

To Paint the Portrait of Jaan Tõnisson: Myth and Psychology

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Jaan Tõnisson (1868–1941) was a legendary Estonian journalist and politician, actually the most influential nationalist leader and mobiliser of social activism among Estonians in the decades preceding the establishment of the Republic of Estonia (approximately 1896–1917). In retrospect, he has mostly been depicted as a semi-mythological figure, whose appearances before the public or writings in the press, as well as his reactions in everyday life, resembled the forces of nature (thunder, storms, fire). Individual psychology has hardly been noticed in him and people have been of the opinion that as a man of ideas, Tõnisson himself also did not care about the psychological sides of living, as if following some kind of mythological plot in which he had been given a decisive role to play. Depending on the situation, Tõnisson could be friendly and supportive, or – half an hour later – spiteful and mad towards his colleagues, then again forgetting all temporary troubles. This is exactly what made him a favourite object of caricaturists.

This essay aspires to sort out first of all whether Tõnisson's own character and views provided reason for mythologising his personality, and secondly how new possibilities can be found for giving it more definite nuances of colour.

The distinctive feature of Tõnisson's personal philosophy was the fact that he understood Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as the moral law of nationality, thus as a nationalist imperative. Nationality is one of the absolutely necessary attributes of every person, and of humanity in general. Just as another person is respected as one's fellow man, so he as a representative of a nation must be also respected. To be a representative of a nationality defines each person's natural motives for functioning in society. If obstacles are set up to it, then human rights are being violated. A person who is not aware of his/her nationality and of the duties arising from it, is morally immature. If one disavows one's nationality, this is immoral behaviour. So for Tõnisson, nationality could not be some sort of ideological construction, as the enlighteners of the latter half of the 20th century argued (such views would have been immoral in Tõnisson's opinion), but rather the innate moral duty of man as a social being. This is the simple core of his 'moral nationalism'.

Another characteristic feature of Tõnisson's views is their fixity in time. Tõnisson thought more or less the same way as a national leader before the establishment of Estonian statehood, and later as a professional politician in the Republic of Estonia. Psychological flexibility was not one of his virtues, and this fostered the generation of the myth of his personality. This also could lead to anachronisms and Tõnisson being bypassed in appointments to state office.

Nationalist imperative as Tõnisson's enduring principle explains a great deal in his life. As a young man he broke off his engagement because his fiancée was not nationally oriented, and as a result of this 'gender-specific' trauma, he remained a bachelor until he turned 41. Even though Tõnisson was, in popular speech, called the duke or Landmarschall of Livland (the head of the Baltic German local government in the territory of what is currently southern Estonia and northern Latvia) because of his dignified appearance and arrogant behaviour, he

has become famous as the most vehement opponent of the Baltic Germans in Estonian history. He did not consider Baltic Germans to be a nationality, but rather a colonial stratum that, as such, had no moral rights in Estonia. His position remained the same in the period of the independent Republic of Estonia, as he denied the necessity of cultural autonomy for minorities (first and foremost Germans), which his main competitor as head of state, Konstantin Päts, stood for.

Tõnisson's irreplaceable service lies in the fact that he unremittingly instilled social courage in the Estonian people in the period when statehood was being forged. Tõnisson's egocentrism, temperament, combativeness, non-diplomatic nature, his air of superiority regarding the dominance of Baltic Germans, and sporadic poseurdom all expressed one message: 'Don't be afraid!' Estonians, for heaven's sake, don't be afraid, carry on valiantly! Tõnisson's fearlessness was legendary. At decisive moments he could demonstrate the disregard of a martyr when facing death.

On this typological basis, Tõnisson's personality is compared to two politicians with whom he was very familiar and who were in some way similar to him. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was the President of Czechoslovakia in 1918–1935. Tõnisson had already met him in 1901 in Vienna and Prague, and had evidently received important personal and ideological influences from him as a national leader. Another politician of utter fearlessness was Viktor Kingissepp, the leader of Estonia's (later underground) communists, who saved Tõnisson's life in 1917 on the condition that Tõnisson leaves the country and goes abroad. Tõnisson, however, was no longer able to save Kingissepp's life in 1922 because Kingissepp was executed immediately after his imprisonment on orders from Prime Minister K. Päts.