

REPUBLIC OF LATVIA IN 1918-1940: THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF FORMATION AND LOSS OF STATE'S INDEPENDENCE

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Cardinal changes are going on in the Baltic states. These processes provoke great interest also abroad. With this report we want to acquaint historians of other countries with the Republic of Latvia characterizing the political aspects of state's formation and loss of its independence in brief.

Latvia is one of the three Baltic republics which lies on the coasts of the Baltic sea. It borders on Estonia in the North, and on Lithuania in the South.

The territory of Latvia covers 64.000 square km which makes it twenty-first in size among the European countries, 15 countries being smaller than Latvia, among them Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Riga is the capital and the largest city of Latvia. Its population is 900.000. Riga lies on the banks of the river Daugava, some nine miles from the Bay names after the city. It was founded in 1201. The Baltic tribes, among them the Latvians, settled along the Baltic Sea some 4000 years ago.

The awakening of the Latvians began in the middle of the 19th century. It reached its peak during the revolution of 1905-1907, but in Latvia the revolution was oppressed, yet the idea of freedom continued to live in the hearts of the people. The Latvians resumed their struggle in 1917. After the dethronement of Czar Nicholas in March 1917 in Russia, the Latvians formed their own political leadership. First they created provincial councils, and in October 1917 representatives of these councils met in St. Petersburg to establish a single central organization.

The Provisional Latvian National Council began its activity when the Bolsheviks led by V. I. Lenin came to power. All the Latvian territories came under German occupation. Zigfrids Meierovics, later Foreign Minister of Latvia, went to London. On November 11, 1918, which is known as the day of the general armistice, Z. Meierovics received from Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, a formal document stating that His Majesty's Government recognized Latvia's independence de facto. Six days later, on November 17, 1918, Latvia was proclaimed a free democratic republic by the representatives of all Latvian political parties; on November 18, 1918, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the leadership of a provisional government was given to Karlis Ulmanis, a young but well-known leader of peasant movement. The political aim of the government was to live in freedom in their country, but there were forces which wanted to destroy

the freedom – it was Russia in the East, and German landed gentry in the Baltic states.

When Latvia's independence was declared, the provisional government immediately began to organize a national army. The first units consisted of volunteers, mostly of students. It was difficult to provide national army with arms. The hope was to gather arms from retreating German units. Already on November 15, 1917, a decree was signed by Lenin and Stalin in St. Petersburg defining the new soviet policy towards the minority nations in Russia. It promised freedom to all national groups who were oppressed by Tzarist Russia and recognized their rights to establish independent states of their own territories.

Soon it turned out that these were deliberate lies to let the Bolshevich regime gain time. In 1918, when the Estonians the Latvians and the Lithuanians proclaimed their independence, Lenin ordered Red Army divisions to move in and occupy the newly-freed nations.

As the Red Army approached Riga, the Latvian provisional government had only a few hundred adequately armed men at its disposal. The government was compelled to leave the capital on January 2, 1919, and move its seat Southwest to the Baltic sea-port Liepaja. The cold winter of 1919 stopped manoeuvres of the Red Army and gave time for the government to prepare for the political and military liberation of the re-occupied land. At the end of February, British Navy units delivered 5000 rifles and 50 machine guns to Liepaja and on March 3, 1919, the Latvians supported by certain German units, started their counter-offensive. Riga was liberated from Communist domination on May 22.

Meanwhile, other Latvian units in the Northern regions joined up with Estonian forces to battle Red invaders in that sector. The last Red troops were forced to retreat behind Latvia's ethnic borders after a war that lasted 620 days. Once again the country was free, and on August 11, 1920, Lenin signed a peace treaty recognizing the independence of the new country.

At the beginning of 1921 the Council of Allied foreign Ministers unanimously agreed to recognize the independence of Latvia and Estonia de jure.

The Latvian government in Riga then was recognized by other countries in the world. The last to recognize Latvia's government on July 28, 1922, was the government of the United States. The Latvian government established diplomatic relations with many European countries. On September 22, 1921, Latvia joined the membership of the League of Nations that had been created to preserve peace and freedom for all nations.

In 1920 the Latvians held their first free elections to choose 152 delegates for a Constitutional Convention which began its work on May 1 of that year.

There was little class distinction among the Latvians. Most of them were peasants, deriving their income from farming or related occupations. The next largest group were the the factory and farm labourers. The representatives of the upper class maintained good relations with the above mentioned groups. This

strongly influenced the democratic character of the new Constitution which declared:

“Latvia is an independent, democratic republic”, adding in the second paragraph: “The sovereign power in the state of Latvia belongs to the people of Latvia”.

Why not the Latvian people, but the people of Latvia? During the long period of foreign rule, many groups of different ethnic origin had settled in Latvia, and the creators of the new Constitution definitely desired to guarantee equal rights to all the people, including the minority groups.

The Constitution guaranteed equal rights to elect and being elected at the age of 21. Voting was to be equal, by secret ballot, direct and proportional. The Parliament, called the Saeima, was to be composed of 100 deputies elected for three year term. The government consisted of a Prime Minister and a cabinet formed by him. The members of the Cabinet, as well as the Prime Minister himself, had to receive a vote of confidence from the Saeima. Furthermore, the Saeima was to elect a President of State with a three year term, and to elect judges.

It is clear that the founders of the Latvia's Constitution intended to create a system that would grant the people maximum freedom to express their will on matters of State, and meant to ensure this according to the concept of ideal democracy. The Latvian Constitution was formally adopted on February 15, 1922, and was close to the Weimar Constitution.

The first elections of the Saeima took place in the autumn of 1922, but the lack of previous parliamentary experience soon proved a considerable hindrance in developing a healthy parliamentary system. The liberal Constitution tempted small and often politically insignificant groups to create their own parties in the hope of gaining a foothold in the Saeima.

Only nine years after the Constitution had been adopted, in the elections of 1931, there were 103 different parties campaigning with candidate lists for a 100 seats in the Saeima, and of these competing groups 27 actually managed to get at least one deputy elected.

In 1933 the Peasant's Union proposed to change the Constitution, demanding for a President being elected by the people; it also proposed the head of government to act independently in the Saeima. On May 15, 1934, the Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis, and the Commander of Liberation Army, General Janis Balodis, decided to suspend the Saeima until a new Constitution was drafted and adopted by plebiscite.

During the period the country was to be ruled by the government headed by Karlis Ulmanis – a development in which Latvia followed the example of a great many European countries of that period.

The Nazi-Soviet pact of August 23 stupefied the World. The secret protocol of the pact divided East Europe between German and the Soviet Union. The Baltic states came under the influence of Stalin, thus leading Estonia, Latvia and

Lithuania to the loss of their independence... The first measures towards the loss of independence in Latvia had been taken already in October.

On October 2, the Latvian Foreign Minister Vilhelms Munters was summoned to the Kremlin. Latvia signed a dictated pact of mutual assistance on October 5, 1939.

The Soviets deployed 25000 troops in Latvia. Stalin managed to occupy the Baltic States one by one, starting from the North.

On June 16, the Soviet Union handed an ultimatum to the Latvia envoy in Moscow, Mr. Kocinsh, demanding immediate admission into Latvia of Red Army troops to protect its interests. It also demanded a resignation of the Latvia's government and the establishment of a new regime confident to the Soviet Union. In case of negative answer, the Soviets threatened to send armed forces across the border. They demanded an answer by 10 p. m. the same day.

The Latvian government met in extraordinary session on June 16, 1940, and, to save the country from devastation and to avoid futile bloodshed, decided against armed opposition. At the same time it ordered the Latvian Telegraph Agency to release to the world's press a declaration that Latvia was the victim of unprovoked Soviet aggression.

On June 17, 1940, Red Army units reached the capital and immediately occupied the central radio, post, telephone and telegraph offices to keep the Latvian government from further communication, and Vishinsky arrived in Riga to establish a "government of Latvia to whom the Soviet Union could give its confidence".

The sovietization of political, social and economic life took place in Baltic States. Many Baltic political leaders were arrested, deported to Siberia, or killed. The soviet government began large-scale deportations of the Estonians, the Lithuanians and the Latvians, including women, children and infants, to the polar and desert regions of the Soviet Union, beginning on June 14, 1941. In one year of Soviet rule, Latvia lost more than 34000 people. The once flourishing Baltic economy was ruined.

During the last 50 years undeniable is the fact that the republic of Latvia consisting in the USSR has reached not only certain positive but also many negative results. In 1990 for the first time during these 50 years, the Parliament of the republic is democratically elected. It has started its activity to renew the independence of Latvia de facto. The first step towards it is the Declaration of Latvia's independence on May 4, 1990.