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COUP D'ÉTAT IN LATVIA IN 1934 AND REACTIONS ABROAD

Abstract

Latvia was among the countries in Central and Eastern Europe that transitioned from parliamentary democracy to an authoritarian regime during the interwar period. This authoritarian rule was established in Latvia in May 1934 through a *coup d'état*. During the following years, the country was governed by a single authoritarian leader, Kārlis Ulmanis, until it lost its independence and was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940. This article aims to delineate the specifics of this emergence of the authoritarian regime in Latvia. It analyses the causes that lead to the coup, its progression, the subsequent repression of political opponents, and the primary characteristics of the newly established authoritarian regime. Considerable attention and research have been devoted to the foreign reactions to the Latvian coup among the neighbouring countries, European great powers and the USA, and the international community.

Keywords: Latvia, Baltic States, interwar period, authoritarianism, authoritarian regime, *coup d'état*, paramilitary organisations, international relations

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1. PREPARATION OF THE COUP

1. 1. CAUSES

The causes behind the authoritarian upheavals that took place in the inter-war period in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe can be categorised into three broad groups: 1) internal factors, conditionally related to the lack of democratic experience or, more accurately, to the shortcomings of its implementation; 2) external influences, which encompass the belief in a stronger stance in relations with neighbouring countries and the presence and example set by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes in the vicinity; 3) economic considerations, where the effectiveness of state economic management is believed to be enhanced through authoritarian rule.

In the case of Latvia, researchers mention several factors that contributed to the plunge into authoritarianism. Firstly, there was a notable reluctance among both the population and the politicians, who had experienced the Russian Empire, to fully embrace democratic practices in the country. Additionally, the absence of a robust Latvian middle class and the lack of active support for democracy among the majority of the peasantry, who did not perceive the effectiveness of the Latvian Parliament (Lat. *Saeima*), played significant roles. Moreover, the political radicalism of Latvian social democracy further complicated the democratic landscape¹. Collectively, these factors facilitated the rise of right-wing radicalism in Latvia, as in other countries. Secondly, disorderly legislation allowed numerous small political groups to enter the parliament, hindering its ability to function coherently. This issue proved decisive in shaping the political landscape. In terms of foreign policy considerations, the dominance and example set by totalitarian and authoritarian states in the Baltic region, notably, Estonia, Latvia's closest regional ally, which had recently embraced authoritarianism, played a pivotal role. Additionally, the legal rise to power of the National Socialists led by Adolf Hitler in Germany in the winter of 1933 posed a direct threat to Lithuania and, consequently, also to Latvia. This threat underscored the need, as perceived by Kārlis Ulmanis, for a strong and coordinated national leadership. In Latvia, as in other countries, authoritarian tendencies were reinforced by the personality of a charismatic leader, Kārlis Ulmanis, and his desire to retain his place in politics, to 'take power into his own hands' and to run the country as he saw fit. Owing in large part to his undeniable leadership qualities and popularity, he succeeded in this by

¹ Historical research on the authoritarian coup in Latvia has also been conducted in Polish, see Piotr Łossowski, *Kraje bałtyckie na drodze od demokracji parlamentarnej do dyktatury (1918–1934)*, Wrocław 1972; idem, *Łotwa nasz sąsiad. Stosunki polsko-łotewskie w latach 1919–1939*, Warszawa 1990.

carrying out an illegal *coup d'état*, unlike other Latvian politicians who also planned a similar path².

1. 2. THE ORIGINS OF THE IDEA AND ITS BACKGROUND

It seems that Kārlis Ulmanis began contemplating the organisation of a coup in the early 1930s, with a more specific consideration in 1933. There are indications that he initially intended to orchestrate it earlier on several occasions: on 18 November and 31 December 1933, followed by 23 April and 2 May 1934, but for various reasons postponed it and finally decided to proceed on 15 May³.

During this period, discussions of a potential *coup d'état* were widespread in public and political circles, with accusation from the Left directed at the Right for its alleged preparations. Latvian historian Edgars Dunsdorfs aptly notes that Ulmanis used this context to advocate the idea of constitutional reform (the issue had been raised quite extensively since the 1920s, primarily with a view to giving more powers to the president of the republic), and that he drew inspiration from developments in neighbouring Estonia, naming the Ulmanis's project as 'plagiarism in the making' (in 1933, a referendum decided to considerably extend the powers of the president elected by the whole nation in Estonia). In August 1933, at an extraordinary session of the *Saeima* convened at the suggestion of the Latvian Social Democratic Worker's Party (Lat. *Latvijas Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija*, LSDSP), amid fears of a *coup d'état* by the radical right Latvian political group Thunder Cross (Lat. *Pērkonkrusts*), Latvian Farmers' Union (Lat. *Latviešu Zemnieku savienība*, LZS) deputy Alfrēds Bērziņš, following a suggestion by Ulmanis, raised the issue of a president of the state elected by the whole nation for an extended term. This initiative also aimed to amend electoral laws to ensure legislative focus within the *Saeima* instead of interfering with 'administrative functions'. On 23 and 24 October 1933, at a meeting of the LZS *Saeima* fraction, a draft amendment to the constitution was discussed and subsequently submitted to the *Saeima* for consideration. It was essentially very similar to the draft that had just been adopted in a referendum in Estonia, which also enhanced the powers of the head of state. The discussions within the *Saeima* were contentious, with the Social Democrats accusing Ulmanis of harbouring 'Hitlerite' motives and suggesting that his inspiration stemmed from his medical trip to Germany in September and October 1933, upon which he began praising dictatorship.

In any case, Ulmanis spoke at length about the necessity for constitutional amendments on 26 October at the LZS Riga District Assembly, and on

² Daina BLEIERE [et al.], *Latvijas vēsture 20. gadsimts*, Rīga 2005, pp. 149–151.

³ Valters ŠČERBINSKIS, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums: cēloņi, norise un sekas*, [in:] *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, sast. Valters ŠČERBINSKIS, Ēriks JĒKABSONS, Rīga 2012, p. 26.

10 November at the *Saeima*, on which day the deputies voted to refer the draft law to the Public Law Commission with 60 votes in favour and 28 against (two abstentions). Subsequently, these amendments became one of Ulmanis's main topics in public appearances. For example, at the LZS conference on 10 December, he discussed the general dissatisfaction with parliamentarism in Europe and the need to amend the constitution, etc. On 4 February 1934 in Ventspils, on 10 and 18 February, as well as in early March in Riga – he emphasised the failure of the *Saeima* (27 parties had won seats in the parliament with 100 seats), the necessity of constitutional reform and the experiences of neighbouring countries, particularly highlighting the role of the peasantry. On 3, 4 and 8 May, when the coup plan was already fully prepared, the draft constitutional amendments were extensively deliberated in the *Saeima*. The proposal to elect the parliament for four years and the president for five years through universal, direct and secret suffrage was adopted with 62 votes in favour and 27 against. However, several proposals were rejected, notably the president's right to dissolve the *Saeima* before the end of its term, which the LZS leadership claimed to be the reason why the party's offer should be considered rejected. Dunsdorfs, however, contends that this claim is unfounded, and believes that the rejection of this proposal served as a pretext for Ulmanis. He believes that, in reality, its adoption could have been achieved by a referendum⁴.

1. 3. DIRECT PREPARATIONS FOR THE COUP

At the end of February and the beginning of March 1934, Ulmanis resolved to overthrow the government of Ādolfs Bļodnieks (it included two ministers from the LZS: Vilis Gulbis serving as Minister of Agriculture and acting Minister of Education, and Jānis Balodis serving as Minister of War), to assume his position and execute the planned coup (this decision is clearly documented by an entry in the diary of Vilhelms Munters, one of the key figures in the coup's planning, on 1 March). The following day, on 2 March, upon the proposal of Alfrēds Bērziņš, the *Saeima* held a vote of confidence in the government. In a very peculiar 'diplomatic' manoeuvre, the LZS requested a vote of confidence in Bļodnieks's government instead of a vote of no confidence. However, the government received only six votes in favour (48 against, seven abstentions), which sealed its fate and led to its overthrow. Ironically, the LSDSP also voted with the LZS led by Ulmanis, thus indirectly facilitating Ulmanis's ascent to power. It is likely that the two ministers representing the LZS in Bļodnieks's government, Vilis Gulbis and Jānis Balodis, felt uncomfortable in this situation. They justified their actions by claiming that Bļodnieks's government did not adhere to the economic policies of the Latvian Farmers' Union. However,

⁴ Edgars DUNSDORFS, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve. Ceļinieks, politiķis, diktators, mocekļis*, Rīga 1992, pp. 215–221.

this assertion sounded pretentious, as they had not objected to the government's policies and had even recognised them as effective and appropriate, having previously been unaware of Ulmanis's intentions.

An intense period of preparation of the new government ensued, during which Ulmanis and his associates extended various promises to their potential supporters, even offering representation in the new government (besides LZS, two representatives of the Christian Labour Bloc, two representatives of the Christian Peasants and Catholics Party (Lat. *Kristīgā zemnieku un katoļu partija*) and one representative of the Latgale Progressive Farmers' Union (Lat. *Latgales Progresīvā zemnieku savienība*). These efforts garnered broad support. During the night of 17 and 18 March, 50 deputies voted in favour of the new government, with 40 against and one abstention. On the same day, during a speech at the Kalpaks's Battalion memorial event in Tukums, Ulmanis emphasised that the policy of the new government would be national, yet not one-sided, and would strive for the betterment of the entire nation. In any case, this marked the path through which Kārlis Ulmanis ascended to power. Opposition to his proposed government primarily came from the Social Democrats, the New Farmers and Small Landowners Party (Lat. *Jaunsaimnieku un sīkruntnieku partija*) led by the deposed Ādolfs Bļodnieks and the Latgale Progressive Farmers' Union. Notably, the Riga garrison pastor, Jānis Teriņš (Christian Labour Bloc), abstained. Ironically, all the deputies representing national minorities, including Baltic Germans, Jews, Russians and Poles, voted in favour of the Ulmanis government.

In early May 1934, a scandal broke out in the society and in the *Saeima*, which posed a threat of exposure to the conspirators' plan for a coup. On 3 May, the Social Democrat deputy Fricis Menders, while addressing the draft amendments to the constitution on the parliamentary platform, referenced a conflict at a private party between the Army's 5th Infantry Regiment Captain's Kauke-Dauge (actually he did not know anything about the coup) with Valdis Šlakāns, a member of the *Saeima* from the New Farmers and Small Landowners Party. During the altercation, Kauke-Dauge allegedly indicated an intention of seizing power, remarking to Šlakāns: 'Gentlemen of the parliament, there is no point in you working, we will do our job!' Additionally, allegations arose regarding the words of Jānis Anšmits, a retired captain and director of the Administrative Department of the Ministry of the Interior, who was directly involved in the preparation of the coup. It was reported that during a party with the commanders of the paramilitary organisation known as the Guards (Lat. *Aizsargi*) or the Guards Organisation (Lat. *Aizsargu organizācija*) in Riga, Anšmits mentioned the immediate necessity for the Guards to proceed to Riga. While Jānis Anšmits himself claimed no recollection of the incident, Alfrēds Bērziņš recalled Anšmits's inquiry about the trustworthiness

of the Guards if necessary. Additionally, Jānis Rubulis, a deputy of the Latgale Progressive Farmers' Union, testified at the meeting on 8 May that Anšmits expressed confidence in the Guards' readiness to come to Riga.

Thus, on 8 May, by 46 votes to 42, with three abstentions, the *Saeima* instructed the Minister of the Interior to dismiss Anšmits from his post. However, considering the significance of his role and responsibilities, a re-vote on the matter was conducted on 11 May. This time, the outcome shifted, with 53 votes in favour and 34 against, so Anšmits was officially retained in his position⁵. A crucial and interesting insight into the manifestation of Ulmanis' intentions is provided by Ādolfs Bļodnieks, who recalls his conversation with Ulmanis in the early spring of 1934, shortly after the congress of the New Farmers and Small Landowners Party on 25 February. During this discussion, Bļodnieks highlighted the fragmented composition of the *Saeima*, which greatly impeded the parliament's ability to fulfil its primary functions⁶.

1. 4. PARTICIPANTS

Undoubtedly, the primary and most instrumental figure behind the idea of changing the political landscape in Latvia was Kārlis Ulmanis. Judging by the recollections of contemporaries, the main architects of the idea were relatively young civil servants: Vilhelms Munters, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who developed the theoretical framework and rationale for the coup, and Alfrēds Bērziņš, Chief of Staff of the Organisation Department of the Guards Organisation, who indirectly advocated the idea of the coup, engaged military personnel in its planning, and served as Ulmanis' 'public relations' liaison. Among the military officers involved in the coup preparations, the most prominent was undoubtedly the retired General Jānis Balodis, Commander-in-Chief of the Independence War Army, who had held the post of Minister of War since 1931. He attested that Ulmanis initially discussed the coup with him in July 1933. However, according to diary entries by Munters, Balodis displayed visible hesitation, uncertainty and doubts in the first months of 1934, which Munters even described as impeding the coup's progress. Additionally, Bērziņš noted an intention to execute the coup on the night of 1 to 2 May, taking advantage of the potential fatigue of the Social Democrats after their celebrations on 1 May.

⁵ 'Deputātu kungi, ko nu jūs tur tik daudz pūlaties, mēs darīsim savu darbu'; Alfrēds BĒRZIŅŠ, *Nepublicētās atmiņas: Laiks, kas negaist*, Rīga 2015, pp. 49–52. See also: Latvijas Nacionālā arhīva, Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs (hereinafter cited as LVVA), ref. no. 5485-1-640-10-42. Also published in: *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, sast. Valters ŠČERBINSKIS, Ēriks JĒKABSONS, Rīga 2012, pp. 173–175.

⁶ Ēriks JĒKABSONS, *Latvijas Ministru prezidents Ādolfs Bļodnieks un viņa atmiņas par 1933.–1934. gada norisēm*, Latvijas Arhīvi, 2016, Nr. 1–2, pp. 180–181.

This intention had to be postponed because of General Balodis's vacillations and uncertainty. There were concerns that he might disclose the coup intentions to his friends – Social Democrats Jūlijs Celms, Marģers Skujenieks or someone else⁷. In any case, a more decisive support for the idea of the coup was shown by the commander of the Vidzeme Division and chief of the Riga garrison, General Krišjānis Berķis. Following his appointment in Riga in the spring of 1934, Berķis clandestinely engaged a number of senior and mid-level officers in the preparation of the coup, crucial for its realisation with the support of military units. These included Colonel Hugo Rozenšteins, Commander of the 3rd Jelgava Infantry Regiment, several senior officers of the Vidzeme Division headquarters and units – Colonel Fricis Virsaitis, Commander of the 5th Cēsis Infantry Regiment, Colonel Rūdolfs Klinsons, Commander of the 6th Riga Infantry Regiment, Colonel Osvalds Fogelmanis, Chief of the Divisional Staff, Jānis Kalniņš, Adjutant of the Operations Division, and others. These officers, in turn, also informed numerous lower-ranking officers about the forthcoming action, as evidenced by the recollections of Jānis Puriņš, Company Commander of the 6th Riga Infantry Regiment. He was invited by the Regimental Commander Rūdolfs Klinsons and directly asked about a potential military coup and his attitude towards it. Puriņš confirmed his positive attitude towards such a coup and, when asked, expressed his readiness to take the Social Democrats' People's House in Riga with his company if necessary⁸.

Initially, among those involved in the preparations was the director of the Post and Telegraph Department of the Ministry of Transport, engineer Bernhards Einbergs (from March 1934 – Minister of Transport). The coup was also tentatively supported by the former right-wing Social Democrat Marģers Skujenieks (Jānis Fridrihsons, the former head of the Political Police, later testified that Ulmanis agreed to include him into the circle of conspirators only after a strict request from General Balodis)⁹. In April, General Kārlis Prauls, the head of the Guards, became involved in the organisation of the coup, along with several senior officials from this organisation and the Ministry of the Interior. These included Augusts Ausmanis, Commander of the 16th Jelgava Guards Regiment, Eduards Mauriņš, Deputy Commander of the same regiment, Jēkabs Legzdiņš, Commander of the 5th Riga Guards Regiment, and others. It was not until 7 May 1934, that Ulmanis informed the Minister of the Interior, Vilis Gulbis, of the intention, who subsequently agreed to support it.

⁷ A. BĒRZIŅŠ, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

⁸ Jānis PURIŅŠ, *Atmiņas par 1934. g. 15. maija militārā apvērsuma iemesliem un norisi, Lāčplēšis*, Nr. 21: 1975, pp. 27–28.

⁹ Indulis RONIS, *Kārlis Ulmanis Latvijas brīvvalsts likteņa stundās un viņa Golgātas ceļš. Eseja*, [in:] *Kārlis Ulmanis trimdā un cietumā. Dokumenti un materiāli*, sast. Indulis RONIS, Arturs ŽVINKLIS, Rīga 1994, p. 100.

Literally a few days before the coup, Jānis Anšmits, director of the Administrative Department of the Ministry of the Interior, briefed Jānis Fridrihsons, recently appointed head of the Political Police, and Teodors Grīnvalds, Prefect of Riga (i.e. the head of the City Police)¹⁰. The conspirators held key positions at nearly all the highest levels, including within the army. For example, on 12 April 1934, General Kārlis Gopers, Commander of the Vidzeme Division, formally retired from the army, having reached the maximum age for service rank, and was replaced by General Krišjānis Berķis, who had been directly involved in planning the coup since April 1934¹¹.

The only exceptions were General Mārtiņš Peniķis, Army Commander, and Mārtiņš Hartmanis, Chief of Staff, but the very fact that troops could be involved in an action of this magnitude without the knowledge of the commander and chief of staff underscores the nature and scale of the coup. Indeed, a significant number of military officers in other senior positions were acting without the knowledge or authorisation of their superiors¹².

Ulmanis and his closest associates had to secure the support of the power structures (army and police), or at least maintain control over them, while also garnering the widest possible support from the most popular political and military figures, and at the same time maintaining secrecy and preventing information leaks. In fact, this proved to be largely successful.

1. 5. THE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE COUP

The main pretext cited by the coup organisers was the purported threat of an armed uprising in the country, which had to be averted. The LSDSP was mentioned first, the Thunder Cross second, and finally the 'Legion', the association of freedom fighters and cavaliers of the Order of the Bearslayer (Lat. *Lāčplēša Kara ordenis*) of the Republic of Latvia. In the case of the LSDSP, the assertion was entirely fabricated. While some rank-and-file leaders within the Thunder Cross may have entertained thoughts of violent overthrow of the authorities due to a perceived rise in popularity of their organisation, its leadership hoped to achieve a legitimate place in the parliament and power structures in the upcoming elections to the 5th *Saeima* in autumn.

Only the third case was genuine. Led by the adventurist retired Lieutenant Colonel Voldemārs Ozols, the 'Legion' had indeed contemplated a coup and even devised concrete plans. By February 1934, the group had established contacts with some active-duty officers. The Political Police were well informed about these activities by their secret informants (as late as 16 April, 11 and 15 May, the Political Police received detailed information about the organisation's

¹⁰ V. ŠČERBINSKIS, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums*, pp. 27–33.

¹¹ A. BĒRZIŅŠ, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

¹² LVVA, ref. no. 5601-1-2056.

preparations to carry out a coup by putting on the alert the generally small and in fact well-known combat groups). Despite the involvement of Ozols and several retired and active-duty officers in the organisation, it was evident that a few dozen individuals involved in active 'battle groups' in an organisation of about 300–400 members, without proper coordination and with a confused, partly imprisoned leadership, would not actually be able to carry out a coup. Nevertheless, Ulmanis and his accomplices capitalised on the activities of the 'Legion', exploiting rumours that circulated in the public and the resulting nervousness of the politicians to portray their coup as a preventive measure against the coup being planned by the 'Legionnaires'.

Moreover, Ozols, who had departed for Estonia in April, was deliberately enticed back and arrested while crossing the border into Valka on 6 May, purportedly as part of the preventive measures against the alleged coup threat. Historian Aivars Stranga aptly concludes that the coup plotters' claims of internal danger as justification for their own coup cannot be regarded as legitimate. At the time in question, the authorities maintained full control over the internal situation, and the activity of the Soviet-inspired communist movement in the underground was weak. The Political Police was closely monitoring the situation through secret informants, assessing the Social Democrats' stock of weapons and their readiness to use it. These activities revealed that the LSDSP's plans did not envisage any armed insurrection¹³.

It is noteworthy that on 15 May, the pretext of a coup threat helped Ulmanis justify some of the preparations. He convened a meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers and informed them of the need for precautionary measures due to potential disturbances caused by 'criminal elements'. This included bolstering security and deploying additional soldiers at government buildings and the Presidential Palace, warning of enhanced security measures at night in the *Saeima*, post offices and telegraph buildings. Moreover, the Social Democrat, Auditor General of the State, Robert Ivanov, promptly informed his party's parliamentary faction of what he had heard, but the information was disregarded amidst a climate of rumours and suspicions¹⁴.

All in all, the coup was meticulously prepared, with Ulmanis and his associates not only achieving the formation of a government, but also skilfully involving the senior officials of the state 'power structures' in the conspiracy, which was necessary for its realisation. Moreover, although there was an information gap in early May 1934, it was overlooked due to the prevalence

¹³ Mārtiņš VIRSIS, *Apvērsuma priekšvakarā*, [in:] *Pretstatu cīņā: Latvija 1917.–1950.*, sast. Viktors LEITĀNS, Rīga 1990, pp. 182–183; Aivars STRANGA, *LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums. Demokrātijas likteņi Latvijā*, Rīga 1998, pp. 153–154; LVVA, ref. no. 3235-3-99-143. Also published in: *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, pp. 178–180.

¹⁴ V. ŠČERBINSKIS, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums*, p. 35.

of corruption and rumours (including those of possible coups) within political circles and society.

2. THE *COUP D'ÉTAT*

The coup plotters, largely because they occupied key state positions, managed to keep their plan concealed until the last moment. On 15 May, the session of the *Saeima* concluded after 8.00 p.m., following the customary working day in the parliament. Throughout the session, the typical exchanges of taunts between the opposition and the ruling party occurred, including jests about the possible coup. Additionally, the customary 'compensation' between the opposing sides took place (when those directly involved in organising the coup left the *Saeima* building, they asked somebody from the opposition to leave). Ironically, in this case it was Kārlis Ulmanis himself who 'was compensated' by one of the leading politicians of the LSDSP, the Speaker of the *Saeima*, Pauls Kalniņš, who was arrested a few hours later. At the same time, the participants of the coup, many of whom had been informed by Ulmanis and his accomplices of what was planned and of their roles on the same day, proceeded to predetermined locations. The primary destination was the government building shared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cabinet of Ministers, where Ulmanis's apartment was located on the fourth floor, and which became the operational centre of the coup. The military command centre of the coup was situated in the lobby of the building, and access to the heavily guarded building was granted only with the password 'Jelgava'. In the dimly lit apartment, Ulmanis was soon joined by Balodis, Gulbis and Skujenieks¹⁵.

At 11.00 p.m., telephone communications in Riga were cut off (they were restored only at 8.00 a.m. on 16 May), and shortly thereafter, the key state institutions were seized by troops and Guards units. The headquarters of the LSDSP on Bruņinieku Street was also occupied. Similar actions unfolded in provincial towns, where leading figures of the Social Democrats and, to a lesser extent, members of other political factions were detained and transported to police detention facilities and prisons. Measures were taken to prevent possible reprisals. While the chairman of the Presidium of the *Saeima*, Pauls Kalniņš, was detained, other members of this presidium, Bishop Jāzeps Rancāns and Kārlis Pauļuks, spent several days under house arrest and were kept under surveillance by officials of the Political Police¹⁶.

At night, Ulmanis came to the Riga Castle to meet with the President of the State, Alberts Kviesis, who was briefed on the events. Historiographical accounts vary regarding the timing of the visit, indicating either 2.00 a.m. or during

¹⁵ A. BĒRZIŅŠ, op.cit., pp. 59–61.

¹⁶ Ādolfs ŠILDE, *Latvijas vēsture 1914–1940: Valsts tapšana un suverēnā vara*, Stokholma 1976, p. 591.

the early morning hours, with the president being informed by telephone during the night. Regardless, the president, without protesting in any way against the blatant violation of the constitution, acknowledged the situation and remained in office until the conclusion of his mandate in 1936, when Ulmanis himself took office¹⁷.

On 16 May, provincial garrison commanders also issued orders to take over the guarding of key locations. In the morning, a manifesto signed by Ulmanis and Balodis was publicly posted announcing the imposition of martial law throughout the country for six months (effective from 11.00 p.m. on 15 May in Riga, and from 1.00 a.m. on 16 May in the rest of the country). The manifesto briefly cited the 'threat of internal disturbances' as the rationale and ordered 'all citizens, military, administrative and municipal authorities to carry out without reservation all duties imposed on them by the regulations on martial law'¹⁸.

On the same day, the Latvian Telegraph Agency issued an official *coup d'état* announcement – suspending the activities of political parties and, consequently, the *Saeima*, until constitutional reform could be implemented, citing the government's necessity to respond to information about an imminent armed coup. It also referred to 'the inability of the parliament to function, the impossibility of taking the necessary steps to remedy the economic difficulties' and explained that 'the government, in its present state, sees the danger of internal disturbances breaking out and considers it its duty to prevent internal political complications by all means at its disposal'¹⁹. This was followed by a brief outline of the steps taken: meetings of associations were allowed only with the permission of the local administration, ban on meetings and processions, introduction of prior censorship of periodicals, the responsibility of the head of the Riga garrison for 'the military steps taken by the government', the presence of the army in the government buildings and the guards of the Social Democrat People's House, the arrests of 'several Social Democrat Party members during the night in order to prevent the execution of the threat to declare a general strike and the declared armed resistance to state power'. It was also reported that 'a large number of weapons' had been found with the Speaker of the *Saeima*, Kalnins, and 'others arrested' (91 revolvers, eight rifles, one

¹⁷ E. DUNSDORFS, op.cit., pp. 252–253.

¹⁸ 'Visiem iedzīvotājiem, kara, administrācijas un pašvaldības iestādēm bez ierunas jāizpilda visi pienākumi, kādus viņiem uzliek noteikumi par kara stāvokli'; Valdības Vēstnesis, 16 May 1934.

¹⁹ 'Saeimas darba nespēja, neiespējamība spert nepieciešamus soļus saimniecisko sarežģījumu novēršanai'; 'valdība tagadējā stāvoklī saskata iekšēju nemieru izcelšanās draudus un uzskata par savu pienākumu novērst visiem viņas rīcībā esošiem līdzekļiem iekšpolitiskus sarežģījumus'; 20. gadsimta Latvijas vēsture, sēj. 2: Neatkarīga valsts 1918–1940, red. Valdis BĒRZIŅŠ, Rīga 2003, p. 594.

assault rifle and a bayonet were found in Kalnins's summer house, 24 in Jūlijs Celms's flat and 20 in Pēteris Ulpe's flat)²⁰. It also mentioned Ulmanis's night-time visit to the president at the Presidential Palace to brief him on 'the steps and situation of the government'. On 16 May, Ulmanis and Balodis also issued the previously mentioned government manifesto, providing further details on the reasons for declaring a state of emergency. They reiterated the stories of constant bickering between the political parties, the political and economic chaos endangering the country's 'security and existence', and cited the failure to pass the proposal to amend the constitution in the *Saeima*, along with the difficult international situation in Europe. They emphasised that the 'action' was not directed against 'Latvian democracy' and was motivated only by the desire 'not to let the healthy spirit and will of the people be stifled by party struggles' and 'to create as soon as possible the conditions in which this spirit and this will can freely be expressed and give birth to consensus and national consciousness, which will steer us back on the right path, clear of errors, and give us a united, strong and joyful Latvia. [They will – Ē.J.] give us the Latvian sun, which shone on the brows of our sons and brothers during the struggles and victories of independence and burned in their hearts. [They will give us – Ē.J.] Latvia where general prosperity will rise and our national, independent, Latvian culture will blossom. Latvia where the Latvian will shines and the alien will is lost'²¹.

On 16 May intensive negotiations on the formation of a new government took place, and on 17 May the Latvian government was established. After the ministers of the existing government had officially resigned by telephone, a new government led by Kārlis Ulmanis was formed. Some changes were made compared to the previous one: Mārgers Skujenieks was appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister, Vilis Gulbis as the Minister of the Interior, Jānis Balodis as the Minister of War, Ludvigs Adamovičs as the Minister of Education, Bernhards Einbergs as the Minister of Transport, Jānis Kauliņš as the Minister of Agriculture, Vladislavs Rubuls as the Minister of Welfare, Hermanis Apsītis as the Minister of Justice, and a few days later, envoy in Kaunas, Ludvigs Ēķis, was appointed as the Minister of Finance. Additionally, on 18 May the new

²⁰ 'Vairāku Sociāldemokrātu partijas biedru apcietināšanām, lai novērstu draudu izpildīšanu par ģenerālstreika izsludināšanu un pieteikto bruņoto pretestību valsts varai'; *ibid.*, p. 593.

²¹ 'lai partiju cīņas nenomāktu tautas veselīgo garu un tautas gribu'; 'pēc iespējas drīz radīt apstākļus, kuros šis gars un šī griba var brīvi izpausties un atdzimt vienprātībai un nacionālai apziņai, kas bez kļūdišanās mūs atgriezīs uz pareiza ceļa un atkal dos mums vienotu, stipru un laimīgu Latviju; dos mums Latvijas sauli, kas neatkarības cīņās un uzvarās mirdzēja mūsu dēlu un brāļu pierēs, kas dedza viņu sirdis; Latviju, kur pcelsies vispārēja labklājība un uzziedēs mūsu nacionālā, patstāvīgā, latviskā kultūra, kur uzgavilēs latviskais un zudis būs svešais'; *Pirmais gads (1934.15.V – 1935.15.V)*, Rīga 1935, pp. 10–12.

government officially declared that 'the functions of the *Saeima* shall be performed by the Cabinet of Ministers until the constitutional reform [is completed – Ē.J.], starting from 11.00 p.m. on 15 May 1934²². On the same day, one of the main organisers of the coup, Alfrēds Bērziņš, was appointed as the Deputy Minister of the Interior. At the same time, on 18 May, the new government established the so-called 'small cabinet', comprising Mārgers Skujenieks (the chairman), Hermanis Apsītis, Minister of Justice, Dāvids Rudzītis, Director of the State Chancellery, and the head of the department or their authorised representative (in each case), whose bill was being discussed. The task of this 'small cabinet' was precisely the function of a parliament, i.e. the adoption of legislation²³.

2. 1. FORCES INVOLVED

The coup involved all the state's power structures: the army, the Guards Organisation, and the police. On the evening of 15 May, the Ministry of War issued an order placing the chiefs of the garrisons of Daugavpils, Liepāja and Pļaviņas (respectively the headquarters of the Zemgale, Kurzeme and Latgale divisions) under the command of the Vidzeme Division commander and the chief of the Riga garrison Krišjānis Berķis. This effectively neutralised any potential retaliation by the Army Commander Mārtiņš Peniķis, who was not informed about the coup. On 15 May, the troops were instructed by Berķis to keep their units on combat alert due to the possibility of an 'active appearance of leftist elements' on the night of 16 May, and night exercises were announced for the units in Riga. After 11.00 p.m., soldiers of the 5th Cēsis and 6th Riga Infantry Regiments systematically took control of central state institutions in Riga and assumed responsibility over their security, with army units also securing bridges and railways. Army units took similar actions in provincial towns where garrisons were located. In some cases, soldiers also had to perform specific police duties. For example, on 19 May 1934, the headquarters of the 7th Sigulda Infantry Regiment assigned an officer on duty at the post-telegraph office in the town of Alūksne, where the soldiers had 'taken over the guard' of this institution, 'to monitor telephone conversations with a listening device and record suspicious conversations in a notebook, noting the two leading interlocutors, and the time at which the conversation took place. If, in some cases, the content of the overheard conversation requires immediate action, report promptly to the regimental commander or chief of staff'²⁴.

²² 'Saeimas funkcijas līdz Satversmes reformas izvešanai izpilda Ministru kabinets, sākot ar 1934. gada 15. Maija plkst. 23'; *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, p. 260.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁴ 'seko ar līdzklausīšanas aparātu telefonu sarunām; aizdomīgas sarunas reģistrē burtņīcā, atzīmējot abu sarunu vadošos abonentus un laiku, kurā saruna veda. Ja atsevišķos gadījumos

From the very beginning, the police structures, whose leadership was also well informed about the events, were involved in the coup. As in the case of the army, however, many individuals in positions of responsibility were not informed of the coup and its preparations. On 15 May, the political administration, acting on received orders, commenced covert surveillance of a number of leading LSDSP figures. On the night of 16 May, the police and the Political Police actively participated in the apprehension and search of politically unreliable individuals and in maintaining order in the streets of towns, especially in the premises occupied by the left-wing political forces and their structures. On 16 May, all police officers were recalled from leave in Riga and other cities.

The Guards and their leadership, primarily Kārlis Prauls, Chief of the Guards, and Alfrēds Bērziņš, Chief of the External Information Department at the Guards' headquarters and Member of Parliament, were intensively involved in the preparation and implementation of the *coup d'état*. In Riga, the Guards Organisation was placed on alert at 7.00 p.m., and shortly afterwards, the Communications Battalion of the 5th Riga Guards Regiment (comprising 355 men under Bruno Pavasars) arrived at the Guards' headquarters, joining the coup shortly after 11.00 p.m. The Guards from rural areas began arriving in Riga shortly after midnight, with the total of about 3,000 Guards (Bērziņš believed it was slightly over 2,500) arriving in the capital by morning. The Guards seized control of the LSDSP People's House on Bruņinieku Street, promptly declaring it the House of the Guards. In the following weeks, provincial Guards units arrived regularly in Riga, rotating frequently. They patrolled the capital, secured various locations, escorted detainees, and liaised²⁵.

The Guards, together with troops (where they were stationed) and the police, were also involved in the coup (including arrests) in the provincial towns of Jelgava, Liepāja, Valmiera, Rīga Jūrmala, Daugavpils, Bauska, Rūjiena, Rēzekne, Gulbene, Ventspils and elsewhere. For example, the press reported on the events in Liepāja: 'The orders for arrests in Liepāja were received yesterday [16 May – Ē.J.] at 12.30 p.m. The police and Guards promptly proceeded to the Workers' People's House on Krona Street and initiated searches. The apartments of the Social Democrat workers in charge were also searched. A large stock of swords and daggers was found. The Guards also assumed control and conducted searches at the editorial offices of the *Strādnieku Avīze* [Workers' Newspaper – Ē.J.]. The national flag was hoisted at the editorial office and the People's House, and the inscription "Guards' House" was affixed to the People's House. The searches continued throughout the night. Floors were broken into in

noklausītās sarunas saturs prasa spert nekavējošus soļus – ziņot tūliņ pulka komandierim jeb štāba priekšniekam'; LVVA, ref. no. 1495-1-101-16. Also published in: *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, pp. 270–271.

²⁵ V. ŠČERBINSKIS, 1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums, p. 41; A. BĒRZIŅŠ, op.cit., pp. 54–55.

several places and suspicious cellars were searched. This morning [17 May – Ē.J.] the searches and arrests continued. So far, 29 Social Democrat leaders have been arrested [...]²⁶.

2. 2. REPRESSIONS

On the night of the coup, arrests were carried out based on pre-compiled lists drawn up personally by the leadership of the Political Police and by the Chief of the Information Department of the Army Staff, Grigorijs Ķikulis²⁷. Arrests continued after the night of 16 May, encountering little resistance, although Bruno Kalniņš, a prominent member of the Social Democrat Party, fired a revolver at the ceiling in protest (later claiming ignorance about the identity of the arresting officers). Similarly, Voldemārs Bastjānis, another leading member of the LSDSP, refused entry to the arresting officers into his apartment and then into certain rooms, with the same motivation, resulting in the door being forcibly opened. Arrests of the dissenters continued for several weeks after 16 May, with at least 503 members of Social Democrat organisations, 126 members of the illegal Communist Party and its youth organisation, and 128 members of the Thunder Cross organisation being detained (mostly on 13 June). Additionally, 18 members of minority political organisations (15 Jewish, two Belarusian and one German), six members of the New Farmers and Small Landowners Party, one member of the Democratic Centre Party, three members of the New Farmers' Union (Lat. *Jaunā zemnieku savienība*, the so-called Pēteris Leikarts' party), one member of the Labour Party, and six members of the 'Legion' (several more of its members had already been arrested before the coup) were detained. According to historian Valters Ščerbinskis, at least 1,080 individuals were arrested for political reasons during the summer of 1934²⁸. The main focus of the authorities was on the leading members of the LSDSP, nearly all of whom were apprehended in the first hours of the coup (except Ansis Buševics, who managed to evade arrest until 20 May, and he even managed to contact Ulmanis personally after the coup to reproach him for the events)²⁹.

²⁶ 'Rīkojumi par arestiem Liepājā vakar pienāca pl. 12.30. Policija un aizsargi nekavējnieku tautas namā, Kroņa ielā, un stājās pie kratīšanas. Kratišanas izdarīja arī sociāldemokrātu atbildīgo darbinieku dzīvokļos. Atrasti lielāki krājumi zobenu un dunču. Aizsargi ieņēma un izdarīja kratīšanas arī "Strādnieku Avīzes" redakcijā. Uz redakcijas un tautas nama uzvilka valsys karogu un piestiprināja uzrakstu "Aizsargu nams". Kratišnas turpinājās visu nakti. Vairākās vietās uzlauza grīdas un pārmeklēja aizdomīgos pagrabus. Šorīt kratīšanas un apcietināšanas vēl turpinājās. Līdz šim jau apcietināti 29 sociāldemokrātu vadoņi'; Notikumu gaita provincē. Jaunākās Ziņas, 17 May 1934. See also: A. STRANGA, op.cit., pp. 158–170.

²⁷ A. BĒRZIŅŠ, op.cit., p. 55.

²⁸ V. ŠČERBINSKIS, 1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums, pp. 45–46.

²⁹ Latvis, 23 May 1934.

All in all, by the end of December 1934, a total of 3,983 individuals had been dismissed from their positions in municipalities and state institutions, with approximately half of the staff in rural municipalities being replaced. In most cases, although not universally, the reason for dismissal was membership in the LSDSP and other organisations deemed unfavourable by the authoritarian regime. The so-called Liepāja concentration camp, where the temporarily interned individuals were placed, became a special institution under the newly established regime. It was established at the end of May under the responsibility of the headquarters of the Kurzeme Division in the territory of the Liepāja military port. Its external security, supplies, etc., were provided by the army, while the internal security fell under the jurisdiction of the Prison Department of the Ministry of Justice, with prison warders reassigned from various Latvian prisons. The dispatch of prisoners to the camp (by rail and under very strict guard) and their release were overseen by the Political Police. The regime was quite liberal – prisoners were only forbidden to leave the camp grounds and were required to adhere to a certain daily routine. A total of 369 individuals (322 of whom were members of the LSDSP, mostly prominent party figures), who were deemed ‘harmful to the state system and security’ were detained in the camp. From 21 June onwards, they were gradually released from the camp by order of the Riga Garrison Chief, Krišjānis Berķis, provided they signed a statement pledging not to engage in political activities in the future. By December, the number of prisoners had dwindled to 70, with the final detainee, Voldemārs Beikerts, a leftist and former first lieutenant in the Latvian army, being released at the end of March 1935. The liquidation of the camp was completed in April 1935³⁰.

During and immediately after the coup, detainees who were not sent to the Liepāja concentration camp were released. The exceptions were the most important members of the LSDSP and a group of Thunder Cross activists. In the first case, Pauls Kalniņš, Speaker of the *Saeima*, his son Bruno Kalniņš, Jūlijs Celms and Pēteris Ulpe were targeted. On 13 June 1934, the Political Police prepared a comprehensive indictment accusing them of anti-government activities and illegal possession of weapons. However, on 18 February 1935, in a trial that seemed staged (the defendants did not plead guilty), the military court sentenced Bruno Kalniņš to three years in prison, Celms to four years and Ulpe to three months. Pauls Kalniņš was acquitted after admitting that he might have been unaware of the weapons hidden in his possession.

³⁰ V. ŠČERBINSKIS, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums*, pp. 45–46; idem, *Liepājas koncentrācijas nometne un tās režīms. 1934. gada maijs – 1935. gada marts*, Latvijas Arhīvi, 2009, Nr. 1–2, pp. 66–88.

In the second case, the Thunder Crossers, who confessed their guilt, declaring that their actions were connected with their political objectives, were tried on 28 February 1935. The leader of the organisation, Gustavs Celmiņš, was sentenced to three years in prison, and 12 others received shorter terms (both Bruno Kalniņš and Gustavs Celmiņš later fled the country and went abroad). After the coup, all 109 political parties and 50 press publications in the country associated with the LSDSP, trade unions, other leftist organisations, the Thunder Cross, National Socialists, minority parties, as well as 'family life-loathing publications', and 113 different associations were immediately shut down. By the end of June, the number of closed publications had risen to 99. These included, for example, Jewish, German, Russian, Polish publications, the so-called 'yellow press' (e.g. *Aizkulises*), the Latvian National Socialist Party newspaper *Zilais Ērglis*, as well as a number of newspapers associated with left-wing political forces in provincial towns³¹.

In fact, the public, especially the political elite, with the exception of the Social Democrats and a few other political forces targeted by the repression of the new regime, accepted the coup and did not openly express dissatisfaction with the blatant violation of the constitution. This applied both to the president of the state and to ordinary politicians, most of whom were caught off-guard by the coup. Firstly, this was due to the suddenness of the events, and secondly, to the fact that the shortcomings of the democratic system and the popularity of authoritarianism in Europe had indeed created a favourable attitude towards such radical steps. One of the few exceptions was Ādolfs Bļodnieks, the leader of the New Farmers and Small Landowners Party and the head of the government overthrown by Ulmanis in March 1934. He recalled that the events, especially the repressions, caused him and 'all true democrats deep indignation'. He wrote: 'I expressed this in a sharp protest to Ulmanis personally when I came to see him, invited "for talks"³². This discussion was reported in the press, which was under the domination of total rule: 'former Prime Minister Bļodnieks, instead of congratulating us, inquired about the nature and further significance of the change that had taken place!' Historian Valters Ščerbinskis quotes an entry in the diary of Vilhelms Munters, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on 23 May, concerning this visit, where it is stated that Bļodnieks 'spoke foolishly during the talk with Ulmanis'³³.

³¹ Idem, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums*, p. 48; LVVA, ref. no. 3724-1-1514-1.

³² 'To izteicu asā protesta veidā personīgi K. Ulmanim, kad ieradots pie viņa aicināts "uz pārrunām"; Ēriks JĒKABSONS, *Latvijas Ministru prezidents Ādolfs Bļodnieks un viņa atmiņas par 1933.-1934. gada norisēm*, Latvijas Arhīvi, 2016, Nr. 1-2, p. 179.

³³ 'bij. Ministru prezidents A. Bļodnieks, apsveikuma vietā, interesējies par notikušās pārmaiņas būtību un tālāko nozīmi'; 'pie K. Ulmaņa ir dumji izrunājies'; Valters ŠČERBINSKIS,

It is true that there were some spontaneous and individual expressions of dissatisfaction recorded by the repressive authorities. In May and summer of 1939, at least 238 individuals were administratively punished by detention for periods ranging from a few weeks to six months, for expressing dissatisfaction with the new regime, making anti-government statements about the Guards Organisation, Ulmanis personally, the system and the government, even treating the national flag with contempt, spreading rumours and inciting to strike. Ščerbinskis states that in fact there was only one case of active resistance in the country, namely when the postmaster of Eleja, Oto Ziemelis, and his wife Alvīne got on the telephone and reported what they heard to the local LSDSP officials³⁴.

The society generally reacted to the coup calmly and passively, as did the political and social elite, although there was some concern among both groups. The general situation is well reflected in the report of 18 May by the Rēzekne District Chief, Viktors Zarāns, on the mood of the population. He mentioned that it was basically calm and 'without excitement', despite the arrest of 15 Social Democrats and nine communists. While some of the population showed a positive attitude, there was also a sense of caution. Zarāns wrote: 'Only the Catholic clergy are reserved, although they try not to show it outwardly. One can see that they cannot feel comfortable in the present situation. The Jewish population was nervous at first, and although their nervousness has now somewhat subsided, they still do not feel as if they are safe'³⁵. The same sentiments were echoed among other national minorities and their elites.

3. REACTIONS ABROAD³⁶

In May 1934, given the international situation, the organisers of the coup paid special attention to three groups of countries, namely Germany and the Soviet Union; the Western powers including Great Britain, France and the USA; and the friendly neighbours, among them Estonia, Poland, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden. Consequently, at the end of May 1934, envoys in Estonia,

Ādolfs Bļodnieks, [in:] *Deviņu vīru spēks. Stāsti par deviņiem Ministru prezidentiem 1918–1940*, red. Gatis KRŪMIŅŠ, Rīga 2016, p. 69.

³⁴ Idem, *1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums*, p. 48.

³⁵ 'Vienīgi katoļu garīdzniecība izturas rezervēti, lai gan cenšas ārēji to neizrādīt. Var noprast, ka tie nevar iejusties labvēlīgi tagadējā stāvoklī. Žīdu tautības iedzīvotāji sākumā bija uztraukti, un lai gan tagad viņu uztraukums daudz maz pārgājis, tomēr tie vēl it kā nejūtas droši'; LVVA, ref. no. 1371-4-1107-68. Also published in: *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, pp. 264–265.

³⁶ See also: Ēriks JĒKABSONS, *Reakcija ārzemēs uz 1934.gada 15. maija apvērsumu Latvijā*, [in:] *Apvērsums. 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos*, sast. Valters ŠČERBINSKIS, Ēriks JĒKABSONS, Rīga 2012, pp. 58–76.

Lithuania, Poland and Finland received a telegraphic order from Ulmanis 'to deny [...] any further news not pleasing to the new Latvian state system without special instructions'³⁷. The attitude of other European countries did not arouse such considerable interest. On 16 May, all Latvian diplomatic representatives abroad received a telegram from Ulmanis regarding the introduction of the state of exception, the suspension of the activities of political parties pending the implementation of constitutional reform, as well as the main reasons for this step: the preparation of an armed *coup d'état*, the inability of the *Saeima* to work, and the 'discontent of the widest circles'³⁸. They also received Munters's report of 16 May on the satisfaction of the population, the 'constant' arrival of congratulatory telegrams, the buildings decorated with flags, the announcement of the government composition on 17 May, and the stockpiles of weapons found with the Social Democrats, among other details³⁹. Subsequent reports concerned, among other issues, the government composition, with particular emphasis on the fact that all ministers were appointed as 'experts' rather than party representatives, and the Senate's opinion on the coup as 'the right legal way out'⁴⁰. These telegrams sent to the envoys should be regarded as the first instructions of the coup organisers.

3. 1. GERMANY AND THE SOVIET UNION

Contradictory views have been expressed regarding the awareness of, or even support for, the coup by Germany and the Soviet Union. Reports from the German legation confirm that there was a suspicion that Ulmanis was secretly preparing for a coup. On 4 April, Ernst Munzinger, head of the German intelligence service in Latvia, reported a conversation with Ulmanis on economic cooperation between Latvia and Germany. Ulmanis mentioned the possibility that if an authoritarian system led by him were to be established in Latvia and exist until autumn 1934, new parliamentary elections would be organised in the meantime and new building projects would be launched in cooperation with German capital and companies⁴¹. Germany, like other foreign countries, did not know the details and timing of the coup. However, Ulmanis's statements in his talks with German representatives in Riga can be interpreted as a certain assurance of Germany's favourable neutrality. An additional argument is the fact that even Soviet historians confine themselves to

³⁷ 'dementēt [...] jaunajai Latvijas valsts iekārtai netikamas ziņas līdz pat sarunu vešanai šajā jautājumā attiecīgās valsts Ārlietu ministrijā'; LVVA, ref. no. 2570-5-43-56.

³⁸ LVVA, ref. no. 2570-5-43-63.

³⁹ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-1178-59-70; LVVA, ref. no. 2570-5-43-62.

⁴⁰ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-1178-43.

⁴¹ Edgars ANDERSONS, *Latvijas vēsture 1920–1940. Ārpolitika*, sēj. 1, Stockholm 1982, pp. 402–403.

stating that Ulmanis visited Germany in 1933 in order to 'get acquainted with the Hitler experience'⁴².

Initially, the German attitude was very favourable, encouraged by the repressive measures against the Social Democrats and, more importantly, against left-wing Jewish organisations and the Jewish-established Committee for the Boycott of German Goods and Services. However, after the first steps of the new government, caution gradually grew, and rightly so. This was largely due to the situation of the German minority in Latvia. Historian Raimonds Cerūzis writes that the local German press welcomed the form of the coup, but the Germans in Latvia, and thus also the German government, could not be satisfied with its content, as the influential German minority was also restricted in various ways in the very first days after the coup. Even the Nazi newspaper *Rigaer Tageszeitung* managed to publish praise for the event on 16 May (before the closure). Initially, other German newspapers in Latvia also expressed genuine satisfaction⁴³.

Speaking about the attitude of the USSR, the Social Democrat Fēlikss Cieļēns stated that Ulmanis had asked the envoy in Moscow, Alfrēds Bīlmanis, to find out the attitude of the USSR leader Joseph Stalin towards the possible establishment of a dictatorship hostile to Germany in Latvia. The answer was that the Soviet Union would maintain a favourable neutrality⁴⁴. However, Edgars Dunsdorfs has serious doubts about the credibility of this statement⁴⁵. Estonian historian Magnus Ilmjārv concludes that the version of Soviet diplomats supporting or encouraging Ulmanis must be regarded as unproven. While it is true that information about the possibility of an Ulmanis coup in Latvia reached the Soviet People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs as early as the beginning of 1934, subsequent reports from the Soviet legation in Riga to Moscow assessed it as 'fascist', oriented towards Germany and eliminating the influence of the Social Democrats, which was considered 'beneficial to the interests of the Latvian proletariat'. Given the foreign policy situation in the USSR, the signals indicating that the Soviet government's main concern was about a possible shift in Latvia's foreign policy towards Germany must be considered justified. One can only agree with Munters's assertion that Ulmanis hoped to improve relations with the USSR after the coup, and with Aivars Stranga's conclusion that the coup could not do so in the long term with any

⁴² Vilis SĪPOLS, *Dzimtenes nodevība. Buržuāziskās Latvijas ārpolitika no 1933. līdz 1940. gadam*, Rīga 1963, p. 57.

⁴³ Raimonds CERŪZIS, *Vācu faktors Latvijā (1918–1939). Politiskie un starpnacionālie aspekti*, Rīga 2004, pp. 159–160.

⁴⁴ Fēlikss CIEĻĒNS, *Laikmetu maiņā. Atmiņas un atziņas*, grām. 5, Stokholma 1999, pp. 19–20.

⁴⁵ E. DUNSDORFS, op.cit., p. 260.

major power, let alone the USSR, given its traditionally hostile intentions towards the Baltic States⁴⁶.

Edgars Andersons recounts the reports of envoy Alfrēds Bilmanis on the reaction of the USSR foreign service leadership. On 16 May, the Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, Boris Stomonyakov, 'was not particularly worried about the events' because, in previous talks, Bilmanis had informed him about the inability of *Saeima*. However, Stomonyakov was really surprised when the Latvian envoy told him about the 'legionary conspiracy' that had been uncovered, the assassinations being prepared against Ulmanis and Balodis, as well as the large stockpiles of weapons of the Social Democrats. This part of the envoy's report is more indicative of what the newly established dictatorship wanted. However, what is important is Bilmanis's further conclusion that the Soviets were interested in whether Latvia's attitude towards Germany would change, but that the envoy had 'allayed their fears'. On 9 June, Bilmanis reported that in the capital of the USSR Latvian events were perceived as a 'fait accompli' and that the Soviet foreign ministry leaders had stressed the need to maintain good relations (including the expansion of economic relations) regardless of the 'form of the Latvian state', which was its 'internal affair'⁴⁷.

After analysing the central Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, as well as the Latvian communist newspaper *Komunāru Cīņa*, Vita Zelče found that the first two publications judged the coup according to the 'framing of hatred of foreign countries in the Soviet public sphere', being particularly harsh against the 'fascist' organisers of the coup and the 'despicable traitors' – the Social Democrats. The Latvian communists expressed open hostility towards the bourgeois and now also 'fascist' Latvian state⁴⁸.

At the same time, the Latvian authorities tried to demonstrate their loyalty to the Soviet side and their determination to fulfil the promises made by Bilmanis in Moscow, seeing this possibility also in informal contacts. For example, on 16 June the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed the envoy in Tallinn, Roberts Liepiņš, to try to find out the time of the planned arrival of the Soviet press delegation in Latvia. The Soviet envoy to Estonia, Alexei Ustinov, replied evasively, although Liepiņš wrote in his report that the Soviet representative had spoken of autumn or winter⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ A. STRANGA, op.cit., p. 176.

⁴⁷ E. ANDERSONS, op.cit., p. 404.

⁴⁸ Vita ZELČE, *Naidis naida ielogā: Latvija Padomju Savienības publiskajā telpā 20. gs. 30. gados*, Agora, sēj. 6: 2007, pp. 266–292.

⁴⁹ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-36-107-109.

3. 2. THE UNITED KINGDOM, FRANCE AND THE USA

In 1934, British relations with Latvia were dominated primarily by economic issues, while Latvia's attempts to secure concrete guarantees for its independence from Great Britain elicited evasive responses and no firm commitments. The coup did not affect relations between the two countries. Although the establishment of a dictatorship in Latvia was not entirely acceptable to the British government and parliament, it did stabilise the internal situation and made the country's development predictable. Moreover, the emergence of dictatorships in Europe at this time was generally perceived as more or less normal in London. In September 1934, the British envoy in Riga, Hugh Montgomery Knatchbull-Hugessen, stated in a report that the establishment of dictatorships in the Baltic States was preferable to the 'parliamentary chaos' that had previously prevailed⁵⁰. Historian Antonijs Zunda concludes that the 1934 coup did not affect relations between the United Kingdom and Latvia, even though the establishment of a dictatorship was theoretically unacceptable to the British and for some time the idea of a Western political *démarche* against the dictatorship in Latvia even circulated in diplomatic circles. However, in January 1935, after consultations between the British and French foreign ministries, the ideas of a *démarche* were eventually abandoned⁵¹. In fact, the notion of such a *démarche* could not have been seriously entertained, at least not in Great Britain, where coups were increasingly viewed as less extraordinary occurrences. Edgars Dunsdorfs, reflecting on the report of the legation's first secretary, Cyril Torr, concludes that British diplomats in Riga were favourably disposed towards the coup, believing it would benefit British economic interests. This perspective was echoed by the British Foreign Office in the first days after the coup⁵².

The French attitude to the coup in Latvia was notably lukewarm, although it did not manifest itself at official level. At this time, France's Baltic policy, which lacked clarity, was determined by the prospects of the Eastern Pact, making the Soviet Union, the main partner of France and its interests, a particularly important factor. Latvia's envoy extraordinary to France at the time of the coup was the right-wing Social Democrat Fēlikss Cielēns, who harboured a strong aversion to it. A few days later, he wrote a letter to Marģers Skujenieks, whom he knew well and who had been appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister, outlining his arguments on the need to restore democracy.

⁵⁰ Antonijs ZUNDA, *Latvijas un Lielbritānijas attiecības 1930–1940. Realitāte un ilūzijas*, Rīga 1998, pp. 42–45.

⁵¹ Idem, *Britu nacionālās valdības Eiropas politika un Latvija (1933–1935)*, Latvijas Vēsture, 1997, Nr. 4, p. 57.

⁵² E. DUNSDORFS, op.cit., pp. 261–263, 288–290.

After a month, when he received no reply from Skujenieks, Cielēns resigned from his post and, remaining in France, openly expressed his disapproval of the regime. While still serving as envoy, he officially complied with all orders received from Riga concerning the explanations to be provided to the French authorities concerning the events in Latvia. However, he also informed several well-known newspaper editors, who published 'articles which showed the Latvian dictator and dictatorship in the right light'. Cielēns pointed out that during his farewell visits to French statesmen in August 1934, he cited the illegal coup in Latvia as the reason for his resignation and, if they expressed interest, provided details of how it unfolded. Unlike French socialists, French Foreign Minister, Louis Barthou, showed particular sincerity and sympathy, as did the former envoy to Latvia, Odon Henri Edmond Antoine de Castillon de Saint-Victor, who extended his condolences and his desire to 'expel the usurper of Latvian state power'⁵³.

The interests of the USA in Europe were primarily economic, but their interests in the Baltics were minor. The American perspective aligned with that of the British: it was economically and apparently politically advantageous to have permanent and predictable governments in the Baltic States, which is why the American Ambassador to Moscow, William Bullitt, was among those who congratulated Latvian envoy Alfrēds Bīlmanis on the *coup d'état*⁵⁴.

3.3. ESTONIA, LITHUANIA, POLAND, FINLAND AND SWEDEN

It was Estonia that had the closest ties with Latvia, and it was there that an authoritarian *coup d'état* occurred shortly before, on 12 March 1934. By 17 May, the Latvian press had already reported the favourable assessment of the coup by Estonian newspapers⁵⁵. On 18 May, the Latvian envoy to Estonia, Roberts Liepiņš, personally briefed the Estonian Foreign Ministry on the events, and then engaged in a longer conversation with the Foreign Minister, Julius Seljamaa. On 25 May, Seljamaa visited Riga, attending a reception with Ulmanis, during which the diplomat 'inquired about the events of the last few days in Latvia and the government's immediate intentions'. However, on his return to Estonia, he told the press: 'I have the impression that the new Latvian government is in complete control of the situation and that its steps are supported by the great majority of the people'⁵⁶. The official stance of Estonia was favourable, although with a certain amount of caution.

⁵³ Fēlikss CIELĒNS, *Laikmetu maiņā. Atmiņas un atziņas*, grām. 4, Stokholma 1999, pp. 162–166.

⁵⁴ LVVA, ref. no. 2570-5-57-51.

⁵⁵ *Lta. Igaunija un Lietuva apsveic Latvijas valdības rīcību*, Latvijas Kareivis, 17 May 1934.

⁵⁶ 'Man ir tāds iespaids, ka jaunā Latvijas valdība pilnīgi pārvalda situāciju un ka viņas soļus atbalsta tautas lielais vairākums'; Latvijas Kareivis, 26 May 1934; Latvijas Kareivis, 27 May 1934.

Envoy Roberts Liepiņš also tried to prevent unfavourable articles about the coup organisers from appearing in the Estonian press, which quite clearly discerned the differences between the situation in Estonia and Latvia, while also exaggerating the 'legality' of its own coup. The envoy's attempts to influence the Estonian press, with the backing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, proved unsuccessful, which underscores the differences between the political landscapes in Latvia and Estonia. Moreover, key officials at the Estonian Foreign Ministry essentially refused diplomatically to influence their country's press, as requested by Liepiņš, and expressed concern about potential shifts in Latvia's foreign policy as it moved closer to Germany⁵⁷.

Following Poland, Lithuania was one of the first countries where the path towards authoritarianism had already been marked since the coup of December 1926 by Antanas Smetona and Augustinas Voldemaras. By the early 1930s, authoritarianism was almost fully established in Latvia's southern neighbour. As Latvian envoy Ludvigs Ēķis was appointed the Minister of Finance in the authoritarian government immediately after the coup, he had the opportunity to hear the personal views of the head of state. During his farewell visit, President Antanas Smetona openly compared it to the 'changes in Lithuania' in 1926, expressing a hope that relations between the two countries would be strengthened⁵⁸.

Lithuanian historian Vilma Akmenytė-Ruzgienė points out that the Lithuanian press generally believed the coup in Latvia would have no impact on Lithuania and that it was more or less viewed positively. However, some newspapers expressed concern about Latvia's rapprochement with Germany and the potential negative impact of the coup on the fate of the planned Baltic Entente, as well as on the worsening situation of the Lithuanian minority. However, these were rare exceptions, mainly voiced by the opposition⁵⁹.

In Poland, on the other hand, the semi-authoritarian regime of Józef Piłsudski from May 1926 and the authoritarian regime from the early 1930s had a great influence on the attitude of that country towards Latvia. In the early 1930s, Polish diplomats in Riga sought to identify supporters and promoters of a similar system in Latvia. They focused on 'the generation of young generals and staff officers', imbued with the idea of independence and 'dreaming of the sanation of internal relations', as well as right-wing radicals. In a 1932 report, Polish envoy Mirosław Arciszewski stressed the sympathy of the Thunder Cross leadership for the Polish authoritarian regime (Sanation). By maintaining

⁵⁷ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-36-311; LVVA, ref. no. 2575-8-36-264-270; LVVA, ref. no. 2574-3-1839-238-248.

⁵⁸ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-1-442-222-223.

⁵⁹ Vilma AKMENYTĖ, *Individuālo ipatnību atņemšana: Kārļa Ulmaņa un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsuma vērtējums Lietuvas presē (1934–1940)*, Agora, sēj. 6: 2007, pp. 219–247.

contact with the organisation's head, Gustavs Celmiņš, the envoy sought 'to influence the campaign for the rehabilitation of Latvian conditions'⁶⁰.

Shortly after the coup, the Kraków newspaper *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* published an interview with Ulmanis, in which he stressed that he had no 'dictatorial intentions' and that the authoritarian regime was transitory: 'It will exist as long as the new constitution is adopted'. Moreover, Ulmanis said that 'Latvia will not imitate the models of other countries and it would be a mistake to compare Latvia with other countries,' 'the new government will not persecute anyone, but at the same time, it is determined to act ruthlessly against all those who show any resistance to the new order. Latvia's current foreign policy course remains unchanged. Latvia wants to cooperate loyally with all the countries belonging to the League of Nations, and it sees in the League of Nations a genuine factor of peace.' This interview was reproduced by the Latvian Ministry of War newspaper *Latvijas Kareivis*⁶¹.

Mostly, the hope was to bring Latvia politically closer to Poland. However, the coup of 15 May itself was perceived with mixed feelings by Polish diplomats in Latvia and the government. The diplomatic reports were quite unequivocal in pointing out that the existing order in Latvia was clearly leaning towards dictatorship. However, there was no overt criticism of the system in Latvia, because the influence of the Latvian 'independence circles', traditionally favourable to Poland (unlike the Social Democrats), had grown and had clearly become dominant, and outwardly, relations with Poland appeared good⁶². In an informal meeting with Latvian envoy Oļģerds Grosvalds, on 8 June, Polish President Ignacy Mościcki even expressed his satisfaction with the changes in Latvia⁶³.

However, the greatest resentment among Polish politicians and the public was caused by the changes in the position of the Polish minority in Latvia, which were connected with the restriction of conditions for public activity of all minorities and the beginning of the implementation of the government's national policy. Immediately after the coup, Polish socialists expressed their

⁶⁰ Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, vol. 6190, pp. 9–10.

⁶¹ 'Pastāvēs tik ilgi, kamēr tiks pieņemta jaunā satversme'; 'Latvija neatdarinās citu valstu paraugus, un būtu kļūda Latviju salīdzināt ar citām valstīm'; 'jaunā valdība nevienu nevajās, bet tajā pašā laikā tā apņēmies nesaudzīgi vērsties pret visiem tiem, kas izrādīs kaut kādu pretestību jaunajai kārtībai. Latvijas līdzšinējais ārpolitikas kurss paliek negrozīts. Latvija grib lojāli sadarboties ar visām Tautu Savienībā ietilpstošām valstīm, un Tautu savienībā tā saskata patiesu miera faktoru'; *Lta. Saruna ar ministru prezidentu poļu presē*, Latvijas Kareivis, 25 May 1934.

⁶² Andrzej SKRZYPEK, *Stosunki polsko-łotewskie 1918–1939*, Gdańsk 1997, pp. 119–120.

⁶³ LVVA, ref. no. 2575-15-93-91. See also the report of Andrzej Liebich, Polish military *attaché* in Riga, of 26 May 1934: Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie, Sztab Główny, vol. 616/151, pp. 443–444.

dissatisfaction, also expressing concern about Latvia's possible rapprochement with Germany. On 17 May there was even a small demonstration of leftists in front of the Latvian consulate in Vilnius with slogans condemning the coup. However, after the closure of the Polish National Association of Latvia and its newspaper, outrage spread to other sectors of society, manifested, among others, in the very poor attendance at the Latvian choir concert on 2 June⁶⁴. However, in general, as in the case of Estonia and Lithuania, Latvian diplomats working in Poland were tasked, first and foremost, to try to prevent suspicions about possible changes in Latvia's foreign policy.

The position of still-democratic Finland was particularly significant, even though its domestic politics had shown similar national radical tendencies as in other countries. Latvian envoy Vilis Šūmanis reported that several members of the government who, in private conversation, expressed their support for the Latvian coup, though asking that 'their feelings and sympathies not be made public'. Finnish Foreign Minister Anti Hakzell also told the envoy that he hoped 'the establishment of a stronger authority in the Baltic States would mean the strengthening of these countries in international terms, which Finland, whose fate will always be linked to that of the Baltic States, can only welcome'⁶⁵.

The same was true of the Swedish Social Democrats. Historian Edgars Dunsdorfs, who was on a mission in Stockholm at the time of the coup, detailed the reaction of the Swedish press, implicitly concluding that the right-wing newspapers generally covered the events favourably, the centre-conscious ones critically, and the left-wing press with indignation⁶⁶. On 16 May, a visit to Latvia by the democratic Swedish Foreign Minister, Richard Sandler, was scheduled but was postponed at Munters's request on 12 May. On 19 May, Ulmanis received Swedish envoy Patrik von Reuterswärd, with whom, according to the Latvian press, an agreement was reached to postpone the cancelled visit of Foreign Minister Sandler until June⁶⁷. In fact, the Swedish envoy made no specific promises. Shortly after the above-mentioned conversation with Ulmanis, he went to Tallinn to replace his country's plenipotentiary during his leave and, on 24 May, he paid a visit to the Latvian envoy in Estonia, Roberts Liepiņš. The latter reported that during this visit the envoy had been summoned for

⁶⁴ LVVA, ref. no. 2574-3-138-136-142; Felikss DONASS, *Politiskos krustceļos. Atmiņas un vērojumi divdesmitgadīgā diplomātiski-konsulārā dienestā*, Evanstona 1969, pp. 108–110.

⁶⁵ 'stingrākas varas nodibināšanās Baltijas valstīs nozīmējot šo valstu nostiprināšanos starptautiskā ziņā, ko Somija, kuras likteņi arvien būšot saistībā ar Baltijas valstu likteņiem, varot tikai apsveikt'; LVVA, ref. no. 2574-3-1389-254-255; LVVA, ref. no. 2630-1-5-133.

⁶⁶ E. DUNSDORFS, *op.cit.*, pp. 257–260.

⁶⁷ *Lta. Zviedrijas sūtņis pie ārlietu ministra*, Latvijas Kareivis, 20 May 1934.

a telephone conversation with the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had enquired about information circulated by the Latvian Telegraph Agency referring to an agreement he had allegedly reached with regard to Sandler's visit to Riga, which would be due in mid-June. After the telephone conversation, the envoy was 'visibly worried' and spoke of a misunderstanding, because 'he could not have spoken to Mr Ulmanis at all about the timing of the Swedish Foreign Minister's visit', as there had been no instructions from Stockholm, 'he only said that Sandler would not arrive until a month later, taking into account Sandler's trip to Geneva and other commitments'⁶⁸. In fact, the visit was postponed for several years.

3.4. ITALY

As early as on 1 April 1934, while reporting to his government on the situation in Latvia, Italian envoy Francesco Mameli wrote: 'It is widely believed that Ulmanis is planning a coup similar to that which took place in Estonia. Whether this is credible or not, in any case it must be stressed that every day the feeling that something is about to happen here too grows stronger'⁶⁹. On 16 May, it was the Italian envoy who was the first among the foreign representatives to congratulate Ulmanis. The political regime of fascist Italy could only be satisfied with the apparent spread of ideology on the continent, even if Italy's interests in the region were rather relative⁷⁰. Italian historian Valerio Perna also draws attention to the favourable tone of the Italian press in describing the events of 15 and 16 May in Latvia. Additionally, he notes that in the summer of 1934, politician Alessandro Pavolini, one of the most prominent representatives of the Italian fascist movement, visited Riga and saw favourable conditions in Latvia for the promotion of the fascist idea. He described the policy of the Ulmanis government as 'following Mussolini and fascism'⁷¹.

3.5. OTHER COUNTRIES AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

The Czechoslovak public perceived the events in Latvia through its own lens of convictions. The communist press linked the events to the actions of Hitler's Germany against the USSR, and accused the Latvian Social Democrats ('Social Fascists') of allowing the coup. Members of the Czechoslovak-Latvian Rapprochement Society, the Social Democrats, lodged a protest with the Latvian legation against the repression. Other media outlets reported on the

⁶⁸ 'Viņš ar Ulmaņa kungu nemaz nav varējis runāt par Zviedrijas ārlietu ministra vizītes laiku'; 'Viņš vienīgi, rēķinādamies ar Sandlera braucienu uz Ženēvu un citiem pienākumiem, esot izteicies, ka Sandler's varētu ierasties tikai pēc kāda mēneša'; LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-36-236.

⁶⁹ Valerio PERNA, *Itālija un Latvija. Diplomātisko attiecību vēsture*, tulk. Dace MEIERE, Rīga 2002, p. 87.

⁷⁰ E. ANDERSONS, op.cit., p. 403.

⁷¹ V. PERNA, op.cit., p. 89.

preventive nature of the coup, criticised the Latvian parliamentary system and stressed the contentment of the population⁷².

Romanian public opinion reacted calmly to the establishment of an authoritarian regime in Latvia without bloodshed. The press highlighted that it followed a prolonged period of 'parliamentary failure' and the government's inability to address economic difficulties. Envoy Mikhail Sturdza reported that the Latvian people 'received the change of regime with enthusiasm'. As a supporter of authoritarianism and a prominent member of the Orthodox nationalist Iron Guard, he wrote: 'As soon as the news of what had happened became known, flags were spontaneously hoisted on buildings all over Latvia'⁷³.

On 28 May, a special royal mission from democratic Belgium arrived in Latvia. Its official task was to inform about changes in the Belgian royal house following the death of King Albert I. The next day, at a reception with Prime Minister Ulmanis, the head of the mission, Extraordinary Ambassador Henri Carton de Tournai, expressed in his speech that, as a former Minister of the Interior, he was 'particularly pleased to see that life in your country [i.e. Latvia – Ē.J.] is proceeding in exemplary order and internal harmony, and that in this respect the government, in full accordance with the will of the people, has with a steady hand directed the development of the country towards a happier future'⁷⁴.

The reaction of the League of Nations was fully in line with its current position in world politics: the institution's prestige had clearly begun to decline, due to various factors, including the shortcomings of the Versailles-Riga system, uncertainty surrounding the policies of great powers, and the lack of a mechanisms to influence potential aggressors. As with previous and subsequent coups, the League of Nations did not issue an official reaction. Latvian representative in this organisation, Jūlijs Feldmanis, reported that Secretary General of the League of Nations Joseph Avenol, in a personal conversation, acknowledged that the events in Latvia were a natural outcome of the crisis of parliamentarism⁷⁵. The Labour and Socialist International expressed dissatisfaction, for understandable reasons, and even submitted a memorandum to the League of Nations General Assembly in autumn, protesting against the repression in Latvia⁷⁶.

⁷² Ľuboš ŠVEC, *Československo a pobaltské státy v letech 1918–1939*, Praha 2001, p. 219.

⁷³ 'De îndată ce s-a răspândit vestea despre ceea ce s-a întâmplat, au fost arborate spontan steaguri pe clădirile din toată Letonia'; Florins ANGELS, *Starp paraleliem spoguļiem: Rumānijas un Latvijas attiecības starpkaru laikā*, Latvijas Arhīvi, 1999, Nr. 4, p. 90.

⁷⁴ 'Sevišķs prieks redzēt, ka dzīve pie Jums norit priekšzīmīgā kārtībā un iekšējā saskaņā un šajā ziņā valdība, pilnā saskaņā ar tautas gribu, ar drošu roku ir ievirzījusi valsts dzīves attīstību pretim laimīgākai nākotnei'; *Ministru prezidenta runa beļģu misijas dienā*, Latvijas Kareivis, 30 May 1934.

⁷⁵ LVVA, ref. no. 2570-5-57-48.

⁷⁶ A. STRANGA, op.cit., p. 178.

In the spring of 1934, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the assistance of its envoys in Estonia and Finland, began efforts to secure the re-election of the Administrative Council of the International Labour Office at the International Labour Conference. The number of delegates to be re-elected was to be increased from 24 (12 designated by governments, six by workers, and six by employers) to 32, of which 16 were to be government representatives. A representative of the Latvian government was supposed to be elected, owing to a guarantee that the Estonian government would refrain from putting forward its own candidate, and the support of Finland and other Scandinavian countries. As late as 16 May 1934, the head of the Western Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked the envoy to Estonia to clarify this matter in Tallinn. However, envoy Liepiņš rightly rejected this idea, as evidenced by his resolution on the above request: 'I have spoken to Vice-Minister Laretei, but after the change of regime in Latvia we no longer had any chance of support from Scandinavia, and the matter dropped of its own accord'⁷⁷.

CONCLUSIONS

From the point of view of the country's constitution, the course of the completely illegal *coup d'état* was meticulously prepared, and the execution of the plan was facilitated by the conspirators being in control not only over the head of the government, but also of the key departments and positions of responsibility in the army, the Guards and the police. The *coup d'état* was carried out precisely as planned, encountering no significant and organised opposition. This was the main reason why no blood was shed. On the night and day of 16 May, the events unfolded so rapidly that much of the population, especially in rural areas, remained unaware of their occurrence. Simultaneously, carefully orchestrated and rather intense repressions ensued and lasted for several weeks with the aim to quell any resistance. Although they mainly involved relatively short-term detentions followed by releases, the repressions took a more drastic turn with political trials, the establishment of a concentration camp for the internment of detainees and the dismissal of thousands of officials. Both the *coup d'état* and its subsequent repressions, along with initial changes, including several retrospective declarations of power (such as the declaration of martial law) and national legislation (the formation of a new government which also assumed a legislative function), were flagrantly illegal.

Kārlis Ulmanis's authoritarian *coup d'état* marked a distinct stage in the upheavals of the 1920s and 1930s in Central and Eastern Europe. It also proved

⁷⁷ 'Esmu gan runājis ar viceministri Laretei, bet pēc režīma maiņas Latvijā mums vairs nebija nekādu izredžu un atbalstu no Skandināvijas puses, un jautājums atkrita pats no sevis'; LVVA, ref. no. 2575-7-36-93-96.

to be one of the final acts of this kind before the outbreak of the Second World War, which effectively put an end to their occurrence in the region. Moreover, it had another important peculiarity: unlike in Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and elsewhere, where coups merely ushered in a shorter or longer transition to authoritarian rule, in Latvia authoritarian rule was established on the night of the coup, with the abolition of the legislative acts and institutions characteristic of a democratic system, such as the constitution, the *Saeima* and political organisations. In all these neighbouring countries, the restoration of democratic institutions, at least formally, did happen to a greater or lesser extent. Despite promises to restore constitutional order, the Latvian coup's organisers failed to fulfil this commitment.

In the lead-up to the coup in Latvia, the organisers were relatively confident regarding the anticipated reaction, or more precisely, the lack of an overt condemnation. This confidence stemmed from the record of political regime changes in most Central and Eastern European countries. However, the reactions were carefully studied, as the positions of Germany and the USSR, as well as those of the West and neighbouring countries had to be taken account of. Particular attention was therefore paid to informing foreign governments of the causes and consequences of what had happened, emphasising the temporary nature of the event and the preservation of the basic principles of foreign policy. Ulmanis and Munters were accurate in their assessment of the general reaction: no country, apart from the USSR, expressed official condemnation of the coup in press releases, which was a predictable outcome. The criticism came primarily from foreign socialist parties, which was also expected. Among the countries that expressed concern, apart from the USSR, were Germany, Poland and, to a lesser extent, Lithuania. However, this concern did not materialise immediately, but rather when it became clear that the organisational activities of national minorities were being restricted. The generally passive reaction can be attributed to the fact that a large number of European countries had already embraced authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, this was also due to the increasingly marginal position of the Baltic States, which was the logical outcome of the inherent flaws in the Versailles-Riga system from its inception.

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