THE GENESIS OF LATVIAN STATEHOOD IN 1918-1919
AND THE MAIN ISSUES
OF LATVIAN-LITHUANIAN RELATIONS
IN THE EARLY STAGE OF INDEPENDENCE*

ĒRIKS JĒKABSONS

Latvian State Historical Archive, Riga

In the period between 1917 and 1920, towards the end and during the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Russia was rocked by revolutionary events and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania strengthened their independence decisively, extremely complicated military and political events and processes were taking place in the Baltic area.

In 1918 the situation in the newly independent Baltic states was characterized by the intertwining of the interests of Germany, Poland, Soviet Russia, the Russian White Guard movement, the Allies and, to a certain degree, of Finland and Sweden (in particular in Estonia), as well as of the national governments of the Baltic states. All that could not but leave its imprint on the formation of these countries as truly independent states. In the case of Latvia and Lithuania that process was particularly complicated, in both positive and negative respects.

As regards Latvia, the aforementioned military and political processes were especially dynamic. Among numerous reasons mention must be made, in the first place, of the highly efficient organizational and economic weight of the Baltic Germans, who also surpassed other national groups in education in Latvia (except Latgale, where Polish landowners and magnates enjoyed a similar position). The situation was also aggravated by the peculiar military circumstances that prevailed in the country. For over two years until September 1917, Latvia was divided into two parts by the front between the warring parties. A rather limited Latvian political activity was confined to Riga or Vidzeme, which were under Russian control – at that time there were about 800,000 Latvian refugees in Russia and the majority of men were drafted into the army. In September 1917

*See the footnote to the preceding report, p. 138.

German troops occupied Riga, and in February 1918 they established their rule over the whole of Latvia after unsuccessful Soviet-German peace talks in Brest-Litovsk.

Eventually the Latvians experienced a common historically conditioned hostility and even hatred towards the Germans. Ethnic as well as class oppression carried out both by German aristocracy and Russian institutions and bureaucrats, combined with a relatively high educational level among the local population of the so-called Baltic provinces (Courland and Livland) led to the spread of the popularity of Social-Democratic ideas (to a certain extent even in their most radical form – Bolshevism). It must also be taken into account that the urban population made up 40 per cent in Latvia (in Russia in general only 14 per cent), and its proletarian nature was a medium favouring Socialist ideology. In 1918, Latvian Social Democrats, later becoming the Communist party, almost unilaterally supported the Bolsheviks. On the other hand, in their declaration of 15 November 1917 they hypocritically advanced a slogan of the right of nations to self-determination.

Therefore, in Latvian political circles the idea of full independence took root much later than in Lithuania, where the reminiscence of the former independence, though in the distant past, was still in the consciousness of the nation. Some politicians (Mikēlis Valters, et al.) had raised the issue of a Latvian state already in the revolution of 1905 and later considered the formation of a common Latvian-Lithuanian state, actually the idea of independence became realistic for many politicians and the population in general only under the conditions of the German occupation in 1918. In the summer of that year two more prominent Latvian parties – the Social Democrats (Mensheviks, which split from the Latvian Bolshevik Social Democrats) and the Farmers' Union – launched the struggle for the full independence of Latvia. That initiative was taken after the unsuccessful attempts of the local Germans, supported by an insignificant number of more conservative pro-German Latvians, since the end of 1917 to form the Duchy of Courland and afterwards a Baltic state as a constitutional monarchy.

Regrettably, the representatives of political parties belonging to the Democratic bloc could not agree on the proclamation of Latvian independence with the National Provisional Council, which was formed as early as 1917 to represent Latvian interests in Western Europe. In the autumn of 1918, however, the Council lost its influence. It must be noted that at that time the endeavours of the national forces depended entirely on the occupational forces, absolutely controlling the situation.

A real chance to proclaim Latvian independence appeared only after cardinal changes in the internal and external situation of Germany in October (the revolution, the conclusion of the armistice on the Western front, etc.). Simultaneously, the Baltic Germans renewed their activity and started the formation of a Baltic state on 5-9 November. Those efforts were fruitless, since the real situation already favoured the creation of a national Latvian state for the first time in history. The newspaper of the Farmers' Union *Līdums* (Clearing) wrote on 10 November: 'Only independent Latvia and independent Estonia can give these lands a happy future.' Several days later power in Latvia was taken over from the military authorities by the German Civil Board, directly subordinated to the *Reichskanzler* of Germany. On 17 November a new representative body – the People's Council – was set up comprising the deputies of political parties (later it also included representatives of national minorities and liberated territories). The Council was to function until the election of the Constituent Assembly (*Satversmes sapulce*) of the independent Republic of Latvia on the basis of free, universal and democratic suffrage. Kārlis Ulmanis was elected the first president (prime minister) of the Provisional Government. In its second session on 18 November, the People's Council proclaimed the independence of Latvia.

In historical scholarship the legitimacy of this Act has been discussed up to the present time. According to one opinion, from the juridical point of view, it was entirely legal only with respect to the takeover of power from the German occupational forces, which was then at their disposal or from Soviet Russia, which, after the annulment of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 13 November 1918, became the bearer of political power in Latvia. Professor Valdis Bērziņš rejects these arguments, stating that in such a case the presence of the German occupational forces should be legitimized, contradicting the norms of international law, while Russia would not be a country, which brought the Bolshevik regime in an undemocratic way. Taking into account all these circumstances, one should not adhere to all international rules, established by the Great Powers and very often broken by themselves. In the first place, attention should be paid to the principle of the right of nations to self-determination, commonly accepted by the same powers. Nationalistically-minded Latvian politicians simply used a more suitable principle for the formation of the Latvian (so far juridical) state, the rejection of which was not in the interests of either of the two hostile states (Germany or Russia) in that particular situation. It was very probable that in the case of the turn-down of the declaration of independence, it could not have been recognized in the future at all.

That was clearly exemplified by the situation in which the Latvian Provisional Government functioned. Real power was in the hands of the German occupational forces. Despite the fact that the German commissioner for the Baltic region, August Winning, recognized the Provisional Government as the supreme body of power in Latvia, transfer of authority in the provinces was very slow or did not take place at all. The armed forces were weak and still in the process of formation. Therefore, faced with pressure from the Red Army, the government was forced to sign an agreement with Winning concerning the Baltic *Landeswehr*, consisting of Latvian, German and Russian forces. Actually, the formation of Latvian forces was hindered and that of Baltic Germans was encouraged in every possible way.

In December one more powerful political force – the Bolsheviks – appeared in the political life of Latvia. They were even more radical than the government of Soviet Russia – at that time they rejected any idea about the declaration of Latvian statehood and treated the country merely as a bridge between Soviet Russia and revolutionary Germany on the way to world revolution. As an unpleasant surprise they accepted unwillingly Lenin's decision about the formation of a temporary, fully puppet, though formally independent structure – Soviet Latvia, the government of which they had to take on themselves. It is worth noting that at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 the alignment of forces and the mood of the people made namely that way a realistic further development of the country. In January Riga was taken by the Red Riflemen, believing that they had come to liberate their motherland (some of them had not been in Latvia since 1915) from the Germans and their supporters. Soon the whole of Latvia was taken by them (except Liepāja (Libau) and its environs). However, the situation started to change gradually, when both the Riflemen and the people began to understand the real state of affairs and the foolish Bolshevik policy towards the peasantry and the red terror, acquiring increasingly bloodier forms. The Bolsheviks lost their popularity and soldiers started to go over to the Estonian troops and their ally – the Latvian Northern Brigade in great numbers. It is noteworthy that there were no deserters to the Germans. In May 1919 the Germans and the Latvian Brigade took Riga and after some time the army of Soviet Latvia was disbanded, while some efficient regiments were transferred into the interior of Russia – that action was undoubtedly induced by the increased desertion of soldiers, in particular after the withdrawal of the Germans in the summer of 1919.

In the winter and spring of 1919 the Latvian Provisional Government was compelled to collaborate with the Germans as with the

only anti-Bolshevik force of considerable strength. Eventually the Government increased its influence and its armed forces both at the front and in the rear. This government was not a German stooge, as was asserted in Soviet historical studies. That was attested by the putsch of 16 April 1919, which was organized by the Germans, who were dissatisfied by the growth of the authority and power of the government. As a result, the government had to continue its activity on board a ship at a pier guarded by the warships of the Allied Powers. After that a pro-German government of Pastor Andrievs Niedra was set up, which proclaimed itself the only legal power in Latvia.

The situation was unique – for several months there were three governments in the country. The Provisional Government of Ulmanis had the aforementioned brigade at its disposal in the north of Latvia and, to a certain extent, the Latvian brigade under German command; the government of Niedra was supported by the Baltic Germans and more conservative Latvian politicians; and the Soviet government of Pēteris Stučka, which had proclaimed itself the supreme power in the country, though in actual fact completely dependent on Soviet Russia. Such a situation lasted till the end of June, when Estonian and Latvian forces defeated the German *Landeswehr* at Cēsis. The result of the fierce battle meant an end to the government of Niedra, and a large part of Latvian territory came under control of the Ulmanis government for the first time. That process continued – in the autumn of 1919 the reactionary German-Russian army under Gen. Pavel Bermond-Avalov suffered a crushing defeat. The Provisional Government became the only power in the entire territory of liberated Latvia (its army by that time had become 7,000 men strong). That meant an end to the period, which is treated by some historians as the Latvian civil war. The existence of the government of Soviet Latvia in Russia ceased in January, and in the liberation of Latgale, conducted together with Polish forces, the enemy was non-Latvian troops of the Red Army.

By the beginning of February the whole territory of Eastern Latvia was freed, a truce was declared in February, and in August a peace treaty was signed with Soviet Russia. Simultaneously Russia was the first to recognize Latvia *de jure*. The Allies and other countries did the same in January 1921, thus ending the process, started by Great Britain on 11 November 1918 in recognizing *de facto* the right of the Provisional Government to represent the interests of the Latvian nation as its supreme authority.

Of the three forms of statehood – The Baltic state, the Socialist republic and the independent democratic country – the latter proved to be the most stable. This situation was not governed by the rule of

chance – under the contemporary circumstances weak Germany and Russia, devastated by wars and revolutions, could not offer any serious support to the adherents of either the Baltic state or the Soviet republic, and thus the form of statehood, best meeting the requirements of the Latvian nation, took the upper hand; besides it was the most democratic of all the three.

The young state had to face a problem, peculiar to all newly born states – its boundaries. Regrettably, the boundary issue complicated Latvian relations with Estonia and Lithuania, even in the period of the struggle against the common enemy – Soviet Russia. The frontier quarrel with Estonia was solved with the help of English intermediaries in July 1920.

Latvian-Lithuanian relations were more complicated because of Poland's active participation in them. The analysis of the relationship of these three nations in the early stage of their independence is important for several reasons. Firstly, Lithuanian-Polish disagreement, which was the main obstacle in the formation of a strong defensive union of the Baltic states, was especially evident in the period between 1918 and 1920 – during the war and in the post-war situation. Secondly, a special role of Latvia in this discord has not yet been properly examined. Thirdly, the delimitation of the southern Latvian border was extremely complicated, and in general this process was associated with the Latvian-Polish state relations as well.

Without going into details one should draw a conclusion that between 1919 and 1921 the first attempts of cooperation between Latvia and Lithuania were quite evident (the March 1919 agreement concerning the Latvian loan of 5,000,000 marks from the Lithuanian government, the use of the seaport of Liepāja by the Lithuanians, episodic military cooperation in the struggle against the Red Army and the Bermondist forces, mutual invitations to regional conferences, etc.). The first serious differences arose over the territorial issues in the region of Palanga and Mažeikiai and in the county of Ilūkste (in September 1920 even a small military incident took place, in which a Lithuanian soldier was killed). In general, such misunderstandings are typical in the relations between the neighbouring states after they obtain their independence. However, in this particular case the solution of the differences was complicated by the general military and political situation in the region. The state of affairs in Latvia and Lithuania had much in common, though there were differences, conditioned by external factors, and the politicians of both states sometimes placed exaggerated emphasis on those real or even seeming causes. The actions of the Lithuanian government sometimes depended on its persistent conviction that after recovery Germany

and Russia would turn against Poland and Latvia (because of the latter's seaports). Therefore, the Lithuanian prime minister Augustinas Voldemaras, at least according to the information of diplomats, did not consider Latvia a reliable partner. In his opinion, Lithuania, pursuing a benevolent policy in respect to both Germany and Russia, could retain its independence and even recover Vilnius.

In its turn the government of Latvia, influenced by the territorial disagreements with Lithuania, yielded to the temptation to cooperate with Poland at least temporarily and inconsistently, nevertheless thus weakening Lithuania and making its policy less flexible.

As has been mentioned above, that discord intensified particularly at the end of 1919 and the start of 1920, when after the talks in Kaunas the Latvian side became aware that the agreement on military cooperation with Lithuania was impossible due to the latter's claims not only to the district of Ilūkste, but also even to Daugavpils and the whole of eastern Latvia – Latgale. That was the reason why a temporary rapprochement was possible between Latvia and Poland, which, in contrast to Lithuania, did not lay any territorial claims to Latgale and Daugavpils (in the form of a secret agreement about military cooperation and liberation of Latgale without informing about it the Lithuanians who were not interested in the establishment of a direct Latvian-Polish border. As a result of a joint Polish-Latvian assault in January 1920 Poland managed to flare up the differences between Latvia and Lithuania, which nearly led to armed conflict (in January the Polish side tried to obtain Latvian consent to attack Lithuania in the case of a Polish-Lithuanian conflict, but the Latvians rejected the proposal). Poland, nevertheless, realized partly at least one of its aims in the relations with Latvia – it isolated Lithuania and took away that region at the Bolshevik front, which until then had been occupied by the Lithuanian troops in Latvia. In future, too, Poland made consequent, though not always successful, attempts to prevent the rapprochement between Latvia and Lithuania. However, it did not manage to attain that aim fully, since both in the Latvian and Lithuanian political circles and in societies in general there were strong mutual benevolent tendencies, based on the perception of the historical proximity and the similarity of the geopolitical situation. Polish possible selfish ends with regard to Latgale and Latvian seaports had not been quite forgotten, either.

It was in 1919-20 that the conception of the southern direction of the Latvian foreign policy was elaborated in order to preserve a political balance between Lithuania and Poland in the general complicated situation. Taken all in all, this conception with certain modi

fications in each particular period was adhered to up to the outbreak of World War Two.

It is understandable that the relations between Latvia, Lithuania and Poland can not be properly analyzed if divorced from the general situation in the region, and the role of the Allied Powers. Germany and the Soviet Union must also be taken into account. Namely these two states were especially influential in Lithuania, whose position at the end of 1919 was much more difficult than that of Latvia, let alone Estonia. In their turn the internal differences between Lithuania and Poland and to a lesser degree between Latvia and Lithuania and other countries prevented the formation of a Baltic union in 1919-20 and later.

In the solution of the Latvian-Lithuanian territorial conflict Britain must be given its due. The inter-state court of justice on frontiers, led by Professor James Young Simpson, ended its work in March 1920; according to the court decision the region of Ilūkste was attributed to Latvia, and Palanga and Mažeikiai to Lithuania. In its turn France – the rival of Great Britain – also exerted its influence in the Baltic region, in particular on Lithuanian-Polish relations. Here the rivalry of the two great powers was quite evident, since they often adopted different policies to Latvia and Lithuania.

Thus, at the initial stage of the independence of the Baltic countries internal contradictions turned out to be stronger to a certain extent than attempts to guarantee independence in every possible way, in the first place establishing concord and forming a defensive union of small states. At present a desirable concord among Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia has not been achieved, either, though the current differences are related to the sea and no more to land. Therefore the governments of all the Baltic states are faced with a question: do they have any right to disregard the lessons of the past? Such a question is the more urgent, if the absence of agreement in 1939-1940 is taken into account. Must not everything be done at present to search for all the possible ways, leading to concord and union?