In various ways and for different reasons, the war forced many people away from the Lithuanian area and scattered them in places all over Europe. One of those places was Norway, where the German occupants kept large numbers of both military personnel, forced labo-

urers and civilian workers. And when the war ended, we find a rather large group of people from the Lithuanian area stranded in Norway. The situation in the country in the early days of peace in 1945 was, as in many other parts of Europe at the time, rather chaotic.³ At first, there were no allied troops present, with the exception of a few Soviet forces in the very north. The Germans had retreated from the northernmost parts of Norway, using the scorched earth tactic in October 1944. This left the land open, but impaired the mobility of the Soviet forces which were in no position to accept the surrender of the German forces. After all, organizing the surrender, demobilisation and repatriation of that many personnel would have to be a complex operation. And the fact that German activity in Norway was spread out all over this 1700 km long country, only made the challenges greater. This in turn meant that in the early stages, since nobody came to accept their surrender, many Germans had to organize their own surrender and just wait for allied forces to arrive.⁴

When they did arrive, during the following days, these allied forces numbered only about 30.000 men⁵. The western allies knew that there was a considerable presence of foreign nationals in Norway during the occupation but were still surprised by the actual numbers.⁶ In addition to the over 300.000 German military personnel, there turned out to be in excess of 100.000 prisoners of war and other unfree workers of more than 40 different nationalities.⁷ In a country with a pre-war population of only 3 million, that would make one in every seven people in the country at the time, a foreigner. That was a very noticeable presence. The Norwegian authorities, who at the time acted out of exile in London, wanted all these foreign nationals out as soon as possible.⁸ However, the process of repatriating all these people would end up taking far longer than anyone had anticipated. The main reason for this was that the borders and national states of Europe had changed as a result of the war, and it was no longer simply a matter of returning each individual to wherever he or she came from. For the people from the Memel area (Klaipėdos kraštas), who had left home at a time when Memel was a part of the Reich and Lithuania was still a sovereign nation, the situation was now quite different. Both Memel and Lithuania were now under Soviet occupation and the German population in those areas had been greatly reduced. Given those circumstances, it is quite understandable that many Memellanders were uncertain about returning to their homes. This uncertainty was indeed shared by people from the Lithuanian area in general and resulted in a considerable number of

³ Leiv Kreyberg, *Kast ikke kortene: i sanitet og utenfor, under krigen 1940–1945*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1978, p. 174.

⁴ Jens Christian Hauge, *Frigjøringen*, Oslo: Gyldendal, 1995, p. 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁶ Einar Kristian Steffenak, *Repatrieringen av de sovjetiske krigsfangene: (fra Norge i 1945): forspill of etterspill*, Bergen: E.K. Steffenak, 1995, p. 35.

⁷ Andrew Thorne, *General Thornes rapport om frigjøringen av Norge*, Oslo: Forsvarsdepartementet, 1955, p. 52.

⁸ Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945: antall, organisering og repatriering*, Tromsø: Institutt for historie, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2009, p. 278.

them refusing to repatriate. Of the 843 people originating from within the borders of the pre-war republic of Lithuania present in Norway in 1945, only 160 are documented to have returned voluntarily.⁹

Repatriation from Norway

Most likely there were more people from the Lithuanian area in Norway during the war, but their presence is so far left undocumented. Many of the written sources from this period are lost, much due to the fact that German troops burned or in other ways destroyed many documents prior to capitulating¹⁰. And as a result of this, it is highly likely that there were more people from the Lithuanian area than the before mentioned 843. On the other hand, documents regarding the repatriation are more extensive, and since the number 843 is based on what can be found in this material, it seems a fair conclusion that the actual number was not substantially higher. However, it is possible that some people were overlooked during the repatriation. There are primarily two ways in which that could have happened. First of all, they could have been among the 84.000 people who were voluntarily repatriated to the Soviet Union shortly after the war.¹¹ This evacuation happened rather hastily, and the documentation regarding it is rather scarce. Mostly it consists of transport lists, written by the prisoners themselves.¹² The majority of them being Russian, they tended to russify the names on these handwritten lists and seem in general to have paid little attention to detail.¹³ For instance, they failed to register about one third of these 84.000 repatriated with nationality,¹⁴ so there is obviously a fair chance that there could be a number of both Memellanders and Lithuanians in this particular group. None of the repatriates were listed as having Memel or Memelland as nationality, but it is clear from the transport lists that there were a few Memellanders among the 160 people listed with Lithuanian nationality. In a similar way, there could have been a number of Memellanders among the 300.000 Germans that were repatriated from Norway after the war. Technically, they were Reich citizens after the re-annexation in 1939, and if they were not opposed to returning to what was left of Germany, it is quite possible that they could have been registered as Germans. Such registration would have been quite certain if they stated German as their nationality. People claiming Memel or Memelland as a nationality, however,

⁹ David Ludvigsen, *Litauiske statsborgere i Norge 1940–1945*, Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen, 2013, p. 56.

¹⁰ Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Slavene fra Øst: sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945*, Oslo: IFS, 2005, p. 32.

¹¹ Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945: antall, organisering og repatriering*, Tromsø: Universitetet i Tromsø, 2004, p. 323.

¹² Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945: antall, organisering og repatriering*, Tromsø: Institutt for historie, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2009, p. 285.

¹³ Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Slavene fra Øst: sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945*, Oslo: IFS, 2005, p. 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

were singled out and eventually placed in a separate camp in Ørje. This camp also held people from the Danzig area,¹⁵ who were in a somewhat similar situation.

A choice of nationalities

The total number of people who claimed Memel or Memelland as their nationality was 98.¹⁶ An important source of information about this group is the Displaced Persons Registration Cards, which all Displaced Persons had to fill out. These cards contain basic information, such as name, age, place of work, the names and addresses of parents etc. More interestingly, they also hold information about “Claimed nationality”. For most people, answering such a question might seem like a rather straight forwards thing. But based on the cards filled out, not only by Memellanders but also by people claiming Lithuanian nationality, it seems that they had several options. Since many people from the Memel area were both bicultural and bilingual, they could argue both that they were German and Lithuanian, depending on what served them best. And we see from the registration cards that some people struggled with this choice. There are several cases where a person has first stated one nationality, then crossed that one out and replaced it with another nationality. In some cases, they even change their nationality back to the original one. This was clearly a choice that some people put a lot of thought into.

The reasons for that may be found in the policy regarding repatriation of Displaced Persons. Or rather policies, since there were two separate repatriation authorities in Norway in 1945: one representing the Western Allies and one representing the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Although allies, these two parties at times had very conflicting views on where to send what people after the war. The Western Allies only recognized the Soviet borders of 1939. And since the de facto borders had moved since then, a lot of Displaced Persons now found themselves in a situation where their homelands were under soviet occupation. This was the case for both Lithuanians and Memellanders alike. Their homes were within the borders of the Soviet Union, and in this situation, the Western Allies did not force anyone to return. They did, however, treat Lithuanians and Memellanders differently. People claiming Lithuanian nationality were offered to relocate to the west, for instance in the US or Canada, after first spending some time in Displaced Persons camps in Germany.¹⁸ People claiming Memel as their nationality, on the other hand, were to be sent permanently

¹⁵ Letter from Sosialdepartementet to Finans- og Tolldepartementet, 23-07-1946. . Flyktnings-og fangedirektoratet, Sentralt arkiv: Eske E 84. Riksarkivet.

¹⁶ David Ludvigsen, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

¹⁷ Einar Kristian Steffenak, *Repatrieringen av de sovjetiske krigsfangene: (fra Norge i 1945): forspill of etterspill*, Bergen: E.K. Steffenak, 1995, p. 147.

¹⁸ AEF, DP Assembly Center Registration Cards. Box 31 and 27. Riksarkivet.

to Germany. In contrast to this, the Soviet repatriation authorities viewed the Lithuanian territory as belonging to the Soviet Union. Subsequently, they laid claim to all people from within that area, with the exception of Germans. While they on the one hand campaigned quite fiercely to get their hands on as many Lithuanians as possible, using everything from harassment and threats to kidnappings, they on the other hand showed little interest in the Memellanders. Not a single case of dispute between the two repatriation commissions regarding repatriation of Memellanders exists, as far as I know. In comparison, there are several well documented cases of disputes regarding Lithuanians resisting repatriation.¹⁹

In such cases of disputes, the Western Allies were to have the final word.²⁰ And since they refused forced repatriation to areas such as Lithuania, this in reality meant that nobody claiming Lithuanian nationality would be repatriated against their will. In this situation, the bilingual and bicultural Memellanders could claim either Lithuanian or Memel as their nationality, and the choices they made would determine where they could go after the evacuation from Norway. Claiming Lithuanian nationality gave the most options. Memellanders who chose this alternative could either return to their homeland,²¹ they could resettle in Germany, or they could emigrate to the United States, Canada or elsewhere in the west. Going back to what was now the Soviet Union was easiest in the early stages of the repatriation, and people must have been worried about whether or not they would be allowed to stay, but we still see that a number of people took that chance. The majority, however, choose to go to Germany, where many would have had family or relatives and where they knew both the language and culture. Emigrating further westwards usually meant learning a new language in an unfamiliar culture, but this alternative also included the opportunity to start over in a country which was not ruined by the war. The Memellanders could also claim Memel as their nationality, but this would limit their options, since they would then be regarded as Germans. Emigration to the west would no longer be an option, and the possibility of repatriating back to Lithuania was greatly reduced with time. Claiming Memel as nationality would on the other hand guarantee them resettlement in Germany as former citizens of the Reich. At the time, this would have been the best option for those looking to reconnect with family and relatives, since the vast majority of the German population in Lithuania had fled there.

Of the total group of 823 people from the Lithuanian area in Norway in 1945, 43% stated that they wished to emigrate to the west. How many Memellanders there were among these 43% is more or less impossible to say for certain, since it is difficult to determine

¹⁹ Einar Kristian Steffenak, *Repatrieringen av de sovjetiske krigsfangene: (fra Norge i 1945): forspill of etterspill*, Bergen: E.K. Steffenak, 1995, p. 187.

²⁰ Einar Kristian Steffenak, *Russerfangene: Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge og deres historie*, Oslo: Humanist forlag, 2008, p. 230.

²¹ Flyktnings- og fangedirektoratet, Repatrieringskontoret R (RA/S-1681), serie Db, stykke L0014-L0024. Riksarkivet.

exclusively on the basis of names whether an individual was Memellander first and Lithuanian second, or the other way around. What nationality they claimed is not useful at all in this respect, because the possibility of emigration would not even be possible unless the person identified as Lithuanian. But there are quite many people with clearly German names among the Displaced Persons claiming Lithuanian nationality, and among those wanting to emigrate to other countries than Germany as well. Regardless of ethnicity, making the decision to emigrate in that situation must have been difficult for many people. It would have been a choice that implied turning their backs on family, friends and relatives in Lithuania and risk never seeing them again. Still, we saw that almost half the group choose to do so. That made it relevant to examine whether or not people who opted for emigration had any distinctions as a group. What I found was that the most determining factor when choosing between emigration and repatriation was age and family relations. Younger people without families were the most likely to choose emigration, while older people with children of their own at home were the most likely to seek repatriation. Many of the Lithuanians in Norway were forced labourers who were recruited at a rather young age, and consequently had no time to start families before the war. They were men in their mid- to late-twenties without children, and for many of them the prospects of starting a new life in North America must have seemed more appealing than life in the Soviet Union. They would also have had fresh in mind, from the Soviet occupation, what such a life could look like. This was an experience they also shared with their older countrymen, but those still tended to want to go back to their children, and rarely opted for emigration. This is also a tendency we see among the very youngest people in the group, who also tended to want to go back home. Some of those recruited for forced labour late in the war were still very young at this stage and were perhaps more motivated to try to reunite with their families. The Memellanders, on the other hand, tended to be older than the Lithuanians in general. After all, most of them found themselves in Norway as a result of being conscripted, and not as forced labourers. And since Norway was not a very active battle front, it is natural to assume that older troops would have been allocated there, while the younger men would have been sent to the more active fronts. In any case, since the Memellanders in general were older, they had more time before the war to establish families. As a result, we see that a far greater percentage of them claim to have children of their own at home, and we see that they are overrepresented among those people who wanted to repatriate.

Memellanders were also greatly overrepresented among the people wanting to be sent to Germany. In the end, that is also where the majority of them ended up going. Even though about 20% stated that they wished to return to their homelands, it seems unlikely that this ever became a real option for them. Whether or not the few Memellanders who went home as a part of the mass repatriations to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1945

were allowed to stay and avoided any later relocation of the German population is also unclear. What we do know is that of the group of Displaced Persons claiming Lithuanian nationality, 43% wanted emigration to the west. They departed from Norway in October 1945,²² heading for DP-camps in Germany. What later became of them is not to be found in Norwegian sources. The rest of the group were voluntarily repatriated to Lithuania, while a few wished to relocate to Germany.

Conclusions

The process of repatriating the over 400.000 Displaced Persons from Norway after the war took several years and was at times quite complicated. Particularly because of the large number of nationalities among them, and the reoccurring challenges of sometimes having to determine what nationality each individual belonged to. In the largely homogenous Norwegian society at the time, such problems were unfamiliar to most people. As indeed it was for me, during my initial study of the repatriation process. The topic was then people from the Lithuanian area present in Norway during World War 2. This seemed initially as a quite straight forward subject matter, but I soon met the challenge of how to categorize people from the Memel area (Klaipėdos kraštas); technically they originated from within the borders of the pre-war Lithuanian state, but a number of them stated non-Lithuanian nationality. Since that study was based on information provided by the individuals themselves, I ended up including all that claimed either Lithuanian or Memel as nationality. In a similar way, repatriation from Norway was also based on claimed nationality. At least until the very last stages. People from the Memel area could effectively choose to identify as either Lithuanian or Memellanders, and this would affect their options in terms of where they could repatriate. Rather than just being a simple question of how each individual identified in terms of nationality, this question also involved practical implications. And we see a clear tendency that men in their late twenties and early thirties, without family obligations, favoured claiming Lithuanian nationality in order to be able to emigrate westwards. Older men with families, as well as men in their twenties, tended to claim Memel as nationality. Most likely to reunite with other family members. These systematic differences in terms of claimed national identity suggests that the matter was not merely a question of self-identity, but also a decision influenced by self-interest. It was a choice considerably coloured by the practical situation each individual was in, and where they wished to settle after the war.

²² Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge 1941–1945: antall, organisering og repatriering*, Tromsø: Institutt for historie, Universitetet i Tromsø, 2009, p. 298.

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David Sætre Ludvigsen

Mėmelenderiai Norvegijoje po Antrojo pasaulinio karo

Santrauka

Po Antrojo pasaulinio karo 843 asmenų grupė iš dabartinės Lietuvos teritorijos atsidūrė Norvegijoje. Tarp jų buvo nemažai žmonių iš buvusio vokiškojo Memelio regiono (Klaipėdos krašto). 1945 m. pradedus repatriacijos procesui, Vakarų sąjungininkai atskyrė lietuvius nuo mėmelenderių (klaipėdiečių). Tai turėjo tiesioginės įtakos tam, kur kiekvienas asmuo po karo galėjo apsigyventi. Lietuviams buvo siūloma grįžti namo arba persikelti į Vakarų, o mėmelenderiai pirmiausia buvo repatrijuojami į Vokietiją. Šis sprendimas privertė asmenis apmastyti savo asmeninę tapatybę ir praktinius sumetimus. Susidarius tokiai situacijai, vieni asmenys pasirinko gyvenimo kelią pagal savo tikrąją tautybę, o kiti priėmė pragmatiškesnį sprendimą atsižvelgdami į tai, kas jiems būtų palankiau. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama mėmelenderių padėtis Norvegijoje karo metais ir jų repatriacijos aplinkybės.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Mėmelis, mėmelenderiai, etniniai vokiečiai, Rytų Prūsija