

Biography. A noblesse oblige out of step with time

Thomas von Vegesack
Utan hem i tiden.
Berättelsen om Arved.

[Not at Home in Time.
The Story of Arved].
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THIS IS THOMAS von Vegesack's story about his father, Arved von Vegesack, but it is also a story about an entire generation of Baltic Germans whose lives were far removed from ours, though their time was not.

Arved von Vegesack lived at a time when the Baltic-German nobility was losing its position. From being socially, politically, and economically dominant, and representing the Latvian and Estonian peasantry, the nobility ended up in a position of disintegration, when a cosmopolitan life-view was opposed to the nation-state. As a child, Arved was taught that he belonged to a select and privileged social class, that he was superior to those who served him. He was inoculated with the Baltic-German virtues: a deeply rooted concept of honor and great loyalty to authority. He was indoctrinated with the idea that it had, since the early middle ages, been the lot of the Baltic-German nobility to rule and administer the Baltic region and to bring German enlightenment and culture to the region. As a grown man, he suffered the indignity of seeing this image used against him, of seeing "Baltic-German" become synonymous with exploitation and repression.

HIS FAMILY PROBABLY belonged to the mid-tier of the Baltic-German nobility – well-off, but living in a wooden manor, and sometimes dependent on family ties to help them through crises, family ties that could be traced back many generations and through several noble lines. Arved grew up and received his education in the late 1800s. During this time, the social climate became increasingly harsh in the Baltic area, with growing ethnic, political, and economic antagonism. The Russian state's attempt to Russianize the whole Empire put Baltic-German culture and education in the shade. This culture and education had formerly given them a "natural right" to high positions in the army and administration. German, which had been spoken everywhere in the public sphere, was now being replaced by Russian. With ever-greater regularity, the central government would question the Baltic Germans' loyalty to the Russian Empire. In spite of this, Arved von Vegesack was among those who stayed in the Baltic region and received their education there, though he did, afterwards, take his doctor's degree in chem-

istry in Germany. During his student days, he had already begun showing some characteristics peculiar to his personality and social position. His time at the university in Tartu was divided between participating in the survival of aspects of the old order – including a life in the German student unions with duels over matters of honor – and in the ideal of the new era, i.e. being a successful student and researcher, dedicated to serving science. His studies were interrupted by the tumultuous years around 1905 when political activism among the workers and the peasantry unsaddled the Baltic Germans and forced them to appeal to the Tsarist army for help in restoring order. As was the case for many Baltic-German families, the unrest had dire consequences for the von Vegesacks, economically as well as personally. Manors that Arved had visited as a child were burned down and two of his maternal uncles fell victim to the violence.

LIKE SO MANY BALTIC Germans, Arved von Vegesack left the Baltic region after 1905, in his case to gain a chance to develop and employ his expertise in Germany. Here also, he is torn between the prospects of research and the responsibility he feels for his home and for Livonia. It seems certain, though, that his time is characterized by a feeling of uprootedness. He finds himself placed between a Livonia, where the Baltic Germans' star is fading, and a Germany, where the Baltic Germans do not have the best of reputations. Was it, perhaps, this feeling of uprootedness that caused him to settle in Sweden in 1911, after his marriage to the Swede Inga af Segerström? But his feelings of loyalty interpose themselves, and he soon returns to what is now the Russian province of Estonia. Up until the outbreak of the war, he occupies himself with research and planning peat-digging operations.

Because Arved was unswervingly loyal to the Russian state, he fought as a cavalry officer on the Russian side during World War I, even though he knew that some of his relatives and close friends were fighting on the German side. He gives a moving description of the war, including his initial fascination with the war as an adventure, his faith in his own capabilities, and, finally, his awakening to the fact that the war was a meaningless and endless nightmare. The Russian capitulation released Arved from his obligations to Russia. He could once again turn his loyalty to Livonia and participate in the Estonian liberation struggle on the side of the nationalists.

In a poignant chapter, we can read Arved's own account of his time as a captive of the Bolsheviks in Tartu, and of an occasion when many lives were saved because an execution of prisoners was interrupted by Estonian troops approaching the city. The end of World War I also became the end of Arved's life in the Baltic area. But instead of beginning a new life in Germany, where his expertise was in demand, he rejoined his family in Sweden.

Like many other Baltic Germans, he probably did not feel at home in interwar Germany, with which he shared little but the language. But according to his son Thomas, a renowned Swedish publisher, he did not

feel at home in Sweden either. He was pained by the lack of knowledge about the world that he encountered there, and the fact that the Swedish picture of Europe included only its western parts.

After some initial reverses, Arved got a position in Sweden as a researcher at Munkfors Bruk (Munkfors Mill), a position he kept for the rest of his life. His research resulted in several patents on steel edging, but these were too advanced to be of commercial value during his life time. We learn little about Arved the scientist and innovator from this book, perhaps because a prior work, by E. Börje Bergsman (1988), has already dealt with this aspect of Arved's life. There might be another reason, as well. Arved's professional life may not have belonged to the world he describes in the letters that Thomas von Vegesack uses as a source. The letters slant the book's narrative, towards a focus on the war years and Arved's youth. Thomas von Vegesack does, however, succeed in capturing the spirit of the time, by weaving in the lives of his father's mother and siblings. Historically, the book is a balanced, personal account whose author is not afraid to mention the injustices that the Baltic, feudal society stood for – but who, on the other hand, cannot entirely reconcile himself to the idea that the right to live in a country is not the same as the right to rule it.

IN THE INTRODUCTION to the book, the author describes his father as difficult to approach, and alienated from the Swedish society in which he lived until his death. Arved von Vegesack's life symbolizes so much of what was Baltic-German: a patriarchal feeling of responsibility to the country that was ruled, a moral obligation and a consciousness of honor and social standing, but also an ability to constantly keep up with the times and conform to new demands and new rulers. These were characteristics that were not always appreciated in the emerging welfare-state of Sweden.

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