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Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought in the Russian Baltic provinces from a comparative perspective

Andre Kruusmaa

ABSTRACT

Pro-slavery argumentation was relatively similar both in the context of New World slavery and the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire, where a small autonomous Baltic-German minority governed over Estonian and Latvian serfs. This became apparent from the justification of the way the system of unfreedom was formed and how the slaves/serfs were enslaved, and to the ideas about why the slaves/serfs could not be freed, as well as why the system of unfreedom was the best possible one. Similar rhetoric was also used in countering abolitionist agitation and argumentation, while the worries of the pro-serfdom faction also involved similar topics like the likelihood of insurrections, the negative influence of abolitionist ideas and supposed false claims about the masters and the system of serfdom. Additionally, the Baltic-German pro-serfdom advocates were aware of the peculiarities of New World slavery, yet referred to it relatively rarely, and often only if the local abolitionists brought out such comparisons. All of this serves to reinforce Larry E. Tise's claim about the universal nature of pro-slavery thought, as well as making it possible to consider the Baltic provinces within Peter Kolchin's ideas of other Souths.

Slavery has been analyzed comparatively by many historians over the years. One of the most renowned comparative studies of slavery is Peter Kolchin's *Unfree Labor*, where he compares Southern slavery and Russian serfdom.¹ Whereas he analyses two well-known forms of unfreedom, there are also works such as those by Del Lago and Bowman, which compare American slaveholders and Southern Italian landowners or Prussian Junkers respectively.² This gives ample evidence about the possible scope of comparative analysis within the field of slavery studies or studies of unfreedom, making it all the more strange that while there are many monographs and articles that deal with pro-slavery thought, there are relatively few comparative studies on a more global scale – especially if we go beyond the Atlantic world.³ This is even more peculiar as leading historians of pro-slavery thought such as Larry E. Tise have claimed that ‘the proslavery argument or rather arguments were virtually the same

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wherever one found slaveholding on the defensive'.⁴ The same need for comparative studies in order to facilitate a better understanding of individual institutions of unfreedom has been also put forward by Kolchin and other historians.⁵

One such relatively less researched topic within the wider context of studies of pro-slavery thought is Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought and the pro-serfdom movement in the Russian Baltic provinces – Kurland, Livland and Estland.⁶ What makes these provinces distinct from the rest of the Russian Empire is the history and background of the development of serfdom there, and the division of serfs and masters into different ethnicities, as well as the somewhat colonial nature of the provinces from the beginning of the German conquest of these areas in the thirteenth century. The high levels of autonomy and self-governance of the Baltic-Germans under various rulers made the provinces in some regards similar to a colonial entity – perhaps partly reminiscent of British overseas colonies or Southern states within the context of the United States. These similarities become apparent from the perspective of the metropole-province relation of the Holy Roman Empire, the Swedish Empire, and later the Russian Empire. The idea of the Baltic provinces as a German colonial entity also existed in the texts of seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers and was a relatively common vision at the time.⁷ The present article will look at Baltic-German pro-serfdom ideas during the period before the abolition of serfdom in the Russian Baltic provinces in the first quarter of the nineteenth century – a time of the most staunch resistance to the emancipation of the serfs – and determine to what degree Tise's ideas about universal pro-slavery arguments hold water in this particular context. The article focuses largely on the writings and theory of two of the most well-known pro-serfdom authors of the time – Georg Friedrich von Fircks and Hermann Friedrich Tiebe. One could consider them as the Baltic-German equivalent of the likes of George Fitzhugh and Henry Hughes. Due to the limited length of the article the focus will be on a select number of pro-slavery/serfdom arguments.

Baltic context

The area of the Baltic provinces was conquered by Danish and German crusaders in the thirteenth century after which the institution of serfdom was gradually forced upon the local population of Estonians and Latvians under the rule of the Livonian Confederation. The area went through a period of Swedish and Polish rule before the Baltic provinces came under Russian rule during the Great Northern War in 1710. The Germans, while constituting a ruling elite, never made up more than 10 percent of the population, while the population of the provinces around 1800 was around 1.1 million, the majority of whom were serfs. Serfdom and master-serf relations were structurally relatively similar in all three provinces, with a clear distinction between Estonian and

Latvian speaking serfs and German-speaking masters and nobility – making for marked ethnic and social divisions.⁸ The structure of the estates was somewhat similar to that of New World slavery, where the estate administration managed the everyday interactions. The serfs could usually not speak German, while the masters sometimes had some knowledge of the local language.

The Germans constituted an autonomous ruling elite under all rulers – thus the autonomous conditions for them remained roughly the same and the privileges of the German nobility were always paramount to them. The Russians in the beginning mostly met the wishes of the German nobility in order to please their new subjects, but before the emancipation debates of the early nineteenth century, they instead went against the wishes of the local nobility and tried to force the abolition of serfdom on them.

It is also important to bring out who the Baltic German pro-serfdom advocates were and what their background was in comparison with pro-slavery advocates in the Western hemisphere. Southern pro-slavery theoreticians like Henry Hughes or George Fitzhugh might or might not come from wealthy plantation-owning families, but they usually had at least some involvement and a clear vested interest in slavery.⁹ Some of them also made a career out of their pro-slavery writings while they had a background in law and sociology. This falls in line with Ronald Takaki's claims as well as contemporary accounts and opinions that some of the well-known pro-slavery and pro-African slave trade advocates were often intellectuals and educated men.¹⁰ The same could be more or less said about Tiebe as well, who while having a background in theology, being a priest and having moderate vested economic interest in owning serfs, became one of the most well-known pro-serfdom theoreticians in the Baltic provinces. What makes Tiebe an even more unlikely pro-serfdom advocate is the fact he had studied in Halle and in theory, taking into account his university background, should rather have propagated Enlightenment ideas, as in the case of the abolitionist Garlieb Merkel.¹¹ While Tiebe might have had less personal economic interest in serfdom, other defenders of the institution such as Fircks or Konrad von Brasch were owners of estates and, thus, would have had more interest in the defense of serfdom purely from personal economic motives. Tiebe was well-acquainted with Brasch and defended him as a good master in his writings, moving in his circle and acting as a kind of a Baltic-German version of Hughes and Fitzhugh.¹² After all, even the pro-serfdom advocate Fircks did not hide the fact that priests often got their appointments through connections, which perhaps pointed to the beneficial nature of having pro-serfdom views while making a career in the Baltic provinces.¹³ Thus, it could be argued that in the case of Baltic provinces, the defenders of serfdom could be either from a larger serf-holding estate background or not, as was the case on the other side of the ocean, and that their motives for supporting serfdom were also relatively similar.

Colonization, Christianity and the unready savages

One of the most radical pro-slavery arguments in the Western hemisphere was undoubtedly the defense of the formation method of slavery – namely the African slave trade. The defense of the African slave trade was a part of Southern pro-slavery thought and became especially apparent in the pre-Civil War era when some radical pro-slavery advocates were, among other things, suggesting the re-opening the African slave trade.¹⁴ The formation method of slavery was, however, not only defended by a minority of radicals, but sometimes also by some more moderate pro-slavery advocates as it was to some degree difficult to morally defend the Southern institution of slavery without defending the way it was formed.¹⁵ The argument was usually tied to the supposed civilizing effect of the enslavement of ‘wild’ Africans through bringing them to the New World and to the light of Christianity and civilization. Enslavement and slavery were thus seen as rather having a positive effect on the Africans. Similar ideas also emerge within the context of Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought. Firstly, it is not uncommon to see references to New World slavery in the writings of Baltic-German pro-serfdom advocates, as well as those of anti-serfdom views – who can often also be considered as somewhat more neutral, unlike their American or British counterparts.¹⁶ However, it is important to bear in mind that while they did sometimes briefly refer to black slavery, some of the most well-known pro-serfdom advocates did not base their main argumentation on comparisons with New World slavery, but rather on the analysis of the local context or places closer to the Baltic provinces like Prussia, Russia proper or Germany.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the descriptions of how the German crusaders conquered the areas of the provinces of Livland, Estland and Kurland were very similar to the descriptions of how the Europeans subjugated the peoples of the New World, with writers like Gustav von Bergman deliberately drawing parallels with the conquest of the New World.¹⁸ Estonians and Latvians were considered to be ‘savages’ similar to Native Americans or black slaves in texts by both Johann Gottfried Herder and August Wilhelm Hupel (albeit somewhat differently), while it also seems that Estonians and Latvians were not considered to be as savage as Finno-Ugric peoples in the north like Samojeds, or were seen being on the way to becoming more civilized.¹⁹ Thus Estonians and Latvians were in a somewhat similar position to that of black slaves in comparison to their free African counterparts for the British and Americans: namely, that black slaves in the Southern states or British overseas colonies were considered to be more civilized compared to Africans living in Africa, while the Africans were in general considered to be on a ‘lower level than Europeans’ – all of which justified their enslavement.²⁰ In the British context we can see this both in the defence of enslavement as such, as well as in emphasizing the positive effect of the Christian religion on the enslaved, while making it harder for the

public to empathize with the 'lower-level' Africans.²¹ Similar overall ideas and propagation of the positive nature of enslavement and the transportation of Africans to the Americas as a positive good also came forth already in early American pro-slavery theory and continued up to Civil War.²² At its more radical end, slavery and the transportation of Africans to the Americas were considered to be favorable for the Africans.²³ Thus, one could hold that the enslavement and the simultaneous Christianizing effort were in all these cases and contexts seen as having a positive effect on at least the civilizing process of the enslaved peoples, even though in some Baltic-German texts the forceful subjugation and enslavement of the local population itself was condemned.²⁴

In the Baltic-German context, however, this positive civilizing effect of German conquest and rule was apparent even in the texts of Enlightenment figures and not only pro-serfdom advocates. This particular pro-slavery argument was already there and fully developed for the more radical pro-serfdom advocates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century who continuously argued that the serfs were not yet ready for freedom.²⁵ They claimed that freedom for the serfs was like a knife in the hand of a child.²⁶ This argument was unwittingly or otherwise fully in line with the racist ideas of gradually civilized 'savages' that were put forward by Enlightenment figures like Hupel or Herder and thus something that abolitionists like Garlieb Merkel tried to counter when arguing that the Estonian and Latvian serfs were capable of freedom, while still drawing comparisons with native Americans and so-called lesser-developed people.²⁷

In countering Merkel, local pro-serfdom writers also expressed ideas similar to those about 'noble savages' in praising their serfs, who they claimed were happy in their condition.²⁸ Similar ideas about slaves not being ready for freedom, not wanting it at all or the seemingly awful consequences of freeing the slaves also existed in the context of the slavery debates in the British Empire.²⁹ American pro-slavery writers even used almost exactly the same words as their Baltic-German counterparts in describing their slaves, namely that they were child-like and needed constant supervision and guidance from 'parents'.³⁰ In this way, Tise's argument about universally similar pro-slavery arguments seems to hold water, as does the claim that the so-called radical pro-slavery regimes like the Southern states were not so different in their pro-slavery argumentation from the more moderate, or even unwitting, pro-slavery writers of other regions or of earlier times when a pro-slavery movement was not yet fully developed or, due to the lack of abolitionist agitation, not actually needed.³¹

The dilemma of insurrections

Another issue that pro-slavery theoreticians and writers often pondered and debated was that of slave insurrections. Insurrections or at least slave unrest

were common problems in any slavery-based society. The fears of slave insurrections were clearly present in the British West Indies right up until the abolition of slavery, as well as being a major concern in the Southern states.³² Strangely enough, Southerners saw slave insurrections to be both likely *and* unlikely. During the debate about re-opening the African slave trade in the pre-Civil War era, it was common for different parties to argue both that slave revolts were unlikely, even with the possible influx of new African slaves, and yet very likely exactly for the same reason.³³ The range of arguments was vast, but the aim was the propagation of a pro-African slave trade agenda, which opponents tried to counter. The same kind of uncertainty, ambiguity or duality was also present in the writings of Baltic-German pro-serfdom advocates. There had been instances in the Baltic provinces where the local peasantry had taken up arms against their German masters, or where there had been local, more contained serf unrest, as was common to any institution of unfreedom, the latest being around 1800.³⁴ Thus, the question of serf unrest was an integral part of the pro- and anti-serfdom discourse.

For example, Fircks, one of the main proponents of serfdom, argued that unrest and insurrections were rather unlikely and that the peasants were peaceful and would never think of revolting against their masters. Remarkably he also proclaimed that even possible external factors and influence would not push the slaves towards any kind of unrest. To support his case, he argued that even the events and unrest in nearby Poland did not cause the slaves in Kurland to rebel and it was ludicrous to suggest that Russian troops were the only guarantor of German despotism in Kurland.³⁵ This could, however, partly be attributed to the fact that his texts were a reply to the abolitionist Merkel, who emphasized the wretched condition and lives of the serfs under their German masters and warned that slave uprisings were very likely and that the abolition of serfdom was the only way to reduce this risk.³⁶ In response, Fircks argued foremost that the serfs of Kurland were happy and living in good conditions under masters that they loved.³⁷ Why then would they revolt? Other pro-serfdom advocates like Tiebe, while still arguing that the serfs were also relatively happy and that Latvian serfs were better off than Estonian ones, disagreed, and saw rebellions as a danger.³⁸ The same fears also appear in the texts of more neutral authors.³⁹ The possibility of revolts was, firstly, tied to the insufficient number of Russian troops within the provinces, as well as possible unrest deriving from a emancipation process that could come into effect with somewhat different conditions and at different times in different neighboring provinces.⁴⁰ Perhaps this is also why it was argued that abolishing serfdom was similar to breaking the fabric of society and if it was to be done then it should have been done in the entire Russian Empire – though the better option, of course, was to leave it intact.⁴¹

Worries about links between unrest in the Baltic provinces and the emancipation process were similar to those in the British Empire, where colonists

also feared the implications of slaves hearing about the emancipation debates, or in the Southern states.⁴² Likewise, there were many examples of fears about slave insurrections being incited by events in neighboring areas, as in Jamaica with respect to the Haitian Revolution.⁴³ Secondly, there was the perpetual security question arising from the extremely small number of whites in comparison to the number of slaves in the colonies – a somewhat similar ratio to the number of Baltic-Germans and Russian troops in the Baltic provinces in comparison with the number of Estonian and Latvian serfs. Similar fears about the ratio of whites to slaves and of an outside force producing unrest were common in the Southern states as well, perhaps even to an absurd degree.⁴⁴

Thus one can conclude that the debate over the possibility of slave revolts was structurally relatively similar in its argumentation and fears, both in the pre-emancipation era Baltic provinces and British colonies, as well as within the more radical Southern states context of the time when the possible re-opening of the African slave trade and the ideas of expanding slavery were being debated. Moreover, the pro-slavery or pro-serfdom advocates tended to use the possibility of slave revolts as it seemed most fitting to them. In the case of those supporting their own arguments of docile happy serfs and discrediting abolitionist critique of master-serf relations and living conditions, they could claim that the serfs were unlikely to revolt and that they loved their masters. In the case where it was necessary to argue against the emancipation process they could, however, also argue that serfs were likely to revolt in and around the time of being freed – perhaps to discourage the policy of abolition or even of its discussion altogether. On the other end of the spectrum, the same tactic of defending different contradictory possibilities also existed around the debates over the possible reopening of the African slave trade in the US, and thus it could be claimed – albeit with certain reservations – that the argumentation was reactionary, flowing and adaptable in nature rather than a well thought out pro-slavery line of argumentation. Slaves might revolt due for a number of different reasons and in totally different contexts, but they equally might not, and whatever the case, freedom would make everything worse.

Unready and not in need of freedom

One of the main pro-serfdom arguments was the idea that the serfs were not ready for freedom due to various reasons, did not need it at all or would not know what to do with their freedom if they did receive it.⁴⁵ The reasons, however, were relatively similar to the ones brought forward with regard to slaves in the Southern states or the British colonies.⁴⁶ It was argued that the serf would not be happy as a free man and that the naturally lazy serfs would not want to work without the pressure and incentives from their masters within the framework of serfdom.⁴⁷ Even more so the serfs – not only lazy but also perpetual drunkards – would probably suffer starvation without their

philanthropic and helpful masters.⁴⁸ Another reason for why the serfs should not be freed was their supposedly thievish nature and the fears that they would riot before they were freed just by hearing about their coming release from bondage.⁴⁹ Additionally, the serfs would possibly want to leave their place in the state and would not want to work their fields as peasants.⁵⁰ All of these descriptions sound very similar to the arguments against abolishing slavery in the context of the British Empire or the Southern states. These arguments and fears, however, were augmented within the writings of more staunch pro-serfdom advocates by their idyllic picture of serfdom and the harmonious nature of master-serf relations.⁵¹

While abolitionists like Merkel were arguing that serfdom was detrimental to the economy of the Baltic provinces, because it kept the serfs in poverty, the pro-serfdom advocates claimed that this was not the case.⁵² They asked what the incentive was for the masters to keep their serfs destitute, when it was detrimental to their own economic well-being, and also argued that in those places where the serfs were impoverished, their masters were in a similar position.⁵³ As a general rule though, the pro-serfdom advocates dedicated their long replies to abolitionists like Merkel in order to argue that his negative descriptions were in fact untrue and that the situation of the serfs was actually quite good – the masters were not oppressing them to the degree that abolitionists suggested, but rather treating the serfs well and indeed helping them more than was actually required by law.⁵⁴ Sometimes in the face of abolitionist attacks, the pro-serfdom advocates also claimed that serfdom was not comparable with the extreme conditions of black slavery. In a sense, they claimed that while African slaves were bought simply for incessant work, serfdom offered far better conditions.⁵⁵

Any kind of ill-treatment or excessive punishment of serfs was written off as either willful exaggerations or clear-cut exceptions and something that happened everywhere, not only in the Baltic provinces.⁵⁶ Tiebe even went so far as to claim that he could write a similar work to that of Merkel's about Germany as well.⁵⁷ This line of pro-serfdom argumentation thus relied on comparisons with other regions like Prussia and claims that excesses also could be found elsewhere – in effect, a form of 'whataboutery'. A similar kind of comparative argumentation also existed in the context of the pro-slavery (and also abolitionist) movements in the Southern states in that it was claimed that while slavery might have some faults it was no better elsewhere in places with other slave regimes or in areas with free labor.⁵⁸

In the context of Southern slavery and slavery in British colonies, the comparisons usually stayed within the framework and context of New World slavery, while in Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought comparisons were also drawn with regions closer to the Baltic provinces and not with the United States or the British Empire.⁵⁹ This is perhaps somewhat surprising as Baltic-German writers knew about and often referred to New World slavery, with even playwrights residing in Tallinn writing about it.⁶⁰ Perhaps this was

because their texts were usually written as a direct reply to and as a refutation of the writings of abolitionists, who themselves did not usually make such comparisons. After all, serfdom was abolished earlier in the Baltic provinces than slavery in the British colonies, which meant that abolitionists did not need to draw comparisons in support of their arguments with regimes where slavery was more entrenched. Why would the pro-serfdom advocates have needed to bring up that somewhere else there were institutions of slavery that were more extreme and be more adamant in their defense than in the defense of serfdom in Eastern Europe, and why would they have gone out of their way to analyze anything other than the specific abolitionist arguments that they needed to refute? The plays of August von Kotzebue, a well-known German playwright and abolitionist, portrayed New World slavery as a horrendous institution and thus the only comparison that pro-slavery writers could have possibly made was to show that serfs had it better than the slaves in the Western hemisphere.⁶¹ Thus references to New World slavery remained scarce in pro-serfdom argumentation even though the line of reasoning and argumentation itself clearly recalled pro-slavery argumentation on the other side of the ocean.

Examples of pro-serfdom argumentation

Much of the pro-serfdom debates were structured around the refutation of abolitionist argumentation and attacks against serfdom which was, of course, a normal process wherever slavery came under attack by anti-slavery rhetoric. However, in the context of the Baltic provinces, as well as that of slavery in the Western hemisphere, one of the main ways in which abolitionist arguments were countered was not by refuting the facts presented, but by claiming that abolitionists were simply ignorant. Thus, it was common for pro-serfdom advocates to argue that abolitionists did not know the local region or master-serf relations well enough to criticize serfdom in the first place.⁶² Sometimes their knowledge was claimed to be merely anecdotal.⁶³ Or else the abolitionists were deemed to be outsiders who condemned everyone and everything that was foreign to them, including the Baltic-German nobility.⁶⁴ When abolitionists like Johann Christoph Petri wrote about the local ethnic Estonians, pro-serfdom advocates argued that he did not even speak their language well enough to draw any conclusions and questioned his overall knowledge.⁶⁵ In addition it was claimed that Petri had essentially borrowed his facts from Merkel, who was also subject to the same kind of attacks on the basis of his knowledge throughout pro-serfdom texts.⁶⁶

Another common pro-serfdom tactic in the Baltic context was emphasizing the supposed sensationalism and exaggerated nature of abolitionist claims.⁶⁷ Throughout their texts, both Tiebe and Fircks often claimed that Merkel exaggerated almost every anti-serfdom argument he made.⁶⁸ In addition to referring to deliberate sensationalism, they also argued that anti-serfdom argumentation

did not rely on facts, but rather emotional rhetoric – in a sense claiming that the inherently irrational abolitionist arguments could be easily overturned by the factual approach of the more well-informed pro-serfdom faction.⁶⁹ Such emphasis on the irrationality of the abolitionists was very similar to pro-slavery tactics in the British Empire and the Southern states, where abolitionists were accused of being ‘visionary, fanatical, enthusiastical, ignorant, distempered and designing’.⁷⁰ Attempts to discredit the abolitionists or portray them as ignorant of distant matters relating to slavery were very common within the framework of British pro-slavery discourse as well.⁷¹ Abolitionists were accused of fanaticism and hypocrisy, something Tise argues was common across pro-slavery thought.⁷² Thus, both in the context of serfdom in the Baltic provinces and in that of slavery in the South and British colonies, pro-slavery advocates argued that only people involved in on the ground knew enough to comment fairly. In this way, the pro-slavery faction discredited all the facts and information that abolitionists put forth.⁷³ Thus, when abolitionists like Merkel attacked or condemned some specific Baltic-German nobles in their texts, the pro-serfdom writers would go on to defend these nobles.

The most notable case is perhaps that of Konrad von Brasch, who both criticized and exchanged pamphlets with Merkel himself, but who was also defended extensively in the texts of Tiebe as an example of a humane and good master of his serfs and an honorable man.⁷⁴ Bringing examples of good masters was a common pro-serfdom tactic though, as the texts were littered with descriptions of how the serfs loved their masters – even to the point of serfs declining freedom and opting to stay and serve their master.⁷⁵ Again, this was a common trope in pro-slavery argumentation on both sides of the ocean.

The same can be said about the pro-serfdom arguments that claimed that any kind of excesses could rather be blamed on the overseers of the estate, who managed the estate while the absentee owner was not there.⁷⁶ Sometimes the entire administration of an estate was blamed for any mistreatment or oppression of the serfs.⁷⁷ While doing so, the pro-serfdom advocates sometimes also claimed that they at least admitted the wrongdoings of some masters, unlike the abolitionists, who only brought out the bad and hid away anything good, thus underscoring what they saw as the deliberately sensationalist approach of their critics.⁷⁸ The pro-serfdom men sometimes even went as far as offering to show the abolitionists around among their compatriots and estate owners in order to prove how untrue their accusations on the ground actually were.⁷⁹

While abolitionist ideas and abolitionists themselves in the Baltic provinces received wide condemnation and critique, it was somewhat milder than in the context of the Southern states. Serfdom was something that could be criticized without the explicit fear of retaliation or even physical violence from the local pro-serfdom contingent. Thus, the setting was somewhat different from that of the one where ‘[p]ro-slavery rhetors and the major slave-state politicians were agreed that slavery could not be criticized, and critics of slavery within

the South faced boycott, shunning, and personal violence'.⁸⁰ Serfdom was something that was quite seriously defended, but it was not as *sacrosanct* as in the Southern states.⁸¹ While there was a consensus in the latter that slavery or any aspects of slavery should not be criticized, in the Baltic provinces the question should rather be why the relatively strong pro-serfdom stance of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries dissipated by the time of the emancipation debates.⁸² Thus, quite differently from the Southern states, the relative pro-serfdom consensus transformed into a consensus where pro-serfdom ideas disappeared from the public sphere and public debate and were replaced with emancipation debates, even though abolitionists like Merkel had only a few decades before claimed that the nobility would never move to abolish serfdom.⁸³ In a sense, and partly due to imperial pressure, the Baltic provinces moved into an era where, instead of abolitionism being discussed, the defense of serfdom moved out of the public sphere.

As with pro-slavery discourse on the other side of the ocean, another theme was the significance of climate – something that the abolitionists supposedly did not understand.⁸⁴ Hence, a lot of the problems that abolitionists brought out in their texts about the serfs' living conditions and their livelihood were put down to the peculiarities of local geography and climate and so the causes of the various hardships serfs faced were attributed to the colder climate, unlike the tropical or sub-tropical climate of the British West Indies and the Southern states.⁸⁵ After all, the local serfs and the ethnically related Finno-Ugric tribes further north were seen as in some ways as 'blacks of the north' for Baltic-German Enlightenment figures.⁸⁶ That is also why, according to pro-serfdom advocates, the Estonians and Latvians were more accustomed to working in this climate and, because of this, it was claimed that they were used to the seemingly harsh lives that abolitionists described.⁸⁷

Another aspect of slavery/serfdom that came under criticism was the use, or rather excessive use, of violence or physical punishment as a method of punishment. In the case of serfdom in the Baltic provinces this was completely acceptable to a certain regulated degree and, as a result, did not in itself generally need defending by pro-serfdom advocates.⁸⁸ However, when abolitionists did attack local masters for using excessive violence, pro-serfdom advocates *would* defend it. Some excessive use of violence was condemned, sometimes by blaming new nobles who had migrated to the Baltic provinces and did not adhere to the same principles of benevolent paternalism as the older local nobility.⁸⁹ Indeed, blaming all the excesses and the bad treatment of serfs on the so-called unmatriculated nobility was a rather common pro-serfdom tactic.⁹⁰ When abolitionists brought up examples of local serfs not being happy with the local German masters, pro-serfdom advocates pointed to the fact that the serfs usually loved their masters but disliked the local Germans who operated in other fields of life.⁹¹ This was highly reminiscent of the supposed mutual hatred between slaves and poor non-slaveholding whites in the context of the

Southern states or the British colonies.⁹² The pro-serfdom advocates also defended the local court system against attacks because it was claimed to be the best way of taking local peculiarities into consideration and also argued that physical punishment for minor infringements was better than fines, which would be too difficult to implement.⁹³ Thus, physical punishment and use of violence was an accepted form of punishment as in the Southern states and the British West Indies. The differences mostly lie in the degree in which the use of violence was considered justified and socially acceptable. The most strikingly universal pro-serfdom or pro-slavery argument, however, was the idea that other masters would condemn the master who used excessive violence on their serfs or slaves. Masters were supposedly inclined to maintain benevolent paternalist relations with their serfs due to this peer pressure.⁹⁴ Overall, it was claimed that it was only the actions of a minority of masters that were seized upon by abolitionists.

Conclusion

This analysis of Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought and ideas has shown many similarities with pro-slavery thought and ideas in the British Empire and the United States, including between the conquest of the Baltic provinces and enslavement of the local population and that of the conquest of the New World, the African slave trade and the building of societies based on slavery in the Americas. In both cases, the Christianizing and civilizing processes, while flawed, were emphasized as being something positive while it was also argued that the civilizing process had not yet reached its end and that the slaves or serfs were thus not ready for freedom – much of which turned on similar racist argumentation. There were also similar ideas about the threat of insurrection and its possible causes, with pro-slavery/serfdom advocates arguing for and against the likelihood of unrest depending on their particular agenda. The ways in which the pro-serfdom faction countered abolitionist ideas were also similar to the tactics and rhetoric used in the context of New World slavery. This encompassed anything from personally discrediting the abolitionists and their knowledge, and systematically countering their ‘false’ facts, to simply referring to the supposedly emotional, fanatical and irrational nature of abolitionism, which could be challenged by the ‘rational’ and ‘informed’ arguments of the pro-serfdom/slavery faction. The defenders of slavery/serfdom also usually had at least some vested personal interest in the system, and the views they expressed might have helped them to make a career in the slavery/serfdom-based society. All the similarities in pro-serfdom/slavery argumentation that were brought forth in the article make it possible to consider the Baltic-German pro-serfdom thought within a universal or global context of pro-slavery thought, as well as, perhaps, to consider the Baltic provinces under Baltic-German rule and autonomy within the framework of Peter Kolchin’s *other Souths*.⁹⁵

Notes

1. Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). See also: Peter Kolchin, *Sphinx on the American Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2003). Peter Kolchin, 'Comparative Perspectives on Emancipation in the U.S. South: Reconstruction, Radicalism, and Russia', *New Approaches to Internationalizing the History of the Civil War Era: A Special Issue* 2, no. 2 (2012): 203–32.
2. Enrico Dal Lago, *Agrarian Elites: American Slaveholders and Southern Italian Landowners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005). Enrico Dal Lago, 'The Nineteenth-Century "Other Souths", Modernization, and Nation-Building: Expanding the Comparative Perspective', *New Directions in Slavery Studies: Commodification, Community, and Comparison* (2015). Enrico Dal Lago, *Inner Civil Wars in the Confederate South and the Italian Mezzogiorno, 1861–1865* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). Shearer Davis Bowman, *Masters and Lords. Mid-19th Century U.S. Planters and Prussian Junkers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
3. Paulin Ismard, 'Writing the History of Slavery: Between Comparatism and Global History', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 72, no. 1 (2017): 10–11.
4. Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 10.
5. Kolchin, *Sphinx*, 78–84. See also: Ismard, *Writing the History*.
6. Contemporaries were also using the term 'slavery' in addition to 'serfdom' ('Sklaverei' and 'Leibeigenschaft' respectively).
7. Ulrike Plath, '„Euroopa viimased metslased”: eestlased saksa koloniaaldiskursis 1770–1870'. *Rahvuskultuur ja tema teised* (37–64). Tallinn: *Uneri ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus. (collegium litterarum; 22)* (2008): 44–7.
8. There was a clear division between 'Deutsch' and 'Undeutsch' – German and non-German.
9. About pro-slavery theory of Hughes and Fitzhugh see: Henry Hughes, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Gramco and Co., 1854). Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South*. George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All!, or Slaves Without Masters* (A Morris Publisher, 1857).
10. Ronald T. Takaki, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade. The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade* (New York: Free Press, 1971), 12. J. D. B. DeBow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slave Holder. The Right of Peaceful Secession* (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1860), 9–10.
11. Andrew J. Blumbergs, *The Nationalization of Latvians and the Issue of Serfdom* (Amherst: N.Y, 2008. Print), 192–3.
12. Hermann Friedrich Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung gegen Herrn Merkel und Petri* (Halle, 1804), 145–92.
13. Georg Friedrich v. Fircks, *Die Letten in Kurland oder Vertheidigung meines Vaterlandes gegen die Angriffe von G. Merkel in dessen Letten* (Leipzig, 1804), 106–7.
14. Tise, *Proslavery*, 29, 32. About the pro-African slave trade movement see: Ronald T. Takaki, 'The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina', *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 66, no. 1 (January 1965): 38–54. Takaki, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade*. Manisha Sinha, 'Judicial Nullification: The South Carolinian Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in the 1850s', in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127–43. Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2000).

15. Takaki, *The Movement to Reopen*, 54. Takaki writes that the failure of the pro-slave trade agitation of the 1850s and the failure to re-open the African slave trade was a significant moral loss for the pro-slavery cause. Namely that 'the Confederate prohibition represented a moral defeat, for it declared that the African slave trade and thus slavery were wrong in principle'.
16. Plath, „Euroopa viimased metslased“, 43. For more references to the New World see: Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 187–8. Jannau, who did not advocate intrinsically in favor of abolition, but rather something reminiscent of amelioration, also referenced black slavery. Heinrich Johann von Jannau, *Geschichte der Skaverey und Charakter der Bauern in Lief- und Ehtland. Ein Beytrag zur Verbesserung der Leibeigenschaft. Nebst der genauesten Berechnung eines Liefländischen Haakens* (Riga, 1786), 152–3. See also: Wilhelm Christian Friebe, *Handbuch der Geschichte Lief Eht- und Kurlands zum Gebrauch für Jedermann* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1791), 244–5.
17. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 23, 142–7; 174–5; Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 1–5, 57, 31–5. As did the more moderate men who were in favor or abolishing serfdom, but also while doing so in favor of keeping intact the privileges of the nobility. See: Gustav von Rennenkampff, *Bemerkungen über die Leibeigenschaft in Liefland und ihre Aufhebung* (Copenhagen, 1818).
18. Gustav von Bergman, *Geschichte von Liefland, nach bossuetischer Art entworfen* (1776), 2–5. We can also see such comparisons made by Johann Georg Eisen in relation to the enslavement and Christianizing processes in Livonia and the New World context. See: Johann Georg Eisen, *Eines Liefländischen Patrioten Beschreibung der Leibeigenschaft, wie solche in Liefland über die Bauern eingeführet ist* (Peterburi: s.n., 1764?). Blumbergs, *The Nationalization*, 89.
19. Plath, „Euroopa viimased metslased“, 41–3.
20. Paula E. Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), 84.
21. *Ibid.*, 39–41, 85.
22. Tise, *Proslavery*, 29, 32.
23. *Ibid.*, 32.
24. Plath, „Euroopa viimased metslased“, 45. Blumbergs, *The Nationalization*, 89, 119.
25. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 7–8, 54, 144. Garlieb H. Merkel, *Die Letten vorzüglich in Liefland am Ende des philosophischen Jahrhunderts. Ein Beitrag zur Völker- und Menschenkunde* (Leipzig 1796), 280; Fircks, *Die Letten*, 228–9. For Fircks freedom was an abstract concept and there could not be freedom in a true sense as men were not equal per se. Essentially he argued that some men were more equal than others. This also applied to serfdom, which was the best system possible at the time.
26. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 1–4.
27. While Herder supported anti-slavery and anti-colonial ideas, his ideas were later mobilized in nationalist and racist thinking. Thus, it is not surprising that pro-serfdom advocates used some of the ideas of Enlightenment figures in promoting their views. See: Barbara Riesche, *Schöne Mohrinnen, edle Sklaven, schwarze Rächer: Schwarzen-darstellung und Sklavereithematik im deutschen Unterhaltungstheater (1770–1814)* (Dissertation, LMU München: Faculty of History and the Arts, 2007), 300. Garlieb Merkel was possibly the most well-known Baltic-German abolitionist. See: Merkel, *Die Letten*, 282.
28. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 137–41.
29. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 62, 158–9.
30. Goerge Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or, the Failure of Free Society* (A Morris Publisher, 1854), 83.

31. Tise, *Proslavery*, 10.
32. Seymour Drescher and David Brion Davis, *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 65, 119, 168. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 109. Rosalyn Narayan, “‘Creating Insurrections in the Heart of Our Country’: Fear of the British West India Regiments in the Southern US Press, 1839–1860”, *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018): 497–517. Carl Lawrence Paulus, *The Slaveholding Crisis: Fear of Insurrection and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State U.P., 2017).
33. For contemporary arguments in favor of either possibility see: South Carolina. General Assembly. House of Representatives. Special Committee on Slavery and the Slave Trade. *Report of the Minority of the Special Committee of Seven: to Whom Was Referred So Much of Gov. Adams’ Message, No. 1, As Relates to Slavery And the Slave Trade* (Charleston: Harper & Calvo, Printers, 1858), 31, 33–5. J. Johnson Pettigrew, Protest Against the Revival of the African Slave Trade. – *Debow’s Review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources. / Volume 25, Issue 3* (New Orleans Sept 1858), 294–5; 298, 302. Leonidas W. Spratt, Slave Trade in the Southern Congress. – *Southern literary messenger; devoted to every department of literature and the fine arts. / Volume 32, Issue 6* (Richmond June 1861), 417. Las Casas (pseud of Mazzyck, Alexander), The Charleston courier and the slave trade (Charleston, S.C. : s.n., 1858). 3–4. Edmund Ruffin, Consequences of Abolition Agitation (cont’d.), *Debow’s review, Agricultural, commercial, industrial progress and resources. / Volume 23, Issue 3* (New Orleans Sept 1857), 271.
34. About peasant unrests around 1800 see: Ulrike Plath, Untergang oder Reform? Die Deutschen im Baltikum zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts, in *Perceptions of Loss, Decline and Doom in the Baltic Sea Region. Untergangsvorstellungen im Ostseeraum*, hrsg. v. Jan Hecker-Stampehl (u.a.). Berlin 2004 (*The Baltic Sea Region: Nordic Dimensions – European Perspectives*. 1): 299–322.
35. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 76–84.
36. Merkel, *Die Letten*, 279, 300–1.
37. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 22, 90–1, 129, 153–7.
38. Ibid., 22, 66.
39. Jegor von Sivers, *Zur Geschichte der Bauernfreiheit in Livland. Wiederabdruck einer Reihe von Flugschriften und Zeitungsartikeln aus den Jahren 1817–1818* (Riga, 1878), 81–3.
40. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 57–9, Sivers, *Zur Geschichte*, 81–3.
41. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 229–30.
42. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 63–4.
43. Drescher, *Econocide*, 65, 119, 168; See also: Claudius Fergus, “‘Dread of Insurrection’: Abolitionism, Security, and Labor in Britain’s West Indian Colonies, 1760–1823”, *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 66, no. 4 (2009): 757–80. About the problem of Haiti for Jamaica and the British Empire see: Julia Gaffield, ‘Haiti and Jamaica in the Remaking of the Early Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World’, *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 3 (July 2012): 583–614.
44. Narayan, *Creating Insurrections*. See also: Dumas, *Proslavery*, 109.
45. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 54, 140.
46. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 109.
47. Merkel, *Die Letten*, 282, 285–6.
48. Ibid., 286; Hermann Friedrich Tiebe, *Nachtrag zu Lief- und Esthlands Ehrenrettung oder die Todten Lieflands stehen gegen Herrn Merkel auf* (Halle, 1805), 16. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 160–1, 168–71.

49. Merkel, *Die Letten*, 286–8.
50. Ibid., 283.
51. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 65, 70–2, 90–4, 123–9.
52. Ibid., 142–9.
53. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 115–18. In this article I will not go into a deeper analysis of whether serfdom was profitable in the Baltic provinces. Within the context of pro-serfdom thought the serfdom-based economy was intrinsically defended, while the question of whether the serfdom-based economy – while mostly considered archaic – was actually profitable is up for some debate, similar to the question of whether slavery was profitable within the context of the British West Indies. For different opinions on the matter see: Christer Petley, ed., *Rethinking the Fall of the Planter Class* (London: Taylor & Francis Ltd, 2017). Christer Petley, ‘New Perspective on Slavery and Emancipation in the British Caribbean’, *The Historical Journal* 54, no. 3 (2011): 855–80. Drescher, *Econocide*. David Beck Ryden, ‘Does Decline Make Sense? The West Indian Economy and the Abolition of the Slave Trade’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (2001): 347–74.
54. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 214–17.
55. Ibid., 187–8.
56. Ibid., 70, 178–80, 181. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 219–23. Tiebe, *Nachtrag*, 75–6.
57. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthland*, 20–5.
58. Edward B. Rugemer, ‘The Southern Response to British Abolitionism: The Maturation of Proslavery Apologetics’, *The Journal of Southern History* 70, no. 2 (May 2004): 221–48. William E. Skidmore II, ‘“A Milder Type of Bondage”: Brazilian Slavery and Race Relations in the Eyes of American Abolitionists, 1812–1888’, *Slavery & Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018): 147–68. Leslie Bethell, ‘The Decline and Fall of Slavery in Brazil (1850–88)’, in *Brazil: Essays on History and Politics* (2018): 113–44. Paul D. Naish, *Slavery and Silence: Latin America and the U.S. Slave Debate* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Dumas, *Proslavery*, 32, 36. For example in the British context it was argued that slaves were treated ‘at least as well as British workers and soldiers’ or even better.
59. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 23, 142–7, 174–5, Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 1–5, 57, 31–5.
60. August von Kotzebue, *Die Negersklaven. Ein historisch-dramatisches Gemählde in drey Akten vom Präsidenten von Kotzebue* (Leipzig: P. G. Kummer, 1796). August von Kotzebue, *Pensylvanien und die Quäker, nach Raynal, Ders., Clios Blumenkörbchen. 2. Aufl.*, (Darmstadt 1814), 319–42. [August von Kotzebue], *An den ungenannten Verfasser des Buches: Geschichte der Sklaverey und Character der Bauern in Lief- und Ehtland. Ein Beytrag zur Verbesserung der Leibeigenschaft, in: Für Geist und Herz eine Monatschrift für die nordischen Gegenden 1* (1786), H. 3, 128–54. Kotzebue also received critique from pro-serfdom men.
61. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 187–8. The parts where Tiebe refers to black slavery almost expect the reader to be acquainted with it. There is no background, but only references pointing for example to the fact that the serfs had better conditions. This also includes the selling and buying of serfs, which is deemed to be different from the selling and buying in the case of black slavery.
62. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 211–17. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 126–9, 183–4, 188–9.
63. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 183.
64. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 10–14. Abolitionists were often Germans from Germany and thus foreigners from the Baltic perspective.
65. Johann Christoph Petri, *Ehtland und die Ehsten, oder historisch- geographisch- statistisches Gemälde von Ehtland: Ein Seitenstück zu Merkel über die Letten* (Gotha:

- K. W. Ettinger, 1802). For a response, see Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 285–8, 290, 298–300.
66. Ibid., 310. For attacks on Merkel, see: Fircks, *Die Letten*, VI–VIII, 2–3, 17–18, 182–3.
 67. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 70, 178–80, 273–5, 298–300. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 243. Tiebe, *Nachtrag*, 75–6.
 68. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 157, 219–23. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 181, 178–80, 70.
 69. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 70, 80–1, 104–5, 149, 178–81. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 33, 75, 87, 101–4, 111–14, 142–6, 153, 174–8, 200–3.
 70. Tise, *Proslavery*, 29.
 71. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 117–22, 55–6. Baltic-German pro-slavery advocates also argued that abolitionists' ideas of freedom were far too theoretical and the abstract principles in which they operated in, would not work in reality. Thus, similarly to the British context, they argued against absurd propositions to modify an already existing system that was working well. In both cases the pro-slavery men lamented the abstract nature of abolitionist argumentation, while oddly simultaneously working hard on refuting the concrete abolitionist facts throughout their texts almost in a case by case manner. See: Dumas, *Proslavery*, 116, 133. Ficks, *Die Letten*, 227–9.
 72. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 118. Tise, *Proslavery*, 29.
 73. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 122–5.
 74. Brasch was another well-known criticizer of abolitionist ideas. See: Supplement zu den Letten, oder Erklärung über die im zehnten Stück des Intelligenz-Blatts der allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung erschienene Anfrage des Herrn Ritters von Brasch, nebst einer Urkunde von G. Merkel (Weimar, 1798). Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 152–63, 181–5.
 75. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 90–1, 157–61.
 76. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 185.
 77. Ibid., 185.
 78. Ibid., 38.
 79. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 33–4.
 80. Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Fanatical Schemes: Proslavery Rhetoric and the Tragedy of Consensus* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 22–3.
 81. Ibid., 22–3.
 82. Tiebe and Fircks wrote their texts around 1803–1805, while serfdom was abolished starting from about a decade later.
 83. Sivers, *Zur Geschichte*, 128–30. The entire article compilation contains debates over the emancipation process. Merkel, *Die Letten*, 267.
 84. Dumas, *Proslavery*, 46–7.
 85. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 27–9, 31–5. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 87–9.
 86. Plath, „Euroopa viimased metslased”, 41.
 87. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 27–9. Similar ideas did not always come out in pro-serfdom texts. According to some Enlightenment figures, such as Herder, the cold was actually making the native people more similar to blacks. See. Plath, „Euroopa viimased metslased”, 41.
 88. Marten Seppel, Vägivalla piirid pärisorjuslikes suhetes Eesti- ja Liivimaa 17. sajandil, *Tuna. Ajalookultuuri ajakiri*, 2, (2012): 20–1, 31. However, as Marten Seppel writes, cases where masters used excessive violence were not uncommon. While perhaps not as extreme as in the South, the Baltic-German masters also consciously aimed at keeping the serfs in a certain amount of fear.
 89. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 234–43.
 90. Ibid., 239–43.
 91. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 185. Fircks, *Die Letten*, 23, 70–2.

92. Jeff Forret, *Race Relations at the Margins: Slaves and Poor Whites in the Antebellum Southern Countryside* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 14, 115–57. Forret writes about the importance of poor whites in slave control, about the mutual animosity and violence between poor whites and slaves, while also concluding that on other occasion they could help runaway slaves escape or even incite rebellion. See also: Keri L. Merritt, *Masterless Men: Poor Whites and Slavery in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
93. Tiebe, *Lief- und Esthlands*, 133–5.
94. Ibid., 196–200.
95. Kolchin, *Sphinx*, 74–115. Dal Lago, *Agrarian*, 16–17.

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