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# SIMONAS DAUKANTAS AND GARLIEB MERKEL — PRECURSORS OF NATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES AND THEIR RELATIONS

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*The article analyses the most important similarities and differences in the main ideological attitudes of the precursors of the Lithuanian and Latvian national movements, and the influence of Garlieb Merkel in Simonas Daukantas' historiography. Daukantas cited Merkel and relied upon him indirectly in characterising pagan religion and theocratic governance of the ancient Lithuanians. Merkel's critique of the serfdom as an instrument of social and cultural oppression of the Latvians also contributed to the radicalisation of Daukantas views on serfdom.*

## Introduction

Simonas Daukantas (1793–1864) and Garlieb Merkel (1769–1850) are both known as the inspirators and ideologues of the national movements, respectively, Lithuanian and Latvian. Both wrote historical-philosophical and other works. Daukantas and Merkel were also contemporaries, they lived and worked geographically close to each other (in Riga or nearby) for about a decade, although they most probably never met in person.

Merkel and Daukantas both are heroes of the national revival in the collective memory.

Merkel was made a national hero by Neo-Latvian movement, or more specifically — on the initiative of Riga Latvian Society. Riga Latvian Society organised the unveiling of the monument for Merkel at his burial place at Katlakalns near Riga, in 1869, commemorating the 100-year anniversary since Merkel's birth. It turned into an inauguration ceremony of the national hero<sup>1</sup>. Daukantas was made a national hero by the efforts of Lithuanian liberal intelligentsia, grouped around the first newspaper in the Lithuanian language, *Aušra* (*The Dawn*), issued for Lithuanian readers living in Lithuania, occupied

by the Russian Empire after the partitions of Poland–Lithuania. The first number of *Aušra*, in 1883, began — after the preface and a few poesy pieces — with the biography of Simonas Daukantas, commemorating the 90-year anniversary of his birth<sup>2</sup>.

This alone evokes interest for comparing their views and impact on national movements. However, it is also important that Daukantas relied on Merkel's works in his writings on the history of Lithuania. However, Merkel's influence in Daukantas works has not been studied in detail. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to evaluate the similarities and differences in the main ideological attitudes of these precursors of the national movements, and to examine the influence of Merkel in Daukantas' historiography.

### **Major similarities and differences in the roles of the precursors of the national movements**

The roles of Merkel and Daukantas in the development of the respective national revivals is similar in the sense that both contributed to its genesis. Merkel became the hero of the Latvian national movement, and Daukantas became the ideal of the liberal Lithuanian intelligentsia. However, Merkel contributed more indirectly, while Daukantas contributed directly and purposefully.

A remarkable difference between Merkel and Daukantas is that Merkel wrote all his works in German, he even did not attempt to write in Latvian, having poor knowledge of it. Whereas Daukantas wrote only in Lithuanian, being one of the pioneers of writing extensive scholarly works in this language. Merkel acknowledged, like other Baltic German writers, that Latvian serfs had many bad living habits (laziness, heavy drinking, etc.)<sup>3</sup>. But he insisted that it was the conditions of serfdom that raised such bad habits. And he unequivocally demanded the

abolition of serfdom before any attempts to educate the Latvian peasants, being a strong abolitionist in opposition to the so-called adherents of popular Enlightenment among the Baltic Germans. Otherwise, apocalyptic revolt of the oppressed serfs with no winner could be unavoidable. As he wrote in his *Die Letten*:

“The people no longer are a slavishly obedient dog that can be beaten into bondage. It is a tiger that chews at the chains in silent anger and waits for the moment when it can burst free and wash its shame in blood. (...) Horrible deeds that make one's heart tremble would take place. Every manor and city would be plundered and burned. (...) All the Germans would be killed, and the Latvians who have been reduced to bestiality in their own forests would be wiped out by hunger and the sword.”<sup>4</sup>

For Merkel his contemporaries Latvians belonged almost exclusively to the social strata of peasantry, even though he could imagine an independent cultural and probably even political future for the Latvians, in a very distant future. However, Merkel expressed somewhat controversial views before the abolition of serfdom in the Baltic provinces and after that. He urged for the abolition of serfdom and improvement of the social and cultural conditions of the Latvian peasants in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, a decade later after the abolition of serfdom, in a short newspaper notice of 1829, he wrote that the development of a separate Latvian literature of high aesthetic value could only breed separatism of this nation for all the future, which would not be good for the Baltic provinces, where Germans and Latvians live together<sup>5</sup>.

Daukantas did not want to describe any negative traits of Lithuanians as a nation in its historical development, he praised firstly its merits. Daukantas' style of the historical narrative and his normative attitude had not allowed for more. In Daukantas view, the

majority of his Lithuanian contemporaries certainly were peasants, but not just peasants were included in his conception of the nation. Social stratification for him in general was not so important as the love of the fatherland, inherited ancient traditions of political freedom, autonomous law tradition, language, customs, etc. For Daukantas, purely ethnocultural elements do not define the Lithuanian nation — the historical political tradition must be included. According to him, that tradition lasted at least in the collective memory even in his own time, and it could and should be reconstituted. Demands for the freedom of peasants and their education, development of Lithuanian language, etc. were considered as very relevant by Daukantas. Nevertheless, he envisioned the fulfilment of these demands as only the first steps towards the political freedom of Lithuania<sup>6</sup>.

### Merkel's influence on Daukantas

Daukantas owned, in his personal library, at least three books by Garlieb Merkel, among them the most famous Merkel's works — *Die Vorzeit Lieflands* and *Die Letten Vorzüglich in Liefland am Ende des Philosophischen Jahrhunderts*<sup>7</sup>. Daukantas must have acquired them while living in Riga. Merkel's publications would have been ideologically akin to those of Daukantas as indicated by Daukantas' use of the ethnographic, cultural, and anthropological sources in his works. Merkel was Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) follower and friend, considered him an authority. In his books on Latvian tribes prior to the Crusades, Merkel provided an extremely positive and almost idyllic portrayal of the Latvian tribes, which was later echoed by Daukantas in his description of the Lithuanian tribes.

Daukantas considered all Baltic tribes to be branches of Lithuanians, while Mer-

kel did the opposite; Merkel considered all Baltic tribes to be the predecessors of the Latvians.

Daukantas wrote: "Samogitians, Semigallians, Sambians being one nation spoke one language, lived under the same constitution, had the same religion, worshiped the same gods, interacted among themselves as brothers"<sup>8</sup>, or "even today one can observe that a Lithuanian living in Prussia understands a Samogitian and a Samogitian understands a Latvian, so they see each other being brothers"<sup>9</sup>.

Merkel, in turn, stated in *Die Vorzeit Lieflands*, that "Lithuania was the Latvian state to survive the longest as the strength of the nation was concentrated there"<sup>10</sup>. In *Die Letten*, Merkel wrote: "The people of Livonia, Curonians, [of] Semigallia, and Lithuania belong to the same nation, as demonstrated by their language and customs"<sup>11</sup>. Despite the disagreement over belonging to Latvians or Lithuanians, both Daukantas and Merkel focused on the unity of the Baltic tribes, emphasising the ethical and cultural similarities.

Kęstutis Nastopka, a researcher of Lithuanian and Latvian literary relations, formulated in the 1970s the hypothesis that Daukantas borrowed from Merkel the idea of ethnolinguistic-ethnocultural unity of Lithuanians and Latvians<sup>12</sup>. This hypothesis cannot be approved, because neither Merkel nor Daukantas were the first to talk about the linguistic-cultural affinity of Latvians and Lithuanians. Merkel found facts about the linguistic and cultural affinity of Latvians and Lithuanians in the works of the German historian August von Schlözer (1735–1809) and relied on them<sup>13</sup>. Daukantas was also aware of Schlözer's works and could also refer to Albertas Vijūkas-Kojelavičius (1609–1677)<sup>14</sup>, whom Daukantas cited on many occasions, who also pointed out the ethnic kinship of Lithuanians and Latvians.

The first work by Daukantas on Lithuanian history, *The Deeds of the Ancient Lithuanians and Samogitians* (in Lithuanian: *Darbai senųjų lietuvių ir žemaičių*), was completed in 1822, just after Daukantas graduated from Vilnius University. No book of Merkel was used as a source for it. For the first time, Daukantas began using G. Merkel's book *Die Vorzeit Lieflands* as a source for his second work on Lithuanian history, *The Samogitian History* (in Lithuanian: *Istorija Žemaitiška*), written during the years of Daukantas' life in Riga (1824–1834), where he was employed as a civil servant at the chancellery of governor-general of the Baltic provinces.

In *The Samogitian History*, compared to *The Deeds of the Ancient Lithuanians and Samogitians*, Daukantas added a chapter titled “The Description of the Lands of Lithuania and Samogitia”, where he directly referenced Merkel's *Die Vorzeit Lieflands*. He cited Merkel's work to support the claim that all ancient Baltic tribes, despite their various names, were part of one nation as they spoke the same language, had the same customs, followed the same religion, and had the same system of government<sup>15</sup>. This reference is rather sporadic, as Daukantas certainly knew other authors who wrote similarly, i.e. von Schlözer a.o. There is one more instance of a direct reference to Merkel's *Vorzeit* in *The Samogitian History*, where Daukantas gives reference to Merkel in supporting his assertion, that Bishop Albert, when establishing the city of Riga, entrusted the city to the protection of the Virgin Mary<sup>16</sup>.

There was also one more new (in comparison to Daukantas' *Deeds* of 1822) chapter in *The Samogitian History*, devoted to the political and government system of ancient Lithuanians. Merkel's *Die Vorzeit Lieflands* had a similar chapter with the description of the political and government system of ancient Latvians<sup>17</sup>. An identical element

in Daukantas' and Merkel's description of the political regime of ancient Lithuanians / Latvians is the emphasis on republican, non-despotic governance. It seems very likely that the abovementioned two chapters describing the geographic conditions and the political system of ancient Lithuanians were introduced by Daukantas in his historical writings under the influence of reading Merkel's work.

After having left Riga, Daukantas moved to Saint Petersburg in 1834. Here he wrote a new book on Lithuanian history and published it in 1845. Its thematic composition is close to the first chapters of Merkel's *Die Vorzeit Lieflands*. The first volume of Merkel's *Die Vorzeit Lieflands* is structured thematically. First, the author focuses on topography, i.e. the geography, nature, and the people. Following are chapters such as “Nobleness and Generosity of Latvians”, “Their Gentle Character”, “The Religion of Ancient Latvians”, etc.<sup>18</sup> Merkel turns his attention here on the religion of ancient Latvians and points out the role of Widewut's in the development of the society and political structure, Merkel even called Widewut the “Latvian Moses”<sup>19</sup>. Daukantas might have gotten the idea to devote a separate book to give the ethnic and cultural characterisation of Lithuanians, inspired, besides other authors, by Merkel's depiction of the Latvians. That book, the third work on Lithuanian history by Daukantas, is his most famous work — *The Character of the Ancient Lithuanians, Highlanders, and Samogitians* (in Lithuanian: *Būdas senovės lietuvių, kalnėnų ir žemaičių*).

*The Character of the Ancient Lithuanians, Highlanders, and Samogitians* of Daukantas contains several references to Merkel's *Die Vorzeit Lieflands*. There are three instances of direct references if to count them precisely. Those are new and do not repeat citations from Merkel in *The Samogitian History*. This means Daukantas read

and relied on Merkel anew, when he began to write *The Character*. Daukantas in his *The Character* refers to Merkel in two cases<sup>20</sup> when describing sacrifices to the God of Thunder (*Perkūnas*) during the spring festivities and during the harvest festival in the fall. In the first instance, the entire text of the prayer to *Perkūnas*, taken from Merkel, is quoted. A third direct reference to Merkel is given retelling the instructions of pagan priests to women on how to be good housewives<sup>21</sup>.

One can encounter, most clearly in *The Character* of Daukantas, not only direct references but borrowing from Merkel important insights on the emergence of the earliest religious and political governance of the ancient Lithuanians. Those assertions are given without direct references to Merkel, but we can see that as we compare the texts of Daukantas and Merkel below:

Daukantas wrote that the earliest political regime of Lithuanians was theocratic, where pagan priests had the highest authority. That authority was based upon the belief that the priests were intermediators between the people and the god and brought the will of the god to the men. This belief was invented and supported by the priests as they were more ingenious and prudent than others. Merkel in his *Vorzeit Lieflands* states that Latvian pagan priests were more ingenious and prudent than the rest of the people. Merkel also characterised pagan priests as interpreters of the gods' will to the people. Characterisation of the pagan Latvian priests with the phrase *sinnreicher und schlauer*<sup>22</sup>, as well as *Dolmetscher der Menschen bei den Göttern*<sup>23</sup>, are identical to the Lithuanian phrases of Daukantas used to characterise pagan Lithuanian priests<sup>24</sup>.

<p><b>Die Vorzeit Lieflands (The Prehistory of Livonia)</b></p>	<p><b>Būdas senovės lietuvių, kalnėnų ir žemaičių (The Character of the Ancient Lithuanians, Highlanders, and Samogitians)</b></p>
<p>(...) to justify and increase his reputation, to make believe his influence with the gods, he pretended to have very precise knowledge of nature and history. (...) became a <b>mediator/interpreter between the men and the gods</b>, the organ of the gods to men (...) priests were obeyed because everywhere there are people who are <b>more ingenious and prudent</b> than the crowd, and relied on own virtues to gain power and wealth.</p>	<p>(...) those priests, as more prudent and ingenious than the others, became at the beginning because of their prudence and ingeniousness <b>mediators between the gods and the men</b>, and therefore in the beginnings of every nation is the authority and administration of the community in the hands of the priests, as the latter always pretended to know everything what the nation or tribe needed from the god and ruling on the order by him. People, on their side, seeing priests as <b>more ingenious and prudent</b>, obeyed their orders as the orders of God himself.</p>

Translations from German and Lithuanian are by the author of this article.

In his *Die Letten* Merkel devoted the first two of the eight chapters in the book to describe Latvian traditions, culture, and national character (*Volkscharakter*), using an ethno-cultural term coined by Johann Gottfried Herder<sup>25</sup>. Both Daukantas and Merkel understood the term *national character* in an identical manner, claiming that national character is the essence of the nation, embodying its morality in customary law, traditions of social life, and religious attitudes.

Merkel's *Die Letten Vorzüglich in Lief-land am Ende des Philosophischen Jahrhunderts* is a criticism of oppression and serfdom. This book had an influence on the abolition of serfdom in the Baltic governorates in 1816–1819. Urging for the abolition of serfdom in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Merkel saw only the advantages. After the abolition of serfdom, there should be a strong expansion of industry in Livonia, a number of leather, soap, tar, canvas, glue, and potash factories should appear in addition to the few existing glass and mirror factories. Bee-keeping and sheep farming would expand, as would trade. This would greatly improve the country's economy.<sup>26</sup> Merkel wrote about skilled artisans and inventors, albeit serfs, and there could be significantly more of them after the abolition of serfdom.<sup>27</sup>

Daukantas did not reference *Die Letten* directly, even though he had this book in his personal library. Daukantas might have chosen not to reference the book due to its reputation as a provocative one; the book stated that if serfdom was not abolished, it would provoke a revolution. Daukantas, as opposed to Merkel, could not write politically charged works due to his service in the Russian Empire and his descent from the “rebellious governorates”. However, Daukantas' assessment of the negative effects of serfdom resembles Merkel's statements quite strongly. Both authors compared serfdom to slavery because of the violation of the peasants' civil rights. A critique of serfdom as a regime where freedom is under-

mined was already present in the first work on the history of Lithuania (1822) by Daukantas. However, critique of serfdom is much more expressed in *The Samogitian History*, the largest of Daukantas' works on Lithuanian history. In *The Samogitian History* it is stated that serfdom undermines human self-worth and self-respect. According to Daukantas, serfdom “cannot be matched with human rationality and justice”<sup>28</sup>. In addition, it is stated that serfdom is an obstacle to economic prosperity and development<sup>29</sup>. In *The Character* Daukantas claimed that there would appear more talented craftsmen after the abolition of serfdom<sup>30</sup>.

These ideas about the negative effects of serfdom, present in Daukantas' works, were also present in Merkel's writings. In essence, it can be said that Daukantas became familiar with the criticism of serfdom expressed by Merkel, while living in Riga, which had an influence on Daukantas' ideological development and contributed to his critical understanding of serfdom.

## Conclusions

Earlier research stated that Merkel's influence implied that Daukantas borrowed from Merkel the idea of ethnolinguistic-ethnocultural unity of Lithuanians and Latvians. That is not supported by closer analysis of Merkel's and Daukantas' texts and contexts of their activities. Merkel's influence on Daukantas was of twofold nature. He was one of the authors inspiring Daukantas to write a separate book devoted to the national character of the ancient Lithuanians. Daukantas in that book cited Merkel and relied upon him indirectly in characterising pagan religion, religious and social customs, and theocratic governance of the ancient Lithuanians. Merkel's critique of the serfdom as an instrument of social and cultural oppression of the Latvians also contributed to the radicalisation of Daukantas' views on serfdom.

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## SIMONS DAUKANTS UN GARLĪBS MERĶELIS — TAUTISKĀS KUSTĪBAS PRIEKŠGĀJĒJI BALTIJAS VALSTĪS UN VIŅU SAKARI

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## Kopsavilkums

**Atslēgas vārdi:** *nacionālā atmoda, lietuviešu un latviešu attiecības, ideoloģiskā ietekme*

Simons Daukants (1793–1864) un Garlībs Merķelis (1769–1850) ir labi pazīstami nacionālās atmodas kustības iedvesmotāji un ideologi, Daukants — lietuviešu, bet Merķelis — latviešu. Viņi abi bija literāti — Daukants un Merķelis rakstīja vēsturiski filozofiskus sacerējumus par lietuviešu un latviešu etnogrāfijas un vēstures jautājumiem. Daukants un Merķelis bija laikabiedri, aptuveni desmit gadus dzīvoja un strādāja ģeogrāfiski tuvu viens otram (Rīgā vai netālu no tās), taču personiski tikušies nebija. Daukanta personīgajā bibliotēkā bija nozīmīgākie Merkeļa darbi: *Die Vorzeit Lieflands* (“Vidzemes senatne”) un *Die Letten, vorzüglich in Liefland, am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts* (“Latvieši, sevišķi Vidzemē, filozofiskā gadsimtena beigās”). Šo grāmatu ietekme Daukanta darbos ir viegli izsekojama. Aprakstot lietuviešu seno reliģiju, tās garīdznieku lomu un politiskās sabiedrības principus, Daukants izmantoja Merkeļa darbus.