

# The Question of Moral Economy and Famine Relief in the Russian Baltic Provinces of Estland and Livland, 1841–69\*

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*Russian rulers recognized the principle that ‘good government’ nourishes its people in bad years. The paper addresses the question how the principle of paternalist ‘moral economy’ was translated into practice or more specifically, what the Russian central government did and ordered the others--manorial lords, communities--to do in this respect. It appears that throughout the period under study, the Russian rulers as well as the Baltic German nobilities made efforts to place the responsibility for the peasants’ maintenance on the shoulders of communities (i.e. local peasants). The paper discusses the results of such policy. Through references to famine experiences in Russia Proper it looks at the adequacy of official relief efforts from the point of whether these kept people from dying and starving, or failed to do so. In different socioeconomic contexts, the same policy gave different results when measured in terms of the demographic response to short-term crisis.*

In 1841–47 and 1868–69, Estland and Livland were hit twice by major famines which developed from repeated harvest failures. In the 1840s all three Baltic provinces (Fig. 1) experienced famine, but the death-toll was significantly higher in Livland than in Estland. Crude death rate in the worst years, 1845–46, was in Livland 48 and 45.2 and in rural Estland 35.3 and 32.2 per thousand, respectively.<sup>1</sup> In the northern part of Livland (present-day southern Estonia and Ösel) it rose to 54.2 and 49.9 per thousand in 1845 and 1846, respectively. In Kurland, famine

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1 For the lack of demographic research into Estonian famines we can hereby rely on the Governors’ reports that provide us with rough figures. Their reliability is yet to be determined. The figures should be taken as providing information on magnitude rather than precise statistics. Annual Reports of the Governor, 1845–46 (National Archives of Estonia, subsequently RA, EAA), f. 296, n. 4, s. 1179; Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs (subsequently, LVVA), 1. f., 4. apr., 317. l, ff 102–210. Data on Estland includes urban population and it is taken from Vahtre, 1973, 262.

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was regionally uneven and in 1845–46 the overall population growth rate was positive.<sup>2</sup> Thus, at the provincial level, the demographic consequences in Kurland remained rather negligible. The crisis of 1868–69 affected Estland and the isle of Ösel and a few regions in the south. In fact, 1869 saw the greatest demographic setback in Estland in the whole century. According to official statistics, the number of deaths was 14,324 compared to the average of 8,120 from 1859–63 (Table 2). Death rate was 45 per thousand and the number of births fell by almost a quarter which resulted in a negative population growth of minus 16.7 per thousand. Both hunger crises coincided with devastating famines in European Russia. In 1839–42 and 1848–49 subsistence crises hit several regions over Russia (incl. Central Black Earth Region) and in 1844–46 Smolensk, Vitebsk, Minsk, Pskov and other western areas.<sup>3</sup> In late 1860s, famine raged in the northern (Arkhangelsk, Grand Duchy of Finland) and western areas of the Russian Empire stretching from St. Petersburg to Kiev.<sup>4</sup>

Protecting its subjects from starvation and extreme want has for centuries been one of the primary functions of government and one of the principal public expectations of the state.<sup>5</sup> Some researchers attribute the government's relief efforts to the governing elite's fear of moral and social collapse, civil unrest, the loss of labour force and the spread of infection,<sup>6</sup> while others point to the principle of paternalist 'moral economy', which called for provision for the needy in emergencies<sup>7</sup>. In the following, this concept is used for expressing the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. In order to maintain social order, rulers had to accept, to a certain extent, peasant communities' expectations that the powerful take action when their minimal subsistence needs were threatened.<sup>8</sup> If that happened, they desired that the authorities provide for the availability of food, and set the prices of subsistence commodities. This expectation has often passed unfulfilled, but it has seldom been emphatically denied by government.<sup>9</sup> It has also been suggested that the Chinese government, for example, took its role as an ultimate provider of food in times of dearth more seriously than its western European counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Western poor relief systems were not designed to take care of large groups of people in temporary need during years of high food prices, but only the small fraction in permanent need of assistance. Therefore, the increasing numbers of landless poor, who comprised

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2 Annual reports of the Governor, 1845–46 (LVVA, 1. f., 4. apr., 316. l., ff 113–90; LVVA, 1. f., 4. apr., 317. l, ff 3–101).

3 Ermolov, 1909, i, 55–6.

4 Lust, 2015, 18.

5 Arnold, 1988, 96.

6 Arnold, 1988, 81–82; C. Ó Gráda, 2009, 197, 202.

7 Scott, 1979; Bohstedt, 2010.

8 Thompson, 1971, 76–136. For a recent analysis see Götz, 2015, 147–62.

9 Arnold, 1988, 109.

10 Bengtsson, 2004a, 140; Lee et al. 2004, 86; Fuller, 2015, 148–50.

one-third to half of Western rural communities remained outside most Western systems of poor relief until the arrival of the ‘new’ poor laws from the middle of the nineteenth century onward.<sup>11</sup>

The principle that ‘good government’ nourishes its people in bad years was recognized also by Russian rulers. In most of Europe, in the late eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century strict regulation increasingly gave way to pragmatic reliance on markets.<sup>12</sup> The Russian antifamine system combined administrative regulation as well as reliance on freedom of the grain trade and public works.<sup>13</sup> Little is known about the prevailing ideologies among elite Russian politicians and bureaucratic elite during the famine years under review. The article addresses the question whether the principle of paternalist ‘moral economy’ was translated into practice, or more specifically, what the Russian central government did and ordered the others--manorial lords, communities--to do in this respect. The Russian imperial government as well as local Baltic German nobilities in Estland and Livland agreed that peasants should be safeguarded against hunger through appropriate policies and institutions in both good and bad years, but in reality, however, it meant that throughout the period under study, they made efforts to place that responsibility for the peasants’ maintenance and social guarantees on the shoulders of local peasants. The results of such policy will be discussed in the light of empirical evidence on mortality. The share of relief borne by local resources and the central administration are seen as important research topics in European historiography.<sup>14</sup> Through references to famine experiences in Russia Proper (subsequently, Russia) this chapter looks at the adequacy of official relief efforts from the point, whether these kept people from dying and starving, or failed to do so. Mortality, of course, does not capture the full demographic impact of famine.

The first two sections examine the relief system and demographic response to crises. The last discusses the successes and failures of government relief policy in Estland and Livland.

## Relief System

Being part of Russian Empire, three Baltic provinces, nevertheless, enjoyed so-called ‘Baltic special order’ status (*status provincialis*), which was based on the recognition of the Baltic-German nobilities<sup>15</sup> rights in local affairs and provided a very firm shield of their privileges even up to the early 1880s. Although famine relief systems differed in some aspects, hunger relief policy was not a question in

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11 Lee et al., 2004, 91.

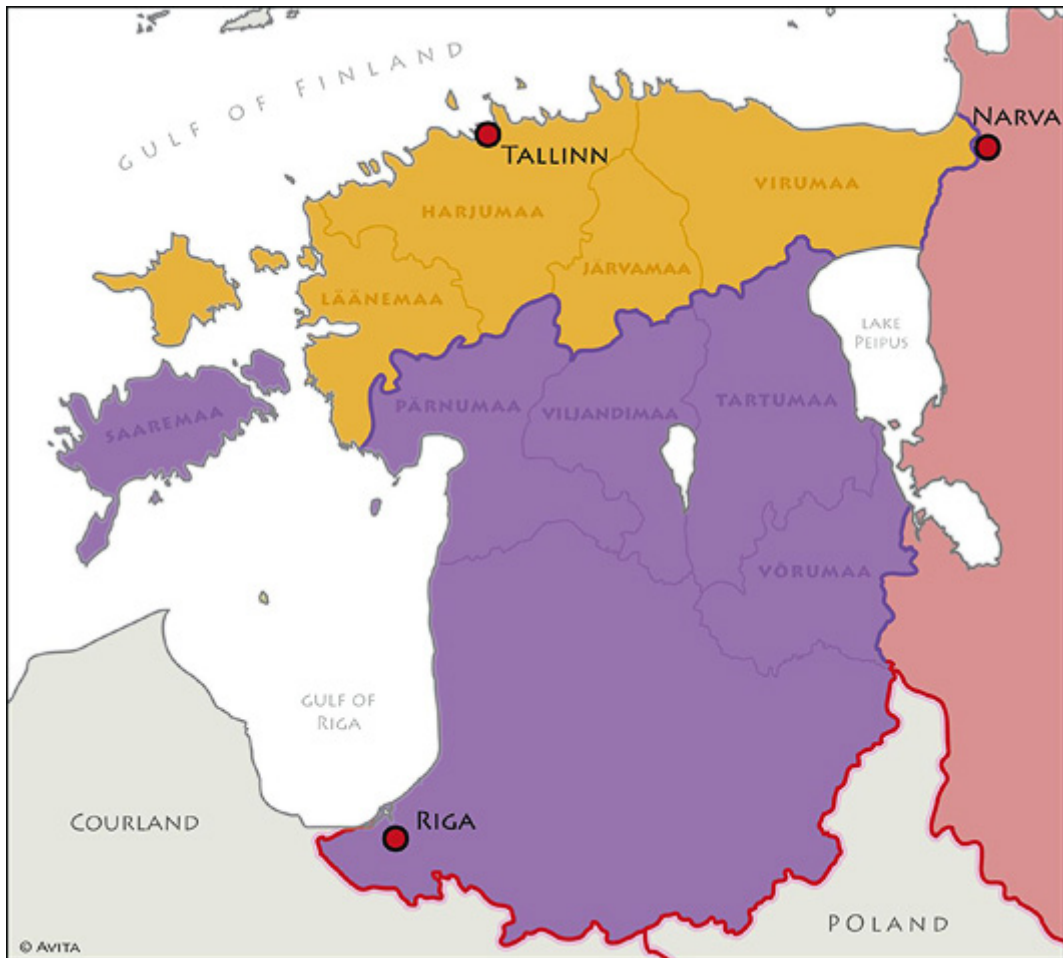
12 Ó Gráda, 2009, 139.

13 Robbins, 1975, 16–30.

14 Daly, 2007, 64–65, 75; Vanhaute, 2011, 50.

15 The *Ritterschaft* was the corporate body representing the interests of the landowning Baltic German nobility.

Figure 1: The Baltic region in the period covered by this article. Map prepared by Avita for the author.



which the special status of the Baltic provinces mattered and the state government regulated it. In this section the system in the Baltics will be briefly summarized as it has been already discussed extensively elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

As long as the serfdom prevailed, estate owners were officially seen as caretakers of their serf peasants in difficult times. For that purpose, the nobilities of Livland and Estland agreed in 1763 that every landlord had to keep a grain stock for his peasants up to next harvest.<sup>17</sup> Since the estate owners saw this obligation as unfavourable to them, it was enacted by the Russian Senate on November 29, 1799 that in the Russian empire communal granaries under the watchful eye of government's agents or noble officials (in the Baltics) had to be set up at every noble and crown estate.<sup>18</sup> Serfs were obliged to contribute a certain amount of corn to these granaries until they contained a fixed amount of grain. General poverty and several crop failures did not allow peasant farmers to make the necessary

16 The following outline is based on Lust, 2015, 15-37; Lust, 2014, 81-106.

17 Decree of the guberniia administration (RA, EAA, f. 279, n. 1, s. 585).

18 *Polnoe Sobranie Zakonov* (=PSZ) I, Vol. XXV, No. 19203.

contributions to the storehouses and the grain reserves were collected at such a slow pace (yearly portion was set at four litres of winter grain and 1.6 litres spring grain per each ‘soul’, i.e. the number of males of all ages) that the stores would have reached the fixed level only after decades. The slow collection meant that estate owners often lent the deficient corn to the communal granary.

The Baltic serf emancipation laws of 1816–19 declared that henceforth peasants would lose their right to demand advance loans from manorial lords, and the responsibility for the peasants’ maintenance and social guarantees was placed on the shoulders of their communities.<sup>19</sup> Every peasant farmer was to contribute grain to a communal granary until it contained a stock of c. 229 kg of grain in Livland and c. 441 kg of rye and 78.6 litres of barley in Estland. In 1828, this rate was lowered in Estland to 220 kg of rye and 61 kg of barley. According to the Rural Township Law of 1866, the amount of stock was unified at c. 210 kg per each male ‘soul’.<sup>20</sup> Also the Russian famine relief statute stipulated that communal granaries were to hold similar amount of grain for each male ‘soul’.<sup>21</sup> In addition to their supplies of stored food, rural communities (municipalities; in Russia peasant communes) were entitled to possess monetary funds. In case of need, community members could borrow grain for consumption and planting. The fixed amount of grain stock was sufficient to provide very meagre subsistence. In reality the landlords still helped out in times of distress when community granaries could not provide the needy with sufficient assistance in the form of loans. In the 1840s, provincial authorities in Estland and Livland explicitly obliged the manorial lords to grant subsistence loans to needy peasants.

Unlike in Russia, capital funds at the *guberniia* (i.e. provincial) and central level did not back up local reserves in the Baltics.<sup>22</sup> As in Russia, provincial food supply commissions were set up in Livland and Estland in the 1820s, but the latter ceased to exist already in the 1830s.<sup>23</sup> The provincial food-supply commission under the chairmanship of the Governor managed cash and grain reserves for the purpose of famine relief and coordinated relief efforts, gathered and mediated information, discussed and made most of the important decisions concerning the amount of hunger relief, means of helping the needy, and so on, but its own money and grain reserves were very scanty or absent (in the 1860s). The food supply commission and Governor could apply to the central government for further aid. In Russia, the provincial commissions were abolished in 1866, and the management of food

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19 PSZ I, Vol. XXXIII (1816), No. 26 277; Vol. XXXIV (1817), No. 27 024; Vol. XXXVI (1819), No. 27 735.

20 *Makoggukonna Seadus Baltia-merre kubbermangudele Riia-, Tallinna- ja Kura-male* (Riia, n.p., 1866).

21 Robbins, 1975, 21.

22 The three-tiered system (commune-*guberniia*-state) in Russia was built up step by step. For more see Robbins, 1975, 16–30.

23 The Estland food supply commission was initially re-established as a temporary body in September 1868 and put on a firm legal footing in spring the next year.

supply operations was turned over to the local self-government (*zemstvos*). In the Baltics, *zemstvos* were absent and provincial food supply commissions continued their work. All *gubernii* could rely on the state treasury. The Baltic provinces were entitled to request grants from the Imperial capital fund (established in 1866) only in very exceptional cases as they did not contribute to it. Requests for such aid were presented to the Minister of Internal Affairs. Loans of more than 50,000 roubles were decided only by the Committee of Ministers and required imperial sanction.

In the event of a large-scale food supply crisis during which local and provincial reserves were inadequate, the imperial government authorized extraordinary measures. Russian antifamine measures included direct aid in the form of loans, public works, tax relief (postponements, exemptions), and interference in markets (price regulation, tariff reductions, export bans). In the Baltics, the government used direct grants of money and grain and tariff reductions with some effect in coping the crises. The government relief loan assigned to Livland in 1845–47 amounted to c. 1.2 million roubles, and Estland received 100,000 roubles in 1845.<sup>24</sup> Kurland received a 0.5 million rouble government loan. All in all, 11 million roubles were assigned to the starving people statewide in 1844–46.<sup>25</sup> In 1868–69, unlike during the 1840s, the central government gave interest-free loans. The Committee of Ministers assigned to Ösel a loan of 150,000 roubles and to Livland mainland districts 50,000 roubles. Estland received from the state treasury 210,000 roubles. Grain prices had doubled in the meantime.

The major deficiencies of the relief arrangement in the Baltics concerned the distribution of, rather than collecting of, the reserves. In Russia, the failure of the grain storage system meant that the central treasury often became the main source of relief in times of famine.<sup>26</sup> Even in the best years the peasants were too poor to fill the granaries and peasant distrust towards the state-imposed granary-system remained widespread. There are no scholarly analyses of the real level of storage in Estonian granaries in the period under consideration<sup>27</sup> but the peasants were chronically indebted to communal granaries in the first decades after their establishment. Afterwards, unlike in Russia, the decline of the granary stores in the Baltics did not pave the way for future difficulties. Communal reserves fell far short of need when a series of unfortunate events accumulated over a period of several years, even though the storehouses had been full prior to the crisis, as happened in late 1860s. Manorial economy commanded resources that could have been used for feeding the population, but the Baltic provinces, however, were not self-

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<sup>24</sup> Lust, 2015, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ermolov, 1909, i, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Robbins, 1975, 18; Lust, 2015, 21; Kahan, 1989, 136; Suvorin, 2015, 17–8; Rogozhina, 2013, 21. According to some authors grain stocks as a hunger relief measure in early modern era were in principle ineffective, irrespective of the country: Collet, 2010, 248.

<sup>27</sup> Kahk has considered a few regions of Läänemaa, poor and rather infertile areas in Estonia, in the 1810s–1820s and his results can be applied neither for other regions nor later time periods: Kahk, 1969, 170–2.

sufficient in the sense that food shortages could have been totally averted without any imports of food. The Baltic ports, however, were centres of the (transit) grain trade, with constant export grain flows and the grain could have been easily bought up for relief by government. The drop of purchasing power of most peasants vis-à-vis an increase of grain prices made such direct aid necessary. In normal years, Baltic agricultural output not only covered domestic demand but also provided grain and potatoes for its well-developed distilling industry.

Several deficiencies related to distribution of aid can be observed. On their own initiative, the communal authorities were free to give out only a portion of the reserves. A three-tier system of supervision over the use of communal reserves -- manorial administration (until 1866), parish magistrate (in Livland) and county magistrate (in Estland), and Governor -- not only significantly slowed the aid to the needy but also made it dependent on the will and expertise of these officials. Each level in this system tried to keep local granary loans as well as relief loans from public funds to a minimum and so did the imperial government, who did not fully grant the governors' requests for further aid. Institutional responses were shaped by the belief that every able-bodied person had to provide for oneself, which was hardly possible due to the loss of jobs, unavailability of public works employment and the legal restrictions on out-migration from the community (in the 1840s) and the province (in the 1860s). The 1866 administrative reform liberated the rural self-government from the local landlord's control, but gave to it free disposal over only a quarter of its reserves; giving out the remaining three-quarters required authorization from the parish magistrate.

Not only 'external' institutions were reluctant to give aid to the needy. Local community authorities which were empowered to grant granary loans and decide who should receive poor relief refused their help. Furthermore, the community authorities would apply for a government hunger relief loan and decide over its disbursal. Since the elders, jurymen and half of the council members (after 1866) were peasant farmers, application for and distribution of relief supplies were dominated by the village elite. The community was collectively responsible for the repayment of the loan at the next harvest, which made it very reluctant to grant assistance to the landless. Official regulations, correspondence of various officials and pastors, reports and supplications reveal that communities concealed information about the real situation and denied the need for aid or understated the severity of the situation, did not ask for sufficient government relief loans, frequently denied granary loans to cottagers and other landless, did not purchase grain for their monetary reserves, and left the landless to starve.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, granary loans to peasant farmers were not held back. Communal land ownership as well as periodical re-allocation of land according to the number of 'souls' were unknown in the Baltics. The lines between landed peasants and expanding groups of landless in the village were increasingly clear-cut.

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28 For the discussion, see Lust, 2015, 15–37; Lust, 2014, 81–106.

Not only were different-level authorities reluctant to give famine aid, but also the fixed norms -- normally one pound per person -- were very low.

## Demographic Effects

In Estland and Livland, famine conditions led to sudden rise in mortality, decline in fertility, and social dislocation<sup>29</sup>. Excess mortality, or at least the threat of excess mortality, is a defining feature of famine.<sup>30</sup> Regardless of the 'disease versus hunger' debate surrounding the bulk of research into famine mortality, the close connection between harvest failures, malnutrition, increased exposure to disease and mortality increase has long been observed.<sup>31</sup> Most famine victims succumbed to infectious disease rather than famine proper.<sup>32</sup> In Estland and Livland, hunger-related diseases were dysentery and typhus or 'typhus-like' diseases.

The extent of famine-related mortality has not been addressed in our historiography. Preliminary figures on Estonia are displayed in two tables and figure 2. Pre-famine 'normal ratios' are complicated to determine since in some areas the years 1841–47 saw an enduring crisis with short breaks and there were crop failures and rises in mortality also in the mid-1830s (most notably in 1835). Conversion to the Russian Orthodox Church in Livland in 1845–47 further complicates the issue since the data on vital events provided by the Lutheran clergymen do not cover a great number of people any more. Russian Orthodox Church records have been very little used to study population figures. Statistical data provided by the police to the Governor is unreliable.

Various methods have been suggested for identifying mortality crises. One simple method is to detect pairs of succeeding years in which the number of deaths was at least 25 per cent above the average since the previous crisis.<sup>33</sup>

By studying recent famines, Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux suggested moving from a binary conception of 'famine / no famine' to a graduated, multi-level definition, and disaggregate the dimensions of intensity and magnitude.<sup>34</sup> Regardless of rather approximate data at our disposal, we may well suppose that crises in the Estonian part of Livland in 1845-46 and in Ösel in 1868-69 can be classified as 'level 3' crises according to intensity (CMR  $\geq 1$  but  $< 5/10,000/\text{day}$ ). In the Estonian case, this method, however, would be more appropriate to use when

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29 About the meaning of social dislocation Voutilainen, 2015, 124–44.

30 Ó Gráda, 2009, 92; Vanhaute et al., 2007, 25–28.

31 Voutilainen, 2015, 124; Sen, 1981, 50; Pitkänen, 1993. See also Bengtsson & Dribe, 2005, 361; T. Bengtsson, 2004c, 40.

32 Ó Gráda, 2009, 116.

33 Bengtsson & Bröstrom, 2011, 124.

34 Howe & Devereux, 2004, 353–72.



knowing the daily death rates and not dividing the annual figure by 365 to find the average daily rate.

Different interpretations of famine’s time-span lead to different numbers of surplus mortality. Famines are products of historical, social, political and economic processes and rarely have clear-cut beginnings or endings.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the seriousness of the crisis varied regionally (Table 1, Figure 2). Our comparison refers to average rates in 1837–39. Migration was restricted and thus it has only negligible impact on district- and province-level data on the number of deaths. In the early forties mortality response was noticeable only in the districts of Võrumaa (Kreis *Werro*) and Läänemaa (Kreis *Wiek*). Mortality rose steeply in 1845 (Table 1, Fig. 1). Famine struck hardest in the southeast and south. In 1845–46, the average yearly number of deaths in Tartumaa (Kreis *Dorpat*) and Võrumaa exceeded more than 100 percent its pre-famine norm (1837–39). In Tartumaa, the number of births dropped by 27.3 per cent. The districts of Pärnumaa (Kreis *Pernau*) and Ösel were hit much less. From 1845–47, in rural Estland excess deaths were c. 5,700 from a population of c. 258,000 (2.2%).<sup>36</sup> We lack similar data on southern Estonia in the ‘decade of misery’ but it would probably not be incorrect to estimate that in the three districts in southern Estonia, total excess mortality in 1845–46 relative to earlier years (1837–39) may have been as much as c. 14,000 deaths (Fig. 2).<sup>37</sup> Death and birth figures returned to normal values gradually in 1846 and in 1847. 1848 was infamous cholera year. In late 1860s, hunger crisis peaked in winter 1868 and spring 1869. In Estland, death figures in 1869 were 76.4% higher than in 1859–63 (Table 2). In Ösel, in 1868–69 the average number of deaths per year rose over 100% compared to average from 1859–63.

**Table 1. Average yearly number of deaths in Estland and three districts of southern Estonia, 1837–1846**<sup>38</sup>

District	1837-39	1841-42	1845	1846	Change in % compared to 1837–39		
					1841-42	1845	1846
Tartumaa*	2882	3424	7793	5090	18,8	170.4	76.6
Viljandimaa	2097	2255	5109	2474	7,5	143.6	17.9
Võrumaa	1812	2195	3501	3780	21,1	93.2	108.7
Järvamaa	1201	1245	1648	1133	3,7	37.2	-5.7
Läänemaa	1772	2147	2608	2792	21,1	47.2	57.5
Harjumaa	1997	1951	2796	2451	-2.3	40.0	22.7
Virumaa	2084	2163	2800	2406	3.8	34.3	15.4

\* Data on Orthodox population is missing in the case of Võru- and Viljandimaa but is available on Tartumaa.

35 Voutilainen, 2016, 24, 325.

36 Vahtre, 1973, 256–8.

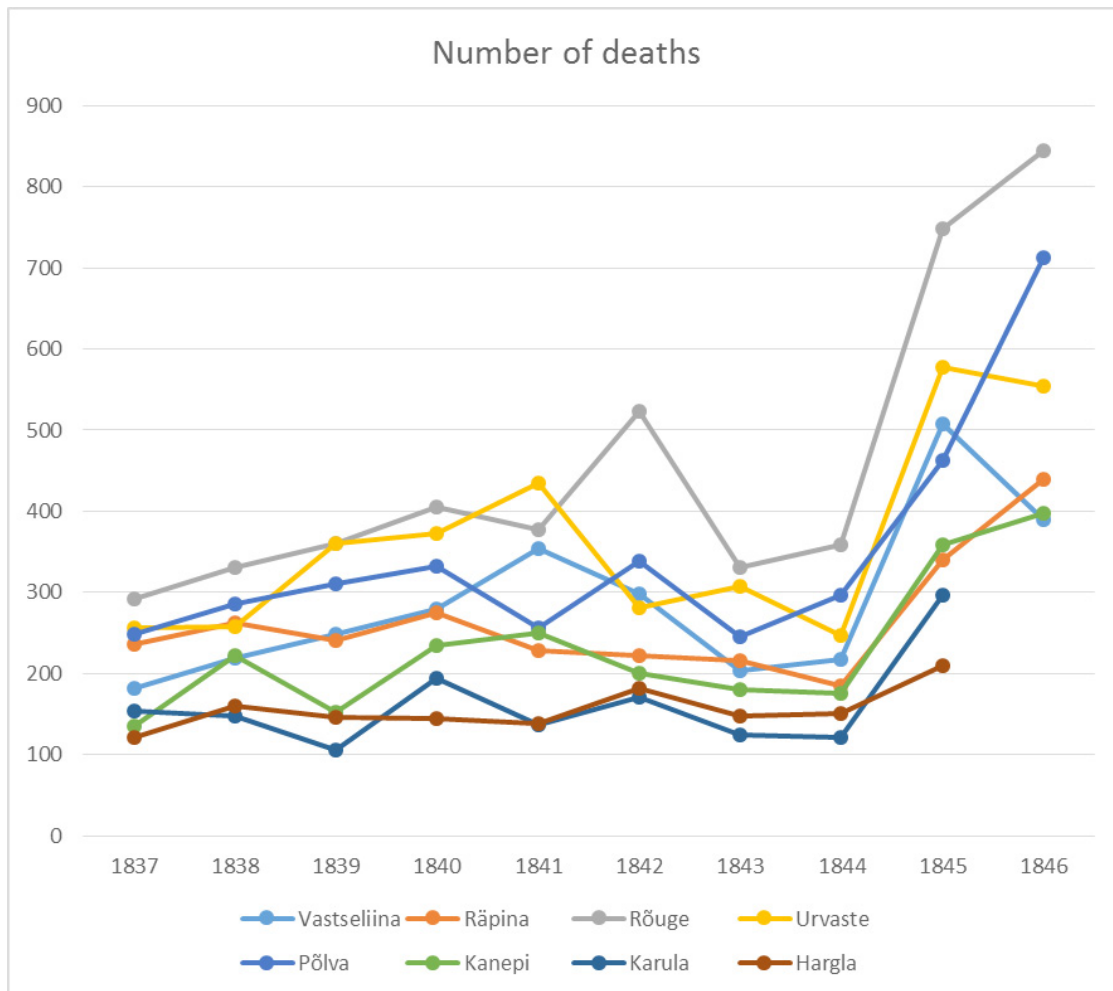
37 The total number of rural population in southern Estonia is unknown. Death figures (in fact, number of burials) are taken from church records and include only rural people.

38 The data on the number of deaths is taken from the annual reports of Lutheran pastors: RA, EAA, f. 1207, n. 1, s. 128, 129; EAA, f. 1205, n. 1, s. 107; Laarmaa, 2009, 165; Vahtre, 1973, 256–8.

**Table 2: Average no of deaths in Estland and Ösel, 1859–1863, 1866–1869<sup>39</sup>**

Region	1859-63	1866-67	1868	1869	Change in % compared to 1859–1863		
					1866-67	1868	1869
Estland (incl. towns)	8120	7769	n.a	14324	-4.3	n.a	76.4
Ösel (Saaremaa)	1056	1075	1989	2546	1.8	88.3	141.1

**Figure 2: Annual number of deaths in the parishes of Võrumaa, 1837–1846 (Lutheran population)\***



\* Data on Karula and Hargla in 1846 are not given since a significant part of the population converted to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1845–47.

39 Jordan, 1867, i, 21; Jung-Stilling, 1866, 26, 30. Governor's annual reports for the years 1866–69, 1866, 1867, 1869 (RA, EAA, f. 29, n. 3, s. 4360; RA, EAA, f. 29, n. 2, s. 4742; 4759); RA, EAA, f. 296, n. 1, s. 47; RA, EAA, f. 296, n. 4, s. 2364. Unfortunately we lack district level data about Estland. The data on 1866–67 derives from the annual reports of the governors and must be taken with caution.

The questions about social differences in mortality and to what extent mortality in the past was determined by economic factors are lively debated issues.<sup>40</sup> During famine, mortality in Finland and Ireland was strongly dependent on social background.<sup>41</sup> Narrative sources lend support to the claim that the rural poor suffered from hunger the most also in Estonia, at least in the late 1860s when the *corvée* had been banned.<sup>42</sup>

With regard to social gradient in mortality, the case of Russia Proper would deserve special interest. Most scholars agree that during the period under review, Russian agriculture was relatively backward and cultivation methods were simple which in combination with adverse climatic and weather conditions made vast tracts of the country prone to harvest failures. Normal mortality rates were high<sup>43</sup> and the significant under-registration of stillbirths and neonatal deaths further complicates the issue. Famine studies, demographic studies and studies of the living standard in Russia, however, have produced different and even contradicting results on the question of famine-related mortality.<sup>44</sup> Great caution is required when making generalizations given Russia's immense size and diversity.<sup>45</sup>

Steven Hoch in his often-cited book ‘Serfdom and Social Control in Russia’ (1986) has claimed, in line with common narrative, that the inability of Russian society to eliminate subsistence crises was one of the major features separating the eastern and western Europe of the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup> In an article published in 1998 he makes ‘a rigorous attempt’ to assess the nature of demographic crises in the parish of Borshevka from 1830–1912 and arrives to the conclusion that nutrition had minor effect on mortality which was determined rather by non-nutritional factors such as demographic factors, familial norms, and climatic constraints. Borshevka is located in the *guberniia* of Tambov, a rather poor region in European Russia. Hoch argues that crisis years when the actual number of deaths exceeded the moving average by more than 50 per cent occurred seven times from 1830–1912. On average, a crisis resulted in an 84 per cent increase over the normal series of deaths. Furthermore, the data reveal no association between the changes in mortality and fluctuations in prices regardless of the lag employed – zero, one, or two years. The peaks of mortality in Borshevka appear to be wholly independent of food availability as measured by prices and mortality crises occurred rather in

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40 Bengtsson, 2004b, 19–20; Bengtsson & Dribe, 2011, 389–400.

41 Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 106; Voutilainen, 2016, 23; Vanhaute et al., 2007, 26.

42 Empirical evidence to support this claim has been provided in two articles; see ref. no 16.

43 See, for example, Mironov, 2010, 478; Dennison & Nafziger, 2013, 433.

44 Authors who believe that subsistence crises affected mortality and hunger and death threatened Russian peasants include: Dyatchkov, 2002, 27; Kahan, 1989, 135; Moon, 1999, 296-7; Nefedov, 2005, 198–252. Kanishchev (Kanishchev, 2011, 167–74), relying on numerous church books, does not deny the role of famines in the decrease of births and increase of mortality but seems to favour, however, Hoch's interpretations from 1998 (see below).

45 See for example Moon, 2006, ii, 386–8, 391.

46 Hoch, 1986, 56; Hoch, 1998, 357–68.

summer or autumn. Grain prices were allegedly less volatile than in western Europe. Tracy Dennison and Steven Nafziger likewise challenge the traditional narrative of impoverished peasant agriculture. They find that peasants at the Sheremetyev family's Voshchazhnikovo estate in Yaroslavl *guberniia* do not appear to have suffered subsistence crises. There are no references to increased mortality, even during those years when harvests in this region were recorded as 'poor'.<sup>47</sup> In both cases, the scale of research is by far too limited.

Sergei Kashchenko has criticized Hoch's findings. Since Hoch uses *guberniia* level grain price data instead of local data to determine grain availability, his calculations are incorrect. In contrast of his findings, local prices were volatile.<sup>48</sup> Fluctuation of grain prices has been confirmed also by Suvorin.<sup>49</sup> In Kashchenko's opinion temporary migration was an important coping mechanism against hunger.

Some authors have argued that crown peasants exhibited lower mortality levels than noble peasants in times of distress.<sup>50</sup> Noble peasants were subjected to greater degrees of exploitation by their landowners than their peers at crown estates. Second, crown peasants were better entitled to public relief.<sup>51</sup>

The leading social historian in Russia, Boris Mironov, hardly considers the issue of famine in his recent books on living standard.<sup>52</sup> He measures the height and weight of recruits, grain yields, wages, mortality and fertility rates, and discusses the diet in long-term perspective and finds no basis for the assumption of deteriorating living standards in Russia. Such an 'optimistic' view, especially with regard to the late Tsarist period, is shared by many Russian and international scholars, but has also been challenged by some others.<sup>53</sup> Famine in Russia Proper in the period under review is a vast, almost unexplored terrain awaiting further research and inclusion in international famine studies.

Long-term dynamics and secular changes do not inform us on demographic response to short-term stress. Most probably, however, there is little evidence of social gradient in famine mortality since the social divisions among Russian peasants were not distinct and poverty was rather equally divided between different segments of country folk. Demographic studies of pre-industrial Europe have shown that the effect of fluctuations in yields and grain prices on mortality rates was clearly apparent in the case of the landless and day-labourers who were most vulnerable and were most likely to fall victim to the food crisis.<sup>54</sup> Destitution and even food shortages are not sufficient to cause famines; famine mortality is

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47 Dennison & Nafziger, 2013, 429–32.

48 Kashchenko, 1999, 30–44. Unfortunately, their (public) debate has not continued since then.

49 Suvorin, 2015, 14–15.

50 Kanishchev, 2011, 163–70.

51 Suvorin, 2015, 17–18.

52 Mironov, 2010, Mironov, 2015, ch. 11.

53 See for example Nefedov, 2011, 127–136; Nefedov, 2014, 110–15.

54 Galloway, 1988, 277–78, 290; Bengtsson, 2004a, 167.

largely a function of ‘social vulnerability’<sup>55</sup> caused not so much by lack of food but by lack of entitlement to resources. In Arnold’s description, ‘the term “entitlement” is used to signify legally sanctioned and economically operative rights of access to resources that give control over food or can be exchanged for it’.<sup>56</sup> This access could be obtained through production, trade, labour, property rights and inheritance, or welfare provisions.

### **Excess Deaths and Starvation: Inadequacy of Government Relief Efforts?**

The seriousness of the crisis varied significantly within the provinces. Such regional differences can be explained by the local crop failures, the availability of local resources and the pace of socioeconomic development. Economically better-off regions recovered more quickly and the crisis was shorter, whereas in the forties in Võrumaa and Läänemaa it lasted for several years with short breaks. In the crisis years, the market failed to move sufficient amounts of cereals into famine-stricken areas, since the need for food there was not translated into effective demand because of lack of market-based entitlement and a shortage of purchasing power. During both crises in Estland and Livland, the grain prices escalated beyond the reach of the poor. Price level convergence and similar price dynamics in different regions in the period 1840–1900 give evidence of significant market integration in Estland and Livland.<sup>57</sup> The coefficient of variation was rather insignificant and did not change over the decades under consideration, and the districts had similar price trends for rye and oats. Only recovery from sharp changes in supply and demand in times of famines did not proceed in the same way. During both famines, state authorities avoided actions to limit exports and refused to ban distillation, which both would have significantly increased the domestic food availability. Their main anti-crisis initiative was to distribute advance loans to the needy. The grain was bought up from merchants and the local lords of the manors and paid for by state resources. In the 1840s as well as in the late 1860s the leading noble politicians actively fought against any price regulation by the government and in the mid-forties they bargained with the state authorities about the price of grain bought up for government loan until the latter agreed to pay them the price set high.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the manorial lords could excessively drive the food prices and worsen the situation. Not only non-landed groups suffered. Crop failures turned subsistence farmers into ‘deficit producers’ who were forced to resort to market purchases or assistance loans to meet the subsistence needs of their households. In the mid-

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55 Voutilainen, 2015, 124–8.

56 Arnold, 1988, 43.

57 For the data and discussion see Lust, 2013, 217–45.

58 Lust, 2013, 235–37.

forties, the government, however, also imported substantial amounts of grain from near-by Russian areas.

The factors that produce regional or local variations in crises do not necessarily explain the occurrence of famine in general. According to Eric Vanhaute, famines triggered by harvest failures only took place when societal institutions failed and the moral economy ceased to function.<sup>59</sup> High death rates and drop in births in times of famines in Estland and Livland give evidence of the insufficiency of aid and the (non-)functioning of the (local) food distribution. The government's role in food policy was manifold. Drèze and Sen distinguish between two aspects of social security, that which provides protection and that which promotes security. The former is concerned with preventing a decline in living standards whereas the latter refers to the enhancement of general living standards and to the expansion of basic capabilities of the population.<sup>60</sup> In the Baltics, slow but powerful avenues of action were the reform laws: serf emancipation in 1816–19, the reforms of crown peasants in the 1840–60s, and the peasant laws of 1849/60 (Livland), 1856 (Estland), 1863 (Kurland), and 1865 (Ösel). Being different in content, they, however, liberated peasant households step-by-step from manorial oppression and established peasants' individual rights in land as private property. These initiatives, as it turned out, were of particular importance in averting the recurrence of subsistence crises. The Baltic provinces escaped the danger of hunger crises after the 1860s. Dilatory process of legislation and slow changes in the socioeconomic relationships and agricultural production could not prevent the occurrence of famine in Estland and Ösel in 1868–69. Ösel was the only Livonian district out of nine to suffer seriously and its closeness to Riga from which it could be reached easily by sea should have made large quantities of grain available. Excess mortality is also an indication of the non-functioning of the food distribution and lack of responsibility at every level in society. It is also typical of the last famine in the Baltics, that the need for aid was the greatest in marginal areas like the islands of Ösel, Hiiumaa (Dagö), Vormsi (Worms), Kihnu (Kühno), the Nuckö peninsula, the fishing villages near Lake Peipus, Ilükste (in Kurland), etc.

The protection measures employed by the government varied in their effectiveness. Imperial government kept legislation and supervision in its hands and decrees were issued with imperial sanction. The government recognized the state's interest in the sphere of food supply and, in case of emergency, direct state action in the area of relief. The government ordered and supervised the build-up of local stocks. Relief infrastructure was integrated into existing governing structures. In order to guarantee the provision of food, it was considered essential to apply coercion and sanctions, but these methods were used much more eagerly and effectively for horizontal redistribution of local resources within the peasant communities than for the reallocation of food and funds from institutions and groups

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59 Vanhaute, 2011, 60.

60 Dreze & Sen, 1989, 16.

with material capacity to the needy. In Estland and Livland, state-financed relief was too little and often also too late. Relief loan distribution was further hindered by a slow and bureaucratic system. By the 1840s, the state government had become reluctant to grant assistance loans.

The official relief system entrusted a very significant role to its lowest level -- the local peasant community, but Baltic community authorities, as shown above, were unwilling to provide for the landless and cottagers.<sup>61</sup> There is little support for the belief that government, while designing the system, intentionally sought the community authorities (i.e. the better-off) to keep assistance loans to a minimum. Communities in Russia, by contrast, were known for 'over-generous' loans to their members irrespective of their needs which worried different-level government officials.<sup>62</sup> The government apparently wanted peasant communities (communes in Russia) to become as self-sufficient as possible and also protect their individual members against natural calamities. In Russia it is likely, as Hoch has suggested, that communes really afforded protection from hunger more than any improvement in the level of economic well-being.<sup>63</sup> It was so due to the specific socio-economic arrangements, namely the household patterns and redistribution of communally governed peasant land. The Baltic village, by contrast, was marked by social polarization and such socio-economic arrangements were unknown here. Over half of the peasants were landless and their households had no right to land allotment. They did not contribute to the granaries and farmer peasants did not want to repay their assistance loans and face indebtedness due to extra loans. However, we have to bear in mind that there were also private credit relations between the local peasants and we cannot judge the scope of the relief solely by the institutionalized famine aid.

One major defect of the Baltic local grain stock system was the inability to force communities that were better off to transfer their reserves to less fortunate ones since granary and monetary reserves were the property of the community. For example, by the time crisis began in 1868, 564 Couronian communities owned food supply capitals amounting to almost one million roubles, but in August the Governor had to petition the Minister of Internal Affairs for 95,000 roubles, which request the Imperial government satisfied in December only partly, assigning upon the Tsar's approval from the state treasury a loan of 70,000 roubles.<sup>64</sup> In Russia, too, the government did not dare to force one commune to lend their reserves to another,<sup>65</sup> but there were also provincial monetary funds established. Such two-tier system would have enabled to reallocate the resources within a province also

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61 For a similar phenomenon in Finland, see Häkkinen, 1992, 149–65.

62 Matsuzato, 1995, 186–8.

63 Hoch, 1998, 363.

64 Governor of Kurland to Baltic Governor-General, 9 March 1869 (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv, f. 1287, op. 4, d. 527, ff. 117–35).

65 Matsuzato, 1995, 189.

in the Baltics. In Russia, however, it was of little help, since the resources at the *guberniia* level were too small to be really useful in times of distress.<sup>66</sup>

The role of landlords in famine relief is largely overlooked in Russia. In the Baltic provinces, their role was based on their obligation to provide assistance and relief as serf owners in earlier times ('path-dependence') as well as on their predominance in rural economy. Although serfdom in Russia persisted until 1861, many authors assume that during the period under review provision for the Russian peasantry was left almost solely to communal and public institutions.<sup>67</sup> Landlords' assistance is seldom mentioned.<sup>68</sup> In the Baltic provinces, the manorial sector was larger, but also in European Russia c. one-fourth of grain was produced on manors. In Estland and Livland, estate owners contributed to the famine relief even in the late 1860s, when they, on their own initiative, credited jobs, bought up grain stocks for sale, and gave assistance loans to individual households as well as to communities.

The effectiveness of the measures taken by the manorial lords in the famine relief has been recently questioned by Swedish authors who studied the empirical evidence on Sweden from 1749 to 1859. Dribe, Olsson and Svensson used the impact of grain prices on demographic outcomes as a measure of the efficiency of the manorial system in protecting its inhabitants against economic stress. The researchers concluded that 'the manorial estate seems to have been able to insure its inhabitants against risks of economic stress, but the protective effect was imperfect and only short term'.<sup>69</sup> Regardless of different methods and sources, in principle my results are in accordance with their findings. However, the mortality figures should be also considered differentiated by socioeconomic status (landed and non-landed groups) and then it might occur that the manor could insure the tenants (farmers) against extreme events and only this was their aim. In the Estonian case, the line of division between tenants and farmhands, however, would be somewhat artificial since as long as the *corvée* persisted (1850-60s), the tenants owed labour duties to the manor and thus both the manorial lords and the tenants most probably were interested in the subsistence of their labour force too. Secondly, infectious diseases were no respecters of class boundaries in the village. Living arrangements on Baltic farmsteads often did not provide separation for the members of farming families from their live-in servants,<sup>70</sup> whereas the cottagers often had separate buildings. The situation might differ in the countries where the residences and the household economies of the tenants, cottagers and servants were separated.

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66 Robbins, 1975, 20.

67 See Kahan, 1989, 135.

68 For references see Moon, 1999, 94–5.

69 Dribe et al., 2012, 292–310.

70 Plakans, 1975, 635.



The Russian government strongly favoured food-for-work schemes.<sup>71</sup> In 1833, the State Council examined a project of relief statute. It thought that Russian peasants expect famine relief for free from the government as well as from the estate owners. The State Council suggested, in an attempt to eradicate this idea, public works as the most appropriate relief means. The landlords were also asked to credit jobs instead of providing loans in money and grain.<sup>72</sup> It laid down general guidelines for relief, which in reality worked out only partially.

Last, but not least, the role of ‘intermediaries’ between the central authorities and the communities (communes) should be considered. The defects of the bureaucratic structure have been long seen as a major factor behind the inadequate relief in Russia. Stocks were entrusted to the village commune under the supervision of the local gentry officials and *zemstva*. In the Baltic provinces, Baltic German landlords retained their control and tutelage over hunger relief since the institutions and offices which conducted detailed inspections of the granary reserves, oversaw the distribution of famine relief, and solved the complaints filed against landlords and communities that did not perform their duties in relation to needy peasants were all manned by noblemen.

## Conclusion

Famines in which death rates doubled for two years were rare in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. During the period under consideration, two districts in southern Estonia in 1845–46 had mortality upswings close to that level. In 1868–69, Estland and the island (district) of Ösel stand out with their high mortality figures. In 1868–69, in Ösel the average number of deaths per year rose over 100 per cent compared to average from 1859–63. Thus, official relief efforts obviously failed to keep people from starving and dying.

Different-level institutions did not have a ‘proper’ or ‘adequate’ share in the redistribution of resources within the society, since the government food supply policy left too much responsibility for the peasants’ provision on the shoulders of local communities. It was not problematic only because peasants were poor. Whereas in Russia this policy resulted in the ‘over-eager’ use of local resources by the communes, in a different socio-economic and institutional context, in the Baltics, it resulted in insufficient provision of landless and cottagers who accounted for over half of peasants. Whereas in Russia, some authors complained of inadequate administrative control over the collection and distribution of monetary funds and grain stocks, in the Baltics the system of supervision and monitoring functioned well in the sense that granaries were, in most places, carefully managed and quite properly filled, but in times of distress, different level officials and institutions

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71 Robbins, 1975, 50–2, 62; Ermolov, 1909, i, 91, 444–7; ii, 71–4.

72 Ermolov, 1909, i, 56–8.

in charge of famine relief tried to keep assistance to the minimum. As is often emphasized in international famine research, societal power relations and the variety of coping options instead of 'quantitative amounts of grain per capita' largely determined the length and depth of crises.<sup>73</sup> The functioning and efficiency of a famine relief system were strongly influenced by patterns of land ownership and the concrete political and social configuration of a society.

Capitalist transformation has been one of the routes by which recurrent famine has been evaded or overcome.<sup>74</sup> The Baltic example illustrates the case. The famines disappeared after 1860s, although the official relief system did not go through many changes after the early 1820s. Manorial lords' role, however, declined. Market economy, rapidly advancing since the 1850s and 1860s,<sup>75</sup> rather than the traditional moral economy saved people from famine in rural class societies where the agricultural populations were divided into farmers, cottagers, day labourers, and servants and where socioeconomic status and group affiliation were of considerable importance. In Russia, the 'effective' redistribution of communal resources could safeguard peasants from the worst for some time, but since the majority of the population endured a poor standard of living in the nineteenth century, it could not be – and, in reality it was not – a sustainable solution to the 'famine question'.

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73 Häkkinen & Forsberg, 2015, 105.

74 Arnold, 1988, 58.

75 For an overview, see Kahk & Tarvel, 80–102; Plakans, 2011, 190–8, 215–21.

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