

# The Harvest of Modernization

## The formation of Agrarianism in Estonia prior to World War I

### Introduction

On March 26, 1907, a group of men gathered in the village of Helme in northern Livland to found a cooperative with the aim of jointly purchasing a grain-threshing machine. The meeting was documented in an agricultural journal:

'All throughout the winter, the Helme men, under the active supervision of the chairman of the agricultural association, schoolteacher A. Krimrin, have discussed every aspect of the machine purchase. The cooperative statutes or agreements were clarified, and the subject of which machine to purchase was thoroughly investigated. (...) In Helme, the saving and loan cooperative provides the resources for machine purchase, while the savings and loan cooperative's director believes that the right way to purchase agricultural equipment is for the local lending cooperative to provide the funding, and all that is needed to be paid in cash. A. Eisenschmidt, the editor of [the agricultural journal] *Põllutööleht*, was also present at the meeting. He had to admit that these Helme men were a serious group! The questions were discussed objectively and thoroughly, and the final decision was made unanimously. (...) The agreement, however, did not materialize out of thin air for the Helme men, but was instead hard won through purposefulness and firmness.'<sup>1</sup>

The way in which the village men are described in this article highlights some of the ideals which were formulated, and hopes involved in the modernization of the agriculture and the agricultural movement in Estonia<sup>2</sup> at the turn of the twentieth century.

The initiative to achieve this progress was promoted by agricultural journals and self-help literature. It was based on the mutual work undertaken by the village men in local associations and cooperatives. In a society such as the Estonian one – still under the hegemony of the Baltic German nobility and the Russian Empire, but with aspirations of becoming autonomous – the agricultural associations provided one of the few forums where common farmers could meet and participate in discussions. They maximized opportunities for structured public debate, and for the experiences of decision making and making compromises in the local community. In the long run, participation in the public institutions also created new opportunities and strategies for the villagers to improve their communication with institutions and representatives on a higher level in society.<sup>3</sup> Taking part in the work of associations also meant forming affiliations with a social system which was not always in agreement with the traditional one. In the associations founded on the principles of voluntary association, members were formally equal, and other merits then

traditional status often counted for positions of leadership. The outcome of the associational life was furthermore a combination of ideas and practices for public life. In the long run, it precipitated the emergence of an alternative model of social stratification, with the emergence of a new local leadership cadre, and with the emergence of a code for participation and assessing merits in the local community.<sup>4</sup> This code would play a vital role in the formation of people's experience in the public sphere, and in the long run, in the development of their ideas on the way in which society should be organized, and what the role of its citizens should be. It presented an understanding of human nature, identified the general problems in the present society, and presented a solution that more or less embraced the whole society.

The general intention of this article is to map the ideas and political practices which were at hand in the rural Estonian society at the turn of the twentieth century. It is done in order to identify an agrarian ideological position and understandings on the character of the Estonian society. Ultimately, the character of the institutions of the independent Estonian state, which was to emerge out of the ruins of the Russian Empire after World War I. Thus, my aim is not just to identify any specific agrarian political program, but rather to localize a mindset and set of ideas, which stood against other dominating positions, such as the radical and socialist positions, and the liberal nationalist position. The underlying assumption is that these positions, during the late nineteenth century carrying on to the establishment of the independent Estonian state after World War I, took part in a discursive negotiation over the character of the Estonian society and the values which were to be expressed by the independent state.

The agrarian position ultimately came to play a dominating role in Estonian politics and society during the interwar period: ideologically, after World War I, through the character of the land reform, which constituted the social and economic framework for Estonian society, and consequently had a decisive influence on the political agenda;<sup>5</sup> politically, during the democratic period in the 1920s and first half of the 1930s, the major agrarian parties, *Põllumeeste kogud* (The Farmers' Party) and *Asunike koondis* (The Settlers' Party) held almost half of the electorate, headed the majority of the cabinets and provided several prominent politicians;<sup>6</sup> economically, during the democratic and authoritarian period, through the establishment of a corporative state, where the interests of the state and the dominating producers, the agricultural cooperatives, were interwoven.<sup>7</sup>

The ideas and position presented to the Estonian farmers principally followed the basic lines of contemporary East European agrarianism. Agrarianism is a rural ideological response to modernization, which occurs in different forms in most rural societies in times of rapid modernization and industrialization. In East Central Europe agrarianism emerged during the social transformation in the nineteenth century. It manifested itself as a third approach in the political and economic spheres between economic Liberalism and Socialism, and promised to modernize society on the terms of rural society. Due to the agrarian character of interwar East Central Europe, Agrarianism had a decisive influence on the structuring of the state and politics during the entire period. The most radical expression of interwar Agrarianism was Alexander Stamboliski's regime in Bulgaria during the early 1920s. A more moderate kind of Agrarianism had a decisive influence in Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Estonia and Latvia, and a still moderate but strongly nationalist Agrarianism represented the Croatian interests in the Yugoslave parliament.

As an ideology, Agrarianism is based on the idea that family farming is the most natural and sustainable base of a society. Through owning the land that feeds them, the family will live in harmony with the nature. Consequently, it anticipates private and family ownership of land as the most important institution in society. Agrarianism focuses on the political and social organization of society, founded on the rural community, and economically on cooperative production and consumption.<sup>8</sup>

This ideology does not derive its foundation from any consistent philosophy, nor is it codified in writing. Instead Agrarianism should be viewed as a pragmatic ideology, which is inspired by other ideologies and social thinking and, what is primarily stated by agrarianist front figures, is a response to concrete social situations and problems in agrarian society. As the case with Western Liberalism, agrarianism shared the concept of democracy and held the freedom of the individual in relation to the state for important, whilst opposing economic Liberalism. The common agrarianist position, argued that economic liberalism represented an excessive individualization of society, because it refused to consider the distribution of wealth and paid attention only to economic values. While a liberal economy encouraged economic growth, the social costs were great, thereby causing much harm to the traditional peasant society, ultimately resulting in the belief that the system favoured the urban bourgeoisie and supplied them with the means to exploit the peasantry. Furthermore, the liberal economy created an instability that was hostile to the basic character of the peasant society.<sup>9</sup> The agrarianist position viewed Marxism's lack of democratic political values to be dangerous. In a strong state, where the peasants were not guaranteed full political influence, and were denied the right to own their land, the peasants would revert to the serfdom of feudal society. Likewise, the idea of forced collectivization of agricultural work and property was viewed as a fundamental threat which struck a discord with the very roots of agrarian society.<sup>10</sup> As the Estonian case developed by responding to real conditions, rather than to the development as a result of social theory, it is of general interest, as Estonian agrarianism emerged in a different social context – with no native elite and relatively large and wealthy farms – larger than most other contemporary East Central European agrarianist movements.

This study focuses on what can be described as a rural public sphere, consisting of new publications and agricultural associations and cooperatives.<sup>11</sup> The study first focuses on the emergence of Estonian language agricultural instruction books and journals. In order to interpret the notion of modernization, the underlying ideals of agriculture and the rural society's organization, the rural institutions, especially the one of cooperatives has been chosen as focus of analysis. The main sources used for this section include agricultural books and booklets published in Estonian, and the agricultural journals *Põllumees*, *Põlutööleht* and *Ühistegewusleht*, which were published from the mid-1890s to 1914. The ideas voiced in the media are studied in practice in the rural public sphere, through the work of local agricultural associations and cooperatives and on a national level, as expressed at the Agricultural Congresses of 1899 and 1905 and the All-Estonian Congress of 1905.

My study employs an approach which diverges from previous studies on Estonian agrarian and political history. By studying the agricultural instructions as producers of ideas beyond agricultural improvement and the ideas and practices of a set of local associations, I put a local perspective on the issue and study material that is not outspokenly political. My intention is thus to contribute to prior research undertaken on this topic, with a locally-based study on Estonian agrarianism during its early years.

## The Emergence of the Rural Public

This study is limited to the period between 1895 and 1914. This is a period which was a critical juncture in Estonian history. Estonian society was faced with rapid social transformation, including class-formation, urbanization and social mobility for the Estonians. Since the 1860s the rural population had been given the possibility to buy land. Through land reform, new farms were established on consolidated land outside traditional villages. This split up the established local communities, with its hierarchy and customary village life. Compared with other contemporary European land reforms, the Baltic countries strived to create relatively large and sustainable farms able to produce for the market, causing the average farm to be about 30 hectares. Following this process, the rural landowning middle class emerged, and according to contemporary observers, the separating line between the landed and the landless became more decisive. On the eve of World War I, almost one-third of the rural population owned land, one-third were tenants, and one-third landless.<sup>12</sup> The self-owning farmers had learned the fundamental rudiments of market oriented farming from the manors, and were early on producing for the markets in Tallinn, Riga, and St. Petersburg, and the transformation to a money economy. Departing with the 1860s, land owners and tenants were given the right to take part in the government of rural townships, providing them with a formal and emotional responsibility for the local community.<sup>13</sup> Another process of inclusion was the rise in cultural and social movements with a national appeal. Cultural, choral, and educational associations were formed in the villages, and agricultural and educative associations emerged in provincial towns. On a national level, choral festivals were held in Tartu and Tallinn, expressing unity and cultural identity and spreading self-consciousness among the former serfs.<sup>14</sup> The associational and cultural life was propelled and bound together by an emerging Estonian language press and literature. For the agrarian sector, it consisted of a growing number of agricultural self-help literature and agricultural journals, which printed news and educational texts for the farmers. The high rate of literacy in the Baltic areas were responsible for the wide spread and reading of the books and journals. Estimations demonstrate that more than one out of ten of the independent farms in southern Estonia had its own journal at the turn of the twentieth century, and that they were read by more than just the subscriber.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1880s, the Tsarist government's tried to anchor the Baltic provinces to the Russian heartland with a set of administrative reforms, and with the introduction of Russian as the language of education and administration. A harsher attitude towards the media and associational life accompanied the campaign of Russification. Without having achieved their goals, many of the activists from the 1860s also lost faith in their cause, precipitating the decline of the national movement. After the death of Alexander III and the installation of Nicolai II in 1894, Russification suffered a defeat, and political and reformist ideas could once again be more and more openly expressed in the public. The openness culminated during the revolution of 1905, allowing for public discussion. The revolution has therefore been considered to be a turning point in Estonian history, especially concerning political and national awareness, and the political organization of a larger part of the population.

## Sowing the seeds for agricultural transformation

During and after the mid-1860s, the message of agricultural transformation and modernization was made available to the newly-emancipated Estonian farmers through agricultural instruction books and popular weeklies.<sup>16</sup> The message of agricultural improvement encouraged the farmers to transform their agriculture from grain growing to cattle breeding and dairy production, and to become familiar with the latest agricultural tools, methods, and knowledge. To attain this transformation, the villagers were encouraged to educate themselves, and to combine their efforts, by gathering in agricultural associations and agricultural cooperatives. The transformation was considered to be a necessary process if the Estonian people were to not trail behind the other peoples of Europe. In the eyes of the national movement, agricultural development was one of the primary means to create a strong and independent Estonian culture equal to other European cultures.<sup>17</sup> Following a line of intellectual nationalism, the nation was henceforth defined as a distinct cultural body, built upon national symbols, and consisting of values on a higher level than customary village culture and the ethnic division between serfs and lords. Important promoters of agricultural transformation, such as Carl Robert Jakobson, the publisher of the newspaper *Sakala* (1878–1906), and Voldemar Jansen, the publisher of the newspapers *Perno Postimees* (1857–1864) and *Eesti Postimees* (1863–1894), were also recognized as leading figures in different branches of the national movement. Whereas, however, Jakobson promoted an Estonian path to modernization, Jansen emphasized the need to learn from, and if possible, go hand in hand with the Baltic German nobility within the framework of existing institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Jakobson's intention was not only to educate, but to contest the dominating understanding of social order and society by providing the framework for a new philosophy of history. His work promoted the idea of history and culture based on agriculture and the work of the farmers. His theory takes its departure point in the prehistoric world of hunters and gatherers, and traces the agricultural stepping stones through history: from the domestication of animals, to the first agricultural experiences, securing the natural position of agriculture in human life and history. Through hard work and a firm responsibility for the land, he explains, farmers had created such cultures as the ancient Greek and Roman, and the contemporary Estonian.<sup>19</sup> Jakobson's approach to history was decisively evolutionistic and subscribed to the idea of different cultural levels tied to the different modes of production, striving for emancipation. But in line with many contemporary social scientists and philosophers, he considered human cooperation to be the driving force in society; and the nation, the primary subject and goal in history. By linking the farmer to the nation and the ideas of culture and history in general, a long-term justification for the primacy of rural society was established. Viewing history as an evolutionary process, manorial agriculture was illustrated as repressive and unmodern; whilst farm-based agriculture, as progressive and modern. The understanding of history as based on the farmers also created a perception of history which deviated from the Baltic German understanding, without having to contest its established symbols. The general problems in Estonian society and agriculture were identified by Jakobson as the persisting supremacy of the Baltic German nobility, and the lack of education and organization among the farmers. His recommendations towards a solution were for political demands for the introduction of local self government based

on the farmers, and for the establishment of agricultural schools. And, most importantly, the farmers were encouraged to improve their situation by uniting in agricultural associations in order to organize and educate themselves, and in agricultural cooperatives, to coordinate agricultural work, increase the power of farmers in the market, and liberate the farmers economically from the Baltic Germans.<sup>20</sup>

Although Jakobson's nationalist approach was absent in the more Baltic German friendly newspapers like *Eesti Postimees* and the agricultural journal *Küandia*, these papers identified the same need for modernization, education, and cooperation. His approach can therefore be understood as creating a model for instruction books and journals up to World War I.<sup>21</sup>

## Forming an agrarian ideal

The movement for agricultural improvement, being interwoven with the national movement in the 1860s, declined together with the national movement in the mid 1880s. With the decline of Russification in the mid-1890s, the ideas of agricultural transformation acquired a new momentum. In the meantime, the number of independent farmers had steadily risen in Livland and began to increase in Estland. However, the reforms only comprised of a third of the rural population in Estonia, leaving the rest a rural proletariat. The message of the new agricultural instructions, which was directed towards the new landowners, followed the basic ideas outlined earlier in the century, with the exception that they lacked an explicit nationalist approach. The focus was not on the well-being of the nation, but on the farmer and the local community, and the arguments were based more on the economy than on the emancipation and culturization. The books were also more purpose-oriented and promoted a higher standard of knowledge than the instructions available in the mid-nineteenth century. The most wide-spread instruction books published in Estonian at the turn of the twentieth century were: George Markus, *Mõistlik Põllumees* (The Reasonable Farmer, 1893)<sup>22</sup>, Peter Obram's *Põllumehe Käsiraamat* (The Farmer's Handbook, 1893)<sup>23</sup>, N. Ødegaard's *Põllutöö Õppetüs* (Agricultural Instructions, 1899)<sup>24</sup>. The instructions reflected a modern agriculture, based on the use of the latest scientific and technological developments, managed in accordance with principles of rationality and market orientation. In the instruction books, and many booklets and brochures focusing on the same themes, modernity was presented through the use of details and precision, and through the implementation of the rational ideal.<sup>25</sup> Knowledge was divided into subjects like mineralogy in order to estimate the quality of the soil, chemistry to improve the soil, and botany to better know what to grow. Precision and scientific classifications were frequently used, and in *Põllutöö Õppetüs*, each chapter was introduced by a definition structuring the subject.<sup>26</sup> Seeds, plants, and trees were often designated with their Latin names and illustrated with detailed anatomic drawings of the entire plant and its parts. Tables explained what nutrition different fodder contained.<sup>27</sup> Enlargements of plants demonstrated the functions of cells in collecting water and sunlight.<sup>28</sup> Drawings of experimentally-raised plants illustrated the need for minerals. The impact of different fertilizers was shown in a similar way.<sup>29</sup> Journals published tables of experiments with different brands of potatoes and grain to find out the best brands for the local conditions.<sup>30</sup> Parasites, worms, and insects causing disease

and damage were named and sometimes pictured, and even rabbits devastating young fruit trees were named with Latin terminology.<sup>31</sup> Different farm animals and breeds were presented and pictured. The focus was mostly on foreign breeds of milk and beef cattle, illustrating what was considered to be modern and desirable. However, to encourage the farmers to improve livestock, domestic farm breeds were also presented.<sup>32</sup> Modernity was thus represented in terms of what can be considered as a Weberian understanding, emphasizing the role of scientific and organizational development, and rationality in every aspect. The concept of modernization underscored the belief that it could constitute the process of emancipation and liberation from poverty. The national question was only mentioned in relation to the general emancipating message connected to modernization. The intention was to give the farmer the impression that he could influence his life and situation through hard work and modern methods.<sup>33</sup>

According to the agricultural instructions, the base for agriculture and society was the independent family farm, run by a family, and able to support a family.<sup>34</sup> In the agricultural instructions, the family was seldomly directly mentioned, but always represented through its labour output, and was also described as an organic unity, where different members had different gender-coded tasks, and responsibilities to fulfill in order to sustain the family. The natural head of the family was the farmer, pictured as a versatile and educated man, who managed his farm through hard work and in concurrence with modern scientific knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Through adapting a rational approach, the farmer could plan his work in order to control every aspect of his labour, and act as a model for his family and servants. It was understood that the farmer had a responsibility for the land, and that to take full responsibility could only be possible if he tilled the land with his own hands. Thus, the prime characteristics of an ideal farmer were not only built on landowning, but also on responsible management of the land in accordance with modern knowledge and rationality.<sup>36</sup> The imposed norm was overwhelmingly patriarchal, but, unlike under feudal conditions, the relations between the farmers, their families and servants were to be marked by mutual respect, based on knowledge and ability.<sup>37</sup> By taking part in the daily work and being capable of performing all of the necessary skills, the farmer was distinguished from the manor owner, and put forth as the more modern and responsible of the two. In public, the farmer, marketing the products, and, present in the assembly of rural township, and the agricultural association, represented the family. As an example, milk and butter displayed at agricultural fairs or sold at markets, were mostly mentioned as the farmer's products, even though home dairying is considered to be a female task.

The picture of the ideal farmer and farm is of course simply an ideal, even if it holds many characteristics of a patriarchal reality. As in all less well-to-do agrarian societies, all hands at the farm were needed during harvest time, and workload peaks, and young women were especially common to the fields at these times. The norm regarding the gender-coded division of work seems instead, like in most parts of rural Europe, to implicate that women could manage male tasks, whereas men could not perform female tasks. The strict gender division in the self-help literature is thus noteworthy, as it gives advice, impossible to follow, and advice not following the promoted ideas of rationality. The most reasonable explanation is that the ideas of a strictly gender-coded division of work existed as a sign of wealth, corresponding to the idea that only on a wealthy and successful farm could women stay home during harvest, a luxury only obtainable through the process of modernization.

Moreover, a broader perspective which plead that the organization of a family was the model for the organization of society, where the work and responsibility of every farmer and family was important for sustaining the local society, began to emerge in the self-help literature. While the program of agricultural modernization and the picture of the ideal farmer in the late nineteenth century was focused on the solitary farm and farmer, it slowly shifted during the first years of the twentieth century to stress that the development of the local community and the role of the farmer as a responsible member of the local community, serving as the foundation for his position in the community as a citizen. From an ideological perspective the farmer was thus presented as the ideal member of the community – an ideological symbol equal to the socialist worker or liberal entrepreneur. In fine arts related to the agriculture this transformation was pictured in illustrations through a change from a solitary bearded Russian farmer to the farmer in modern sober dress, working with others in front of a steam engine.<sup>38</sup>

## Agricultural associations

The message of improvement represented by agricultural instructions was effected by a new generation of agricultural associations, ultimately realized in the last years of the nineteenth century. The associations were independent from the state. Despite being founded in a society which was fundamentally suspicious of all form of public life and independence, the associations were forced to have their statutes approved by authorities and to follow strict regulations.<sup>39</sup> Until 1905, a network of sixty-five independent associations was created in Estonia. The typical association had 100 to 300 members meeting in schoolhouses, town houses, and on open ground.<sup>40</sup>

According to the statutes, the agricultural associations were apolitical and founded for the purpose of promoting agricultural development, based on the principles of voluntary associations, and open to all who shared its aims and ideals. In reality, the associations mainly consisted of manor-owning Baltic German nobility, farmers and professionals from villages interested in agriculture matters, and had no members from the landless. Excepting the nobility, whose presence is not to be expected, the members generally belonged to the same groups, which were capable of taking part in the government of the rural townships. During the first ten years of work, the association boards consisted of a mixture of farmers, noblemen, and professionals from the villages, such as township secretaries and teachers, with leading positions reserved for a combination of farmers and nobility.<sup>41</sup> The associations reflected the emergence of a new economic structure, where specialization and, accordingly, cooperation were most needed, as well as the demand for a new form of a rural public sphere, able to manage the problems of the landowning. The presence of Baltic Germans in the association boards has thus far been interpreted as an attempt by the Baltic Germans to control and direct the activities of the independent farmers in the direction of the nobility's interests.<sup>42</sup> This seems most likely, but viewed from the perspective of the farmers, the nobility also provided the associations with access to a wider social network and manorial agricultural knowledge. Most importantly, the cooperation required the nobility to break with the old hierarchy of lord and servant and to instead adapt to the farmers' perceptions, and discuss Estonian issues on an equal basis.



The main activities of the studied associations included lectures and discussions concerning the modernization of agriculture. Lectures generally followed the path of modernization outlined by the agricultural instructions. However, the associations were closer to the reality of the farmers and aware of the risks and lack of capital, and therefore often promoted a more careful program of modernization. Besides the main focus on a shift from grain growing to cattle breeding, considerable interest was shown in the improvement of fields and fieldwork, and in the development of other possibilities for income, such as gardening and beekeeping. Besides promoting the introduction of foreign breeds, the improvement of local breeds was also discussed in associations. At the beginning, lectures were often delivered by association members, and journals were read publicly. However, after the turn of the twentieth century, invited agricultural instructors and publishers held many lectures. This probably standardized the agenda beyond the influence of the printed agricultural instructions. Lectures were also held on subjects of general education and on issues concerning the local community. Meetings and discussion were held in a spirit of unity and consensus and votes often ended in almost unanimous agreement. A modicum of respect was granted to members of the board and to lecturers, but everyone was allowed to speak and take part in the discussions, although there were occasions when board members made use of their social position or rank in the association to close discussions which threatened to bring up issues that could cause conflict or conflicted with their own views.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the consensus can be understood as both a mirror of the traditional social structure, where the noblemen were in a superior position, and an expression of unity.

Most agricultural associations also arranged annual agricultural exhibitions, introducing the audience to agricultural tools, cattle breeding, and arranging agricultural competitions.<sup>44</sup> The aim was to publicize the associations' aims and ideas to a broader public, and the exhibitions often turned into large festivities, and became a public tradition which extended to others than those who were typical targets for the message of improving agriculture. Exhibited items and agricultural competitions indicated improvements and encouraged farmers to pursue further achievements. At the same time, the contests can be interpreted as a method to promote the characteristics of the ideal farmer, and maintain the patriarchal norm within the gender-coded division of farm work.

As long as the associations remained focused on agricultural improvement, they managed to work in a spirit of consensus with few disagreements over the agenda of modernization. During the last years of the nineteenth century, this changed. The social tension in the Baltic provinces affected the associations. Faced with conflicts between landowners and the landless, the association members closed ranks and defended what they considered the stability of the local community and the interests of agriculture. As an example, many association's members agreed to not hire lazy, criminal or alcoholic laborers, and endeavoured to discover ways to discipline farmhands. However, issues which directly reflected the social inequality within the associations also caused a deepening fracture in the associations. One of these issues was the governmental program for land measurement, where farmers feared that the nobility would gain too much influence and that farmland would therefore be taxed more heavily than manor land. Claiming that the issue was political, and therefore out of the associations' field of competence, the nobility tried to prevent the associations from discussing land measurement or expressing their fears to the authorities. Unable to secure an agreement to this approach, many nobles left the boards and

associations. The tense relationship between the farmers and the nobility became visible with the 1905 revolt. Conflicts within the associations over land tenancy and taxes were underscored by the ethnically based social conflict between the Estonians and the Baltic German nobility. The situation was accentuated in the years before 1905, when members in some associations tried to bring up political issues and demands on the authorities on the agenda. This caused most representatives of the nobility to leave the associations.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Estonian farmers and the local Estonian elite came to manage most of the associations in the period after 1905. The associations maintained their unpolitical status, but extended their work and interaction with the surrounding society. Presentations on agricultural improvement were the main issues on the association's agenda, as far as the agricultural journals indicate and the minutes allow studying. Increasingly, with respect to the time before 1905, the number of courses held by agricultural instructors in the associations and the joint purchase of goods indicate a shift to a more purpose-oriented work. The membership records of the associations during this period show that the members were mostly landed Estonians, along with a few landless and some farmers with Russian names, demonstrating a broadening of the associations to new groups of people sharing the same problems, ideas, and interest in modernization. Most significant was the growing number of members in the agricultural associations and agrarian cooperatives, which focused agricultural associations in a new and even more central position in the rural public sphere.

## The farmers on the national arena

The social turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century and the Revolution of 1905 emphasized the role of the associations as an emerging entity on the national scene. As one of the few allowed organizations in rural areas, the agricultural associations represented the native rural society. The first public expression was the Agricultural Congress of July 1899, arranged by *Tartu Eesti Põllumeeste Selts*, the newspaper *Postimees*, and those who represented an ideologically national and liberal position. It was visited by 23 agricultural associations and a large public, primarily from Livland. The primary aim of this Congress should be understood as creating a common agenda for modernization, facilitating and expressing unity among the agricultural associations and publicizing their unity and ideas. The agenda was dominated by presentations on agricultural matters, similar to those delivered in the agricultural associations, and discussions on agricultural issues. One of the main issues was the promotion of saving and loan cooperatives and dairy cooperatives, which aimed to better support and make use of the modernization of agriculture. The Congress' main resolutions were to found a central organization, representing the agricultural associations, and to found an Estonian secondary agricultural school.<sup>46</sup> None of the resolutions could be implemented, but they underline the importance of education, which had already been identified and expressed by the agricultural associations in the 1860s, and highlight the intention to unite the farmers and express their interests in the society.

Social and political pressure from the tsarist government increased during the first years of the twentieth century. In order to meet the farmers' demands for participation in the public affairs, some agricultural associations were invited to represent farmers in

consultations on rural development in 1902.<sup>47</sup> Thus, for the first time, the authorities acknowledged farmers as a group which was capable of formulating a standpoint and negotiating. The interest of the nobility and the authorities in such consultation was, however, negligible, thereby prompting farmers to encourage agricultural associations to send their own proposals to the authorities. With this action, the associations indirectly formed a common political program for the farming community. The main demands were to institute a political reform which would allow for common people to be represented at different levels in the province, increased possibility for the landless to purchase land from the church and the manors which had been promised during previous land reforms, the abolishment of all noble privileges, the opening of agricultural schools, and the institution of Estonian as the prime language in schools.

During the Revolution of 1905, the farmers' interests were accentuated and demonstrated by the 1905 Agricultural Congress in July and the 1905 All-Estonian Congress in late November. Given the lack of organized political groupings, the main newspapers generally came to fulfill their function during the revolution, and the class-based perspective of *Teataja* and *Uudised* competed with the idea of national unity presented in *Postimees* and *Sakala*. The 1905 Agricultural Congress was a broad follow-up to the 1899 congress, with more structure and with more associations present. Noteworthy was the tension between some of the local agricultural associations and an elite, consisting of publishers, intellectuals, and agricultural instructors, during the Congress.<sup>48</sup> This tension can be understood from different perspectives. It highlights the divergence between agricultural programs and agricultural science, and the daily problems facing farmers in the implementation of agricultural transformation. Moreover, it can be understood as a conflict between the older, and often urban-based associations, which took a central position on the national level, and the new and local associations, which would represent the genuine agricultural society. This circumstance probably affected what can be understood as a hidden aim of the Agricultural Congress: namely, to form a united rural front. This front would be able to compete with the workers and socialists over the symbols and meaning of the revolution, especially at the All-Estonian Congress later in the year. This aim initially failed, because of internal tension, and because the congress did not include representatives of the landless. Some associations, like the one in R pina, also seem to have begun the work of formulating their own demands, inspired by the programs presented by the radical newspapers *Teataja* and *Uudised* and the demands put forward in 1902, and thus demonstrated a greater similarity to socialist rhetoric than to the rhetoric of the moderate nationalists charged with organizing the congress. However, being socialist in this context did not mean to follow a Marxist agenda, but rather to demand radical and immediate social changes. In its content the congress must be considered as a step towards a more consistent agrarian program, as the focus on agricultural cooperatives implicated the creation of a new agrarian structure which promised to solve the general problems of society.

The All-Estonian Congress held at the end of November became the first general political manifestation in Estonia's modern history. However, due to the political tension, the Congress split in two on its first day of work, and ended with the presentation of two different resolutions. The split also divided the representatives for the agricultural associations, and the rural population correspondingly, between those supporting the radical *Aula* resolutions made by the socialist camp and the *B rgemuse* resolutions presented by

the moderates, following the lines of the organizers of the Agricultural Congresses.<sup>49</sup> The 1905 congresses can be understood as part of the process of the formation and positioning of a rural class, based on the farmers and a class of landless. During the revolution, the aims and ideas of the farmers fully challenged, for the first time, the aims and ideas of other groupings in Estonian society. It made them realize that the intellectual nationalist perception of a national unity beyond social interests did not reflect reality completely. Instead, the farmers found themselves competing with the labor movement on the issue of representation and a solution for the landless. This caused a sharp class-based division between the landed and the landless in rural society. However, the proposals made by the agricultural associations in 1902, and by some associations during the revolution 1905, called for a broadening of landowning, and thereby for the broadening of the farmers' class. The intention behind such proposals can be understood as corresponding with both national and agrarianist views of a classless society, based on self-owning farmers. But the move towards the landless came too late to be successful during the revolution, as the landless generally seemed to have been more attracted by socialist rhetoric, identifying them as rural laborers, rather than as farmers. It is also worth noting that the socialist-based *Aula* resolution paid more attention to the rural conditions than those of the *Bürgermuse*, which demonstrates that the farmers were taken by surprise by the socialists' intervention in matters which farmers considered as to be their area of expertise. But, even if the socialists had taken the initiative during the All-Estonian Congress, and presented far-reaching solutions for the landless by promising them land, they would have had to adapt to farmers' values and understandings, ultimately accepting the hegemony of their ideas.

## Founding an agrarian movement

After the revolution, the transformation from grain to dairy production was put into practice through a network of cooperatives. In the agricultural journals, the cooperatives were presented as the deliverers of the poor, and as one of the main factors in a modern agriculture. From an evolutionary perspective, cooperatives were presented as a development of agricultural association, and as having roots in traditional forms of cooperation. By initiating a network of savings and loan cooperatives, the farmers would be able to collect investments for agricultural improvement on the local level, and reap the benefits of those improvements. Through production cooperatives, the members would get access to technology and methods that would have otherwise been too costly or advanced for the single farmer. They would also be able to market their products jointly, and thereby reach a wider market without having to go through a middleman. In order to be able to negotiate better prizes and avoid giving profits to middlemen, goods were to be bought by consumption cooperatives. The vision was a society functioning on the principles of a cooperative, a vision closely tied to an agrarianist ideal.<sup>50</sup>

In practice, the establishment of production cooperatives was also made possible through mutual loans between cooperatives. Agricultural associations also often became deeply involved in the founding and management of cooperatives. Agricultural instructors employed by the larger agricultural associations supervised the founding of cooperatives. The cooperative networks thus occasioned an intensified integration in the local

community. The networks between agricultural associations, cooperatives and the representatives of the rural townships established the agricultural associations as a central entity in the rural public, and provided the community with its own recourses, independent from Baltic Germans and the state. In contrast to the voluntary associations – which everyone in principle was free to enter and leave – the cooperatives demanded a long-term engagement, often including work, investments and loyalty from its members.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the ideals of cooperation and consensus, promoted in the agricultural associations, were tested on far more demanding grounds, where the production and well-being of the farm was put at stake. The sense of responsibility for the local community was also deepened and the organizational ideas set into practice in a modern shape, as the interests of the single farmer were directly tied to those of other cooperative members.

During the years preceding World War I, the cooperatives slowly united on a national basis. From an early stage on, informal networks were created between the cooperatives, often based on the networks between agricultural associations. In the years immediately before World War I, these were transformed into formal umbrella organizations.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the cooperatives managed to fulfill their goal of founding a central association, uniting the farmers organizations, which had been the goal of most agricultural associations since the Agricultural Congress 1899. The central association created a standard for organization in the local communities and the emergence of a new rural elite primarily consisting of cooperative managers and agricultural instructors. Combining agricultural education, with practical skills and commitment to agricultural and social development, the instructors embodied the ideal farmer outlined in the agricultural instructions. The cooperatives formed a network, separate from the Baltic German cooperatives and trade organizations and separated from the state. In order to envision a good cooperative member, the promoters of cooperatives accentuated the ideals from the 1890s agricultural instructions. By emphasizing the role of the member acting for the best interest of the collective, individualism and mismanagement were depicted as the main threats to the welfare of modern society.<sup>53</sup> The technical aspects of development also excluded women, to some extent, from the cooperative movement. Dairy cooperatives were discussed and organized in accordance with male norms and women's traditional knowledge of dairy production was often marginalized.

The cooperative movement was built on and promoted ideals from foreign cooperatives, linking Estonian development to Western Europe.<sup>54</sup> Similar to the Danish and Polish movements, but unlike the Russian, the Estonian cooperative movement was built on grass-roots principles, a circumstance which was vital for its survival. While the Siberian cooperative movement already faced considerable problems before World War I, the Estonian movement survived, despite its problems. The result was that the rural community was relatively well-organized when the independent Estonian state was founded after World War I.

## Towards an agrarian program

From an ideological perspective, the ideas formulated in the Estonian rural local and national public, was best summarized in Aleksander Eisenschmidt's agricultural program

from 1912.<sup>55</sup> In his view, the fundamental change needed in the rural society was primarily of an economic character. Albeit, with a strong focus on means such as education and cooperation.<sup>56</sup> Eisenschmidt's program strived higher than the mere transformation or introduction of specific methods to branches or breeds as promoted by agricultural self-help literature, and aimed at a transformation of the entire society. Despite the fact that his program, which rested on solid academic work and years of publishing in agricultural journals, did not have the same character as the political programs of the socialist and nationalist camps published in the newspapers. Eisenschmidt avoided words with political connotations and only forwarded his opinion against an idea of the un-modern, and did not challenge other ideologies.

According to Eisenschmidt, agriculture had to be regarded holistically, where different fields and parts of the rural economy were connected to each other. Thus, it was a program which implicated a far-reaching specialization of agriculture, but also a diversification of the farm economies in order to make farms sustainable.<sup>57</sup>

Eisenschmidt supported the idea of land reform, but added that it had to be carried out in accordance to economically rational principles. Small farms could, according to Eisenschmidt, only create wealth if they were intensely cultivated. Thus, the quantity of land under cultivation was secondary to the amount of capital and knowledge invested in the cultivation.<sup>58</sup> In line with Eisenschmidt's perspective, the development of the existing farms depended on and was to go hand in hand with the development of new farms. This kind of argument marks, on one hand Eisenschmidt's holistic perspective, and on the other, his ambition to unite the different interests in agriculture and create consensus as a fundament for a common work and program.

An important tool to create an harmonious society was *ühistegewus* (cooperation). The cooperatives were to take over where the capacity of the individual no longer sufficed. They were to organize farmers and make sure that the right breeds and seeds were selected for their production, and marketed for a good price. The cooperatives would, in the perspective of Eisenschmidt, be an assisting and controlling institution. The capital necessary for improvement would be made available through banking cooperatives, where the farmers could borrow capital and deposit their profits. Economic cooperatives would make the farmers aware that they could only be strong by uniting on a local, as well as national level, and they would thereby ameliorate the negative effects of the individualism which he observed amongst Estonian farmers. Unity was the responsibility of every *rahwaliige* (member of the people), who should keep his savings in an Estonian cooperative or credit institution, and thereby contribute to the progress of the people.<sup>59</sup> The idea of economic rationality, as it was understood by the agricultural instructions in the 1890s, was complemented by national rhetoric, implying that the national perspective was rational. Nevertheless, Eisenschmidt's discussions always focused on improving the Estonian conditions. His program formulated a clear agrarianist standpoint, and he considered agriculture to be the backbone of the society and economy. Society should be based on family farms, and he pronounced the ideals of making decisions through rational discussion. He stressed the responsibility of every member for the progress of the whole community.

Compared to the agricultural program, including cooperatives, presented by Jakobson in the 1860s, Eisenschmidt's program was far more theoretical and abstract. The main threat to the farmers was not considered to be the Baltic German nobility and its

century-long domination of the countryside, but the abstract mechanism of the market, and unwillingness to modernize among many farmers.

In an international comparison, Estonian agrarianism should be considered moderate and progressive friendly. It was a democratic and pragmatic form of Agrarianism, whose ideas had been formulated by the new local rural elite, consisting of wealthy farmers and agronomists, and had developed its practices through work in agricultural associations and cooperatives. These associations and cooperatives were based on the democratic principles of voluntary associations, but gained through their focus on learning joint production a special character and understanding of the social order, based on knowledge in agricultural issues and willingness and ability to act for the wealth of the community.<sup>60</sup>

During the democratic period, Estonian parties acted as responsible parties in parliament, ready to negotiate. They later, however, turned, during the authoritarian period, into supporting the regime stressing responsibility and order. This shift cannot fully be explained by the movement's origins in the nineteenth century. But an understanding can be made easier if the focus on order, knowledge, and rationality, promoted by the agricultural movement at the turn of the century, is considered. In interwar Eastern Europe, agrarian parties seldomly managed to stay in power or be successful for longer periods. As Dorreen Warriner has noted, much of their attractiveness was lost as soon as land reforms were carried out, and the parties seldom had a program which embraced the whole of society or which was prepared to manage the crises of the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> However, stressing the primacy of rationality – but doing it on the expenses of democracy – Estonia became one of few examples of successful peasant based development, capable of managing the economic crises of the 1930s.

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- 55 See Aleksander Eisenschmidt, Kodumaa põllutöö põhjalikumaks muutmise küsimus, Tartu 1912.
- 56 Cf. Eisenschmidt, Kodumaa põllutöö, see fn. 55, 9.
- 57 Cf. Eisenschmidt, Kodumaa põllutöö, see fn. 55, 38.
- 58 Cf. Eisenschmidt, Kodumaa põllutöö, see fn. 55, 10.
- 59 Cf. Eisenschmidt, Kodumaa põllutöö, see fn. 55, 40.
- 60 Kuidas ühistegewuse-liikumisele Eestis alus pandi, in: Ühistegewusleht (1913) 3.
- 61 See Doreen Warrinner, *Contrasts in Emerging Societies*, New Haven 1936.